



Clarissa Koenig

## Review: *The Odyssey Project* at Center Stage Theater

*The Odyssey Project* at Center Stage Theater

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by CHARLES DONELAN

On Sunday afternoon, an enthusiastic audience filled Center Stage Theater to capacity for the single public performance of *The Odyssey Project*, Michael Morgan's ambitious program for healing the identities of young men who are incarcerated. Each summer, Morgan, a professor in UCSB's Theater Department, pairs eight juvenile offenders from the Los Prietos Boys Camp with eight UCSB students for a journey of discovery through the experience of ancient literature and the medium of theatrical performance. The class, "Theater 143: The People's Voice," meets four times a week for six weeks in sessions that each last almost four hours. During those sessions, the men from Los Prietos learn the story of Homer's *Odyssey*, compare its hero's struggles to their own lives, and then combine the two in an original, fully produced show with lighting, costumes, back projections, masks, and music. It's a rare and bold kind of experiment, premised on the observation that, like Odysseus, these boys will need skills, courage, and enormous persistence to make it home from the dangerous world into which they have wandered.

Eventually, another, even larger audience will get to enjoy Sunday's performance, as the show was filmed by a professional documentary crew, complete with crane and Steadicam. The show they captured was varied, upbeat, and revealing. Through a variety of techniques, including recitation from the *Odyssey*, enactments of its scenes, dance, shared personal stories, raps, and affirmations, the cast created a hybrid virtual world that contained both the grandeur and exoticism of the ancient Mediterranean and the gritty, uncompromising reality of life at risk in contemporary Southern California. With just a handful of props, T-shirts for costumes, and some very clever masks, these actors transformed the space into one of community, beauty, and emotional truth. Following the program's principle that to live as a hero means knowing that your voice in the world has power, each performer, whether from UCSB or Los Prietos, bore witness to the issues that concern them. For example, during one sequence that resembled a friendly version of a dance-off, each performer prefaced his or her moves with a simple statement of intention, e. g., "I dance for all those who struggle with poverty," or "I dance for the ones who have fallen." Taken alongside the elegantly staged scenes of the Greek epic, these moments of personal witness and social truth expanded to encompass the entire community. Congratulations to the men and women of *The Odyssey Project* for taking us someplace hopeful and new and for helping everyone involved feel a lot closer to home.