



**Berkeley Rep  
School of Theatre**



Student Matinee Study Guide

# Argonautika

**WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY MARY ZIMMERMAN**

ADAPTED FROM THE VOYAGE OF *JASON AND THE ARGONAUTS*  
IN ASSOCIATION WITH MCCARTER THEATRE CENTER  
AND THE SHAKESPEARE THEATRE COMPANY

Study guide written and compiled by  
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## Letter from the Outreach Coordinator

Dear Educator,

Welcome to the *Argonautika* study guide. We hope you will find it useful and that it will give you and your students some insight into the magical work of this production. We know that each classroom is different, and we urge you to use this material to suit the needs of your students.

With that in mind, we have provided background information, discussion questions, and language arts activities designed to help you find the lens through which your class will get the most out of *Argonautika*. We hope that you will find it useful.

Please, let us know how this study guide enhances your experience of the play. Send comments and suggestions to [dmaier@berkeleyrep.org](mailto:dmaier@berkeleyrep.org). We look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Dave Maier  
Outreach Coordinator  
Berkeley Rep School of Theatre

# Jason and Medea: Re-examining the Hero Myth

By Lila Neugebauer, Literary Intern



(from right) Jason (Jake Suffian) woos Medea (Atley Loughridge) in the West Coast premiere of *Argonautika*, an exhilarating new adventure from Tony Award-winner Mary Zimmerman at Berkeley Rep. Photographer: Kevin Berne.

Jason's quest for the Golden Fleece is among the oldest of Greek legends. The story's archetypal simplicity is strikingly familiar: a hero is sent to retrieve an extraordinary prize and must perform seemingly impossible feats to obtain it. For the leading scholar of myth, Joseph Campbell, Jason epitomizes the hero figure at the core of all mythology.

Campbell's hero can be a prince, a warrior, a saint, or a god; the "boon" he brings back may be a material prize, a bride, or wisdom. Prometheus retrieves fire from the heavens for mankind; Jason circumvents the dragon and obtains the golden fleece; Aeneas voyages into the underworld and communes with his deceased father. In all of these journeys, Campbell identifies a symbolic quest for identity. Many hero myths are figured as a return to the father—Jason's reunion is symbolic: he returns to assume his father's rightful throne. Campbell reads this search as, fundamentally, the search for the self.

The motif is common in fairy tales—the hero usually a prince, the prize often a bride. The Argo's voyage closely resembles the body of folklore in which a prince secures his prize with the help of companions possessing magical talents. An oft-cited parallel is the Brothers Grimm tale *The Six Servants*, in which a prince succeeds in marrying a beautiful maiden whose witch-mother seeks to deter suitors with a series of treacherous challenges. En route to his future bride, the prince is joined by six men, each possessing a unique physical attribute that proves vital to surmounting the six obstacles the witch presents.

The Medea-Aeetes-Jason story belongs to yet another, even more pervasive folk motif common to tales around the world: a man facing a series of trials in a foreign kingdom is aided by the daughter of his hostile host, who thereafter abandons her own family and kingdom to elope with him. The Norse *Mastermaid* and Gaelic *Battle of the Birds* feature the same theme. Within the Greco-Roman tradition, Hippodamia sabotages her own father's chariot and causes his death so that her future husband can win the race; Ariadne famously arms Theseus to defeat the minotaur, fleeing her kingdom thereafter to marry him.

Medea's role in the legend makes a near irony of the original folk motif of happy helpers: her extraordinary magic renders the talents of the Argonauts inconsequential. It is Medea's sorcery alone that enables Jason to obtain the

fleece, her power that earns him his heroic status. Jason's success lies in winning Medea's love; his heroic virtues are seemingly charm and good looks. He is, after all, the first of many ordinary men to play the hero's part in western literature.

This chapter in Medea's story remains unknown to many, even those who are well-versed in classical mythology. She is more widely recognized as Euripides' "barbarous monster," the mother who commits the unimaginable, the murder of her own two sons. Abandoned by Jason so that he can obtain a throne by marrying a Greek princess, Medea is left alone and homeless in a foreign land; she has betrayed and abandoned her family and kingdom for Jason's survival and glory. It is easy to forget that she was a young girl who fell in love under the gods' hands, who was promised marriage, family, and home. Apollonius' epic *Argonautika*, from the third century BC, depicts a strikingly complex psychological portrait of a young girl alone in the depths of her native woods, agonizing over the betrayal she fears she will commit, but sick and chilled with the pangs of first love. Jason and Medea's romance is recognized as the first love story of the western tradition.

