

'Genius' at work

Touted grant winner revisits myths

By MICHAEL GILTZ

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Writer-director Mary Zimmerman's "Metamorphoses" — an acclaimed production of ancient Roman myths that had smash runs in Chicago and Los Angeles — was in rehearsals here in New York when the World Trade Center was attacked.

Its stories of wrenching loss and enduring love thus became all too pertinent.

"It was rough," admits Zimmerman, who says she worried in particular that the tale of a king who goes to sea and is suddenly and unexpectedly killed might hit too close to home.

"Our first audience, when we got up to the beginning of Alcyon and Ceyx — where he's about to set sail and be hit by that storm — I just started shaking really violently because it has such uncanny echoes.

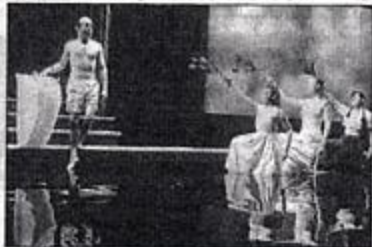
"But then I had to admit to myself that that's what catharsis is. These myths have a redemptive power in that they are so ancient. There's a comfort in the familiarity of the human condition.

"Plus, that story ends with this kind of divine transformation into birds where the two are always together in another form."

Indeed, the entire 90-minute piece, currently in previews at Second Stage and opening Tuesday, is a balm, showing in witty and unexpected ways how these eternal myths speak to us.

It features the stories of King Midas (who asks for the power to turn everything he touches into gold and is told by a god, "That's a very, very bad idea"), Orpheus and Eurydice, and less familiar works.

Marvelously, it's presented in



"These myths have a redemptive power in that they are so ancient," says director Mary Zimmerman of her acclaimed show, "Metamorphoses" (left), which tackles Roman stories of love and loss.

and around a 27-foot-wide pool that always keeps a sense of play about the darkest tales. The show reaffirms Zimmerman — the recipient of a MacArthur "genius" grant — as one of the foremost directors today.

This is something that New Yorkers who've seen her previous plays like "The Notebooks of Leonardo Da Vinci" and "Arabian Nights" have known for years.

Despite being on the cutting edge, Zimmerman's work with

her company Lookingglass is hardly avant-garde. It's warm, accessible and theatrical in the best sense, maintaining an air of fun she learned from a very early age.

"I've told this story a million times," says Zimmerman, who is calling from Northwestern University in Evanston, Ill., where she is on staff.

"But when I lived in England when I was 5, there was a wood in the back of our house, a national preserve. It was called in that very British way, the Little Woods. Unknown to me, in

a clearing in that woods every year was performed "A Midsummer Night's Dream." I actually stumbled upon a rehearsal of that and it's sort of my primal scene of theater.

"At the end of it, they put on a gramophone record and the man playing Oberon ran away trailing these streams of red fabric with people running behind him. They ran and they ran."

"Suddenly, the guy playing Oberon said, 'How many circles do we make?' And everyone started laughing. It was kind of the double ap-

peal of fairies in the wood, but more importantly, it was adults playing and laughing like that. It was just absolutely thrilling to me."

Zimmerman started acting in community theater, at school, even putting on productions in her backyard. Now 41, she's maintained that sense of play while pursuing projects as varied as "The Odyssey" and "Eleven Rooms of Proust," a take on "Remembrance of Things Past" that received rave reviews in Chicago but can't travel to New York or London until the right vast space is found to accommodate it.

Up next is an opera about Galileo — a collaboration with Philip Glass — that debuts in Chicago in the spring and comes to BAM in the fall of 2002. In between, Zimmerman — who is now single after a 17-year relationship with the playwright and actor Bruce Norris — hopes to return to New York, where the past few summers she's done Shakespeare in the Park, most recently "Measure for Measure" this year with Billy Crudup.

"You're in this tradition that's recognizable all over the country and being part of that is thrilling," says Zimmerman.

"I find it profoundly pleasurable to be a part of it. Growing up in Nebraska, you were told if you walked into Central Park after dark, you would be knifed in five seconds. And to be walking home through the park at two in the morning, with other people, you feel you're in a state of grace almost.

"You're in this quiet pastoral place in the middle of the city and it's just enchanted. I would never turn down the park, it's such an extraordinary experience."