

The New Criterion

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There and back again

by Natasha Simons



Nabiyah Be as Eurydice and Damon Duanno as Orpheus in Hadestown. (Epoch Times)

About five minutes into *Hadestown*, a new musical at the New York Theatre Workshop—right about the time a sandpaper-throated hobo caricature walks out and announces himself as “Mr. Hermes”—you’ll know whether you’re in or out.

It turns out that saying “folk musical based on a concept album based on the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice” raises more than a few eyebrows when you mention your plans for the night. But then again, so did “hip hop musical based on the life of Alexander Hamilton” back in the day, and that seems to have done all right for itself.

“As flies to wanton boys are we to the gods; they kill us for their sport.” And sometimes they let us kill ourselves. And so it goes in the tragedy of Orpheus and Eurydice, the story of a musician and his lady love, whose death sends our hero down to the underworld in literal hot pursuit. He lulls the three-headed Cerberus to sleep and charms even Hades with his songs, who allows him to return to the living with Eurydice—provided he leads her out of hell and never looks behind to

ensure she is following him. He gets pretty close before he finally succumbs to doubt and turns back; game over for the unhappy couple.

The folk singer Anaïs Mitchell, who created the source album of the same name back in 2006, helped envision its ambitious transfer to the stage. She's done it splendidly, creating a multi-textured opera that glances off of gospel, soul, jazz, folk, and country balladry in its recreation of one of the best known myths in the pantheon. Orpheus (Damon Duanno) has been reimagined as a Bob Dylan archetype, Eurydice (Nabiyah Be) is a cross between Norah Jones and Peggy Lee, Persephone (Amber Gray) is Billie Holliday, and Hades (Patrick Page) is a fantastically gravel-voiced, black-blazered Tom Waits. If you committed to it back at the five-minute mark, it all makes a lot of sense.

I've been a bit grouchy about unconventional staging as of late, but the in-the-round approach in *Hadestown* really works. This is not least of all because of the intelligence of the director Rachel Chavkin, who does all her work with fine purpose and design (see also: *Natasha*, *Pierre*, and *the Great Comet of 1812* and *Small Mouth Sounds*). The staging here is intimate and serves to make us part of the story: Hades, demanding Orpheus cease his miserable elegies in the underworld, gestures to the audience as those that are being disturbed by it. We are the eternal witnesses to this story, which cycles as endlessly as the seasons that Persephone controls.

In the myth of Persephone, it's actually Demeter who changes the seasons, bringing the earth back to life with joy as her daughter returns to the overworld for five brief seasons of each year. But she gets more to do here, as does Eurydice. In myth, she's bitten by a snake and dies thusly; here, she grows tired of Orpheus's poetic-but-empty promises to keep her fed and secure and makes the choice to leave the overworld to head "way down to Hadestown." As Hades sings, "Give him your hand, he'll give you hand to mouth/He'll write you a poem when the power's out."

A few people have noted that Hades bears a certain resemblance to a certain toupee-topped politician in the news of late, especially apparent in the call-and-answer sermon song "Why We Build the Wall." This song was written back in 2006, but its theme of keeping the undesirables out ("The enemy is poverty/and the wall keeps out our enemy") can't help but bring Mr. Trump to mind. *Hadestown* is presented as an industrial slave mine that provides security, in contrast with the more frivolous but less lucrative overworld. Frankly, this is the least comprehensible part of the show, and it should be dropped or vastly simplified in any future staging.

Mr. Duanno as Orpheus is rather good, with a beautiful falsetto that really drives the emotional notes, so to speak, home. But, perhaps consciously or unconsciously, Ms. Mitchell has handed the story over to Eurydice, brought heartbreakingly and resplendently to life by Ms. Be. Her carefully tempered and prudent questioning of Orpheus in the first act's "Wedding Song" ("Lover, tell me if you're able/Who's gonna lay the wedding table?") and her grief-struck realization of what she's given up in "Flowers" ("Come and find me lying in the bed I've made") in the second act provide such soaring point and counterpoint that her inevitable final scene actually feels rather anti-climactic and small in comparison.

This is likely because the walk out of hell reaches the far limits of the poky theater; Orpheus and Eurydice are basically traversing the same small pathway back and forth, making a few of his attempts not to “see” her during their journey slightly risible. We never see him again after he fails Hades’ test, which underscores how uninteresting the narrative finds him. By all rights, Eurydice should deliver a grand eleven o’clock number about returning to hell here, but the gods take over the story from this point on. Hermes is the one who brings the show full circle, singing, “It’s a sad song, but we sing it anyway.” It might well end there, but there’s one more unremarkable song from Persephone to close out the night. It’s the conclusion where the workshop’s seams begin to show in what is otherwise a very accomplished and polished production.

If you can’t catch *Hadestown* before it vanishes back into the underworld on July 31, keep an eye out for it transferring to a larger space in the next few seasons. It may lose some of its sweetness in a bigger setting, but gain a few awards in the process. I certainly don’t imagine we’ve seen the last of this unique, entrancing gem. Like Orpheus after Eurydice, you’ll want to follow this one.

Natasha Simons is a writer and editor living in Brooklyn.