

OPENCITY PERFORMANCE

Monsterness at Book-It,
Fits and Starts at
Cava-Parker

Monsters & Mothers

BOOK-IT THEATRE'S CURRENT ADAPTATION of John Gardener's novella *Grendel* is—to get to the point—superbly realized. It comes alive and flickers beautifully, vividly. A monster and his mother, a monster and his madness, a monster and his unceasing thoughts—all those

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glimmering thoughts! Even now, as I look back and reassess the total experience of that performance, I cannot find fault with it.

Sure, a few words were garbled, but this is forgivable when one considers the difficulty of the text the actors were dealing with—the constant trickery of words and meanings—and besides, perfection, like a handsome face, is never complete without a scar.

I recommend you leave the original book at home. The story's effectiveness is lost if one is busy comparing versions. What matters,

and this is where this play truly succeeds, is the acting. The director, Susanna Wilson, manages to subordinate the brilliance of Gardener's text (adapted by Paul Mullin) and establish performance as the core of the play.

The acting of the Dragon, the singing Shaper, the shamed knight Unferth, and, most significantly, the melancholy monster, played faultlessly by James Lapan, are what make this version of *Grendel* worthwhile. Lapan's very presence, his voice, his movements, all articulate the monstrousness of Grendel with a natural ease. Whether he is hanging from a tree or fighting soldiers or teasing priests, you are convinced that he is nothing else but a monster.

Now imagine if the director had done him up like the bewitched Beast in *Beauty and the Beast*, covering him up in so much fake fur that his humanness was no longer visible to the eye: after a minute of watching him, we would find ourselves saying, "Hey! That's a great make-up job they've done." But never would we be convinced he is a monster. A monster doesn't have to look strange, but it has to demonstrate to us that something is not altogether there. Etymologically speaking, a monster portends that something bad is going to happen. A demonic quality must rise straight from its troubled spirit and charge the air with foreboding. What I mean is, a monster is never something put together from the outside. Monsters emanate, radiate from the inside out—and this is what James Lapan manages to do. Whatever "monsterness" exists with in him, he is able to communicate it.

To the play's credit, it never falls into that sentimental trap which claims most narratives operating on the premise of being told from the outsider's point of view: the monster never becomes a mere set of eyes so the audience can see, from a distance, how silly, how pretentious, how frail humans are. We have seen this device all too often: a green alien descends from outer space and encounters humans, and through his large eyes we view how cruel, how crazy "civilized" humanity is. Then at the end of the "insightful"

show we are supposed have learned something more about ourselves, something profound. Thank God this was averted.

Under weaker direction, with weaker performances, this could easily have become another preachy parable. Despite his loneliness, his humor, and his complexity, Grendel is not likable. James Lapan never expresses him in a way that asks us to feel pity for the detestable creature. In fact, you actually feel sorry for the humans he delights in tormenting: they are not bad people, they only want to forget their barbaric past, drink mead, mate, make music, and be merry. At *Book-It Repertory through March 30, 216-0833. CHARLES MUDEDE*

