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Not giving us the Willy for a change

Metamorphoses
Queensland Shakespeare Ensemble
Sue Brenner Theatre,
Metro Arts
Wednesday, November 8
Reviewer: James Harper

THE story of King Tereus, his terrible crime against his wife and sister-in-law, and their bloody vengeance, is as appalling a tale as you'll come across in myth, legend or history.

It is the truly gripping central pillar of the Queensland Shakespeare Ensemble's first non-Shakespeare production, *Metamorphoses*, based on British poet Ted Hughes's translation of the first-century Roman Ovid.

Three other stories from Ovid's original 15-book epic also feature. After an introductory *Creation* story, *Echo and Narcissus* tells of the nymph who became but an echo of her former self, and the beautiful boy in love with his own reflection.

Linking these episodes are three versions: one comic, one brutal, and one rather more gentle of the story of Peleus and Thetis, parents of the warrior Achilles.

Director Leah Mercer and her cast of six don't attempt literal depiction of the stories' frequent supernatural transformations: the metamorphoses of the title. Nor is the production preoccupied with attempts to shock through graphic acting-out of extreme mayhem.

It is driven primarily by the power of the words, given life by the performers' whole-hearted conviction, as they switch between portraying individual characters and a collective identity as a storytelling chorus.

The production values are distinctly low-budget, and the tatty ambience and poor soundproofing of Metro Arts' Sue Brenner Theatre are a barrier to willing audience engagement with the play's imagined world.

Nonetheless it's an absorbing, sometimes grueling production that goes to the heart of the stories, working simultaneously at several levels.

There is also a clever and restrained layer of symbolism, without the pretentiousness and mystificatory carry-on that often occur when theatre productions tackle ancient myth.