

Actors, both beginner and experienced, helped bring the excitement of Greek myths to Hidden River Cave in Horse Cave, Kentucky.

'MythUnderstood'

Actors, veteran and beginner, make mythical magic in the mouth of Hidden River Cave

BY RYAN EMMONS AND JULIE CONGRESS

IN THE MOUTH of Hidden River Cave, in Horse Cave, Kentucky, students and professional theatre artists came together to develop a new musical, *MythUnderstood*. The plan was to stage the show outdoors in the sinkhole that leads down into the cave. In the sweltering summer heat of Kentucky this might sound like a sticky proposition, but as locals know, the temperature of the cave is around 74 degrees Fahrenheit (even in the dead of winter). The mouth of the cave is filled with rocks, lush greenery, and for two weeks last summer, it was also home to live music, a giant Cyclops puppet, and fifteen performers in ancient Greek costumes running in and out of the cave (with audiences running after them) to create the chaos inherent in the Greek myths.

In this new, interactive musical comedy, the three Fates have tangled

the threads of life—mixing up the gods, monsters, and humans of ancient Greece. The Cyclops is out of his cave and on a rampage; Hercules is too lazy to perform his twelve labors, and Medusa is terrified of the snakes growing out of her own head. Our hero, Odysseus, takes on the task of fixing the world with the help of Hermes. The Fates sing catchy songs to introduce the audience to characters such as Poseidon, Prometheus, Aphrodite, Hades, Persephone, Tiresias, Apollo, Pandora, and many more.

Our company, No.11 Productions, a non-profit theatre from New York City, drove fourteen hours to Kentucky this past July for the perfect location and the rare opportunity to work with a mixed cast of students and adults ranging in age from nine to sixty-five. We had workshopped an early version of



The Cyclops, a one-eyed, cave-dwelling giant from Greek mythology, was depicted using a large, two-person puppet in the outdoor production of *MythUnderstood*.

MythUnderstood in 2009 in Saratoga Springs, New York, and were thrilled to get the opportunity to continue developing the piece. Joined by actor/co-writer Maxwell Schneller, composer Enrico de Trizio, and puppeteer Jen Neads, we wanted to write a musical that was *for* students. What better way to do that than to collaborate *with* students?

We had worked at the Kentucky Repertory Theatre two months before when we brought our show *Quest for the West: Adventures on the Oregon Trail!* there for a three-week run. *MythUnderstood* was developed with the intention of creating an educational opportunity for students to work with adult actors. We returned to Kentucky in time for the final week of KRT's summer theatre arts camp and spent several days getting to know the students through workshops and ensemble-building exercises. All of the students in the camp were invited to be in the show. We held a day-long audition workshop in which the students watched an audition by one of our professional actors and then each student performed a monologue that they had prepared in advance. We encouraged students to choose their own material, but we were also happy to recommend plays for those who wanted guidance. Students received

feedback, provided constructive criticism for one another, and were then able to rework specific beats in their own pieces. Our goal was to demystify the audition process, relieve pressure, and give everyone the opportunity to perform at their best. Following the audition workshop, each student was given a part based on the performance of their monologue, their ability to take direction, and their individual strengths which we had observed working with them during the camp.

We began the rehearsal process with a full day exploring Greek mythology. Several of the students loved the Percy Jackson novels by Rick Riordan and were familiar with Greek myths. Others felt they knew nothing, but many quickly realized that pop culture—Disney, Harry Potter, *Clash of the Titans*—had actually given them a basic knowledge of Greek mythology. The script was still a draft, so we took some time to find out which myths, heroes, gods, and monsters most intrigued and resonated with the ensemble and wrote several of those into the piece. There are many different variations on these stories, and the students engaged in lively discussions about how these characters would best be brought to life onstage. Students felt motivated to learn more so that they could have more to contribute to the conversation.

The character of Hermes was not part of the play until thirteen-year-old Kole Isenberg sold the group on adding in this fun foil. Perhaps not all of the students knew who Hermes was, but they all understood the importance Odysseus having a sidekick. Because the show functions for the audience as a crash course in Greek mythology, this tablework was both crucial and fun.

The next step was guiding students in creating compositions that explored the characters and myths we were about to bring to life in *MythUnderstood*. Empowered by their research and new knowledge, the students were divided into groups of five or six and we prompted them to spend thirty minutes creating a short scene, with a beginning, middle, and end. The scene also had to include a list of requirements including three Greek words, a moment of group stillness, a conflict, a secret handshake, two transformations, a hero, and a monster. We have used this devised-theatre technique in our educational theatre productions before. It sparks the imagination, creates a great sense of play, and frequently yields moments that can be used in the production. By doing this on the set (or in our case, the mouth of the cave) it encourages actors to find interesting ways to be in dialogue with their surroundings.

We had three and a half days to stage and direct the play. This might sound like a director's nightmare, and it's true that there wasn't much time, but the episodic nature of the script, broad outdoor comedic style, and commitment of our cast made the production a success. Not only did we have one of the largest and most diverse audiences KRT has seen in years, but this free production made theatre accessible and a true community event. Parents, shop owners, KRT subscribers, teachers, college students—a sizeable percentage Horse Cave's population—came to see “what was happening down in the cave.”

