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Tom Jacobs

‘A Medusa Thread’

When you think of the mythological figure of Medusa, a vivid image immediately springs to mind: A woman with live snakes growing out of her head. The repellent reptiles symbolize her personality, which is angry, vengeful, or to use playwright Candrice Jones’ term, “monstrous.”

The question of what turned her into a monster often doesn’t arise at all — she’s an archetype, after all. But in one of the best-known versions of her story — the one the ancient Roman poet Ovid tells in his Metamorphosis — Medusa has a traumatic back story, in which she was raped by the sea god Poseidon.

So she can be viewed as a survivor of sexual assault who turned her unprocessed rage outward. In that light, her tendency to turn men into stone with her stare takes on a very different resonance.

“Medusa is a touchstone for so many people who can identify with being monstrous,” said Jones, whose play-in-progress A Medusa Thread begins preview performances Monday, May 16 in the Performing Arts Theater at UC Santa Barbara. “She has been the subject of thousands of poems, plays and stories. Women, in particular, connect with her.”

Jones has brought her to life yet again in her new drama, which the UC Santa Barbara Department of Theater and Dance is producing as part of its LAUNCH PAD program. This unique initiative, created and overseen by Professor Risa Brainin, features full productions of works-in-progress. It allows playwrights to get a look at

how a show looks, sounds and feels even as the writing continues to evolve.

The genesis of the play can be traced back to a traumatic event early in Jones' life. "When I was three years old, I became a survivor of child sexual assault," she said. "It goes without saying that experience had an effect on my entire life. When I began writing plays, I knew this topic was something I wanted to approach.

"I didn't want to write a revenge play about sexual assault. I didn't want to write a play in which a sexual assault was portrayed onstage. So I started thinking of creative ways to talk about the subject."

Her breakthrough took place about a decade ago, when she was in graduate school at the California Institute for the Arts. "We talked a lot about mythology, as well as ownership of stories, and the way stories are transmitted from one generation to another, and from one culture to another," she recalled.

"I was thinking of characters in literature whose central narrative also involved sexual assault, and Medusa came to mind. In Ovid's version, she was turned into a monster because of this monstrous thing that happened to her."

Jones ultimately invented a plane of existence she calls the Mall of Purgatory, where Medusa runs a hair salon. Her other major character, who has the symbolic name Essence Worthy, enters the establishment after her untimely death, and is instructed to choose a hairstyle and a preferred afterlife.

To Medusa's dismay, she refuses to go along with the plan, insisting she'd rather stay at the shop and act as her assistant. As they argue over her fate, both women are forced to come to terms with their past traumas.

"I see it as being about the death, burial and resurrection of the spirit," said Shirley Jo Finney, who is directing the production. "The two women are mirror images of one another.

"Medusa, like Essence, hasn't let go of what happened to her. She has built this wonderful place where people get healed, she hasn't been able to truly let go of the trauma and guilt she feels regarding her mother. The transformation of both of them takes place in the shop — the letting go."

Finney first collaborated with Jones in April 2021, when she directed a Zoom reading of A Medusa Thread as part of UC Santa Barbara's BIPOC Reading Series Festival. "I

was very impressed," she recalled. "I said, 'She's going to be a voice to reckon with.'" When she was asked to direct the full production — her fourth show for UC Santa Barbara Department of Theater and Dance — she happily agreed.

"Shirley Jo is a force," Jones said. "It's very clear that she has done this for a long time. She knows what will work and what won't work. But even with all of her wisdom and knowledge, she allows a certain freedom in the process. She gives ideas — all of which are great — but if I decide a particular idea is not what I want for the play, she doesn't continue to push it."

A native of the small town of Dermott, Arkansas, Jones currently lives in Little Rock, where she is playwright-in-residence with the Arkansas Repertory Theatre. She submitted her play to UC Santa Barbara while finishing up a stint as a Jerome Fellow at the Playwrights' Center in Minneapolis.

"I really have enjoyed working with the UCSB community," she said. "Some of the students who were in the cast for the online reading are in the cast now. They've seen the play change and grow. It's beneficial for them, and for me as a playwright. I really love smart actors who challenge me. I'm 41, and most of these students are still in their 20s. But I don't discount their opinions.

"One day, I asked them a simple question: 'This is a play set in a fantasy world. What do you guys understand, and not understand, about the rules that govern this world?' If they, as actors, don't understand what is going on in this world, audiences aren't going to get it."

That goes for both the plot and the larger themes Jones is exploring in this layered work. "I want to look at how stories are told," she said, "how they are accepted in society, and how the mythology we have around sexual assault shapes the way society views survivors."

A Medusa Thread will be performed at 7 p.m. May 16, 18, 20, 21, 23, 24 and 25, and at 1 p.m. May 21, at the Performing Arts Theater on the UC Santa Barbara campus. Tickets are $17 to $19 general or $13 to $15 for seniors and UCSB students, alumni, faculty and staff. Information: 805-893-2064 or https://www.theaterdance.ucsb.edu/news/event/924

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