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In *Till We Have Faces*, Mustard Seed delivers the myth of Psyche with a powerful punch

By Paul Friswold
 published: April 21, 2011



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Orual (Sarah Cannon), Michelle Hand (Queen) and Psyche (Rory Lipede) beautify C.S. Lewis' *Till We Have Faces*.

Details:
Till We Have Faces
 Through May 1 at the Fontbonne University Fine Arts Center Theatre, 6800 Wydown Boulevard, Clayton.
 Tickets are \$20 to \$30 (\$15 for students and seniors).
 Call 314-719-8060 or visit www.mustardseedtheatre.com.

Like most myths, the Greek myth of Psyche relies on simple characterization to convey its message. Psyche is beautiful but somewhat foolish; her older sister Orual is ugly and jealous, and the gods, as ever, are capricious and ineffable. When C.S. Lewis recast the tale as Christian parable in his novel *Till We Have Faces*, he had to flesh out the characters and find motivation beyond "because she's beautiful, because she's jealous." His success can be measured in the character of that covetous older sister, Orual, who becomes a figure of tragic, frustrated longing. Just what it is Orual longs for is a mystery, especially to herself. The return of her lost sister, revenge and justice are all candidates, but none of these possibilities mollifies her.

Director Deanna Jent's stage adaptation of Lewis' novel is a richly detailed, brilliantly limned portrait of Orual and her spiritual hunger. Jent splits the character into two halves and two actresses: Young Orual, played by Sarah Cannon, and Old Orual, played by Michelle Hand. This is no mere stunt of stagecraft; it fully requires the unique talents of both women to depict Orual's journey. The result is a dense, rewarding evening of theater.

Old Orual tells us the story of her childhood and how she was determined to write it down as a "case against the gods." Her beautiful sister, Psyche (Rory Lipede), was sacrificed to the God of the Mountain for her various good deeds, but rather than devour her, this god

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takes her as his wife. Young Orual climbs the mountain and discovers Psyche living blissfully in a glade that she claims is a castle, with a husband neither sister can see. Orual threatens to take her own life in order to force Psyche to sneak a peek at her husband, hoping that Psyche will come to her senses and realize her husband is just a man. Psyche does and is cast out into the world by the vengeful gods. Orual's gripe is that the gods stole Psyche from her, and then turned men against Orual by claiming it was Orual's selfishness that ruined Psyche's life; Orual wants not just to set the record straight, but to bring the gods to justice for their crimes against her sister — or rather, against Orual. All of this occurs on an evocative, Dunsi Dai-designed set of stone walls and jutting promontories under the watchful gaze of the bloodthirsty goddess Ungit, a lumpen effigy of the Venus of Willendorf that hangs over the stage like a bloated spider.

Hand, heavily veiled and observing the action from the periphery of the stage, narrates with regal sternness much of the first act, while Cannon performs Orual with a rasping need. She wants so desperately to be loved that she becomes ever-more grasping and demanding, using her eventual position as queen to keep within arm's reach at all times everyone she cares about — but they are also at arm's length. Remarkably, she is sympathetic even as she smothers her beloved tutor, Fox (an excellent Gary Glasgow), and dominates the life of the man she secretly loves, Bardia (Shaun Sheley, also excellent), because it's clear she's terrified of losing them like she lost Psyche.

In the second act, Hand takes a more active role, interrupting Cannon's Orual any time her younger self shows weakness. It's a seamless performance, magnificent in the psychological implication that Orual's memory is rewriting the past — the truth — before our eyes. Hand's mournful voice and rocky resolve in her own moral rectitude merge with Cannon's youthful outrage until both women shout their unified case for love against the gods and we hear Orual's true voice for the first time. It is old and bitter and young and furious, and it rings terribly, agonizingly and shamefully hollow.