

## The Wading Game: "Metamorphoses," at Augustana College through February 6

Written by Thom White

Monday, 31 January 2011 06:00

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Sitting down, preparing for the start of Augustana College's Friday-night performance of *Metamorphoses*

, I marveled at the pool that took up a majority of the stage space, but worried that it would be a gimmicky, annoying distracting from the show – a series of vignettes based on Ovid's Greek myths.

Yet while it took a bit of time to stop focusing on it (and to stop worrying about it sloshing onto the theatre's carpeting, and how the crew deals with soaking-wet costumes), the water was not at all a gimmick. Instead, it added an ethereal element to the staging, and served multiple purposes throughout the play. Sometimes it was literal water, and at others it was symbolic of emotion or struggle; in the tale of Alcyone and Ceyx, for example, the splashing adds to the chaos of a storm at sea, then transforms into the emotional weight burdening Alcyone as she wades through the pool, saddened by the death of her husband.

Director Saffron Henke preserves playwright and original director Mary Zimmerman's staging concept for Augustana's presentation, with the help of scenic (and lighting & video-projection) designer Adam Parboosingh's construction of the two- or three-foot-deep pool. Henke has not set all of the action in the water, but has her cast move into and out of it, often as though it was completely natural to move from hard surface to liquid without registering the shift. Its usage quickly becomes so familiar to us that it seems essential to the performance, as if there were no other way to present these stories than with the use of a pool. Here, the water is no gimmick. It's an artistic necessity.

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While the pool takes center stage, literally, it's not the only reason to see Augustana's performance. With each actor taking on several roles, changing character at least as often as the play shifts from one myth to another, *Metamorphoses'* cast seems so committed – so willing to take on this movement-based, very wet challenge – that their passion translates into exceptional work.

Samantha Bestvina offers two powerful performances, the first of which finds her playing Hunger. Crawling on the ground while sounding vocal tics, not unlike the movement and voice of Gollum in the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy, Bestvina is effectively repulsive and frightening. However, it is her Myrrah, a young woman cursed by Aphrodite with a burning lust for her own father, that showcases Bestvina's gifts as an actress. Through her eyes, a mixture of sexual longing and self-disgust dances across Bestvina's face. When it comes time for the incestuous acts to be portrayed, though, the actress throws herself into them fully, registering shocked delight in her physical portrayal, and is no less astonishing in the expressions of anguish, torment, and self-hatred that follow.

Matthew Kerr also shows great skill as a self-important Midas, wailing with abandon at the inevitable loss of his daughter to his golden touch. And Kerr's Pheaton – the son of Apollo who demands to drive his father's "car" for a day – is also something to behold; with underlying tones of pained sadness, the actor portrays, and portrays well, a spoiled rich kid aching for attention from his dad.



Bart Curtin is notable for his intensity in every role here, particularly as Vertumnus, a god of Spring in pursuit of a wood nymph who refuses all suitors. He attacks his portrayals without holding back, seemingly willing to lose himself to more fully flesh out a character. Logan Douglass, in contrast, incorporates a pleasingly goofy humor in his *Metamorphoses* roles. As Erysichthon, a sacrilegious man who cut down the favorite tree of a goddess, Douglass is particularly funny, in a style that reminds me of TV's

Ryan “

*Whose Line Is It Anyway?*

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Stiles; when overcome by the wiles of Hunger, Douglass seems to mimic the movements and sounds of a velociraptor, searching desperately and unapologetically for food. Veronica Smith broke my heart as Eurydice, particularly in the second telling of the story of Orpheus and Eurydice. Recounting, from Eurydice's perspective, her walk through the underworld, I couldn't help but be moved by Smith's hopeful sadness.

Neil Friberg's poised, richly-voiced narration is also notable, as is Elyssa LeMay's sweet, unassuming wood nymph Pomona, and Martin O'Connor's slick Zeus, with his 70's-style bravado. Jacqui Schmidt's Baucis possesses a tender modesty, while Robin Quinn's Psyche is earnest in both her curiosity and her pain. Danielle Swanson seems truly gripped with anguish when enacting Alcyone's loss of her husband. And Tyler Henning maintains a godly prominence

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throughout, especially while expressing his Orpheus' longing for love and disappointment at loss.

Augustana College's *Metamorphosis* is a truly moving experience, deeply emotional in its telling. And not only is the script is now among my absolute favorites, but this production tops any I've seen in Potter Hall thus far.

*For tickets and information, call (309)794-7306 or visit [Augustana.edu/theatre](http://Augustana.edu/theatre) .*