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‘Psychopomp’ a magical, meditative walk through McLaren Park

By Jean Schiffman
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Pearl Marill takes flight as Hermes in “Psychopomp” in McLaren Park. (Courtesy We Players)



PLAY DATE

JEAN SCHIFFMAN

Although it's the first live theater event to open in The City since the pandemic began, We Players' latest world premiere, "Psychopomp," is in some ways a solitary experience — at least if, like me, you arrive solo.

Most people attend in pairs, carefully socially distanced from other pairs — so socially distanced, in fact, that I never saw or heard any other audience member on the 90-minute semi-guided walkabout along a mile and a half trail through McLaren Park.

And although most of us theater-goers crave that shared theatrical experience, "Psychopomp" (the title means "guide of souls to the place of the dead" in Greek mythology) is instead a contemplative, sensorial journey through woods and wildflower-filled meadows, up and down hills. The day I was there, a cold and cloudy Saturday, there were few non-audience park visitors to distract me.

We Players' founder/artistic director Ava Roy and her ensemble of impressively physical and vocally expressive actors, along with longtime company member Britt Lauer, devised the piece. In it, the performers, located at strategic spots along the trail (which is marked with red ribbons), sometimes with a few key props, lure you into their enchanted space, whether that be a circle drawn in the dirt or a spot on a log.

Elaborately and at times hilariously masked and costumed (by Brooke Jennings), each character interacts with you in a personal way — but you're never required to respond, unless you want to.

The characters themselves are based on mythology; some will be familiar, others not so much. For example, Charon (Nick Dickson) will ferry you cheerfully across the River Styx, and Cat Sith, a fairy creature from Celtic mythology (Alan Coyne), is at the same time Schrödinger's famous Cat, who'll instruct you in existential scientific theories that'll make your head spin.





Ling Ling Lee is a provocative guardian of the underworld in *Psychopomp*. (Courtesy We Players)

I was almost intimidated by a trickster from the Haitian voodoo tradition (Rotimi Agbabiaka) who beckons seductively from a wooded hillside and chats quite convincingly with a tree. A Chinese guardian of the underworld (Ling Ling Lee) invites you to ask a question, an Egyptian god (Drew Watkins) encourages you to remember the ancestors, a three-headed Valkyrie (Chris Steele) advises you (and itself) to Be Present. A golden, bird-like Hermes (Pearl Marill) offers a ... well, you'll see.

Most of the time you're likely to feel like Alice wandering, dazed, through a sort of ancient Wonderland.



Drew Watkins portrays Egyptian god Anubis in *We Players Psychopomp*. (Courtesy We Players)

This is a witty and magical way to jump-start San Francisco's theater scene, by a company that's thoroughly

mastered the art of creating site-specific and wonderfully creative and provocative environments.

IF YOU GO

Psychopomp

Presented by We Players

Where: McLaren Park, walk starts at 21 John F. Shelley Drive off Mansell Street, S.F.

When: 2, 2:50, 3:40 or 4:30 p.m. Thursdays-Sundays; closes June 27

Tickets: \$50 to \$240 for 1-2 people

Contact: <https://www.weplayers.org/psychopomp-guided-walk-2021>