

SCHOOL SHOWS OF *GILGAMESH* - BOOK QUICKLY! CALL ANN DUNN at (828) 258-1028

THE PRODUCTION:

Gilgamesh is a story of gods and heroes. It is probably the oldest legend in the world. It is a foundation stone of the classical literary canon, and a source of many incidents which reappear later in the bible and in the long memory of humanity. The fact that it brims with monsters and battles and adventures is no small part of its charm.

The Asheville Ballet, under the direction of **Ann Dunn**, in collaboration with **Black Swan Theater**, is able to offer *Gilgamesh* this September as a special matinee production for high schools and high-school age homeschoolers. Mature middle-schoolers at the discretion

The play, by UNCA professor and playwright **David Brendan Hopes**, preserves the archaic splendor of the original while smoothing over some of the rough places in narration caused by broken tablets and, sometimes, simple ignorance of what those ancient people were talking about. It is contemporary, fast-moving, sometimes funny. We think that the ancient classics were often funny, though we sometimes miss the joke. **Matthew Richmond**, instructor of music at UNCA, has created a brilliant original vocal and instrumental score for Dunn's dancers. Both the music and the choreography, while remaining thoroughly contemporary, seek to invoke the flavor of that ancient time. *Gilgamesh* is a collaboration among three educators, who, in the full sense of the word, never stop teaching.

Gilgamesh has been chosen to be part of the festivities surrounding the installation of UNCA chancellor Anne Ponder.

Evening performances of *Gilgamesh* are September 29 and 30 at 7:30 PM at the **Diana Wortham Theater**.

Special school matinees will be offered Friday September 29 at 9:00 a.m. and 11:00 a.m. Cost for students is \$5, for accompanying adults is \$10. For reservations, please call Ann Dunn at 828 258-1028.

STUDY GUIDE:

Gilgamesh was the king of Uruk, one of twelve city-states of ancient Sumer, in heroic times. He was probably a real person, though the legends that grew around his name, possibly from as early as thirty centuries before the common era, elevate him into one of the supermen of legend.

The people of Uruk loved Gilgamesh, but maybe feared him a little, too, because he had the energy of a god and most people don't. He was wearing them out with his wars and amours and building projects, so they prayed to the gods to give them some relief from their inexhaustible king. At the same time, a wild man named Enkidu was roaming the wilderness, breaking the traps of hunters and setting free the captured animals. The hunters, too, prayed to the gods to save them from Enkidu.

The gods, hearing both prayers, got the idea that Gilgamesh and Enkidu should meet and draw off one another's energy. They conspired to get Enkidu to Uruk by sending Shamhat, a beautiful priestess of the goddess of love, to seduce him and bring him to town.

Enkidu and Gilgamesh did meet, but things did not go as the gods had planned. They did in fact fight for a moment in the streets of Uruk, but in the middle of the battle each realized that the other was the helper and companion he had been needing all his life, and they became allies and heroic friends.

Feeling the strength of brotherhood, Gilgamesh and Enkidu decided to challenge the very gods, and attacked and killed a watcher-spirit of the great wilderness of Lebanon, the demon Humbaba.

The goddess Ishtar loved Gilgamesh, and came to Uruk to try to seduce him. Gilgamesh, however, knew of the bad luck of Ishtar's other lovers, and spurned her with some very cutting insults. Scorn is not a good thing to heap on the Queen of Heaven, and Ishtar sent The Bull of Heaven—possibly the symbol for an earthquake—to plague Uruk and its king.

Enkidu and Gilgamesh defeat the Bull of Heaven, but Enkidu is mortally wounded. Gilgamesh holds his dying friend in his arms, the first tragedy of his triumphant life, and vows that he will find the secret of immortality and bring his friend back from the dead.

Does he succeed? Come see.

