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Metamorphoses



Photo by Craig Schwartz

A Noise Within

After one incredibly disappointing reinvention of a classic last weekend, I was extremely nervous the following day to attend A Noise Within's revival of Mary Zimmerman's *Metamorphoses*, which takes ancient Grecian myths and delivers an imaginative contemporary spin on them performed in and around a giant onstage swimming pool.

Granted, I had seen the original production of the MacArthur “Genius” Grant’s brilliant multiple award-winning production, which was originally conceived at Chicago’s Lookingglass Theatre in 1998, transferred here to the Taper in 2000, then finally debuted in New York two years later. Zimmerman’s enchanted retelling of Ovid’s mythological narrative poems made an enormous splash there with all the dramatic power of a storm at sea, winning its creator the Tony Award for Direction, as well as Drama Desk, Drama League, and Lucille Lortel honors as the Best Play of 2002.

I should have trusted that anything produced by ANW, with direction by the company’s co-artistic director Julia Rodriguez-Elliott and designed by Francois-Pierre Couture, would be spectacular. Within minutes of watching the castmembers reciting their well-known folk tales while bathing, playfully dangling their feet in the water, making slippery and sensual love, or soaking Gary Lennon’s shimmering gowns and revealing togas in the onstage pool under Ken Booth’s mysterious lighting, and my soul was happy cleansed of the horrific memory of the night before.

Featuring a cast of nine gifted and fiercely committed ANW resident artists taking on some 85 roles in the classic myths, *Metamorphoses* delivers mesmerizing new versions of the stories of Midas, Orpheus, and Aphrodite, among others, and does so with humor and breathtaking visuals as the cohesive team conspires to create a glorious celebration of the joys and heartbreaks of the human condition—something that hasn’t changed much over the last 2,000 years.

Adapted from David R. Slavitt’s free-verse translation of “The Metamorphoses of Ovid,” the play’s locations, like the actors, are also constantly evolving and transforming from one watery location to another, including the vast once-uncharted oceans of our planet, the River Styx, a quiet place where simple peasant women wash their clothes, and the depiction of a whimsical poolside therapy session played with the patient leisurely floating on an inflatable chaise lounge. There are gods and mortals alike depicted, all with one unifying trait: the universal quest for love, the challenges of loss, and the transformations that unify us all. “It’s been said a myth is just a public dream,” a character tells us prophetically, “and Our dreams are private myths.”

The original staging by Zimmerman was haunting and incredibly innovative as her graceful and athletic cast immersed themselves in the dreamlike water, the concept appearing to some critics at the time to be gimmicky but surely commercially foolproof. Having seen the play performed totally devoid of its lyricism and featuring performers unable to embrace the poetic dialogue, however, I can tell you it’s not.

Rodriguez-Elliott totally gets it and, on ANW’s often challenging thrust stage, she becomes more conjurer than director. Every design aspect is pure magic, from Couture’s simple but evocative set to Lennon’s Cirque du Soleil-like quick-drying costumes to Booth’s shimmering lighting which crawls up the walls on either side of the audience, as well as Robert Oriol’s enchanting original music and eerie sound design knitting it all together.

Just as in the original production, Rodriguez-Elliott’s ensemble is simply flawless, particularly Kasey Mahaffy in all his roles as he humorously distracts the audience from the play’s heavier themes, especially when portraying that nonchalant victim of modern psychotherapy bobbling away as he spills the family secrets.

ANW's co-artistic director Geoff Elliott is also a standout as Midas, Poseidon, and even the sun, although he initially scared me making his first entrance talking on a cellphone, an echo of the dastardly presentation we sat through the night before and something definitely becoming a way too-frequent device when adapting classics into contemporary settings. Thankfully, Elliott won me over quickly as his Midas exhibited his distracted OCD conversation juggling business deals with his familial obligations—and we all know how that turns out.

There's no doubt the most exotic feature here is *Metamorphoses'* omnipresent water feature, which is somehow alluring in a totally elemental way. Just as drifting off to contented sleep with Alexa playing the sound of ocean waves on a continuous loop, the effect of the show's onstage pool is something that calms as it appeals to our primordial senses, I suspect.

About a decade ago, an ambitious young LA theatre company made a bold choice by renting the Road Theatre Company's former stage to present the first 99-seat theatre production of Zimmerman's epic. The naïve best-laid plans quickly sunk into the lowest depths of circumstance when, as the renters loaded in, the Road's Taylor Gilbert realized for the first time the producers planned on adding three tons of liquid to the set, something which surely wouldn't... well, *hold water*... especially on the second floor of the aging Lankershim Arts Center.

Already geared for opening night, the show went on regardless, with the otherwise impressive multi-levelled structure still featuring desolately unused underwater lighting fixtures, filters and cables yet remaining dry-docked; any interaction with that missing life-giving element keeping us all alive was awkwardly pantomimed by the game cast.

It was as though there was a 10th character missing: that essential element guaranteed to pull the riddles of time and theatrical novelties together into a cohesive whole. As valiantly as the actors and members of the creative team toiled to make their beached efforts stay afloat, without its H₂O, Zimmerman's concept unfortunately didn't make much of a ripple.

Mary Zimmerman's captivating theatrical masterwork gently explains that we wander in the dark until we hopefully find true love. Wherever that love may go, there we find our soul—and if we're lucky and let ourselves be blind and stop always craving more, our lives will be fulfilled. If I walked away from ANW's unforgettable production of *Metamorphoses* with nothing more than that revelation stuck in the complex confusion of a life well spent rattling around continuously in my addled brain, I for one will be the richer for it.

THROUGH JUNE 5: A Noise Within, 3352 E. Foothill Blvd., Pasadena. 626.356.3100 or anoisewithin.org
