



## Metamorphoses at University Of Michigan/Flint

I want to start informally by thanking everyone involved with the production and our evening in general for an enjoyable evening in the theatre and a good dinner with intelligent conversation. I have always looked forward to visiting your program at Flint and was not disappointed this time. Your students continue to be interesting, thoughtful, intelligent and well spoken.

As to this production I will try to speak to most of the production aspects in more of an informal way and due to the multitude of characters and stories I will often be more general in my response but hopefully you will now which moments I am addressing. I really commend the company as a whole for the selection and execution of this work. There is a huge demand on the technical aspects of this show as well as the new demands of the physical acting that were layered into the production as well. These are all very ambitious undertakings and need to be noted they worked more often than not. I will try and address each area specifically.

### Set

I really enjoyed this set from the moment I walked into the room. It leaned very heavily towards a classical theatre environment. It reminded me of the old Roman bath houses with its symmetrical look, smooth roman columns and what looked like a viaduct behind. For me it had more of a Roman feel than Greek but I don't think that is a problem. It looked like a romantic little nook that magically takes us back in time. This romanticism seemed to seep thru the color choices and wash down into the pool which sparkled invitingly and looked good enough to want to jump into. This romantic grovel played well for me in what I believe the director was trying to say. I really loved the visual weight of the columns, the vertical use of the large four columns that grounded heaven and earth. I also appreciated the historical use of "heaven" upstage above the actors looking down on the humans. My only concern was that the 4 columns were so close together ( and I believe the "heaven" platform was set back even further) so that you really limited your playing space when actors were up on the upper platform. I sat center and if there were ever two actors trying to share the space between two columns it was very tight visually. I can't imagine it did nice things for the sightlines from the side. I know that this was done in rep with "How I Learned To Drive" and I am sure that it had something to do with that as well but I did find it problematic. There was great detail in the execution of the set painting and it all stood up to the water very well. I liked the way you laid out the pool so that it was deeper as they moved towards the audience. This gave them some nice levels to use in the water itself. The area around the pool was set up well to be used – easily accessed from all sides giving it the prominence it needs for the

script to work. The only small thing I noticed was that the two ends as the actors would cross down to us seemed narrower than the rest (could have been an illusion) and was the only place where the actors looked like they were working to keep their balance when everywhere else they moved with ease. My only other concern was that the apron of the stage was the only place where the actors played on the black floor instead of the deck color. I would have liked to have seen that defined a little better either as part of the playing space or clarified we were in another part of the world. All in all a beautiful set that served its play and director very well!

### **Lighting**

I must admit that I felt this area of the design worked the least for me. There was so much detail and theatrical magic in the other designs I kept waiting for the lighting design to be the same. Now again I understand that this show is done in rep and some of this reaction may be due specifically to the fact that it was a rep plot and had to serve two shows, which means they each may have had to sacrifice lighting details. The lighting did serve the play and for the most part I was always able to see the actors but I did want to see more of a theatrical essence to the lighting. I appreciated the saturated lighting choices and most of cue placements worked. There were a couple of moments where actors were playing in the dark (not the incest scene—I got that) one time they were down on the forestage and the chorus was lit upstage but they were in the dark. Now this could have been a cue placement as well. Some examples where I thought there could have been a little more theatrical use of the lights. One was the Midas sequence where he turns everything to gold. I saw the attempt to help this moment with lights coming up in the areas where he was touching things but the color here was not nearly saturated enough or different enough to really help the “magic” of the moment. Another moment I thought the lighting could have helped visually more was the raining moment. That was a lovely moment but (at least from where I was sitting) the way the light that came up with the water cue was hitting the water in such a way that it didn’t light up the falling water so we can see it. I guess I was also waiting for that because in the pictures that were in the lobby and all around the water was lit really well. My last question was about the preset lighting and why there really was no light on the set. It is such a beautiful set I wasn’t sure why you were trying to hide it from us. There wasn’t anything in the first sequence that gave me reason as to why you wouldn’t light it. Anyway, small things and certainly nothing in the lighting took away from the production as a whole.

### **Costumes**

I really enjoyed the costumes in this production. I loved the flowing airy quality that was created and conceptually moved from the costumes into a lot of the imagery the director was using for sails, drowning, rainbows, etc. I thought the costumes helped tell the story really well by defining the characters we were supposed to pay attention to. I personally really liked that in the beginning the main characters were always in white and the peripheral characters were in other colors. This changed as we moved into the play and as I found out at the response, each story had its own color scheme. I think this is a great idea and in hindsight I did see that but perhaps more variation in the earlier stories would

have set this up better? Not a big deal at all really just nit picky. Another thing I would have liked to have seen is some sense of solid earth in some of the characters. Something heavy and not airy. On the other hand I thought the use of the cloth in the Euridice scene was beautiful as they simply pulled the cloth over their heads to be dead. I must commend the designer and crew for all that material, not just dyeing and building all of it but taking care of it every night getting wet and all that goes with this show.

