

# Book-It's 'Grendel': spirited and shocking

## Theater review

"GREDEL," by John Gardner.  
Book-It Repertory Theatre, 1219  
Westlake Ave. N. Thursday-Sunday  
through March 30. 216-0833.

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Imagine: two-plus hours of railing, mead swilling, sword fighting, drum pounding and even a dragon who smokes a cigar and wears a musty old suit during his wise, cough-laden speech on destiny, morality, time and fate's "flicker flashes."

Imagine all this to know the tormented psyche of Grendel, the raving yet always questioning monster from the "Beowulf" classic so many high school students simply snore through, even though — or perhaps because — it is one of the world's first written poems.

But through the prism of novelist John Gardner's mind, the eighth-century English poem makes for a fascinating examination of the consequences of morality. Or is it immorality? It's hard to say in a world where the monster feels he must bite back at King Hrothgar's callous pillaging of forest lands. Of course, he's torn about this. Should Grendel, or should he not, go in for all the pillage and rape and murder he can get?

Supported by the wit and precision of Gardner's text, the staging of "Grendel" by Book-It Theatre presents a bountiful display for the ears and mind. But, alas, it is often bewildering for the eyes. While the fight scenes are excellently choreographed, far too often it's as if Grendel is in the eye of a swirling hurricane as one scene slams hurriedly into the next.

"Grendel" is a shocking work.

Not only is our hero (played by James Lapan) a furry mess reeking of fresh blood and muddy trees, but the language is uncommonly, wonderfully vivid — and sometimes even mockingly profane. And in a Book-It production, where the words are literally taken straight from a novel's pages, the work can be only as good as the language supporting it.

"Grendel" tills some riveting philosophical ground, especially on the nature of order vs. chaos and the destruction of man. The lusty monster despises humans and their ways. Yet he often detests himself and his decisions. He is alone, and lonely. With soul laid bare, Grendel serves as an X-ray, exposing our own dark-loving side.

Paul Mullin's spirited adaptation of the story is fettered by Gardner's challenging retelling of the epic, sliced into 12 pieces — one for each zodiac sign — and divided structurally through differing, and sometimes confusing, narrative devices.

The Book-It actors, directed by Susanna Wilson, generally roam through this cacophony with force — even vision. With his Abe Lincoln cheekbones and blackened toenails, the sturdy Lapan creates an appropriately crazed, sometimes whiny Grendel. Excellent supporting work comes from Leslie Law as a blind poet who comes to represent hope (or is it illusion?) and George Mount as the philosophical dragon.