

PLAYS FOR
New Audiences

A Division of Children's Theatre Company

***Jason and the
Golden Fleece***

by John Olive

Based on the story by Apollonius of Rhodes

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JASON

ATALANTA, a god, daughter of Artemis

SOLDIER

PELIAS, King of Thessaly

HERCULES, strongest man in Thessaly

ARGOS, a ship-builder

ORPHEUS, a poet

PHINEUS, a seer

THE HARPY, head of a hawk, body of a woman, black wings

SORCERESS

HIPSYPYLE, Queen of Lemnos

A SEA BIRD

ARACHNE, a thief

AETES, King of Colchis

MEDEA, daughter of Aetes

THE SERPENT GUARDIAN

INOS, a swamp creature

The above are played by a company of five to eight actors.

Thousands of years ago, when the world was charged with magic.

(At rise: the banks of the River Anaurus, in Thessaly, near the city of lolcus. JASON, wearing rough peasant's clothing and a single sandal, enters. He carries a WOMAN slung over his shoulder. He staggers from the weight, his bare foot slapping the floor, legs shaking)

JASON:
You're... so... heavy!

(He sinks to his knees, gasping for breath. The WOMAN stands, facing him, smiling. JASON look up, sees her and reacts, jumping up)

Oh! Where, where did the old lady go? I carried her through the River Anaurus, she was old, and, and frail, and she asked me to help her, so I said sure, and I picked her up, and I slung her over my shoulder and she was light, like a bunch of dry sticks, but then she got so heavy, and I—

WOMAN:
Jason.

JASON:
—lost my sandal!

WOMAN:
Jason.

JASON:
What?

WOMAN:
The old woman is I.

JASON (after a brief pause):
What?

WOMAN:
I am the old woman.

JASON:
You?

WOMAN:
Yes.

JASON (stares for a moment):
But you're beautiful.

WOMAN:
Thank you.

JASON:
Who are you?

WOMAN:
I am Atalanta, daughter of Artemis, guardian of wild things.

JASON:
You're... a god?

ATALANTA (nods)

JASON (suddenly laughs):
Oh, that's ripe! "I'm a god. Atalanta, daughter of Artemis".

ATALANTA (lets him laugh, then quietly says):
I know what you intend to do.

JASON (stops laughing, steps back):
No, you don't.

ATALANTA (looks at him calmly)

JASON:
He killed my father. His own brother. And my mother. Slew them. Put himself on the throne of Thessaly. My throne. Thessaly is mine. The fields, the vineyards, Mount Pelion, the city lolcus. Mine. I am Jason, son of Aeson, and—

(Shouts)

—I am coming! Do you hear me, Uncle?! I'm coming!

ATALANTA:
How do you know this?

JASON:
I remember it. All these years I thought it was a dream, the look on my mother's face when she gave me to Nurse, the sound of her screaming as Nurse carried me down the secret passage. But I remember. And yesterday, when I reached my age, Nurse came back and told me what happened, and now I'm—

(Shouts again)

JASON, con't:

—coming back, Pelias, you slayer of kings and mothers, I'm coming for you!

(Suddenly panicky)

Are you saying it's not true? You'd know. I mean, if you're really a god. Isn't it true?

(Pulls a talisman from under his shirt)

I have an amlu, an amru— A thing.

ATALANTA:

An amulet.

JASON:

It belonged to my mother. See? The royal seal. This is proof. This makes me king of Thessaly.

ATALANTA:

Does it?

JASON:

Yes.

(ATALANTA looks at JASON appraisingly for a long moment)

ATALANTA:

So, Jason, son of Aeson, what are you going to do?

JASON:

Take my throne.

ATALANTA:

How?

JASON:

I'll show Pelias my amulet. He'll have to step down.

ATALANTA:

I think you've been out of touch up there on Mount Pelion, living with the old man in that little hut. I don't think you know what sort of king Pelias has become. I'll show you.

(KING PELIAS and a SOLDIER enter)

PELIAS:

Seize him!

(The SOLDIER grabs JASON roughly. ATALANTA steps back, watching)

Bind him.

(The SOLDIER lashes JASON's hands together. PELIAS notices something)

Where is your other sandal?! Where is it?!

