

Review Theater

'The Giant Squid' is back on a Philadelphia stage

By Howard Shapiro
INQUIRER STAFF WRITER

The Giant Squid, a great homegrown goof of a show that was a dark-horse hit of the 2008 Philly Fringe festival, is back in a version that's eerier and a little less playful than the original. Yet it comes together with more polish — especially in Mark Valenzuela's spooky sound design and the lighting by David O'Connor and Terry Brennan, both aspects of the show that are essential to the fun.

An earnest so-called professor (Robert DaPonte) lectures us about the giant killer squid he pursues, aided by his enormously pregnant wife (Jenna Horton, new to the cast) and his crew: an uber-macho fighter (David Johnson), an Inuit explorer (Justin Jain), and a young adventurer (Bradley K. Wrenn).

The best bits are from the original production, as when we go on an underwater adventure or learn the (fiction-

al) art of open-ocean violence called mer-fu, or whenever the bits and pieces of the show become madcap and clownish. The special visual effects are purposely low-tech and very funny; they give the whole thing an element of the bizarre. There's a wonderful giant-squid tentacle that begins to have a starring role, and ... well, I won't give it away.

The show's performers and creators are now part of two locally based theater groups, the Berserker Residents and Swim Pony Performing Arts. I wish their current version had the original's feel of spontaneity, but part of the difference is that the site-specific Drexel classroom where the Fringe version was performed was perfect for a spoof in the form of a lecture and demonstration, and the Annenberg Center's Harold Prince Theatre, where I saw it last weekend, is far less intimate.

The director of both versions is the inventive Adrienne Mackey, and Timothy Sawicki wrote the piece with the ensemble. *The Giant Squid* will run Friday and Saturday for two performances at West Philadelphia's Community Education Center. It's an entertaining 75 minutes and ... yikes — is that a tentacle reaching out behind you?

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The Giant Squid

8 p.m. Friday and Saturday at the Community Education Center, 3500 Lancaster Ave. Tickets: \$10. 847-309-1266 or www.eventbrite.com/event/4378588476.

#philastage on Twitter. Read his recent work at www.philly.com/howardshapiro. Hear his reviews at the Classical Network, www.wwfm.org.



Cast members (from left) Jenna Horton, Bradley K. Wrenn, Justin Jain, Robert DaPonte, and David Johnson. The current production of "The Giant Squid" grew out of a version that was a hit at the 2008 Philly Fringe festival.
MARK VALENZUELA

