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### A *CurtainUp* Los Angeles Review *Grendel*

By [Laura Hitchcock](#)

*You are the darkness in which they see their little light.* --- The Dragon to Grendel

Yes, it was worth waiting for. The long-anticipated opera by Elliot Goldenthal, directed by his partner Julie Taymor, based principally on John Gardner's lyric novel, missed its own opening night. Originally scheduled for May 27th, it was postponed because of computer problems with its giant central set piece. Last night's belated opening went off without a glitch and, with nothing to make excuses for, we can consider it as its creators intended.

The music and the production blend together so seamlessly (there's no other word to use, wretchedly overworked though it is) that it's hard to conceive of one without the other, which indicates that it's difficult to conceive of the opera as solely a listening experience. Goldenthal and Taymor have been professional and personal partners for years and this intuitive interpretation serves them well. Both were fascinated by Gardner's 1971 novel which takes the story from the first recorded English saga, *Beowulf*, and tells it from the viewpoint of Grendel, the prototypical big bad monster overcome by the hero Beowulf.

The core of an opera is, of course, the music and Goldenthal succeeds in creating a score that evokes the prehistoric world, not the melodies and themes of the 18th and 19th century grand operas. He begins with notes of cracking icicles and makes such remarkable effects as creating a whole world out of the final note of "Down falls the snow." He solves the problem of a solitary Grendel by creating three shadow Grendels which enables him to commune with himself as a quartet or trio. The Acts, despite the special effects in the first and Grendel's ominous "I will to fall, and so will you" in the second, seem to stop, rather than climax.

Composed around the 8th century, the saga, as recorded by Christian monks, depicts Grendel as a descendent of Cain and lets The Shaper, a blind bard at King Hrothgar's court, tell the story of Christian salvation. The isolation of this monster begins in childhood when children attempt to capture and kill him. He's saved by his mother, who disappears from this production but meets Beowulf herself in the saga. In telling the Beowulf saga to his children, John Gardner discovered what so many tale-tellers and filmmakers have learned: the villain is the most fascinating and identifiable creation.

Art stuns the eavesdropping Grendel. "Brutal facts put in a poetic place," he muses. But the tortured child monster becomes an alienated serial killer, after observing the senseless wars of humans. He's also infuriated by the abuse of the planet by Man, making Grendel an ecological enforcer.

In one of the opera's most colorful scenes, Grendel visits Madame Dragon in her lair. She's sung by Denyse Graves, who lolls menacingly on the tongue of a gigantic dragon head. Three sultry Dragonettes writhe like snakes in the dragon's tail. The Dragon expresses the nihilistic mechanical view of the universe and advises Grendel simply to get gold, though not her gold, and sit on it.

Grendel then begins a 12-year raid on King Hrothgar's hall, supported by his sense of the dragon's breath around him. Act I ends with waves of computer-generated effects, in which tiny figures sail through space and enlarged photographs of tortured human faces fill the back stage.

The warrior Unferth has come to slay or die but Grendel tosses him off easily. The closest he comes to defeating is the love he feels for Wealtheow, the beautiful bride of King Hrothgar. In a scene whose visual poetry matches its yearning serenade, Wealtheow and the tenor Shadow Grendel float across the stage in a white boat.

Another visual stunner is the entrance of Beowulf and his gold-mail clad warriors and choreographer Angelin Preljocaj's electrifying ballet in which Beowulf, danced with breathtaking grace and power by Desmond Richardson, finally defeats the monster. In this version, Grendel is ready to go.

Grendel's opening night gremlin is a gigantic iceberg set center stage studded with various openings that revolves to present a rosy cave, designed by sculptor and architect George Tsypin.. The various levels enable Grendel to sing over the heads of the ballet below. Although removing the revolving factor would eliminate some of the scenic texture, it appears that it could be done without other damage to the production. Donald Holder's nuanced lighting design both complements the set and evokes the dim doom-ridden world with its violent lighting flashes.

The cast is perfection. Eric Owens' Grendel is unforgettable, monumental in both bearing and voice. Elegant Denyse Graves is impervious and imperious as The Dragon. Tenor Richard Croft sings The Shaper with mesmerizing authority. Jay Hunter Morris is riveting and funny as the warrior/victim Unferth and Laura Claycomb lends a delicate lyric soprano to the mournful sacrificial role of Queen Wealtheow. David Gagnon has the greatest opportunity to demonstrate his silken voice as the tenor Shadow Grendel. Baritone Jonathan Hays sings the baritone Shadow and Charles Temkey the Bass Shadow.

Constance Hoffman's costumes are devastating, particularly the Dragon's scarlet train and slithering green gown. Poet J D. McClatchy shapes Gardner's novel to Goldenthal's score, selecting syllables with the precision of a laser specialist, serving as co-librettist with Julie Taymor. Contemporary humor spikes the earthy Middle English, reminding us that pissing in public and such epithets as "Bull---" have been around a long time.

The remarkable puppets are designed by Taymor and Michael Curry, beginning with a wooden ram whose parts are composed of cogs. When the ram makes love, the cogs spin feverishly. The huge ghostly gawky figures designed for Grendel's mother and her clan are awesome, in the word's original sense.

Taymor's compassionate, humorous and powerful staging holds it all together, generating the excitement and sensitivity for which she is famous. Although some of the philosophy is a little confused, this thinking monster who traces man's trajectory through poetry, philosophy, religion and the natural world emerges as an exceptional and memorable creation. We echo the Dragon's mandate: "Stick to man! Scare him to glory!"

#### **GRENDEL**

Playwright: Opera by Elliot Goldenthal; libretto by Julie Taymor and J. D. McClatchy; co-conceived by Elliot Goldenthal and Julie Taymor; based on original material by John Gardner and the epic poem *Beowulf*

Director: Julie Taymor

Cast: Eric Owens (Grendel), David Gagnon, Jonathan Hays, Charles Temkey (Shadow Grendels), Kyle Hampson (Child Grendel), Sean Sullivan (Young Prince Hrothgar), Charles Robert Austin/Raymond Aceto (King Hrothgar), George Sterne (The Propagandist), Richard Croft (The Shaper), Denyse Graves (The Dragon), Maureen Francis, Hanan Alattar, Jessica Swink (Dragonettes), Jay Hunter Morris (Unferth), Laura Claycomb (Queen Wealtheow), Desmond Richardson (Beowulf), Lisa Crave (Soprano Soloist), Veronica Christenson (Alto Soloist), Conductor (Steve Sloane, Lionel Friend)

Choreographer: Angelin Preljocaj

Set Design: George Tsypin

Lighting Design: Donald Holder

Costume Design: Constance Hoffman

Puppet Design: Michael Curry, Julie Taymor

Projection Art Director: Karin Fong

Running Time: Three hours, one intermission

Running Dates: May 27-June 17, 2006

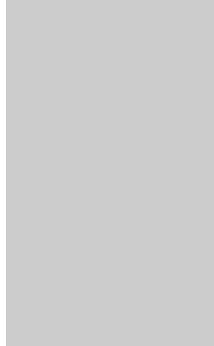
Where: Los Angeles Opera, Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, 135 N. Grand Ave., Los Angeles, Reservations: (213) 972-8001

Reviewed by Laura Hitchcock on June 8.

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