The discovery by archaeologists of the text of ***Gilgamesh***, in cuneiform on hardened clay tablets in the ruins of the palace of Assurbanipal of Assyria, gave context to certain images and allusions which were mysterious until people knew the story they referred to. Since that time, the epic has become standard reading in most universities and many schools, prized for its full-throttle emotions and the universality of its vision of heroism and fortitude, of particular interest to religious scholars for the light it sheds on the milieu of the ***Old Testament***. Anyone familiar with the heroes of the ***Iliad*** will recognize ***Gilgamesh*** immediately. Anyone familiar with the conviction of immortality and full devotion to passion of an adolescent will recognize ***Gilgamesh*** immediately.

The area of the adventures of Gilgamesh and Enkidu was very long ago called Sumer, and then Akkad, then Assyria or Media or Persia, or any number of other things, but in more recent times—the last two millennia or so—was known in the West by the Greek word “Mesopotamia,” meaning The Land Between Rivers. It is roughly the area we call Iraq (Humbaba lived in Lebanon, which was then a vast cedar forest), and so we see history and legend, love and war have been unfolding there for a very long time. Uruk—sometimes called Erech—is a very old city indeed, one of the first cities that we know about, though the Sumerians themselves had ancestors and “ancients,” who are sometimes referred to in the original epic.

The ancient people of Mesopotamia reckoned by twelves, as we do by tens. Their mystical respect for twelve (derived from one of the only “natural” markers of time, the twelve full moons, or months, in a year, and the twelve signs of the zodiac which correspond to them) accounts for the fact that there are twelve hours in a day (and twelve in a night), sixty seconds in a minute and sixty minutes in an hour (5x12), 360 degrees (12x5x6) in a circle or a horizon. The sacredness of twelve endures in living traditions, such as the twelve apostles or the twelve tribes of Israel or the twelve gems on the Hebrew high priest's breastplate. You might want to make a count of other areas in which twelve seems to be a magical or efficacious number.

Most scholars agree that the people of Sumer invented writing by pressing reeds into wet clay, a process we call cuneiform. The epic of ***Gilgamesh*** was recorded on cuneiform tablets, but in the different languages which succeeded each other in the area, and over a quite long span of time. The tablets don't always agree, so someone presenting “the epic of Gilgamesh” must choose the line of narrative which seems best to him from a broken and partial tradition.

The audience may want to be on the look out for the themes of love and friendship, and for the particular take this poem has on the ancient battle of the sexes. The sometimes fatal, sometimes serpentine subtle power of women in this text balances much of what we suppose to be the subservient position of women in antiquity. Observe how what Uruk meant by “god” is different from what we mean by the word. Watch for the ways in which people removed from us by more time than the first stone of the first pyramid are recognizable, plausible, in most ways, just like the person sitting in the seat beside you. Just like you.

Here are three excellent internet sites for further reading on the Epic of Gilgamesh: <http://novaonline.nvcc.edu/eli/eng251/gilgameshstudy.htm#fut>
<http://www.utexas.edu/courses/clubmed/gilgamsh.html>
http://classics.uc.edu/~johnson/epic/study_guide1.html

Additionally, you may want to get online and research topics such as:

Mesopotamia
ziggurat
Ishtar or Inana (an older name for Ishtar)
Ereshkigal (Inana’s sister)
Babylon
Sumer
Uruk
Ur
Assyria
nature spirits (such as Humbaba)
Mesopotamian religion
ancient warfare
Noah’s Flood
city state
translations of *Gilgamesh*
the gods and goddesses of Mesopotamia
Enuma Elish (the Babylonian Genesis)

Teachers may want to consider utilizing the Asheville Ballet/ Black Swan production of Gilgamesh to introduce or supplement sections on:

modern dance
contemporary music and composers
creative writing
drama
acting
dance and movement
history
multi-cultural perspectives
poetry and literature.
gender
Contemporary problems and issues in the Mideast.

What other great stories do you know that really need to be put on the stage? Are you perhaps the person to do it? Are you and your friends and teacher the people to make it happen?