

The New York Times

Odysseus Is Parading Into Queens

By MELENA RYZIK

Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story of Hermes the winged messenger, with eyes like binoculars. Of wise old Robert Moses, his head a literal globe, and of Typhoid Mary, a health threat in a skirt made of spoons.

Odysseus has, finally, found his way to Queens, and — journeying through storm surge and eons of urban grit — has been transformed a bit in the process. On Monday evening “The Odyssey” will be restaged through the lens of New York City history, using costumed characters and giant puppets, in a site-specific work commissioned for Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City. Visitors will play the part of weary Greek travelers, traversing the park to see seven “processionals” enacting stories from Homer’s epic poem.

Alex Kahn inspecting a puppet at Socrates Sculpture Park, in preparation for “Odysseus at Hell Gate.”

The one-night-only performance, “Odysseus at Hell Gate,” was created by Alex Kahn and Sophia Michahelles, artists who specialize in processionals, parades and puppetry: they also create the Day of the Dead skeletons and Kabuki flying baby moths, among other creatures, for New York City’s Halloween parade. Their other projects include a walking opera and a three-act movement along a bridge, and as part of their mission, they use volunteers in the building (“puppet-raising”) and performance of their works. Involving the community, they said, makes the pieces better.

“What we like to do is take that genre of parade that everybody knows, and try to deconstruct it,” Mr. Kahn said. “We really see parade in the way that it is in carnivalesque cultures, as a real way of storytelling through multilayered, complex visuals.”

For “Odysseus at Hell Gate,” Mr. Kahn and Ms. Michahelles, a couple from Red Hook, N.Y., who are artistic directors of a nonprofit group called Processional Arts Workshop, researched the history of the sometimes forgotten spaces that dot the East River, like Hart Island, a potter’s field; North Brother Island, home to the hospital that quarantined Typhoid Mary; and Hell Gate, a traditionally treacherous maritime

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No Host For MTV Video Awards

By BRIAN STELTER

MTV manages to surprise viewers almost every year with its Video Music Awards, and this year it has done so before the show even starts: by electing not to have a host.

Producers for the show, which will be telecast live on Sunday night, say they concluded that they simply did not need a person or persons onstage guiding the proceedings.

“In this particular year I don’t think you’re going to miss it,” said Dave Sirulnick, an executive vice president for the channel.

To a much greater extent than other awards shows, the V.M.A.’s, as the event is known to

A show that needs no guidance, one executive says.

viewers, are reimagined every year, with different awards categories, elaborate stages and equally elaborate social media stunts. Twice before, in 2004 and 2007, the show has done without a host, instead having different celebrities present awards and segue into musical acts.

The awards show is typically MTV’s highest-rated telecast of the year, and it’s been on the upswing in recent years, with 11.4 million viewers watching in 2010: the channel’s single biggest audience since 2002. But the 2010 edition, hosted by Chelsea Handler, was widely panned, partly because it lacked the kind of must-see television moment in which

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passage and the site of the 1904 burning of the excursion ship the General Slocum. They found many parallels in these stories to those in "the Odyssey."

Roosevelt Island, which is visible from the sculpture park, was once known as Welfare Island; it housed a women's prison, "and the two most famous inmates who spent some time there were Mae West and Billie Holiday, so we thought they would be fantastic sirens," Ms. Michahelles said with a smile. There are no siren songs per se, but a score that Mr. Kahn composed includes a Billie Holiday recording of "Comes Love (Nothing Can Be Done)," interspersed with Mae West beckoning, "Come up and see me sometime."

Some juxtapositions are more conceptual: Moses, the influential urban planner, plays a part because of Randalls Island, where he had his office when he was the state parks commissioner and chairman of the Triborough Bridge and Tunnel Authority. He is represented by a Cyclops-like creature because, Mr. Kahn said, Homer's "description of the Cyclops could've been lifted right out of Robert Caro's 'Power Broker,'" the biography of Moses. (Of course the head of this Cyclops looks like the Unisphere from the 1964 World's Fair in Flushing Meadows-Corona Park; a silver-painted Hermes has a head resembling the kind of viewfinder found at landmarks.)

Shaun Leonardo, the director



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of public programs and community affairs for Socrates Sculpture Park, a four-and-a-half-acre strip of riverfront that hosts everything from sustainable-living lessons to movie screenings among its rotating installations, said that park officials originally envisioned the Odysseus project as an extension of their regular programs, but geared to adults instead of children; in the week leading up to the performance, Ms. Michahelles and Mr. Kahn hosted a puppet workshop for

volunteers.

But the scope of their ideas "was more than we would ever have expected," Mr. Leonardo said. "It will be one of our biggest programs."

He added that "Odysseus at Hell Gate" served an "important goal here, to open the understanding of what sculpture is, and to introduce different ideas of sculpture and sculpture making to the park."

Built by volunteers with supplies donated by Materials for the

Arts, a nonprofit group, the whole project cost less than \$10,000, Mr. Leonardo said. Drawn by the chance to be creative in his time off, Mike Russell, a teacher, volunteered a few days before the show, and found himself papier-mâché-ing Typhoid Mary's head.

"This is my neighborhood, this is my park," Mr. Russell, 33, said, explaining why he wanted to get involved. Whatever he learned would make its way into his classroom, he added.

For Ms. Michahelles and Mr. Kahn, the decision to use "The Odyssey" as source material was both artistic and geographic.

"We liked the idea of anchoring it in a story that people may not know intimately, but are probably familiar with," Ms. Michahelles said. "And we were also interested in the fact that this was traditionally a Greek neighborhood, and of course the park is called Socrates."

Though visitors to the show



Sophia Michahelles, left, inspects wings to be mounted on a Mae West-inspired puppet for "Odysseus at Hell Gate," at Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City, Queens. Above, faces for other puppets in the production.

will get a "passport" explaining some of the history, park officials and the artists realized that audience members might not pick up on all the references.

"Not all of these juxtapositions are lockstep-perfect allegories of each other, but a lot of them come close enough to create that electricity," Mr. Kahn said. "It leaves a little openness for the audience to think more and more about how they themselves can graft a mythic history onto the very present story of New York City."

ONLINE: SLIDE SHOW

A look at the preparations for "Odysseus at Hell Gate":

nytimes.com/arts