

February 19, 2007 —

Rare Sondheim musical hops into Pittsburgh

In *The Frogs*: 'The time is the present. The place is ancient Greece.'

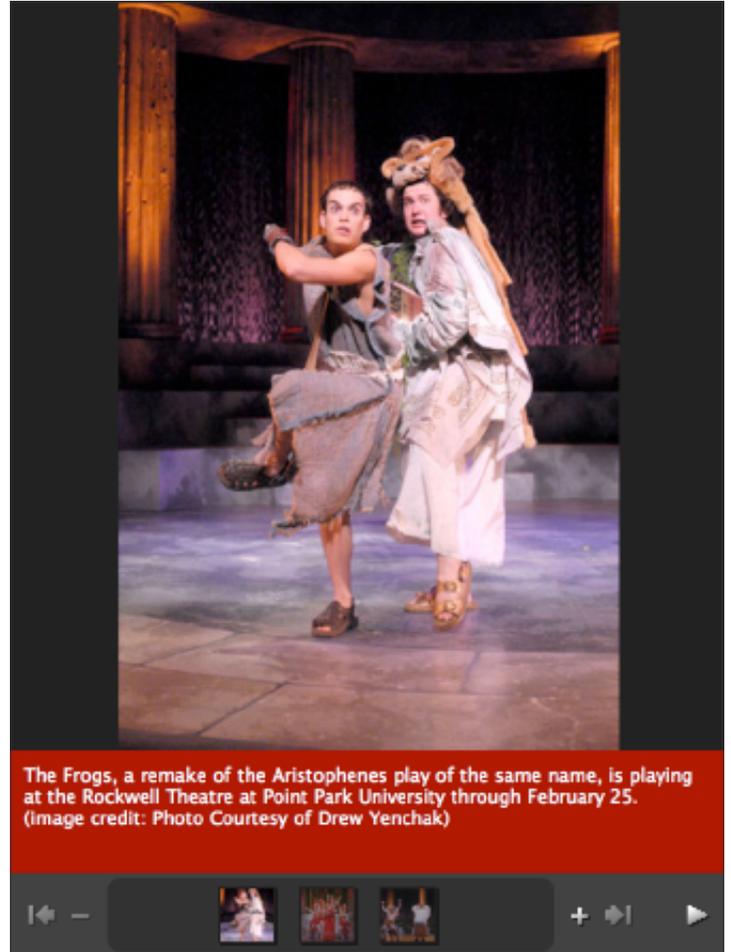
PILLBOX | Selena Beckman-Harned

The Frogs opened in Yale University's swimming pool in 1974, starring then-unknowns Meryl Streep and Sigourney Weaver, plus a raft of undergraduate swimmers in jockstraps and green mesh. The Pittsburgh premiere at Point Park University on Valentine's Day was much drier, but only slightly less absurd.

Stephen Sondheim and Burt Shelove — the pair that created *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum* — adapted *The Frogs* from Aristophanes' play of the same name. Like *Forum*, *The Frogs* updates ancient material with a barrage of anachronistic jokes, brilliant numbers, and a touch of social commentary. Aristophanes' play follows Dionysus, god of the theater, who, exhausted by war and frustrated with bad theater, decides to fetch Euripides back from Hades. The musical replaces Euripides with George Bernard Shaw and alters the plot to reflect frustrations with current political leaders.

Point Park's version begins with Dionysus (Dale Spollett) and his slave Xanthias (Jordan Grubb) laying down rules for the audience in a portion called "Invocation and Instructions to the Audience," which includes admonitions not to hum along, unwrap candies, fart, eat, cough, or leave early. Spollett, utterly convincing as the bon vivant Dionysus, explains, "The time is the present. The place is ancient Greece."

While feeling a war-torn Athens, Dionysus and Xanthias note their leaders' incompetence: "Words seem to fail our leaders — even simple words." The audience howled in appreciation, and the two head off to see Herakles, who can help them find the way to hell. Lugging Dionysus' extra togas and Shaw's complete works, Xanthias complains about his lot in "I Love to Travel." Grubb seems an unlikely ancient Greek — but a great comic sidekick and everyman character.



Donning a lionskin headdress, fur loincloth, and drawn-on six-pack, Herakles (Thomas Sullivan) dominates the stage. The hero decides that Dionysus can't survive in Hades unless he impersonates a more powerful god, so he gives Dionysus a quick lesson in striking fear into mortals' hearts and lets him borrow his spare lionskin and club. Dionysus sets off for Hades with the reluctant Xanthias in tow.

The disguised Dionysus starts across the river Styx in a boat rowed by gatekeeper and pothead Charon (Kevin Doyle). Halfway to Hades, Dionysus is beset by a swarm of huge frogs, as bouncy as Tigger, but ten times creepier. The frogs represent the status quo — they want to prevent Dionysus from bringing back Shaw and changing history. But Dionysus escapes the frogs and steps onto the shores of Hades, shaken and covered in seaweed.

After a few misadventures and an encounter with Pluto (played flamboyantly but unimpressively by Adam Chisnall) the two Greeks find Shaw and are set to head back when Dionysus spots Shakespeare. Torn between the two geniuses, Dionysus decides to pit them against each other in the ultimate verbal battle. After the two playwrights face off, quoting the subjects of life, love, and death, Dionysus realizes that despite Shaw's brilliance, the world will respond to Shakespeare's idealistic poetry better than Shaw's dark truths. Dionysus and Shakespeare head upwards, leaving Xanthias behind as collateral. The play ends with the somewhat sobering "Final Instructions," begging the audience not to be apathetic like the frogs, to get out and change the world.

Point Park's production was brilliantly performed, costumed, sung, and orchestrated. The play is alternately hilarious, serious, political, silly, and thought-provoking. It's showing until next Sunday, so hurry — hop on over to the Pittsburgh Playhouse before it's gone.

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