

Murder, mayhem and . . . monotony

'Grendel' can drag
but it's visually lively

By JOE ADCOCK
PI THEATER CRITIC

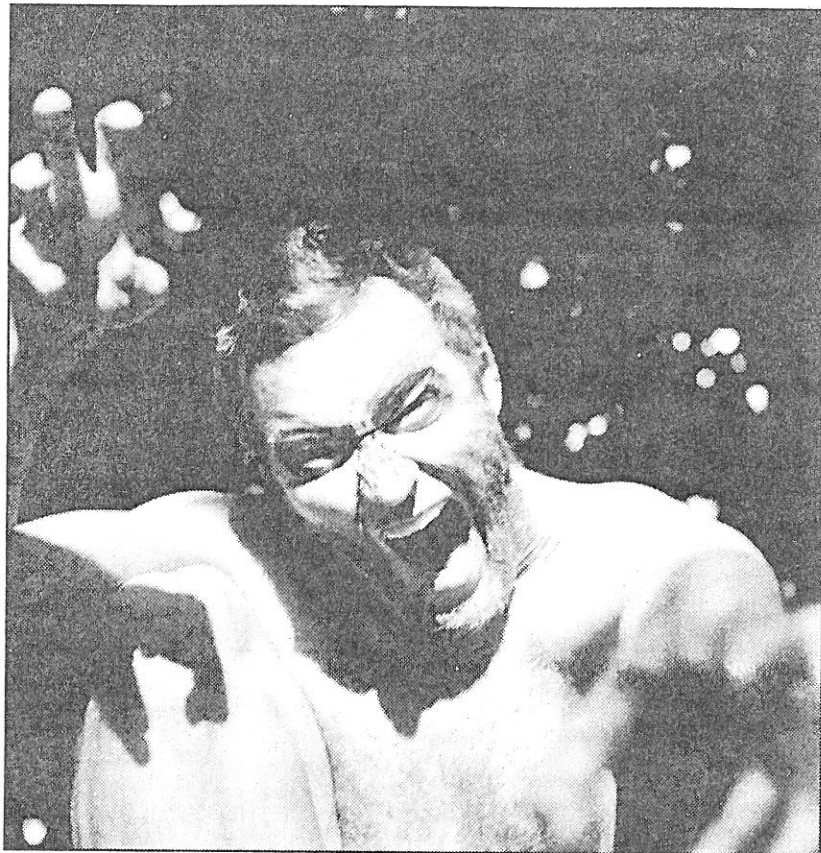
Clobber and kill, clobber and kill are just too dumb. Speculate and theorize, speculate and theorize are just too dull. A fusion of these two genres — action/adventure plus philosophical treatise, dumb plus dull — isn't much of an improvement.

"Grendel," which is receiving its premiere production at Book-It Repertory Theatre, is a big lump of clobber and kill, slathered over with a thick gravy of speculation and theory. What saves the show from being utterly dumb and dull are bits of astute acting, some bizarre visual elements and the occasional flash of humor.

The title character, for example, divides phenomena into two categories: murder and that which impedes murder. With his homicidal phenomenology, his fur-enhanced unitard and his spring-loaded antics, Grendel (played by James Lapan) is kind of funny in a grotesque way. So is his gorilla-goddess mother, played by Leslie Law.

Seattle playwright Paul Mullin's drama is an adaptation of a 1971 novel by John Gardner. Gardner's "Grendel" is a reworking of material from "Beowulf," the oldest English epic, composed in the early eighth century A.D.

The trouble with epic is that it is essentially one damn thing after another. The series of battles is presumably enthralling if the heroes are your ancestors and the tale is sort of a home video of tribal lore. But an epic



James Lapan as the title character is funny in a grotesque way in Book-It Repertory Theatre's premiere production of "Grendel."

THEATER REVIEW

■ **Grendel.** Based on the novel by John Gardner, adapted for the stage by Paul Mullin. Book-It Repertory Theatre, 1219 Westlake, third floor. Through March 30. Tickets \$8-\$12; 216-0833.

without a personal tie-in is like gossip from Mars.

Gardner nudges epic toward myth. He foists archetypal human significance on mindless medieval slaughters. Abstractions like Heroism, Love, Truth, Religion, Materialism, Cynicism, Nihilism, History, Egotism and Ideals are forced to keep company with manipulation, murder and massacre.

Medieval warlords alternate between slaughter and diplomacy. Gren-

del sticks to slaughter, with time out to mock men's philosophical delusions.

Director Susanna Wilson gives visual bounce to monotonous material. Her cast of seven, playing two dozen roles, is lively — even acrobatic at times. Wilson keeps one of the drama's essential players out of sight until the concluding scenes. In doing so, she infuses new energy when it is much needed.

A dungeons-and-dragons set by Dan Schuy, Prince Valiant costumes by Teresa Banks, creepy sound by Jay Weinland and spooky lighting by Craig Bradshaw enrich the show. If Puget Sound Goths need a cult spectacle, here it is.

But for all its verbal and visual ingenuity, "Grendel" lacks the rudiments of drama. The characters are one-dimensional. And the action is a slow ride down a narrow one-way street.