

Ancient story shines in new telling

REVIEW Theater artists from every discipline contribute to a vibrant adaptation of the Epic of Gilgamesh.

By JOHN TOWNSEND, Special to the Star Tribune

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The Sumerian Epic of Gilgamesh dates to the second millennium B.C., though it evolved from Babylonian stories that preceded it by centuries. This cautionary tale probes the arrogant destructiveness and heartache of a ruler of the city of Uruk in what is now Iraq. It also depicts a flood similar to that related in the Genesis story of Noah.

Theatre Novi Most's captivating stage adaptation of the epic, with beautifully spare text by Kira Obolensky, titled "The Oldest Story in the World," now plays at Minneapolis' Southern Theater. Though the ruler's moral education is central to this 90-minute piece, it is interspersed with commentary by George Smith (Stephen Pearce), the 19th-century British scholar who first discovered and translated the Gilgamesh cuneiform tablets.

Director Lisa Channer relies heavily on design elements, but she keeps the play anchored with astonishing performances by Erik Hoover as Gilgamesh, who is two-thirds divine and one-third human, and Billy Mullaney as Enkidu, his companion, who is two-thirds animal, one-third human. The gods, played by other wonderful ensemble members,

create Enkidu to temper Gilgamesh's tyrannical behavior. A pool table, signified simply and strikingly by Robert Perry's lighting, is where the two launch their first dispute.

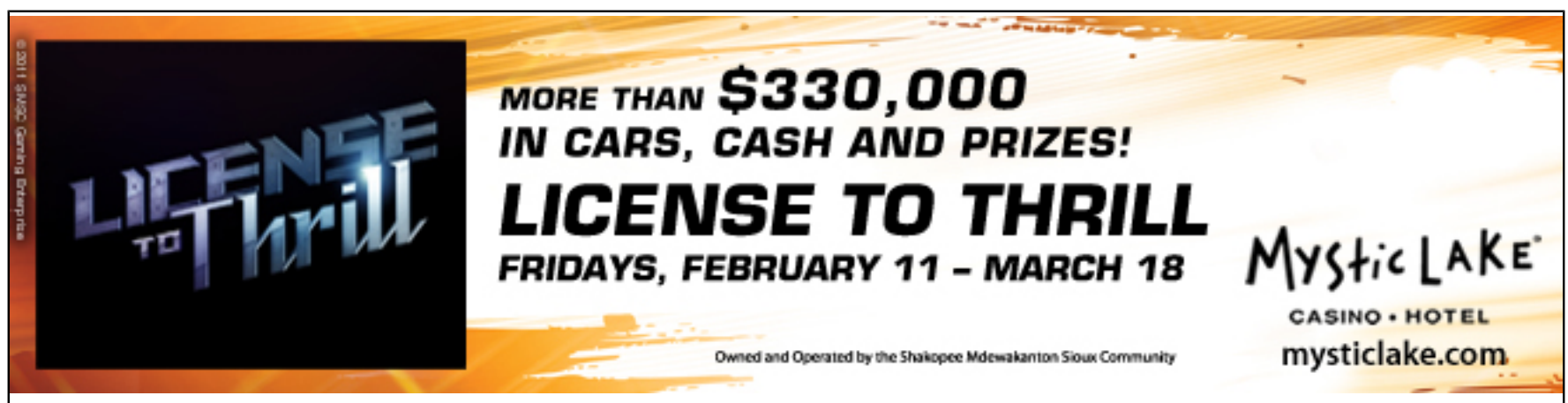
Hoover and Mullaney have been choreographed by Carl Flink, Gulgun Kayim, Vladimir Rovinsky and Channer, to beguiling effect as they tussle and tangle with lots of body contact. Gymnastically athletic, the two men reveal that paradoxical connection between aggression and intimacy. Their loyalty to one another and unabashed masculine combative energy hint at the ultra-macho homo-romantic roots of ancient militarism.

Pearce gives fascinating contrast to this as the rigid Smith, who is so moved by the story's primal power that he starts to shed the body shame of his Victorian era. He plays a later scene in underwear.

Sublime a cappella vocals by Molly Dworsky, Sasha Gibbs and Johanna Gorman-Baer, which they composed with the show's evocative sound designer, Vincent Oliveri, range from doo-wop to Celtic folk to Dr. Seuss.

Technical elements flirt with overpowering the story, but they ultimately complement and mesmerize. Daniel Vatsky's multimedia design, Annie Katsura Rollins' costumes, Adrian Jones' scenic design and Perry's lighting convey a sense of timelessness. Projected images akin to Rorschach Test blots and hot green lighting reminiscent of the Green Zone in Baghdad emanate a spectral, contemporary feel that reminds us that megalomania, all these millennia

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