

THEATER

Review: We Players' 'Psychopomp' in McLaren Park is a wondrous gateway back to in-person theater

If you're comfortable going on a fully masked walk, you'll likely feel safe on this theatrical tour.



Lily Janiak | May 17, 2021 Updated: May 18, 2021, 7:11 am





We Players performs “Psychopomp” for audience pods of one or two at a time as they walk through McLaren Park in San Francisco.

Photo: Carlos Avila Gonzalez / The Chronicle

Follow the red ribbons and red arrows, they said. Stay on the marked path through the eucalyptus and over the hills; otherwise, you might miss encounters with creatures from the spirit world. But be on the lookout for dog walkers and bicyclists, too. This magical park, with its portals to the supernatural and stunning city skyline and bay vistas, also happens to be their stomping ground.

These are some of the instructions that audience members hear before We Players’ “Psychopomp,” a theatrical walking tour through McLaren Park in San Francisco. The piece, seen Sunday, May 16, gets its name from the Greek word for beings who serve as guides to or messengers from the beyond. Their manifestations in many world cultures and religions make up the show’s characters – the Ox Head and Horse Face of China (Ling Ling Lee), Anubis of Egypt (Drew Watkins) and the cat-sìth of Celtic myth (Alan Coyne), among others.



Anubis (Drew Watkins) creeps up a hill while performing in “Psychopomp.”

Photo: Carlos Avila Gonzalez / The Chronicle

If you’re comfortable going on a fully masked walk in a park by yourself or with just one other person in your pandemic pod, you’ll probably feel safe at “Psychopomp,” where parties of two maximum embark on the tour seven minutes apart, encountering one performer at a time.

The one-on-one or one-on-two structure comes with an understandably steep price tag, at a sliding scale of \$50 to \$240. But the piece, which is helmed by Creative Director Ava Roy, rewards investment. Performers embody their characters with that particular vein-throbbing joy that comes from having a say in their creation.



Papa Legba (Rotimi Agbabiaka) tries to seduce audience members during “Psychopomp.”

Photo: Carlos Avila Gonzalez / The Chronicle

Rotimi Agbabiaka as Papa Legba — a deity in West African, Haitian and Santeria traditions — slithers among a grove of trees as if they’re his gossip circle or his seduction targets, wordlessly bidding audiences to do the same with the expert physicality of a trained clown. He turns McLaren Park into a lair and lounge, suggesting that you could do the same if you simply paused to appreciate the way a felicitous arrangement of branches makes a fortress or stage.

Pearl Marill develops so convincing a birdlike physicality as Hermes that you might think you see talons sprouting from her fingernails. She’s mastered that curious thing birds do of seeming to lead every motion with their heads while also keeping them perfectly still. As she builds toward a sleight-of-wing magic trick, she makes both study and riot out of each bit of flapping and unfurling and strutting.



Hermes (Pearl Marill) does a sleight-of-wing magic trick in “Psychopomp.”
Photo: Carlos Avila Gonzalez / The Chronicle

The afterlife proves more comic than scary in “Psychopomp,” with performers offering wryly insightful takes on their characters. Nick Dickson’s Charon is no forbidding boatswain on the River Styx but a blundering, wide-stepping fisher spouting maritime gibberish as he fights upstream. Lee’s Ox Head and Horse Face are a comic double act, one notch shy of a nyuk-nyuk-nyuk, whose two voices she suggests by making her shoulders talk to each other.

The costume designs of Art Director Brooke Jennings are vital in these performances, each a new *pièce de résistance* that tops the last. Agbabiaka’s Papa Legba wears a tiny hat at a jaunty angle, a jack-o’-lantern smile on his mask, skyrocketing eyebrows and ruffly cascades of skirts that, revealing sparkly leggings, make for a perfect flirtation partner. Chris Steele as the Valkyries had three faces and a punk rock aesthetic with bondage harnesses, corset and Mohawk, as well as faulds over the hip that wouldn’t look out of place on a storm trooper.



As the Valkyries, Chris Steele looked like a three-faced punk rocker.

Photo: Carlos Avila Gonzalez / The Chronicle

Before the COVID-19 outbreak, We Players — which has performed everywhere from Fort Point to Angel Island to a 19th century schooner sailing on San Francisco Bay — had been planning a riff on “Alice in Wonderland” in Golden Gate Park, called “What Alice Found There.” Rather than retrofitting a preexisting piece into coronavirus constraints, the company came up with a new one built specifically for them. Still, a similar spirit of childlike wonder, discovery and magic that Lewis Carroll might recognize also runs through “Psychopomp,” especially in the way you’re never quite sure when the next splendid creature will appear — around a bend, cresting a hilltop, bounding in behind you.



Kate Sachen prepares audiences to enter the supernatural realm of “Psychopomp.”

Photo: Carlos Avila Gonzalez / The Chronicle

Actors frequently enjoin audiences to slow down, listen to and appreciate the park, and if those reminders grow repetitive, they’re never wrong. We Players see the rugged sites of their site-specific performances as scene partners, not as obstacles. Whenever a performer tells you to attend to the wind, the wind seems to rise up on cue. When another tells you to appreciate the trees, you might look up, only to see boughs waltzing with one another.



“Psychopomp”: Created by Ava Roy in collaboration with cast and crew. Through June 27. Two hours. \$50-\$240. McLaren Park, 21 John F. Shelley Drive, S.F. www.weplayers.org

EVENT DETAILS