Yet how does Medea's critical role in Jason's "decisive victory" fit into Campbell's monomyth? She is not Jason's bridal "boon"; the fleece is his prize. While his quest entails a return to the father, it necessitates Medea's betrayal and abandonment of hers. A princess's desertion of her family seemingly supports the regenerative logic of marriage and procreation; the folk motif justifies the break young must make from old in our cultural order. But Jason readily discards Medea for a potential throne—for the social role and status he journeyed to obtain. If that betrayal is a necessary step in Jason's heroic initiation into manhood, what conception of heroism does this story espouse?

Despite our hero's casual cruelty, his epic voyage continues to captivate the western imagination. Nathaniel Hawthorne introduced American children to the legend in his *Tanglewood Tales* (1851), and Charles Kingsley did the same for the British with his collection, *Heroes* (1855). This nineteenth-century trend of adapting the tale for young people has made the story a mainstay of children's books since. Myths, like fairy tales and fables, function not only as entertainment, but also as pedagogy. We read them to our children in the hopes that they will prove instructive: stray from the path and a nasty wolf might eat you up; a candy house may look inviting, but greediness could get you boiled by a witch. They are primers, guidebooks for the roles and responsibilities we assume when we enter the adult world; their conventions become encoded in our everyday lives, in the social customs through which we build our relationships to one another. Campbell tells us these stories help us learn how to live. They also, of course, reveal a great deal about how we already *do* live.

