Review: The Odyssey Project Is More Than a Hero’s Journey

In his opening remarks to an enthusiastic, packed house at Center Stage Theater on a recent Sunday afternoon, The Odyssey Project creator and director Michael Morgan called it “a mode of artistic intervention.”

This innovative collaborative theater project began in 2011, bringing together teens from Los Prietos Boys Camp, a residential treatment facility for incarcerated youth, and undergrad theater students from UC Santa Barbara under the direction of Morgan, a senior lecturer at the school’s Department of Theater and Dance.

They use Homer’s Odyssey as a framework, exploring how the mythic elements of this ancient, archetypal story relate to events in their own lives, and interweaving the original text with their own stories. By reframing and retelling their stories in the context of a hero’s journey, they are empowered to rise above the mistakes of their pasts and chart a new course for their lives.

The performance is of mythical proportions itself. Using mime, movement, masks, music, aspects of ritual, creative staging and shifting roles among the actors, they bring to life Odysseus’ heroic trials with Cyclops, sirens and the underworld, and his struggle to return home to Ithaca.

Yes, the theater students are more polished and practiced in their acting skills, but the young men from Los Prietos clearly have worked hard and do a fine job, their raw emotion coming through the lines of dialogue.

Together, these dedicated and talented young people portray a world where challenges may seem insurmountable at times, but with the support of your peers and belief in yourself, anyone can be a hero.

Click here to read more about The Odyssey Project and to keep in touch regarding next year’s performance

— Justine Sutton is a Santa Barbara freelance writer and frequent Noozhawk reviewer. The opinions expressed are her own.