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Review: "Till We Have Faces" by Mustard Seed Theatre

This show has a promising start, but loses its way in the second act.

BY ROSALIND EARLY



PHOTO BY JOHN LAMB

Mustard Seed Theatre
6800 Wydown Blvd.
St. Louis, MO 63105
(314) 719-8060

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The problem with theater with an agenda, be it religious, political, or otherwise, is that it is never very adept at working in the agenda without being heavy-handed or preachy.

Mustard Seed Theatre's *Till We Have Faces* is no different. What starts out as a promising play that—if not deftly at least tolerably—weaves story and religious allegory together, becomes bogged down in the second half with convolutions, treatises on faith and the devolution of the female heroine into screechy over-emoting.

The play is based on the C.S. Lewis novel by the same name, and was adapted by Deanna Jent, professor of theater at Fontbonne University and the director of the play. The novel is about the myth of Psyche as told from the perspective of her sister.

The myth itself is that Cupid falls in love with the beautiful Psyche, marries her and takes her to his palace. When her sisters come to visit they are jealous and convince Psyche to break the one rule Cupid has for her, that she can't look at him or know who he is. Psyche obeys her sisters and is cast out.

The play though is about Orual, Psyche's ugly older sister, who takes issue with this telling of the myth. She was never jealous, she claims, but acted out of love for Psyche and concern that her sister was being tricked by a monster.

The first act is straightforward enough with Queen Orual (Michelle Hand) narrating her story and Young Orual (Sarah Canon) portraying it. On the whole, the cast turns in solid performances, especially the two Oruals, Fox (Gary Glasgow) and Psyche (Rory Lipede), who has the perfect sort of cheerful airy voice to portray Psyche—a beauty who also finds beauty in everything.

It is the second half of the play that loses its momentum. Queen Orual and Young Orual are in the action of the play side-by-side to show the transformation of Orual into the bitter, old queen. But keeping them onstage together throughout the entire second act at times seemed downright convoluted and forced.

The story also stops completely while Orual writes her complaint against the gods and reads it to them. The complaint itself is baffling, as is the entire Christian allegory about the nature of faith that starts to consume the second half of the play.

As the second half drags on, both of the actresses playing Orual seem to want to make up for the lack of clarity and action by becoming more emotionally distressed. Unfortunately, this doesn't heighten the tension but only makes the play more puzzling as the characters expatiate about the nature of love and relationships to the gods, as well as the nature of intellect and the inadequacies of human beings. While, to its credit, it never feels like a sermon, the play also loses its coherency and all track of a story.

On the whole, the play is well-acted and largely well-written until it falters in the second act. So, if you do go see it, don't feel bad if you have to leave early.