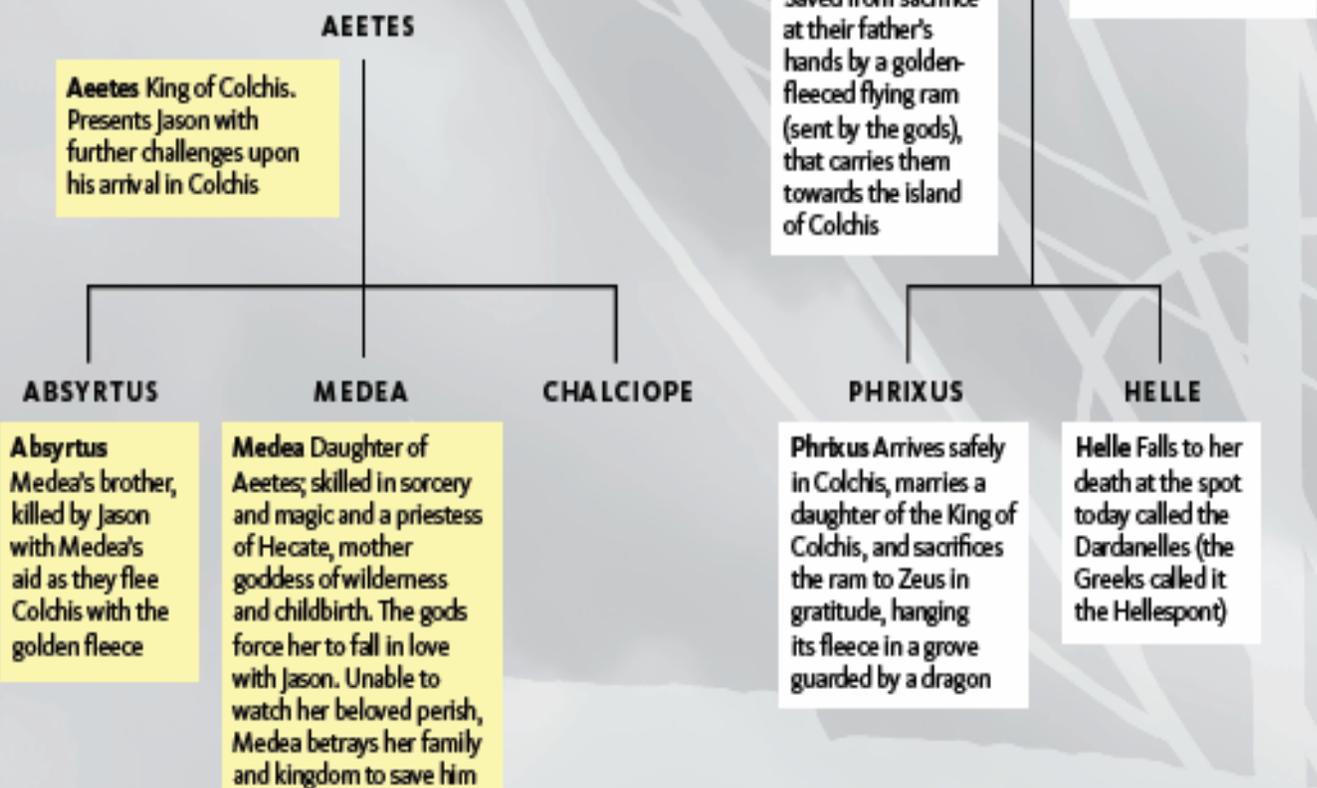


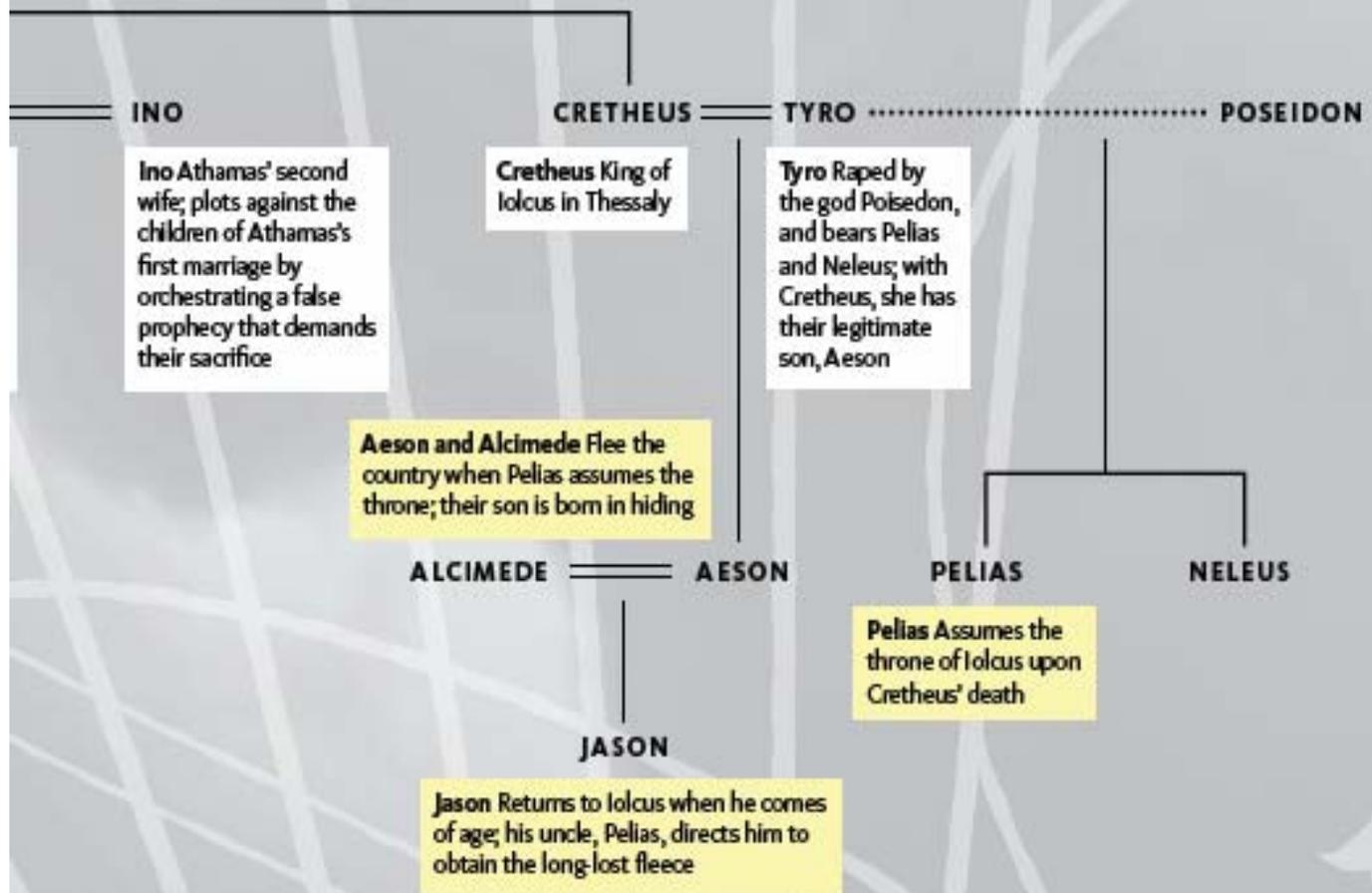
A scene from Mary Zimmerman's production of *Argonautika* at Berkeley Rep. Photographer: Kevin Berne.

