



STAGE

## Primordial Parables

‘The Serpent’ and ‘Gilgamesh’ tell old stories with new, and not-so-new, twists

~ By DON SHIRLEY ~



Photo by Chris Covics

~ Take the Apple: A scene from The Serpent ~

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xtremely ancient stories can stimulate mesmerizing feelings of awe at a theatrical event. Or not. Examples of both outcomes are available in a pair of shows that opened last weekend.

The more compelling of the two is *The Serpent*, an Unknown Theatre revival of Jean-Claude van Itallie’s 1968 “ceremony.” Although seldom seen, it’s famous in theater history. Its original production by the Open Theatre was a seminal moment for the American avant-garde.

The core text here is from Genesis – Adam and Eve, their seductive neighborhood serpent, Cain and Abel, the “begetting” passages. But these tales are supplemented by incantatory ’60s words and images, including a repeated visual reenactment of the Zapruder footage from the JFK assassination and a brief excerpt from Martin Luther King’s “I have a dream” speech. Contemporary reflections on everyday life and death are spoken by a doctor and by a chorus of four women.

It might sound like a hodgepodge, but director/designer Chris Covics and his 12 performers turn it into a gripping invocation of birth, death, and those in-between instances when you realize that irrevocable moments have passed but the end is not yet known.

The performers lead the audience from the lobby past the theater’s regular seating, into a circular stage area covered with black sand. Spectators sit around the edge of the circle, never more than a few feet from the action. In-the-round configurations can run the risk of blocked sight lines, but the ritualized movement here is staged with penetrating clarity as well as fully committed passion. The title character is played by a handful of performers slithering as one.

Despite the continual close-ups, audience members are never thrust into the action – and for those who care one way or the other, there’s no nudity, even during the simulated copulation of the “begetting” scene. The actors wear bland, anonymous workout uniforms that allow them to assume different roles with no fuss.

It’s yet another eye-opener from the Unknown, which surprises anew with each production. That element of surprise is missing from *Gilgamesh*, a dramatization of the Mesopotamian epic at the Boston Court.

*Gilgamesh* has an impressive pedigree – Stephen Sachs of the classy Fountain Theatre adapted Stephen Mitchell’s new translation. Sachs also did the initial directing, but the theater’s artistic codirector Jessica Kubzansky assumed a codirector role in the last month, as the press of Sachs’s other commitments (the Fountain’s brilliant *Miss Julie* and the upcoming New York staging of Athol Fugard’s *Exits and Entrances*) required an additional hand at the helm. The performances are excellent, including those of DeObia Oparei as the fearsome *Gilgamesh* and Will Watkins as *Enkidu*, his more mortal adversary turned ally. Everything is executed flawlessly.

But the *Gilgamesh* text and costuming are too literal. The style is story-theater, which sometimes devolves into the formulaic stances and stentorian delivery of a swords-and-sandals epic. Even though the action takes place in what is now Iraq, there are no explicit links to the present. The warriors and gods feel remote physically and thematically, compared to the more down-to-earth characters in *The Serpent*. Even the snake who plays a role near the end of *Gilgamesh*’s tale is a shadow of the title character in van Itallie’s play.

Still, if you insist on nudity with your cutting-edge theater, *Gilgamesh* has a notable edge over *The Serpent*. *Enkidu*, whose arm-first entry from a hole in the stage is the evening’s most arresting image, begins the play as a naked wild man. He’s civilized via sex with a priestess, then eventually has a full-mouth kiss with his “brother” *Gilgamesh*. In 2700 B.C., sex made people more human, not more animalistic – something that audiences in 2007 might want to consider. 🍷

*The Serpent*, Unknown Theatre, Hollywood, (323) 466-7781. Closes April 7. Info: [UnknownTheater.com](http://UnknownTheater.com). *Gilgamesh*, Theatre @ Boston Court, Pasadena, (626) 683-6883. Closes April 8. Info: [Bostoncourt.org](http://Bostoncourt.org). For more reviews by Don Shirley, see *Stage listings*