JASON (stares at PELIAS with hard hatred)

PELIAS:

Kneel him.

(SOLDIER kicks JASON's feet, forcing him to his knees)

Who are you?

JASON:

Your nephew.

(PELIAS goes to JASON, examines the amulet, then yanks it off JASON's neck)

PELIAS:

My brother had no children. You are an impostor, a spy.

(To the SOLDIER)

Take him to the temple. We'll offer his steaming heart to the gods at dawn. Get him out of my sight!

(Shift: the temple. Night. The SOLDIER shoves JASON forward. We hear the booming of a thick door, the sharp snap of a lock. JASON sinks to his knees as the SOLDIER exits)

JASON:

Oh, father, you must be so ashamed of me. Defeated before I even reached Iolcus.

(Bows his head. Moment. ATALANTA enters)

ATALANTA:

Jason.

JASON:

How did you—? Oh. You really are a god. Can you help me? Slip the lock and open the door? Or fly me. I'd really like to fly. Please. It can't end like this.

ATALANTA:

I'm going to tell you a story.

JASON:

I die at dawn, and you're going to tell me a story?

ATALANTA (points):

There. Do you see?

JASON:

What?

(Soft music)

ATALANTA:

A young boy, Phrixus, shivering in a temple
This temple
Waiting to die upon the morn
Sacrificed to end Thessaly's drought
Dry clouds seeded with the mist of his sweet young blood

JASON:

I don't like this story.

ATALANTA:

Comes the dawn sun
Golden light gleams on the priest's bright blade

(Music crescendos, then stops)

JASON:

What happens?

ATALANTA:

A ram

(Music returns)

A wondrous ram with fleece of golden crystal
Blinding!
Down he swoops and gathers young Phrixus on his back
He flies high, higher than any mortal has ever flown
He flies Phrixus from Thessaly to the country of Colchis
On the Unfriendly Sea

ATALANTA, con't:

The Black Sea

There, when Phrixus reaches his age he sacrifices the ram and hoards the golden fleece for his own use

(Light, rich, golden and liquid, plays over JASON's face)

JASON:

Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh....

ATALANTA:

Do you see it, Jason?

JASON:

Yes.

ATALANTA:

He rules Colchis for four hundred years
His son Aetes is now king

ATALANTA:

Aetes is three hundred years old
The golden fleece gives life
The golden fleece gives power
The golden fleece makes kings

(JASON reaches out for the fleece — the source of the light. ATALANTA stands, and the light normalizes)

Good-bye, Jason.

JASON:

What? Please, no, don't go. I need you.

ATALANTA:

When you need me, look to the sky.

JASON:

I need you now, they're going to cut out my heart at dawn, don't go!

(ATALANTA leaves)

No!

(Shift: dawn)

Oh.

(PELIAS enters, carrying a dagger)

PELIAS:

I don't want to kill you.

(Approaches JASON)

They must have hidden you well. I had soldiers looking for you everywhere. I'd convinced myself you were dead. When the oracle warned me, beware a man wearing a single sandal, I dismissed it as a hag's superstition.

(Moment)

I don't want to kill you. Do you know what it will mean? For me, the usurper, to kill my brother's son? Kill the true heir? The rebellion will never stop. I will have to devote every minute of the day, every drachma of treasure, to quell it. I don't want to kill you!

JASON:

Then give me the throne.

PELIAS:

I should. I'm tired of it. The sullen hatred the people give back to me every time I face them. The endless plots, assassination attempts, the horrific things I must do to keep order. And it's poisoning me. I feel something coiling inside me, like a snake. It's growing, growing. Yes, I will let you be king.

JASON:

Good.

(PELIAS unsheathes his dagger. It gleams in the dawn light)

PELIAS:

I don't want to kill you, but I must.

(Thrusts at JASON. JASON dodges. They circle each other, thrusting and dodging. Then PELIAS comes close enough to make JASON fall. JASON tries to scramble away but PELIAS straddles him and holds him fast. He raises the dagger for the death blow)

JASON:

If I bring you the golden fleece of Phrixus will you give me the throne?

PELIAS:

What?

