

British Theatre Guide

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Beowulf

Chris Thorpe

Unicorn Theatre (Weston Theatre)

1 October–5 November 2017

A thousand years ago an Anglo-Saxon poet wrote an epic about a hero called Beowulf who defeated a trio of monsters. It is set in Scandinavia five centuries earlier but it is written in Old English, an important landmark in our literature.

Publicity posited Beowulf as a pop star giving a final concert but Chris Thorpe's play doesn't turn this into a story of battling the monsters of fame and addiction as that might suggest. Although its presentation owes much to a pop concert image, it offers a straightforward telling of the original story. Hero Beowulf is a brave warrior from Geatland who goes north to aid Danish King Hrothgar. Every night, men disappear from the Danish feast hall of Heorot, carried off by a menacing monster who devours them.

Writing in verse with rhythms and alliteration that give the text a virile Anglo-Saxon quality, Chris Thorpe presents Beowulf telling his own story and posing the question "was I a good king?"

Samal Blak's design presents a bare platform, smoke rising from below it, backed by a scaffold that house a DJ's desk where a shadowy figure with glowing green eyes produces music. It is flanked on each side by a battery of speakers that truck very slowly backwards and forwards. Spotlights swivel across stage and auditorium.

Composer-performer Danny Saul, behind those green eyes, creates an electronic and live soundscape that builds atmosphere and responds to the drama of the story with Richard Williamson's lighting adding drama.

Against this, director Justin Audibert sets a single performer, Debby Korley, as Beowulf. It's gender-blind not cross-gender casting: he's a male warrior with pig-tailed hair studded with metal and black costume and boots shining with steel too, a dominant presence both microphone mega-star and heroic fighter.

It is a stunning virtuoso performance that takes us to Heorot, set in its marshes, strides between soldiers' shield walls and faces the terror first of monster Grendel, then his mother, rising high in the air to plunge a blade in a death blow.

There are moments when her voice is submerged by the music's volume and times when the regular rhythms are so mesmeric that they blur the brain to meaning but Debbie Korley keeps the audience spellbound.

When Beowulf comes face to face with his mythical opponents, Danny Saul brings his guitar downstage, a black shape with a face now formed of ice shards. At first, it seems he is the monster but there is no physical meeting, no well-defined contest, just a presence that doesn't make a clear dramatic statement.

Was something planned here that didn't quite work? The slow movement of speaker banks seems more oppressive. But nothing is going to deter this hero.

Back in his homeland, Beowulf becomes king and many years pass before he sets out to face another monster, an angry dragon, frighteningly presented by sudden flaring flame that thrilled the young audience (and me too) as the play rushes to its conclusion.

"Was I a good king?" That is something to debate afterwards. Beowulf set out to protect his people and help those across the border, but is violence and bloodshed the best way?

Did it work as good entertainment? This combination of rock-star persona-storyteller, a modern metamorphosis of the ancient bard in the mead hall is a formula that clearly connects with the Unicorn's audience. Charismatic Korley is a Beowulf who is black, female, northern accented and had something to connect her with everyone in the audience. This is storytelling on high-octane fuel.

Reviewer: [Howard Loxton](#)