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"Till We Have Faces"

Mustard Seed Theatre

Tuesday, April 19, 2011 10:12 AM CDT

Play: "Till We Have Faces"

Group: Mustard Seed Theatre

Venue: Fontbonne University Black Box Theatre, Fine Arts Building, 6800 Wydown

Dates: April 21, 22, 23, 24, 28, 29, 30, May 1

Tickets: \$15-\$20; contact 314-719-8060 or info@mustardseedtheatre.com

Story: Orual, queen of the mythical kingdom of Glome, accuses the gods of lies and injustice. She makes her case by recounting her life, an unhappy one precipitated by her father's cruel declaration to Orual as a child that she is ugly and therefore needs to be a scholar in order to have any usefulness.

Young Orual lives with her widowed father and her sister Redival. The king remarries, but his second wife dies in childbirth delivering another girl, Istra (Psyche). Orual develops a strong kinship with Psyche, while also learning from her slave teacher Fox and the king's soldier protector Bardia. When the people of Glome begin to worship the genial and beautiful Psyche as a goddess, their own goddess Ungit becomes jealous and sends Psyche to her death in another kingdom as the "Bride of the Brute."

Orual learns, however, that Psyche may not be dead but rather exiled for following Orual's forbidden command that Psyche look upon the face of her mysterious husband. Between grief over the banishment of her sister and Orual's unrequited love for the married Bardia, the queen prepares to accuse the gods of the injustices that have ruined her life.

Highlights: 20th century novelist, essayist and lecturer C.S. Lewis considered his final novel, "Till We Have Faces," to also have been his best. Based on the Greek myth of the love of Psyche and Eros (Cupid in Roman mythology) that was forbidden by his mother Aphrodite, Lewis attempted to adapt the myth numerous times in his life, first as verse and finally as a novel. The complexity and multiple layers of meaning in his work underscore a current seminar at Fontbonne University devoted to his version of the myth.

Now, Mustard Seed artistic director Deanna Jent has adapted Lewis' novel into a play that is having its world premiere at Mustard Seed in an absorbing if overly complicated rendition directed by Jent herself. A sprawling saga that appears faithful both to the original myth and to Lewis' interpretation, Jent's "Till We Have Faces" is most impressive for a pair of phenomenal performances by Sarah Cannon and Michelle Hand.

Cannon is simply stunning as the young and disillusioned Orual, who counters her father's cruelty with a powerful passion for love and acceptance, at times shaking with both



Photos courtesy of John Lamb

anger and determination, fiercely conveying Orual's courage as well as her vulnerability. The accomplished actress has never been better than in this bravura interpretation.

Hand masterfully complements Cannon as the older Orual, a bitter, resentful queen who learns, albeit late, about the intricacies of life and the often elusive fruits of fulfillment that it can bear. Spending much of her stage time hidden behind a veil that protects her from torment as much as shielding the outside world from Orual's supposed imperfections, Hand's resilient command of her character demonstrates once again why she's one of St. Louis' finest actresses.

Other Info: Jent's direction is finely focused and deeply attuned to the nuances of Lewis' script. Even with that, however, it's an extremely weighty tale that will challenge audience members not familiar with the novel and maybe only marginally aware of the original myth. You may be scratching your head at some of the goings-on while still able to appreciate the intrinsic artistry of the production.

Dunsi Dai's set design seems assembled from pink pillows and illusory artifice that underscore the moral lessons of the fable, and Michael Sullivan's lighting consistently bathes the scenery in shadows and haunting appearances. Costumes by Donna Northcott effectively place the characters in the realm of the fantastic, while the sound design by Jent and Kareem Deanes supports the ethereal mood on stage with soft background melodies. The uncredited fight choreographer also warrants praise for the splendid combat between Cannon and Phillip Bettison as a cocky soldier.

Acting is first-rate in support of the two aforementioned performers, led by an excellent interpretation of Fox by Gary Glasgow. His combination of wisdom, temerity and kindness offers a solid contrast to the callous and brutish persona of the king etched precisely by Robert Mitchell. Shaun Sheley is a properly noble and beneficent Bardia, while Rory Lipede personifies the beauty and innate kindness of Psyche.

Rounding out the cast with important contributions are Jill Ritter as an imperious priestess; Bess Moynihan as Orual's petulant sister Redival; Leslie Wobbe as Bardia's wife, Lady Ansit, who is all too aware of Orual's desires; Richard Lewis as a powerful priest of Ungit; Jean Lang, Justin Leibrecht and Bettison.

Difficult to follow but ultimately rewarding, "Till We Have Faces" is an adaptation that Lewis himself would likely have found impressive.

Rating: A 4.5 on a scale of 1-to-5.

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