A lack of time creates a beautiful pressure that spurs actors of all ages to do some of their greatest and most intuitive work. This project was about making big choices and trusting instincts. There is no time to worry if you are doing it “right,” you just have to jump in and go. Of course, we are not suggesting your next school show should have a three-day rehearsal process, but for the right show, it is an excellent exercise in creating expressive and varied characterizations.

It was after the theatre camp and at the beginning of the brief rehearsal process that we layered in the adult actors—four local actors and three of us from New York City. There are tremendous educational benefits to combining student and adult actors. Each group inspires and motivates the other in different ways. The students bring life, energy, and silliness that are infectious. The adults bring a professional work ethic, technique, and training. Pairing students with adult actors gave students an extra boost of confidence—inspired by the work of their more experienced scene partners.

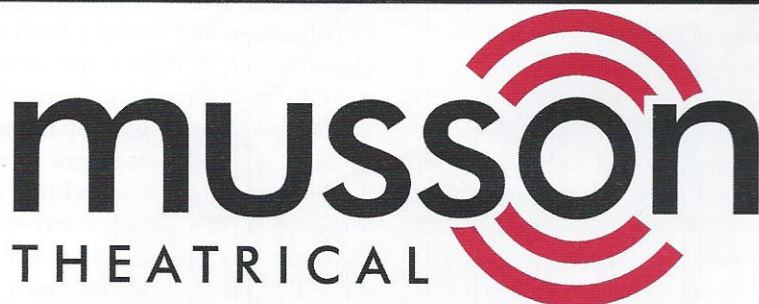
The entire cast felt ownership over the show and helped us make many improvements to the script. *MythUnderstood* is a play for young audiences that had the distinct advantage of being developed by many young performers. In a scene where Odysseus seeks advice from the Oracle, the priest agrees to help him, but declares, “First, the sacrifice,” as he eats a piece of baklava. We instantly revised the script when

sixteen-year-old Devin Rowe suggested we change the word “sacrifice” to “snackrifice.”

“I enjoyed the willingness to listen to ideas and take suggestions from everyone, especially the children,” adult actor Giselle Chatelain said, “and that many of those ideas were incorporated into the production.”

The staging for *MythUnderstood* was far from conventional. Christopher

Carter Sanderson, then executive director of Kentucky Repertory Theatre, is the creator of Gorilla Theatre, in which the audience moves with the actors from scene to scene. Inspired by Christopher's style, we decided to try a similar approach with *MythUnderstood*. The audience got to join Odysseus on this quest by literally following him. We hoped to use this interactivity to physically engage the audience and make



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them feel invested while enlivening Greek myths. It's easy to feel like you are descending into the Cyclops' den when you are actually walking into the mouth of a cave. Guiding audience members around the sinkhole also gave them a fresh look at the natural wonder in their town.

"I greatly enjoyed the interactive aspects of the show and the novel usage of space," audience member Lane Ross said.

The mouth of the cave became a living funhouse of Greek mythology. As the audience came around the first bend, suddenly there was Poseidon on their left and Hercules on their right. When you looked down towards the cave you could see Hades and Persephone arguing over a pomegranate or Tiresias, sixty feet down the cave, blindly painting in the "Underworld." This gave the actors the chance to create characters that existed even when they were not in a scene. With no backstage, their physicality and relationships were ever-present in the world we created outdoors.

Most people assume that educational theatre happens on a stage. But

working site-specifically with students broadens their conceptions of theatre. We taught our students that a show can be done anywhere, and the surroundings can become a set that far exceeds what can be built onstage. Think of the resources you have as an educator. Why not shake it up and do *You're a Good Man Charlie Brown* on the playground or *High School Musical* on the basketball court or *Proof* in the library (with permission, of course).

Our goal with this production was to collaboratively create a fresh take on classic material. We felt that students were more invested and learned more about Greek mythology by being part of the creative development process than if we had used an existing text. We gave them a forum to express their ideas, and they were able to see how those ideas and conversations actively changed the show.

Now, back in New York City, we're planning to take *MythUnderstood* on tour so we can share this special experience with a wide range of people. We have several schools lined up in the New York City and New Jersey

regions and will continue bringing this unique story about teamwork and mythology to schools and communities. Our hope is that this script will inspire both young and old theatre artists to put on a play, with courage and enthusiasm. We know that the final version of *MythUnderstood* would not have been so inspired without the blend of ages and experiences in the cast.

Ryan Emmons and Julie Congress are the New York state chapter directors for the Educational Theatre Association and co-artistic directors of No.11 Productions, a non-profit theatre company based in New York City. For more information about the company, go to www.no11productions.com.



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Visit Schooltheatre.org for links to more on *MythUnderstood* and information on performing it at your school.

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did you know...?

⇒ U.S. employers rate creativity and innovation among the top five skills that will increase in importance in the next five years.

Source: *Ready to Innovate*. Americans for the Arts/The Conference Board, 2007.

⇒ 97% of surveyed school superintendents said that theatre activities develop creativity in students.


Source: *Ready to Innovate*.

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Source: *Ready to Innovate*.

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