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Stage

The Myth Element
Update of Greek classic makes changes for the better

by Anna Ditkoff

Metamorphoses | By Mary Zimmerman | [Through May 2 at UMBC](#)



Young myth-es (from left) Elana Williams, Siarra T. Mong, and Samantha Nelson.

—only to learn that that isn't such a good thing. To give you a sense of how the updating plays out, Midas emerges talking on a cell phone, and when he makes his wish to Bacchus, the god responds, "That's a really bad idea, Midas."

In Orpheus and Eurydice, Orpheus (Kevin James) asks the god of the underworld to give his beloved wife back after she dies. He agrees, telling Orpheus that Eurydice (Elana Williams) will follow him back to the land of the living as long as he does not turn back to look at her. Orpheus fails, but Zimmerman doesn't leave it at that, examining not only the possible reasons for Orpheus' failure, but Eurydice's feelings about returning to life.

Pomona (Samantha Nelson) and Vertumnus (Travis Hudson) add some valuable comic relief. Pomono is a nymph uninterested in love; Vertumnus, the God of Spring, is in love with her, and tries various disguises to win her with little success. Hudson is excellent as Vertumnus, and his stage presence makes the character funny, but not a buffoon, playing each folly with absolute emotional seriousness.

This silly tale leads into the darkest: Myrrha. Myrrha (Louise Schlegel) spurned Aphrodite, angering the goddess so that she causes Myrrha to fall in love with her own father. And you know that doesn't go well. While the whole cast does a great job tackling the show's mix of comedy and tragedy—Williams, Hudson, and Patrick Cervantes Letterii are particular stand outs—Schlegel steals the show. The pretty blond manages to flawlessly morph from the bereaved widow Alcyone to the dangerous grasping embodiment of Hunger to Myrrha, who is both sympathetic and emotionally bankrupt. It's quite a task for a seasoned performer, never mind a student.

Change can be a good thing. In Greek and Roman mythology, sometimes even pretty dubious sounding change—into a bird or a tree or even a pool of tears—can be a boon from the gods. Mary Zimmerman's colloquial, updated version of Ovid's book of myths *Metamorphoses* is a positive change. Not that Ovid's writing isn't wonderful, it's just that Zimmerman's version gives the old stories an immediacy and freshness that makes them more digestible for a modern audience and provides some much needed comic relief in the often disturbing tales.

University of Maryland, Baltimore County Theatre attacks Zimmerman's script with verve and palpable enthusiasm. The ensemble cast is incredibly strong and the young actors enliven every scene despite the dark subject matter. How else can you explain walking away from the play with a feeling of brightness despite all the horrors you've just seen?

The tales include the story of King Midas (Roderick Howard II), who asks for and is granted the ability to turn everything he touches into gold—

On the lighter side, Phaeton (Letterii) learns that his father is Apollo, god of the sun (among other things), and asks to take his chariot for a ride. As in all tales where a kid borrows his dad's car, it goes badly. The story of Eros (Hudson) and Psyche (Sierra Mong) provides one of the play's few happy endings because, as one character says: "It's just inevitable. The soul wanders in the dark, until it finds love. And so, wherever our love goes, there we find our soul." It's a sweet sentiment the play earns largely because it shows that love can't actually conquer all.

Elena Zlotescu's stage is as unconventional as the play, a sweeping circle with blue lit squares in the center. It's both simple and ethereal and lends itself well to the play's varied needs. Platforms and swings are added and taken away, and ensemble members often stand in for scenery. Director Eve Muson also uses the space well, flowing from one scene to the next so effortlessly that you barely notice the lack of an intermission.

The costume design is more problematic. Zlotescu dresses her actors in sheath dresses and pajama pants, topping them with gauzy glittery confections for the various characters. The outfits are fantastical, but they sometimes veer into silliness, something the play otherwise manages to avoid. Zeus' tinsel coronet and Erysichthon's Sonic the Hedgehog/French Fry head piece are particular offenders. Zlotescu fairs better with the more earthly attire of Bacchus and Aphrodite.

Despite this occasional distraction, UMBC's theater program puts on a performance that could stand shoulder to shoulder with the area's professional theaters. Here's hoping that some of UMBC's finest stay in the Baltimore area after graduation.

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