

THE VALLEY Breeze

'An Iliad' at Burbage connects award-winning performer with audiences

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Two-time Grammy Award winner Bill Harley stars as “the poet” in “An Iliad,” alongside Cathy Clasper-Torch, in background, as “the muse,” now playing through Nov. 24 at The Burbage Theatre Company, 59 Blackstone Ave., Pawtucket.

PAWTUCKET – Since opening at The Burbage Theatre Company on Nov. 7 for a limited three-week engagement, “An Iliad,” a modern retelling of Homer’s “The Iliad,” has been a cathartic experience not only for audiences but for two-time Grammy Award winner Bill Harley.

Written by Lisa Peterson and Denis O’Hare, “An Iliad” features Harley as “the poet,” the lone character on stage who is fated to tell the ancient tale of the Trojan War, through poetry and humor. Harley’s character is accompanied musically by “the muse,” portrayed by multi-instrumentalist Cathy Clasper- Torch.

The play is based on Robert Fables’ translation of Homer’s classic epic poem, which Harley said resonates with just about anyone in this day and age.

“It’s a really strong anti-war piece,” Harley told The Breeze, adding that the play really highlights the effects of rage and “reaches across a lot of boundaries.”

“There’s a lot (of) it that’s about who we are,” he said. “It mentions Iraq, Israel, Gaza, Yemen, and all the wars going on today. If it didn’t have that relevance, we wouldn’t still be telling it.”

Harley said he came across the script for the retelling almost five years ago and knew right away that it was a story he wanted to perform.

He was put in touch with Burbage Theatre Artistic Director and President Jeff Church, who attended high school with Harley’s son and agreed to come on board for the project to provide direction.

During these last five years at Burbage’s new home at 59 Blackstone Ave., as well as through 13 theatrical seasons, nearly 60 full-length productions, and two years in residency at TEN31, Church said the company has really hit its stride and is bringing its best, most compelling work.

“We love Pawtucket,” he said. “When we first moved into our partnership with TEN31 Productions across the river, we knew we’d found a home. Our goal has always been to create affordable, professional-quality, compelling dramatic and comedic plays for our audience.”

As far as this year’s production of “An Iliad,” which Church is directing, Harley said, “It’s a very compelling story, and they’ve figured out a way to tell the story in a basic way, so you know what’s going on. For me, to have the support of The Burbage and input from other people has just been great.”

So far, Harley has seen how the piece has moved audiences along with himself and Clasper-Torch, which he said makes it feel like “we’ve all been through something together.”

“It’s a very emotional piece,” he said. “The size of the theater is good for it, since storytelling is an intimate thing. It’s just us in this room together, with words.”

Through his performances, Harley said he has found that the story isn’t about “The Iliad,” it’s about “the person who has to tell the story,” whom he says hopes for people to listen every time he tells it so that they stop what they are doing.

“All of us are capable of harm, but we also have the capacity to stop what we’re doing,” he said.

Based on the reactions he’s seen from audience members “pinned against their seats and with their eyes wide open,” Harley said he knows that people agree with him on that sentiment.

Now that he has gotten accustomed to his role in the play, Harley said the performances will be “more of an exploration with the audience,” as well as opportunities to connect with them more.

“Storytelling is very much about your relationship with the audience,” he said. “I can mess up, and they are there to help me.”

There’s also an interplay between Harley’s character and the muse, he said, including how she reacts when she gets his attention and vice versa.

While this is not the only solo play that Harley has performed in, he said it’s his first in a while, since he spent most of his time writing children’s books during the pandemic.

Harley has also done storytelling for school aged-children and toured internationally as a performing artist, author, and keynote speaker.

He was nominated for seven Grammy Awards, and won two awards for Best Spoken Word Album for Children.

“The reason I’m doing all of this is that I can’t choose,” Harley said. “I knew from the beginning I was a generalist and in some ways, it’s better to specialize, but I’m interested in all things. It’s been a very organic exploration.”

Ultimately, he said he is very interested in what’s involved in being an artist and decided to pursue the role in “An Iliad” because “we are all a community sharing this kind of common story.”

“We’re in the middle of a fight of what that story is,” Harley said. “Where do we start to talk to each other and what language do we use to talk? How do I use my skills and talents to tell that story? This project is an expression of that.”