City Paper

BALTIMORE'S FREE WEEKLY VOL. 15 NO. 11 MARCH 15 - MARCH 21,1991

Gilgamesh: Con/Quest
Conceived by Ralph Blasting and
Mahmood Karimi-Hakak
To March 14, Towson State University

Like Rachel, Gilgamesh goes on a quest. Unlike our contemporary heroine, it never occurred to the hero of old to set out in search of himself. He knew damn well who he was: born of the goddess Ninsun (the wild cow) and some poor mortal man, king of Uruk, destroyer of the sacred wood, slayer of the storm bull. No one on Earth measured up to Gilgamesh, and no one in heaven either, except in one respect, that the gods reserved immortality for themselves. So Gilgamesh set out to conquer Death.

The epic of Gilgamesh was carved on 12 clay tablets unearthed in 1853 among the ruins of a library in Nineveh, Iraq. These 12 tablets told of how Gilgamesh ruled the world's greatest city, how the gods gave him the wild man Enkidu for a companion, how Gilgamesh refused to marry Ishtar (goddess of love and destruction), how she caused Enkidu to die painfully in the course of 12 days, how Gilgamesh traveled 12 leagues in total darkness (as the sun, in Mesopotamian mythology, travels underground in darkness from west to east) to reach the garden of precious stones, and how it took 12 poles to propel him across the waters to meet Utnapishtim (the Babylonian Noah) at the end of the earth where, having struggled so long to win immortality for himself and a new life for his beloved companion, he realized at last that there is no permanence in this world.

The gods got the last laugh. Gilgamesh received immortality after all, but it was the storytellers who gave it to him. He made a name for himself, but his name lives on only in the stories that the people tell about him. Take Jim Palmer. His comeback would go nowhere without the "media circus" surrounding it. Who knows what other heroes, just as appealing to the people as Gilgamesh was, had their legends carved on tablets that crumbled to dust?

Gilgamesh: Con/Quest grew out of an advanced experimental acting course that started last fall at TSU. The students explored the major themes of the epic—ambition, the craving for companionship, the terror of death. They also searched for physical images through which they could embody the giant guardian of the cedar forest, the great bull of heaven, the waters of death, and other mythical creatures and features of the story.

Director Mahmood Karimi-Hakak was determined to bring the legend of Gilgamesh to the stage without elaborate sets or special effects, using only his actors, a few simple props (principally scarfs and draperies), a couple of basic musical instruments like drums and cymbals, and some lighting changes. The company also worked with TSU assistant professor of theater Ralph Blasting to develop a script.

They decided to frame the story in the return of Gilgamesh to Uruk after his long journey to the underground. This Gilgamesh (played by a woman made up to look old and leaning heavily on a staff) is not the splendid hero the people remember. So while they re-enact his legend, s/he fills in the blanks in the story.

This device makes it unnecessary to find larger-than-life actors to play Gilgamesh, his companion Enkidu, and the goddess Ishtar. The program doesn't give a cast of characters. It simply lists "the ensemble" in reverse alphabetical order. It's this ensemble as a unit that portrays the giant and the bull and (most effectively) the 12 leagues that the sun travels in darkness. The weeks they spent in workshop together gave them the trust to roll over and climb up and fall back on one another. Their voices sing the ballads that punctuate the narrative. Their shouts and screams amplify the cries of the principal characters. The chorus *is* the play.

Gilgamesh: Con/Quest is a pocket epic, less than 90 minutes long, mixing elements of early Greek tragedy (the older Gilgamesh functions like a prophet or messenger), the collaborative tradition of a medieval guild play, and contemporary "ritual theater" as practiced by Schechner and Grotowski.

One drawback of working with student actors, no matter how committed, is that their acting vocabulary is limited. In this show, for instance, their instinctive gesture seems to be to drop to the floor and roll like tumbleweed. Yet, as far as I was concerned, this naive quality came to enhance the telling of the tale. The ensemble manages to capture the essence of the people of the city of Uruk, so peaceful since Gilgamesh left them, and yet so fickle that "They remained unsatisfied. They still longed for the glory of their former king."

If you're reading this on Wednesday, you have just two more nights to catch a glimmer of that glory on stage.