

Anon(ymous) is stunning retelling of epic quest

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Once upon a time, I was trying to explain to my young son what a myth was. The two of us finally settled on the working definition that it was a story that was "true" but not "real"; a way our predecessors explained complex concepts and phenomena without the benefit of modern scientific or social knowledge.

The Children's Theatre Company's striking production of "Anon(ymous)" both reinforces that definition and blows it to smithereens.

Naomi Iizuka's world-premiere adaptation of "The Odyssey" is at once grounded in antiquity and blisteringly contemporary. Recasting Odysseus as Anon, a teenager from an unnamed war-torn country traversing America in search of his mother, the story has light, cocky street smarts and the heft of an epic.

If you're up on your Homer, you'll recognize — among other parallels — that Rosanna Ma's long-suffering sweatshop worker is the sought-for Penelope; that Steve Hendrickson's deliciously ghoulish turn as a one-eyed butcher represents the Cyclops and that Sonja Parks' comely surfer-girl-cum-spiritual-guide is a stand-in for the goddess Athena.

But "Anon(ymous)" doesn't necessarily require a working knowledge of Greek mythology. Iizuka, director Peter Brosius and CTC's crack design team conjure a flashing, noisy, contradictory world of posh beach homes and train tunnels, dive bars and Elysian Fields of wheat and wonder. The show pulses in your eyes, your ears and — in a curry shop scene in which you can actually smell the spices — even your nostrils.

Michael Escamilla brings an intriguing blend of worldly wariness and wide-eyed naiveté to the title role. For the teenaged audiences this show is aiming to attract, he makes Anon a champion worth cheering for — a kid who brawls when he must, charms when he can and survives on his wits.

To a generation raised on irony, Anon offers an imperfect hero who's never really sure of the right course of action but learns from his mistakes and eventually stumbles on the right road.

The 11-member cast — most of whom play multiple roles — punctuates the tale with rangy, pungent performances. Terry Hempleman is an unctuous, amorous sweatshop operator one moment and a pig-faced barfly the next. Emil Herrera makes his updated version of the blind prophet Tiresias seem fully at home in a big-city curry shop. Annie Enneking shines in the broadest range of characters — hard-smiling senator's wife to abused and twitchy bird.

"Anon(ymous)" completes CTC's first season for teens on the new Cargill stage, and with it, helps to bring a new face to a performing company best known for its work for younger audiences. This ain't your little brother's theater, but, in its best moments, it's a stunner.

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Capsule: Homer goes home-boy in a gritty and striking riff on "The Odyssey."