



Jayden Adams-Ruiz, from left, Anna Sosa, Katherine Cottrell, Thomas Hall, Ryan Clemens and Gunar Pencis in Virginia Stage Company's production of "The Hobbit," showing through Nov. 6 at the Wells Theatre in Norfolk. **SAMUEL FLINT/PHOTOS**

CREATURE COMFORTS

Theatrical 'Hobbit' rules at Virginia Stage

By Page Laws
Correspondent

Forget the "one ring to rule them all." At the Wells, at least until this show ends on Nov. 6, theatricality rules.

And what, pray tell, do we mean by "theatricality"? No inkling of an answer? (Please imagine "pray tell" and "inkling" in the voice of the South African-born Oxford don John Ronald Reuel Tolkien, 1892-1973, who published "The Hobbit" in 1937 and the "Ring" trilogy in 1954-55, and with C.S. Lewis belonged to a men's literary group called the Inklings.)

We mean some low-tech, highly imaginative stagecraft and agile acting. "Theatricality" is the elusive answer to every fantasy-fiction fan's question: "How do they plan to pull that off on a stage?"

For an audience accustomed to Peter Jackson's cinematic, computer-generated miracles, how will the Virginia Stage Company manage to conjure Gollum (played by half-masked Anna Sosa nicely hissing, "My Preciousssss"? How will VSC create visible/invisible hobbits, dwarves, elves, goblins, wolflike wargs, giant spiders and a dragon, without simply projecting a CG film on the theater's back wall?

Director Billy Bustamante recognized the problem early on and went for

an unexpected answer. He punned the fantasy football by saying, as noted in the playbill, "My duty was not to fulfill expectations but to challenge them." He'd been handed, pre-pandemic, a serviceable stage adaptation by Greg Banks — one of a dozen dramatic and/or musical efforts to capture Tolkien for the stage (not to mention the scores of adaptations for radio, ballet, opera, TV, gameboards, computer games, Lego sets, etc.). Banks uses tried-and-true theater techniques: One main narrator, in Bilbo Baggins (youthful but assured Jeffrey A. Haddock), occasionally addresses the audience but steps right back into the current temporal flow, sometimes all within one line.

Bilbo shares plot-precipitating duties with the forward-and-backward-seeing wizard Gandalf (the perspicacious Alana Dodds Sharp), plus nine other double- or triple-cast dwarves, trolls, elves, goblins and even humans — some played by Equity pros (Ryan Clemens as Balin, for example) but others by stalwart young actors from the Governor's School for the Arts, which is "right next door" to the Wells, as Producing Artistic Director Tom Quaintance mentions in his curtain speech. (Note: GSA is on a talent tear. A different, equally gifted batch of GSA students just

starred in "Grease" for Virginia Musical Theatre at the Sandler, in Virginia Beach.)

The plot Gandalf semi-engineers is a simple series of perils: One reluctant hobbit and 13 dwarves overcome trolls, goblins, spiders, wood elves, underground imprisonment, and one big fat dragon, with the goal of winning a lost kingdom and vast treasure of silver and gold. But there's nothing simple about the Tolkienian ethics being hammered out on this forge. More on that to come.

And so, director Bustamante went for a stripped-down, unmasked theater-walls set (bare except for a giant circle, remarkably reminiscent of the one just used, albeit differently, at Virginia Opera's "The Valkyrie." Coincidentally, Tolkien despised Wagner.) Onstage, Joseph Reynolds left a stripped-down remnant of his very own staircase from the VSC's most recent production, "Cat on a Hot Tin Roof," with lots of nice hiding shadows beneath it and space for wooden boxes and benches for later use in Bilbo's house party, to serve as ponies and such.

For cool lighting, especially those shadows and a swell invisibility effect, credit Christina Watanabe, and for cool sound effects (especially Gollum's voice) thank Steven Allegretto.



Alana Dodds Sharp as the Even Queen in Virginia Stage Company's production of "The Hobbit."

And while we're still at it, how does one do low-tech, theatricality-inducing costuming? Jeni Schaefer went for a well-worn L.L. Bean timeless, finely outdoor look, accented with a hooded cape, if you're a hobbit, and touches of bare arms and leather for a dwarf king such as Thorin (the talented and tall-for-a-dwarf Thomas Hall).

Thorin becomes a key role when it comes to Tolkienian ethics — the aspect of this production of most interest to adults who may have outgrown an interest in monsters. Both Bilbo and Thorin are on a quest to learn trust in themselves and in others. As Gandalf advises her struggling students, "You don't need magic. You have each other. That's more important than magic."

Bilbo, of course, is ever the reluctant hero, who longs throughout for his

armchair and hot cocoa. He perks up, however, once out in the world and given his "bad boy" sobriquet of "bandit." (We suspect he always had a touch of larceny in him.) Thorin begins his learning quest with intentions of sharing his treasure with all his allies but finds himself consumed by mistrust and greed that lead, as they often do, to death and destruction: here, the Battle of the Five Armies. And for what? Gold, pride, paranoia?