# Jason and the quest for the Golden Fleece: the players

The characters who populate Jason's saga are members of the Ailod clan, distant descendants of the mythic Titans

These characters appear in *Argonautika*





## The epic tradition

*Starting from you, Phoibos, the deeds of those old-time mortals I shall relate, who by way of the Black Sea's mouth, and through the cobalt-dark rocks, at King Pelias's commandment, in search of the Golden Fleece drove tight-thwarted Argo*

— Invocation, Apollonius of Rhodes' *Argonautika*

THE ORIGIN OF THE JASON STORY, LIKE MOST MYTHS, REMAINS obscure. As legend, Jason's tale is older than those of the heroes at Troy, and its recitation dates back to the ninth and tenth centuries B.C.. The Greek poet Apollonius of Rhodes first crafted Jason's story into an epic, *Argonautika*. Little more is known of this author than that he was a citizen of Alexandria in the Third Century B.C., a one-time pupil of the Greek scholar Callimachus, and a director of the great Alexandrian Library. Alexandria was the most culturally vital Hellenic city of the Third Century, more thriving than either Athens or Rome, and a preeminent center of Homeric scholarship. In opening with an invocation to the gods, Apollonius positions himself within a cherished and illustrious epic tradition, albeit on a somewhat altered scale (compare the four book *Argonautika*'s 6,835 lines to Homer's twenty-four book *Iliad*, which totals over 15,000 lines). Drawing heavily upon Apollonius, the Roman poet Gaius Valerius Flaccus wrote a Latin *Argonautica* in the first century A.D., and it remains the other most fully realized written record of Jason's quest from antiquity. The array of adventures packed into both of these epics are speculated to be a kind of folkloric amalgam.

## Pre-Show Investigations

### Argonauts: The Next Generation

After you study Jason's family tree, proceed to this research activity.

Members of the Argo's crew are famous for achieving great deeds on board the Argo. Some of them also had famous parents and relatives, many of whom were gods and goddesses.

The next generation of mythic characters went on to achieve great deeds, too. Using your favorite search engine, enter these names, and discover the famous **children** of the Argonauts below. (note: this list may include characters who were not depicted in the production of *Argonautika* but who, according to legend, may have been a part of the expedition)

Then connect the research to literary works with which you are already familiar. Depending on your grade level and curricular content, you may wish to isolate one particular family tree and discuss it with your classmates. How might one family leave an enduring mark on our culture through its depiction in various ancient myths?

Jason  
Castor  
Pollux  
Acastus  
Idmon

Laertes  
Argus  
Laocoon  
Medea  
Atalanta

Meleager  
Argus  
Andromeda



Athena is helping a crew member erect the sail, while Argus is building the ship, 50 AD Roman relief.

berkeley repertory theatre, in association with  
the shakespeare theatre company, mccarter theatre  
center, and lookingglass theatre company, presents  
the west coast premiere of

# ARGONAUTIKA

## Cast

Hera	<b>Christa Scott-Reed*</b>
Jason	<b>Jake Suffian*</b>
Athena	<b>Sofia Jean Gomez*</b>
Pelias and others	<b>Allen Gilmore*</b>
Idmon and others	<b>Jesse J. Perez*</b>
Meleager	<b>Andy Murray*</b>
Castor and others	<b>Chris Kipiniak*</b>
Pollux and others	<b>Casey Jackson</b>
Hercules/Aietees	<b>Søren Oliver*</b>
Hylas/Dymas	<b>Justin Blanchard*</b>
Andromeda and others	<b>Ronete Levenson</b>
Amycus and others	<b>Paul Oakley Stovall*</b>
Aphrodite and others	<b>Tessa Klein*</b>
Medea	<b>Atley Loughridge*</b>

