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THEATER BEAT

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Survivors link past and present



"Kingdom Come" is a truly bizarre theatrical animal -- an old Incan tale translated from Quechua into English (by way of Spanish) and then given a 21st century avant-garde makeover in the form of a group incantation that spans centuries and continents.

That the original story still manages to pulsate powerfully through the layers of linguistic and stylistic drag is remarkable. This over-conceptualized production by the Unknown Theater is frequently ridiculous, but its austere poeticism exerts a hypnotic pull that is difficult to resist.

The play begins as a group of disparate wanderers congregates on stage, all repeating the phrase "Once upon a time." Each character represents a survivor from a real-life political cataclysm -- a Jewish boy from World War II, a member of the Russian royal family, a survivor of the Hiroshima bomb and so on. Gradually, the actors morph into members of an Inca tribe in 16th century South America. Their leader is King Atau Wallpa (David Pavao), a benevolent and wise ruler whose power proves to be tenuous in the face of modernity. An invasion by Spanish conquistadors topples this seemingly idyllic kingdom with alarming speed.

Directed and translated by Dan Oliverio, "Kingdom Come" is a daft experiment in neo-antiquity. The cast performs with a straight face and mostly monotone delivery, which gives the story an unexpected minimalist beauty. The strikingly abstract set (by Chris Covics) suggests a bridge to the past and to the future -- a literal link between eras and civilizations. The play's "We Are the World" vibe can elicit a bad laugh from time to time. But it's a noble folly whose embrace of humanity is never less than heartfelt.

-- David Ng

"Kingdom Come," Unknown Theater, 1110 Seward St., Hollywood. 8 p.m., Thursdays through Saturdays; 6 p.m., Sundays. Ends June 28. \$18. (323) 466-7781. Running time: 1 hour, 30 minutes.