JASON:

I will bring the fleece back to Thessaly, if you promise to let me take my place as king.

(PELIAS stares in astonishment, then laughs)

PELIAS:

The fleece is in Colchis.

JASON:

Yes.

PELIAS:

No one has ever gone there.

JASON:

I'll go. I will.

(PELIAS sheathes his blade)

PELIAS:

Yes. I give you the oath of a king: if you bring the fleece back to Thessaly, back where it belongs, then, with humble forbearance, I will step aside and make you king.

JASON:

I'll, I'll need a ship. And... provisions for the journey.

PELIAS:

Of course. Anything. You can depend on me, nephew.

(PELIAS laughs again.

Shift: bright sunlight. JASON blinks. PELIAS orates:)

People of Iolcus! I bring great tidings! The golden fleece of Phrixus will return to Thessaly! The golden ram was ours! Its fleece belongs to us! With the fleece hanging in the temple Thessaly will be the most powerful nation on earth! This man, Jason, son of Aeson, will bring the golden fleece home! Jason!

(Grabs JASON's hand and raises it high. We hear percussive music as JASON receives the crowd's acclamation.

Slow shift: a beach. JASON approaches a small derelict ship. He brushes sand and grime away to read the name on the prow)

JASON:
Hesperia. This is my ship? I'll never get to Colchis.

(A MAN enters, a worn canvas bag slung over his shoulder. He sees JASON, smiles, assumes a heroic stance)

MAN:
Jason, son of Aeson, your troubles are over.

JASON:
They are?

MAN:
I'm here.

JASON:
And who are you?

MAN:
I am the strongest man in the world.

JASON:
You are?

MAN:
I can break large rocks in half with my head.

(Goes to the wrecked ship, spits on his hands, then lifts it high into the air)

Arrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr.... Do you see? Strong.

JASON:
Please be careful. That's our ship.

MAN:
This?

JASON:
Put it down, carefully, please.

(The MAN does)

MAN:
My name is Hercules. I've come to join your brave band of adventurers.

JASON:
There's no "band". You're the only one.

HERCULES:

No.

JASON:

I'm afraid so.

HERCULES:

This is the greatest adventure in history. I'd've thought Thesalians from all over would heed the call.

JASON:

You'd be wrong.

HERCULES:

They're cowards.

JASON:

No, just smart. No offense.

HERCULES:

They're coming. I'm sure of it.

JASON:

Everyone is afraid of Pelias. Afraid of what he might do to their families if they join me. Look at the ship he's given me.

(HERCULES claps a hand on JASON's shoulder.
JASON staggers)

HERCULES:

Courage, Captain. Courage.

(A MAN, bent with age, enters)

There, do you see? Have you come to join us, old fellow? Hahahahaha!

(The MAN ignores HERCULES, goes to JASON. He grasps his shoulders, his arms, JASON's hands)

OLD MAN:

You have your father's hands. Strong hands. But you have your mother's eyes.

(Lets JASON's hands go)

Your father and I built the greatest fleet in the world. He had a great instinct for ships. My name is Argos.

(Looks at the Hesperia)

OLD MAN, con't:

This is the ship Pelias has given you?

(Examines it)

This is a good ship.

HERCULES:

Ha!

ARGOS:

Do you see this mark, here, under the prow? I built this ship. It's a good ship. I will make it seaworthy.

JASON:

Will it be strong enough to take me to Colchis?

ARGOS:

No one has ever gone there, so I can't answer that.

JASON:

How long will it take you to get it ready?

ARGOS:

Three days.

HERCULES:

Hail, Argos! Hail! Your heart is true, and though you are old and decrepit, you are... skilled. I am certain beyond any doubt that your brave ship will carry us—

ARGOS:

Excuse me. You are...?

HERCULES:

Hercules!

ARGOS:

Country boy, are you?

HERCULES:

Do you insult me, old man?

ARGOS:

I wouldn't dare. But I do have some advice: be careful. Pelias's spies are everywhere. Keep to yourselves — and be quiet.

(Shift: the beach, several days later, late at night.
JASON and HERCULES are sitting by a small fire)

JASON:

Hercules, how is that you're so strong, when you're... not all that... big?