Scenic Design	<b>Daniel Ostling</b>
Costume Design	<b>Ana Kuzmanic</b>
Lighting Design	<b>John Culbert</b>
Sound Design & Original Composition	<b>Andre Pluess &amp; Ben Sussman</b>
Puppetry Design	<b>Michael Montenegro</b>
Stage Manager	<b>Cynthia Cahill*</b>
Casting	<b>Amy Potozkin</b>

\*Denotes a member of Actors' Equity Association, the Union of Professional Actors and Stage Managers of the United States

# ARGONAUTIKA

## Pre-Show Questions:

Thank you for spending an afternoon with us at Berkeley Repertory Theatre! Before seeing the show, we offer you these topics to consider. These questions and activities will help your class become acquainted with the major ideas in *Argonautika*.

1. What qualities do you value in your leaders at home, at school, or in your community? How does a leader earn and keep your trust?
2. What are some common obstacles all travelers may face when they leave home?
3. How can travel bring people closer together? In what ways can it drive us apart?
4. What is your definition of hospitality?
5. What role does hospitality play in your community?
6. Prophecies and prophets are often a part of Greek mythology. Do we have an equivalent of prophecy today? If so, what or who is it?
7. Is falling in love a negative or positive experience? Why?
8. Joseph Campbell, a mythology scholar, speaks of “the return” as one of the most challenging parts of any hero’s journey. Why might coming home be difficult for someone who has been away for a time?

## Post-Show Questions: Act I

1. When we first meet Jason, he is performing a random act of kindness for an elderly woman. How does this act shape the later events in his life?
2. If you boarded the Argo as a passenger, which member of the crew would you trust the most, and why would you trust him or her?
3. Why are the women of Lemnos given such a prominent role in the telling of this story? What can we learn from them?
4. When Hylas and Hercules stray from their crewmates, members of the Argo expedition wish to leave them behind. Others argue that it is unfair to leave a comrade behind. Who is right?
5. As the Argonauts travel toward Colchis, they meet Phineus, a prophet, who is punished by the gods for knowing too much about his own future. Why do you think this scene is included?

## Post-Show Discussion: Act II

1. When Jason meets the king of Colchis for the first time and asks him to turn over the Fleece, the king refuses and then threatens Jason and his men. Who, do you think, ultimately has the right to the Golden Fleece?
2. Why is Eros, or Cupid, characterized as a young brat who refuses to obey others?
3. Medea's desire for Jason eventually causes great suffering to those closest to her. Although Jason uses Medea to win the Fleece, Hera is actually the one who engineers the entire affair between the lovers. What does this suggest about free will?
4. How might the Argonauts' adventures at Colchis have been different if Hercules had remained on board the Argo?
5. Rather than remain with Medea, Jason chooses to marry someone from Thessaly in order to regain the throne of Thessaly. Medea, however, betrays her family to retain Jason's love. Ultimately, who was right-- Jason, or Medea? Why?
6. Why is the telling of myth still important in the 21st century? What stories do you think future generations will tell about our society today?



(from right) Hera (Christa Scott Reed) teases Aphrodite (Tessa Klein) in the West Coast premiere of *Argonautika*.

# Critical Thinking: Leadership in Myth and in the Real World

In the article “Re-examining the Hero,” the writer notes that Jason as a hero of ancient myth is a flawed protagonist, one who “readily discards Medea for a potential throne.”

Leaders who are entrusted with power often react in different ways, especially once they achieve their goals and face the daunting task of returning home with overwhelming responsibility. In the columns provided below, list both Jason's positive use of power and his abuse of it in the later portions of the story.

Jason's Positive Use of Power	Jason's Abuse of Power
<i>Carries Hera across a river</i>	<i>Asks Medea to betray her family</i>

Now that you've focused on Jason, recall the role of Hera as a goddess and leader in the production you just saw. Complete a similar list for how she uses her power as an immortal.

Hera's Positive Use of Power	Hera's Abuse of Power
<i>Protects Jason while he is at sea</i>	<i>Tries to kill Hercules with serpents</i>

Throughout history, many leaders have struggled with using power effectively. Think carefully about one of these leaders from the history of your own culture, and make the same list below.

