

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

A Sheep In Serpent's Clothing

Sylvie · Wednesday, March 11th, 2020

In its ongoing 50th Anniversary, revisiting productions it had tackled in its foundational year or thereabouts, the Odyssey Theatre Ensemble has just opened its revival of *The Serpent* by Jean-Claude van Itallie.

So here's the background. During the 1960s and early 1970s, the progression of the suspect Vietnam War induced an earthquake of societal change in the United States. The national antipathy for that war gave birth to a massively influential counterculture that permeated every aspect of society, affecting every so-called institution of American life. As usual, the arts led the way in recognizing that this was a revolution, as the theatre grabbed it by the horns and led the charge.



The cast of the Odyssey Theatre's revival of Jean-Claude van Itallie's *The Serpent*.

The transformational success of *Hair*, the Gerome Ragni-James Rado and Galt McDermott musical that introduced the world to the hippie revolt, saw to it that life, and the theatre, would never be quite the same again.

Hair may have been the most visible manifestation of this tectonic jolt, but not the first. The birthpangs of revolution were felt most keenly in the smaller radical movements of fringe theatre where every tradition seemed aching to be broken. And it was into this permissive atmosphere that *The Serpent* came to be.



The cast of the Odyssey Theatre's revival of Jean-Claude van Itallie's *The Serpent*.

Van Itallie had just come off a large success with his 1966 anti-war trilogy *America Hurrah*, when he wrote *The Serpent*. He called it a "ceremony" loosely based on the Book of Genesis and on which he worked with Joseph Chaikin and Chaikin's Open theatre. It went on to win an Obie Award.

At roughly the same time, Ron Sossi decided he'd had enough of network television in which he'd been working (unhappily) and start his own theatre company — a theatre dedicated to this new model of unrestricted experimentation that he had grown to love. He called his company the Odyssey Theatre and became its Founding Artistic Director, which he still is.

The Serpent was the Odyssey's second production (Brecht's *A Man's a Man* had been the first).

It opened in the Spring of 1970 in a small rented space at 5230 Hollywood Blvd., becoming, or so Sossi tells us, the West Coast premiere of the play.

What a difference 50 years makes.



The cast of the Odyssey Theatre's revival of Jean-Claude van Itallie's *The Serpent*.

Theatre is first and foremost a young person's art form. It requires lots of energy. Most, if not all, of the cast members in the 2020 revival, were probably not even born in 1970, and the only person who retains his same role 50 years later is the director, Ron Sossi. While the original *Serpent* was pivotal in its time, almost everything about this revival is not: the execution, the reception, the message — even the critic assigned to review it. I was a rookie stringer for the *Los Angeles Times* at the time.

I don't pretend to remember much about that production except for being struck by its inventiveness. For lack of a baby-sitter, I had my young son in tow and, not knowing the play, I was mostly concerned that he'd be able to sit still for the duration. He was, thanks to the kindness and wisdom of the cast, because the actors, decked out in animal costumes and noting the presence of an eight-year-old in the audience, played heavily to him. It got — and held — his attention. As well as mine.

What in 1969 and 70 had been a striking excoriation of American political life and the presence of too much murder and death in that life (the Kennedy assassinations, the Martin Luther King assassination, the Vietnam war and its consequences) became an incisive exploration of life in general. Today, the play comes across more as a respectful retrospective of those life-changing historical events. More broadly, *The Serpent* reconstructs how we human beings leave innocence behind as soon as we are born and become the imperfect creatures that we are.

The Serpent, then and now, is a choreographed piece about childhood innocence, the inevitability of love and temptation, the eating of the apple, leading to the confusions of sin and the “m” words: murder, miracles (sex and birth), morality and mortality. It remains as aspirational and ceremonial as it always was but, like the world we live in, it has aged stylistically. In the process, however, it also has earned its place in the pantheon.



The cast of the Odyssey Theatre's revival of Jean-Claude van Itallie's *The Serpent*.

Under Sossi's uncompromising direction, the revival is, with some intention, a stripped down affair, performed on an empty stage by an inspired and vigorous ensemble dressed in what we'll call everyday rehearsal clothes. It is difficult to tell the actors apart, since they all play many roles indistinguishably and well, as is required. Aware of the play's anchoring past in theatrical history, however, these brave young actors bring to the piece the vigor and enthusiasm it demands, in tune with 21st century protocols. The performance also is a testament to the power of change, renewal and, most important, continuity.

Top image: The cast of Jean-Claude van Itallie's The Serpent revival at the Odyssey Theatre.

Photos by Enci Box

WHAT: *The Serpent*

WHERE: Odyssey Theatre, 2055 So. Sepulveda Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90025.

WHEN: • Fridays, 8pm: March 13, 20*, 27; April 3, 10, 17*, 24 & May 1.

• Saturdays, 8pm: March 14, 21, 28; April 4, 11, 18, 25 & May 2.

• Sundays, 2pm: March 15, 22, 29; April 5, 12, 19, 26, May 3. Ends May 3. EXCEPTIONS: Wednesdays, 8pm: March 25 & April 22 ONLY. Also Thursdays, 8pm: April 9 & 30 ONLY.

The **third Friday of every month is wine night at the Odyssey: enjoy complimentary wine, snacks & mingle with the cast after the show.*

HOW: Tickets, \$32-\$37, online at www.OdysseyTheatre.com or by phone at 310.477.2055 x 2. "Tix for \$10" is available March 13, 25 & April 30.

• Discounted tickets also are available at select performances for seniors, students and patrons under 30. Call 310.477.2055 x 2 for details.

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