HERCULES:

When I was a boy I decided to be the world's strongest man.

JASON:

You decided?

HERCULES:

Like you decided to be king.

JASON:

I didn't "decide" to be king. My father was king. The greatest king Thessaly has ever had. And I'm... his son.

HERCULES:

And you decided to take his place, and that's why we're embarking on this grand suicidal adventure, bringing the golden fleece of Phrixus back to Thessaly.

(Suddenly stands, goes into the shadows, then returns, dragging a young MAN)

Skulking in the shadows, Captain. Should I kill him?

JASON:

Please stop calling me "Captain". All right? And no, don't kill him.

(HERCULES searches the MAN, roughly)

MAN:

Hey!

HERCULES:

No weapons.

JASON:

Who are you?

MAN:

My name is Orpheus.

HERCULES:

What do you want?

ORPHEUS:

To go to Colchis with you. To bring the golden fleece of Phrixus back to Thessaly.

HERCULES:

Do you see? I told you men would come. Orpheus, eh? What can you do, Orpheus?

JASON:

Can you sail a ship?

ORPHEUS:

Never been on one before.

JASON:

Oh.

HERCULES:

Are you good with a bow and arrow? A spear? I know. You possess the sword of Theseus, the hardest, sharpest blade in the world. With a sword like that you can slice a fly in half.

ORPHEUS:

Weapons make me ill.

JASON:

Can you read the stars? We need a navigator.

ORPHEUS:

Sorry.

HERCULES:

I bet you're a fast runner, fleet as wingéd Mercury.

ORPHEUS:

Hardly.

HERCULES:

Can you cook?

ORPHEUS:

No.

JASON:

What do you do?

ORPHEUS:

I'm a poet.

HERCULES (after a moment, bursts out laughing):

A poet! What possible use do think we would have for a poet? We need men. Brave men, stout-hearted men.

(Shoves him)

HERCULES, con't:

Get out of here, poet. Go play your lyre for the ladies.

ORPHEUS:

Don't you want to be famous? Don't you want the world to celebrate your courage, your ferocity of spirit? I will compose an epic that will endure through the ages. You will become gods among humankind. Ages hence, in a shining city by the sea, where buildings pierce the stars, your exploits will be celebrated.

HERCULES:

Welcome, Orpheus!

JASON:

Welcome, yes. Come, make yourself comfortable. Sit. Eat. We sail at dawn.

(They sit)

ORPHEUS:

Where are the others?

JASON:

There are no others.

ORPHEUS:

It's just us three?

JASON (nods)

ORPHEUS:

Well, Captain, three is—

JASON (quickly):

Don't call me "Captain".

ORPHEUS:

Three is a very lucky number. If we had a huge warship, bristling with weapons and dozens of sailors, it would attract attention. Our enemies would send dozens of ships to meet us. But three sailors on a small craft, with finesse, and resourcefulness, and... a lot of luck, can go wherever they want.

(Stands)

We three, we intrepid three. Jason. Orpheus.

(Looks at HERCULES)

HERCULES:
Hercules.

ORPHEUS:
Hercules. We are, and I say this of course with deep humility, Thessaly's pride. I tell you true, my friends, when the gentle fingers of dawn pinch the cheeks of the sky to bring forth the first blush of day we will sail upon the vast Sea of Pontus where lurk dangers and monsters and powers unknown. Are we frightened?

HERCULES:
No!

ORPHEUS:
Of course we are frightened, but we know that the fire of our resolve will melt fear away.

(Shift: the next morning. ARGOS enters)

ARGOS:
She's ready. I've given her a new hull of Mount Pelion oak. New decking. A white pine mast. New sails. New rudder. She's tough, maybe the toughest craft I've ever built. But... there's something else.

JASON:
What?

ARGOS:
I believe this ship is alive.

JASON:
Alive?

ARGOS:
I can feel it in my feet as I stand on her deck, like a tightly coiled animal ready to spring forward.

ORPHEUS:
We must give her a new name.

(Everyone looks at JASON. Moment)

JASON:
We'll call her the Argo, after her maker.

ARGOS:
I'm honored.

ORPHEUS:
And we are the Argonauts.