Critic Jes Battis suggests that Tolkien knowingly mixes his genres — epic, romance, pastoral and fantasy — while also using his different species metaphorically. The hobbits represent "colonial subjects" invariably misjudged by others despite being our "primary lens" for seeing Middle-earth. The elves represent "written

IF YOU GO

When: 7:30 p.m. Wednesdays through Fridays; 3 and 7:30 p.m. Saturdays; 2 p.m. Sundays. Through Nov. 6.
Where: Wells Theatre, 108 E. Tazewell St., Norfolk
Tickets: Start at \$25.
Details: vastage.org, 757-627-1234

culture"; the dwarves are "industrialists"; and here in "The Hobbit" the rarely appearing humans of Laketown are "failed interlocutors." Thorin admittedly doesn't give them much of a chance to succeed in that role.

Thorin's fate and the "socialist" solution to wealth distribution are something expert Tolkienians already know about, and theatergoers should have the chance to see for themselves. That doesn't relieve us of the nagging sense that some species (say, goblins, trolls, wargs) are definitely less worthy of life than others. Save the wargs?

Until then, let the questions flow...
"Does the VSC's hobbit have oversized bare feet (like his Harfoot cousins on TV's "Rings of Power")?"
"Since you mentioned TV, you'll have to buy a ticket to answer that one."

"But how do they create a giant spider and a lethal flying dragon for theater?"
"Would you believe it's all done with bendable foam rods and trash bags? Plastic sheets are used a good deal as well. (A move to cloth might better suit the aesthetes and environmentalists among us.) Watch for the eagle rescue by air. That and the giant spider are my particular favorites."

One principle — theatricality — to rule them all.

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Mitre keeping history alive in legal thriller 'Argentina, 1985'

By Lindsey Bahr
Associated Press

The 1985 Trial of the Juntas was a seismic moment in Argentina's history, helping to solidify the country's democratic future after seven years of military dictatorship. But when filmmaker Santiago Mitre started talking about making a classic political thriller about the David-versus-Goliath trial, in which public prosecutors Julio Strassera and Luis Moreno Ocampo tried former military leaders for war crimes, including the torture and disappearance of thousands between 1976 and 1983, he was surprised to learn that few of his peers knew much about it.

Mitre was only 4 years old at the time of the trial, but through his mother — who worked in justice her whole life — he had grown



Santiago Mitre, seen Sept. 4, directed "Argentina, 1985," a film about the Trial of the Juntas. **VANNEY LECAER/INVISION**

up hearing stories about the trial, its importance for Argentina and anecdotes about Strassera's unique personality (grumpy, but

full of humor). Strassera was the veteran prosecutor who reluctantly took on the case, fearful for his family and himself. Ocampo was younger and more idealistic, but also risked alienating his prominent family, who had significant military ties.

Mitre was certain that the personalities and drama of the situation would make for a great film in the vein of classic political thrillers like "All the President's Men" and "Judgment at Nuremberg."

"Argentina, 1985," now streaming on Amazon Prime Video, chronicles the momentous trial, which took place under a cloud of extraordinary uncertainty and unease only two years after the dictatorship fell.

Wife and death toll that human rights organizations estimate at 30,000, Argentina's dictatorship is considered Latin America's deadliest of the 1970s and 1980s. Less than half of the dead have been recognized at the official level, however, because the military made the bodies of most of its victims disappear.

Across five months in the courtroom, during which the prosecutorial team received constant personal threats, 833 witnesses testified. Several of those testimonies are used verbatim in the film to great dramatic effect.

"It was super important to have direct contact with the people that worked on the trial," Mitre said. "I spoke to as many as it was possible for me, because I felt that the film needed like to have this stronger human perspective... It was very important for me for not only for knowing the facts, but to understand

what they were feeling." He met Ocampo, played by Peter Lanzani in the film, and Strassera's son, who was enraptured by his father's work.

Upon hearing about the project, Ricardo Darin wanted not only to play Strassera, who died in 2015, but to produce as well. He remembered the trial well, and wanted to help younger generations who were born into democracy in the country understand what happened.

"It was a very, very big deal," Darin said through a translator. "Let's not forget that a lot of people in a lot of parts of the society in Argentina back then, they had no idea of the horrors that had happened. This is something that was not talked about and something that was not shared. So for a lot of people, being able to see witnesses come

forward and being able to hear the family members of people who were killed or tortured was an eye-opener."

The film has been well received around the world at various festivals, recently picking up the audience award in San Sebastian, and in Argentina, which submitted it to compete for best international film at the Oscars.

For Mitre, though, it's more than awards on his mind. He's trying to help preserve and build a society's memory. "It was important for me as a citizen to do this film, not only as a filmmaker," Mitre said. "It was the base of the new democracy. It was a point of reunion of the society. Many people don't remember how it was to get our democracy and how important it is to keep defending democracy."