

METAMORPHOSES

Reviewed by WILLIAM MCBRIDE

It has been said that some stories should be retold by every generation. Queensland Shakespeare Ensemble's visceral and lyrical *Metamorphoses* is a testament to this maxim.

The text for this show comes with more baggage than a polygamous marriage to Courtney Love, Anna-Nicole Smith and George Michael. In the first century AD a Roman poet called Ovid composed a magnum opus called *Metamorphoses*. Based on tales from Greek Mythology, this fifteen-book summary of life has had an extraordinary legacy in the stories of the western world. English literary giants Chaucer, Milton and Shakespeare are some of the bigger names heavily influenced by Ovid, and in this Post-modern world of 'no new stories' you can be sure he is behind every soapy season finale, Today Tonight 'exclusive', and contrived reality TV twist that you have ever seen.

British Poet Ted Hughes was good enough to translate these ancient stories into his own work of art called *Tales From Ovid*, and it is from this text that QSE's first non-Shakespearean production is derived. The language of Hughes' translation like the greatest poetry is at once extraordinarily elaborate and efficient. Replete with rich, classical imagery of the natural world, these tales encompass the great extremes of human experience.

Out of 24 stories, four have been chosen for this production including the familiar Echo & Narcissus, about the beautiful man who falls in love with his own reflection. The program notes explain that the "prerequisite for selection was those stories in which the internal passion experienced is so great that the flesh is transformed," and there is a great tragedy and violence behind each tale. Lust leads to murder, vanity to cruel imprisonment, and rape to the most gruesome revenge. These tales are a welcomed reminder for us to 'confront our shadows' in this contemporary society that does its best to compartmentalise and make abstract the ever-presence of violence.

QSE pride themselves on their ability to make classical theatre accessible to a contemporary audience, and with *Metamorphoses* this proves correct. The language of classical text can often prove alienating for a contemporary audience as they attempt to decode archaic speech heard fleetingly and for the first time. The performers in *Metamorphoses* coun-



tenance these difficulties through their heightened speech and stylised physicality. Each player is strong in this ensemble piece, bringing to life these tracts of poetry through various roles and shared narration. Rob Pensalfini and Tamara Meade are especially good in the ferocious tale of Tereus.

The design choice places the show in a contemporary urban setting; Heléna Dingle's set is a grotty mix of blacks and greys, evoking a highly industrialised contrast to the colour and classical imagery of the language. Gavin Edward's haunting and constant musical score adds a depth and intensity to the rhythm of the piece, giving the audience another sensory access point.

Director Leah Mercer is the name behind some of Brisbane's best independent theatre, and she has again proved herself worthy of that mantle. She brings a great imagination and subtlety to her art form. Her use of simple but highly effective movement sequences, unlikely visual metaphor, and an uncanny ability to animate the most mundane inanimate objects, serves here to crystallise the language. She gently guides her audience through a multi-dimensional theatre experience, but has the good sense to never belt us about the head with her themes.

QSE present themselves as 'grassroots' theatre (a charm or plague in the eye of the beholder), and a suspension of disbelief is definitely needed as these epic words emanate from the Metro Arts stage. But that's theatre, and, once I surrendered, this show was a joy; the dismal audience numbers on Saturday night were thoroughly undeserved. *Metamorphoses* is another rough gem from Brisbane's independent theatre scene whose innovation and originality would never grace the blockbuster stages of QPAC, or even QTC.

Metamorphoses will play at Metro Arts until Saturday November 25. Booking details in the listings.
