

World

The Odyssey, but make it an airport. New play turns Homer's poem into a modern epic

Calgary band Reuben and the Dark provides soundtrack to *Ulysses, The Last Odyssey*

[Megan Williams](#) · CBC News · Posted: Jul 30, 2023 4:00 AM EDT | Last Updated: July 30



Ulysses, The Last Odyssey situates the ancient Greek poem inside an airport, like the Greek islands along its hero's route home, a place where people arrive, depart from and get stuck in. The spoken-word and dance show played in Syracuse, Italy, in early July. (Megan Williams/CBC)

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By modern standards, the outdoor theatre in the town of Syracuse on the southern Italy island of Sicily is historic, putting on plays under the night sky since 1914.

But the amphitheatre, with its gleaming stones carved into the hillside overlooking the port town, actually dates back much further — to some 500 years BC.

Sicily was then part of the larger Greek empire, Magna Graecia, and the theatre was one of the biggest in the world. [Upwards of 10,000 spectators](#) sat spellbound as tragedies written by Sophocles and Euripides and comedies by Aristophanes played out on the stage, the last rays of sunlight giving way to the rising moon.

That same magical experience continues today thanks to Italy's National Institute of Ancient Drama, whose productions draw sold-out crowds. And this summer for the first time, its repertoire has widened to include fresh takes on other ancient works. Among them is a new version of Homer's *Odyssey* called *Ulysses, The Last Odyssey*, a spoken-word and dance show with a hauntingly powerful soundtrack by Calgary folk-rock band Reuben and the Dark.

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"This year was kind of an experiment," said Valeria Told, who took over the Institute as superintendent in May, with ambitious plans to take productions on tour globally. "To use classical text and mix it up with dance, circus, modern music and a folk-rock band."

The Last Odyssey, which ran in June and early July, is their principal test run.

Set in an airport — a present-day reinterpretation of the Greek islands where Odysseus (or Ulysses) arrives, departs from and often gets stuck in — it's a mash up of influences. These include Steven Spielberg's *The Terminal*, Pina Bausch choreography and Italian TV variety shows, with musical refrains from Reuben and the Dark infusing it all with yearning and a sense of foreboding.

"There's a certain sentiment across all of the songs that really suits the storylines in *The Odyssey* and I was kind of surprised by how I seemed to write from that character," said band frontman Reuben Bullock.



Original stones from the 2,500-year-old Greek outdoor theatre in Syracuse can still be seen today, where people continue to come to watch ancient Greek tragedies and comedies. Here, the audience gathers for *Ulysses, The Last Odyssey*, on July 1. (Megan Williams/CBC)

Italian-Canadian artistic collaboration

In the ancient poem, Odysseus sails triumphantly away from Troy after a 10-year siege, making his way home to Ithaca, a journey that takes another decade. Along the way, he and his fellow warriors encounter witches, one-eyed monsters and sirens who try to lure the men to their death — a scene Bullock wrote original music for.

"You know beauty and temptation and evil and all that," he said over the phone from Calgary, where the group played as part of a Western Canada tour this summer.

Bullock says the offer to collaborate on the ancient Greek stage production came a few years after he'd tagged a post of a [TV dance routine by renowned Italian theatre](#)

[director](#) and choreographer Giuliano Peparini that had used his band's song *Hallelujah*. The two exchanged a few messages. Then last year, Peparini reached out to ask Bullock if he'd like to do the music for his mounting of *The Odyssey*.



Reuben and the Dark lead singer and songwriter Reuben Bullock performs in CBC Calgary studios in this file photo. The band provided the soundtrack to *Ulysses, The Last Odyssey*. (Ellis Choe/CBC)

"When I listen to his music, I just have images coming out of my mind," said Peparini.

Peparini isn't the only director to be captivated by the cinematic quality of the band's music: Reuben and the Dark songs can be heard on series, movies and trailers for everything from *The Handmaid's Tale*, *Grey's Anatomy*, *Resident Evil* and *Heartland* to *Breaking Bad*, *Game of Thrones* and the movie *Dolittle*.

Peparini said the band's emotional range and nuance were able to convey the darker, self-involved sides of hero Odysseus. "He wants to see things and lots of his companions die just for his curiosity," he said.

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For *The Last Odyssey*, Peparini and Bullock worked remotely, picking and choosing from Reuben and the Dark's back catalogue. Bullock also wrote a few original songs and instrumental compositions.

Bullock had a copy of an English translation of *Ulysses* on his shelf for ages and finally read it. He was struck, he said, by how modern, complex and ultimately human the Greek hero is — and by how much he found of the ancient traveller in his own song writing.

"It was very interesting how my writing style, and the character I write from which is myself as well, has a lot to do with this man lost at sea being tormented and tested by the world," said Bullock.

LISTEN | Reuben and the Dark:

Suffering plays a central role

Francesco Morosi, 32, the Greek scholar who translated and wrote the play, said he stripped down the text to focus on the individual adventures the hero recounts in the airport to fellow stranded travelers.

"It's full of emotions and feelings," Morosi of the poem's lasting appeal. "And suffering plays a central role. This is a man who suffers for 20 years and he can't even find comfort in memory. By having to recount his memories, he's asked to suffer twice. So you can't help but empathize."

Italian theatre critic Peppino Ortoleva agrees.



The haunting music of Calgary folk-rock band Reuben and the Dark underscored the sense of longing of *The Odyssey*, which director and choreography Giuliano Papparini set in a present-day airport. (Megan Williams/CBC)

"You are moved not just by Odysseus's trials, but also by his reliving his many tragedies, which is one of the most modern aspects of Greek culture — that life is unpredictable," he said. "Unlike in *The Iliad* and many other tragedies, our destiny is not defined. Odysseus goes through a series of unpredictable events and this is very modern."

The decision to convey the story with dance and a modern sound track — not to mention the odd flash of variety show kitsch — has paid off, with the show selling out and about a third of audience members under age 25, higher than the 20 per cent average for the tragedies, say organizers.

"The tragedies are an easy sell," said Valeria Told. "But we want a wider program to draw a more diversified audience. Younger people and especially people from abroad."

Productions with music and movement like *The Last Odyssey* don't rely on translations, which makes the shows more accessible.

The next step, says Told, is tapping foreign directors and looking for production partners to take these vibrant new interpretations of ancient works to audiences in Europe, the United States and Canada.

Ulysses, the Last Odyssey opens again in September in Sicily before touring in Italy.

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