### **Acting**

I fully applaud the choice to work on this production using a very physical approach to the actors work. This type of work is exciting to watch from an audience perspective and must training for any young actors hoping to work in the modern professional theatre not to mention it makes you a better person-or at least it should. The commitment this acting ensemble showed to the process and the execution of their work showed and really came thru especially as they talked to us about there process. You can see this is something they will take with them. This show must have an ensemble to succeed and I do believe that is what the strength of this production was its ensemble. The other strength that I perceived was some of the visual pictures created by the physical commitment and execution of the actors. The most successful of these seemed to stem directly out of physical work you were doing. The most memorable, to mention a few, were the two turning into a tree, hunger and the way she attached herself to the actor as he splashed around on stage, the men rowing, and my favorite at the end as the two actors floated to each other and clasped hands without ever looking (excellent!) and then effortlessly getting up and holding the pose for an extended time. This is when the physical work really paid off and took the show to another level for a little while. I thought the actor whose work really started to transcend this idea of physical and emotional theatre was the actress who played the incest girl. In every scene she was not only doing the physical work but was finding a way to fill it emotionally so that it was as "big" as the mythical emotions that were being played on stage. She also executed a beautiful moment as she disappeared under water and reappeared at the end of the scene to slowly exit upstage. Not only was all the movement of this sequence handled really well but when I looked at the set afterwards and saw that there was no lip for her to hide behind or under and that she had to slowly move with what I assume was just her nose above water so she was not seen. Very impressive! I would have liked to have seen that kind of commitment to emotional journey of these characters from more of the cast. The danger sometimes with physical work is that if the emotional journey does not match the physical it just becomes more about the physical journey. I did feel at times that was the case were I just don't think the actors emotionally were as connected as they could have been. Also, and this is really nitpicky, but when you have this kind of work where it depends on everyone working together for the moment to be "magical" and powerful all it takes is for one to be off a split second for the effect to misfire. I felt like there was a tremendous amount of attempt at this kind of communal movement but for the most part it never really came together. The most effective moment for me of this group movement was in the Eurydice story where it took us to a different place and one of the reasons that was one of the more effective stories in the play. Now don't get me wrong. I really appreciate the work that

you were doing and applaud you for it and hope that with a long extended run you will continue to find more of this. Actors who work in this train for hours each day and for years on end, physically and with each other to achieve this special kind of theatre. The fact you came as far as you did is to be commended!

Another area I would have liked to have seen a little more care in was the vocal work. I had a hard time hearing a lot of what was going on especially when emotions were high and there was a lot of sound coming from other places. Again it felt like the emphasis was put on the physical and the vocal took a little bit of a back seat.

### **Directing**

A huge undertaking and kudos for also taking on the physical style of the work. I really enjoyed and truly appreciated the visual images that you created. Very powerful and effective. I thought that the show got better as it went on. Early on I felt like there wasn't much connection as we moved from story to story but felt that the second half of the production (around Eurydice) I started seeing the work come together from the actors and from the directors vision. The story started to leap off the stage and the images were even stronger. The staging and use of the physical training really started to show in the detail and didn't seem anymore that it was just being laid on but was coming out of the work. There were some very strong choices that were made that I really enjoyed. The staging of the incest scene in the dark and just the repetitive sounds was a great choice. In other productions I had always seen this staged under light using water as the medium of illusion. I thought this was so much more effective to leave it to our own minds and how disturbing it is. The use of clothe throughout was a very creative touch and worked for the most part. The actors were still getting used to this kind of precision work and I can only imagine that will get stronger as the show went on. I thought the staging of the unison movement, starting with the brilliant choice of the actors just pulling their clothes/cloths up over their heads created a very powerful visual. This was probably the strongest moment in the show where everything came together.

Another area I feel lacked the specificity in the staging was the movement in and out of the water. Sometimes like the very first entrance with the servant plopping down in the water was great but more often than not it looked like they just were following blocking. There was no "need" created for the scenes that were going to be in the water. I also would have liked to have seen more definition in the directorial story telling and letting the audience know when we were moving on to a new story and also telling us how all of these stories come together. Is it love? Or is it some other part of humanity? I saw so many beautiful images thru out this production but ultimately I am left feeling unfulfilled. I don't know how much of that has to do with this production or just this show in general because that is how I have felt the other times I have seen this show. Granted I did not see the original, and I can't put my finger on exactly what it is, but perhaps this is goes into that whole realm of shows that were created by a specific group for the group (Laramie Project) and when it is performed by other companies it is always missing that ingredient. I saw so much good work I kept waiting for a bigger pay off. As I said in the response I think this kind of show has such a small needle pinpoint target for it to work

that it is so easy to just miss by a little and that little miss is felt by the audience. And yet it is more important to miss by a little and do the show than to have not done it at all and certainly important to all the actors who were involved with it. This was a good show with some absolutely beautiful moments but ultimately missed the emotional potential thru the precision of the acting and some of the theatrical magic.

Thanks for everything.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mark Liermann', with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

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