Once you've started thinking critically about power, you may wish to make similar charts for characters you've encountered in literary works you are currently reading in class.

Finally, you may wish to reflect on a time when you or someone you knew struggled with power, and then evaluate the behavior accordingly. When have you used power in a positive manner? Has power ever had a negative effect on the way you treat others?

_____ 's Positive Use of Power	_____ 's Abuse of Power

_____ 's Positive Use of Power	_____ 's Abuse of Power

# Object Lessons

## Theatre Arts: Spotlight on Properties Design and Artistry

Throughout the production you just saw, actors held various objects in their hands in order to help us understand a story. These items are called props. Read the list below, and see if you can recall the function and the importance of each of the following props in *Argonautika*. How do props help tell the story of Jason's voyage in this play?

SANDAL	ROPE	LANTERN	ROCK
OAR	EYE	DRUM	CUP
SCARF	ARROW	BALL	RAM

The writers of this study guide had a chance to meet Tom Aberger, Production Manager, and with Darcy Engel, props department intern, at Berkeley Repertory Theatre.

### **What exactly is a props artisan, and what skills do you require when you hire personnel to work on a show at Berkeley Rep?**

A person who works in props is really a "jack of all trades." He or she should have a wide range of skills and be able to solve problems for many different types of productions. Whether the person is upholstering and building furniture for *Heartbreak House* (a play staged earlier this year at Berkeley Rep) or working with the electrics department to create stars and constellations in *Argonautika*, each member of the props team faces different challenges.

### **Can you describe the production process involved in working on a show like *Argonautika*?**

Well, some props we use originated from Lookingglass Theatre Company, where the show was first staged. Our department inherited a number of objects, but had to improve on or repair them during the rehearsal run. Even during the rehearsal, the designers continue to comment on what they want and how they wish to improve on it. There is a great deal of collaboration.

### **As a student, one option of learning more about props or other fields of theatre is to become an intern at a company like Berkeley Rep. Why is this an important part of a theatre career?**

Every show we do is different. Interns are faced with all kinds of projects that they may never have a chance to get their hands on outside of a professional theatre. The kind of problem solving involved on one show is different from on another show. Plus, some interns have experience with building, but may never have worked with puppets or with the process of making masks. They can fill in the holes of their education.

As the intern, Darcy works under the guidance of Ashley Dawn, head of the props department, and gains access to a professional design crew who helps bring the visions of Mary Zimmerman, director, and Dan Ostling, set designer, to life. She answered our questions about her work on *Argonautika* and her previous education in the area of props design.

### **As an intern who is working on different projects at Berkeley Rep, what do you think is the most challenging aspect of creating props?**

Being able to "fake it." You have to make something look realistic when it isn't real at all. Even food, which seems like it can be eaten, can't be if it functions as a prop for a show. Some of the bread you see in

*Argonautika*, for example, is made of carved foam. Since it's not always possible to have the real thing, that's where the creativity comes in.

One of the most important things is having an understanding of what the actors have to hold or use, and what they need to do, and how to accommodate that and be appropriate to the show's design. Everything has to be functional as well as realistic. And of course, safety is very important, so one of the spears in *Argonautika*, for instance, held by a goddess who flies through the air on a harness, is an almost weightless piece of PVC pipe that looks like a spear. Obviously no actor wants to risk carrying a heavy object when they are performing a stunt.

**What other props challenged you as a member of the props crew during preparation for *Argonautika*?**

I would say the breaking oar that Hercules holds when he races was the biggest challenge. Our struggle was to come up with a new solution to this problem, since it had given other theatres trouble in the past. We had to find out a way to keep him from being self-conscious, you know, so he wouldn't worry about the oar falling apart while he was using it and he wouldn't have to hold two pieces in his hands throughout the entire scene.

First, we cut the oar in half and put a piston in it and had hardware put into it, so that when Hercules pressed a button, it would release the bottom half of the oar so that he could totally control it. But the weight of the broken piece was too heavy, and it flopped around. So we finally decided to use magnets to stick and unstuck the two pieces together. Now it's strong enough to hold while he uses it, but it's also made so that Hera can rip it apart.

