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DANCE REVIEW

Top wulf on the street

Collage Dance Theatre puts a contemporary spin on an Old English epic in 'My Beowulf.'

By LEWIS SEGAL
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You saw the movie ("Beowulf"). You heard the opera ("Grendel"). You rented the other movie ("Beowulf & Grendel"), and here comes the updated, alternative, multidisciplinary stage version: "My Beowulf," performed Friday by the locally based Collage Dance Theatre in the State Playhouse at Cal State L.A.

Normally, Collage's artistic director, Heidi Duckler, takes on site-specific projects that explore atmospheric architectural monuments: an abandoned jail, a disintegrating hotel, etc.

This time, the monument is literary, and she and her poet-sister, Merridawn, have modernized it to show how our collective need for a hero to rescue us in frightening times affects and ultimately destroys those who strive to be top wulf.

The Ducklers have been creating the work in installments, and the latest isn't necessarily the last, although it does tell the complete tale in two acts.

As played in speech and rap by the stalwart Connor Barrett, Beowulf is an acting role, and although his sidekick Wiglaf is skillfully break-danced by Rawbzilla, the most powerful choreography goes to Jones Welsh, ter-

rific whether cast as the blood-thirsty Grendel, Grendel's hell-on-wheels mother, a gymnastically deranged college professor or a slithery psychiatrist.

Tina Finkelman and Pamela DeBiase also turn up in multiple roles, and they are especially effective as dragons that bring Beowulf down — although in this version, they're sub-prime real estate loan sharks.

Along the way, Merridawn D. finds clever contemporary equivalents for the elaborate wordplay in the original text, and Heidi D. uses a cabaret sequence to indulge the same taste for opera that dominated her piece at the Police Academy.

Mostly, the style stays loose, accessible, close to the street, with the text lightly making salient points and the dancing never straining to impress.

The prevailing satiric tone freshens the classic story without trivializing it, and the simplicity of the staging keeps the key issues and performances front and center. Who needs 3D CGI when you've got Jones Welsh?

In one scene, Collage's site-specific instincts take over and the audience is guided onto the stage to see Welsh and Finkelman dance at close range.

More of that and less action underneath tables might be wel-

come, but, as the title proclaims, this is a personal version and as such has a right to its eccentricities.

Besides the tracks played by DJ Elsewhere, the work boasts original music by Bob Een and Hassan Christopher, costumes by Ryan Heffington, a "Beowulf on Ice" film by George Langworthy, singing by Angel Bazigou, versatile dance-acting by Lou Becker and Carlos Rodriguez, guest dancers in the film and a passel of demented hooded monks just about everywhere.

The Old English epic never had it so good.

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MODERN TIMES: Members of Collage Dance Theatre interpret a scene from the Beowulf saga.



Photographs by STEFANO PALTERA For The Times

REINTERPRETED: "My Beowulf" stars, from left, Pamela DeBiase, Carlos Rodriguez, Tina Finkelman and Jones Welsh.