

# The Evening Sun®

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**Theater**

## Staging of 'Gilgamesh' lacks strength

By Winifred Walsh

Evening Sun Staff

A free-form dance and song celebration in narrative form is the framework chosen for "Gilgamesh: Con/Quest," the American premiere of an adaptation of the epic Mesopotamian poem. The production is part of the Towson State University/Theatre Project Experimental Theatre Festival, which concludes tonight.

Mounted in the university's Mainstage Theatre, this interesting work about an ancient (2700 B.C.) king of Persia (now Iraq) seeking immortality was prepared for the stage by TSU faculty member Ralph Blasting. Native Iranian Mahmood Karimi-Hakak also directed the rhythmical piece that warns of the corrosive effects great power and ambition can spawn.

As ruler of the richest city of its day and feared by his people, Gilgamesh was two-thirds god and one-third man. His counterpart and soul mate was Enkido, two parts wild human and one part god. Together they were an invincible team unconquerable in their zeal to achieve warring glory.

Gilgamesh spurns the love overtures of the omnipotent sex goddess Ishtar. In her wrath she sends the Bull of Heaven to destroy Gilgamesh and Enkido but they easily vanquish the beast. To avenge this act the gods subject Enkido to a long, lingering death. In great despair, Gilgamesh journeys to the ends of the earth in search of the secret to eternal life.

In adapting this lyrical poem for the stage, Blasting has not fleshed out the work with scenes (befitting the classic dialogue of the poem) in which the main characters could vitally interact to establish Gilgamesh's relationships with Enkido, Ishtar, his mother and enemies.

The audience never gets emotionally involved with the characters — the most important element in play construction. The narration should only serve as rich background material.

Director Karimi-Hakak has beautifully choreographed his chorus of student actors in an energetic, gymnastic ballet. The students alternately represent a writhing forest, gods, town folk and tormented emotions.

But the chorus is sometimes out of sync and the various personalities and symbols they are trying to convey

often blur. Karimi-Hakak has chosen to opt for the too simple stage format relying on the actors' movements and the rather monotonous atonality of their interpretations to tell the story.

There need not be obvious special effects but the use of creative mystical imagery, dramatic lighting and spectacular costuming would have enhanced this mythical morality tale.

Patrick W. Johnson Jr. is a likable Gilgamesh but we do not feel his power. As the older Gilgamesh (and narrator) we find the asexual casting of Amy E. Heller, who bears no resemblance to the younger version of the monarch in appearance or vocal delivery, strange.

The most sensitive and best performance is given by a gifted young actor, John Benoit, as Enkido who rises above the script to create a compelling, memorable characterization.

Jamie Jones is the revengeful Ishtar and Lydia Catherine D'Wynter is the mother of the king.

The affective gold and black set with carved earth tone sculptures symbolizing ancient Mesopotamia was devised by professional designer Gregg Hillmar.