**From past shows, which prop have you made that played a significant role in developing the story on a literal level but also acted as a symbol on a figurative level?**

When I designed props for Anthony Shaffer's *Sleuth*, I had to build "the laughing sailor," which was a carnival toy box with a mannequin inside, a gypsy fortune teller. The main character, Andrew, who owned it, had this line about living alone and having a horrible relationship w/his wife, and his life is just one big game, a joke. So the prop actually represented the character who had been cheated on by other characters in the show.

**What about for *Argonautika*? Which prop had special symbolic significance for you as a crew member and for the designers of this show?**

I worked on a miniature box, called an image box, which was a scaled down version of a location mentioned in the text. It had mountains and trees inside to represent one of the lands where Jason travels. At several points in the show we see landscapes inside 3 different boxes, hanging from pipes in the theatre above the action on the theatre floor. They each come in at a different time.



### Can you walk us through a process of making one particular prop for this show?

I worked on the “clashing rocks” Jason faces on his journey, and these are the steps I used to create them:

1. I found two blocks of wood. I wanted a certain sound of rocks hitting, which means I had to experiment with hitting many types of wood to get it right. I settled on two 4x4 chunks to serve as the rocks.
2. Using a bandsaw with a vertical blade to make detailed cuts and shapes, I carved the wood to get a rounded shape like a rock.
3. I painted the blocks with primer, which is the first coat of paint you put on a surface so that additional coats will stick to it.
4. After putting on primer, I used texture spray paint to make the objects look like granite. You can get those types of spray at any crafts or hardware store (People use it in their own yards with pots and lawn ornaments). I sprayed at least two coats.
5. I finished with a coat of dark brown spray paint to make the final appearance look realistic.



## ARGONAUTIKA Study Guide Activities

*Argonautika* is told in a highly theatrical style that incorporates the use of props, costumes, movement, rhythm and character. These exercises are designed for middle school through high school. The activities are sequential and may be adapted for your particular classroom.

### Exercise #1: Create a New Myth

Step 1: Gather random objects (example: tape dispenser, football, frying pan, cowboy hat).

Step 2: Divide the class into groups of four or five. Give each group an object at random. This is the sacred object of their imaginary culture.

Step 3: Choose one member of the group to be the scribe (or they can take turns). Then have each group come up with a story that includes:

- The Origin of the object - where does it come from and why is it so important to the culture?
- How the object was lost?
- Who were the heroes that brought the object back?
- Include three obstacles that these heroes had to overcome.
- In the end, what price did they have to pay to accomplish this task?

Note: Stress the importance of collaboration during this process. Each group member should make a contribution.

Step 4: Have the groups read these myths to the class or move on to...

## **Exercise #2: Frozen Tableaus**

This exercise builds on the previous activity of myth creation.

Step 1: Instruct each group to identify six key points in their myth:

- The beginning
- The first obstacle
- The second obstacle
- Gaining the object
- The journey home
- What happens afterward

Step 2: Instruct each to create five frozen pictures or tableaus depicting these events. Each group member should be in each tableau. If there are not enough characters in a scene, actors can also play objects or create the environment (actors can play the mountains, or water, a chair or a boat).

Step 3: Present these tableau to the class.

## **Exercise #3: Cultural Exchange**

This activity requires that you have completed exercise #1 but not necessarily exercise #2.

Step 1: Once each group has established a new myth based on their object, they should choose a name for their group of people.

Step 2: Instruct the groups that they are to take part in a cultural exchange. They are going to relay the story of their myth to the other groups. They can choose one of the following forms to share their story:

- Create a song
- Create a dance
- Create a play

The choice should be based on what they know about their culture and on what they think would be fun to do. All group members should be included! Note: These should be short works of art that can be presented all together in one period. However, this exercise can take several periods if your schedule permits. If you have access to simple costume pieces or musical instruments, you may wish to make them available to the students.

Step 3: Have each group present their work of art to each other.

Step 4: Discuss the differences and the similarities between the group myths.

Step 5: If you have seen *Argonautika*, discuss the differences and similarities in the production versus what the students created in class.



# Berkeley Rep School of Theatre

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**Special thanks to**  
Madeleine Oldham  
Lila Neugebauer  
Tom Aberger  
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School of Theatre programming made possible by

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