A casual theatregoer wandering into a production of Shakespeare's *Pericles* without a playbill or prior knowledge might think it was a forgotten Homeric epic. That's not too far off: Shakespeare harked back to the Greeks with this fantastical picaresque narrated by a chorus. And the best productions of *Pericles* make a case for it as a kind of timeless epic theatre that echoes down through the centuries, to the beginning of storytelling and song, and right back up to the present.

Director Joseph Haj’s upcoming production of *Pericles*, which opens in the Thomas Theatre in late February, brings its own history with it. It will be partly based on a 2008 staging Haj did at PlayMakers Repertory Company in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, where he’s producing artistic director. The OSF production will have a new cast and some new designers, but Haj plans to bring along a few key PlayMakers associates to help recreate their original vision: scenic designer Jan Chambers, video designer Francesca Talenti and, perhaps most significantly, composer Jack Herrick, who is refashioning his earthy/ethereal score for the new production.

Herrick will be on hand through most of the rehearsal process, as his score is no mere press-play prerecorded underscoring but a song-heavy and very present character in the staging. Indeed, Herrick himself performed the score live in the North Carolina run, along with some cast members as singers and instrumentalists. Part of his job in the coming rehearsal/re-composing process will be to teach the score to an onstage musician and some cast members.

“There’s about 50 percent of the previous score we really like, and the rest we’ll work on,” Herrick says. “We tend to want to increase the amount of music in it; we’ve even given some thought to making it a musical, but I guess we backed up to a ‘playical’—a play with songs.”

Those songs include settings of the opening invocation and other bits of narration by Gower, the play’s conveniently omniscient chorus, as well as an interpolated Shakespeare sonnet and a fisherman’s chanty with lyrics that are largely Herrick’s invention. “I grazed freely over the material,” says Herrick, who has done scores for Haj’s *Hamlet* at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., and who, with his old-time string band the Red Clay Ramblers, has scored shows by Sam Shepard and Bill Irwin.

**A play made for song**

*Pericles* all but mandates a musical element: Its opening words are “To sing a song that old was sung.” For Haj, this framing suggested “the troubadour tradition, the Homeric tradition, a folk tradition. The sea is in the ears of all the characters in this play.” Though the play’s action spans the Mediterranean, with the title character hurled over decades from Antioch to North Africa and back, and the play’s visual design evokes a “pan-Mediterranean style,” Haj says. “What didn’t seem right to Jack and me was to make some pseudo-Mediterranean soundtrack.”

Indeed, Herrick’s *Pericles* score, he says, ended up “fairly eclectic, somewhat folksy, somewhat techno,” employing sampled music alongside live instruments. His own deep background in Americana and Appalachian folk surfaces in some Celtic-sounding passages. Explains Herrick, “Those styles are perfectly modern and current, but they sound antique—or at least emotionally take us back through the years.”

This suggestive, non-exotic approach fits with Haj’s mandate. “We leaned rather intentionally away from anything that felt heroic or chivalric,” Haj says, instead interpreting the wild, Odyssean journey of the title character as the story of “an Everyman, an ordinary person, trying to move his way through a life.”

Though Herrick says he much prefers the specificity and purpose of writing music for the theatre as opposed to “just writing a song,” not every marriage of theatre and music is foreordained. “You can’t just take a play and throw the band onstage,” he says. “You have to have a reason. But with *Pericles*, it’s a no-brainer.”