

THE *Current*

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Tom Jacobs

Student theater company offers new view of Medusa with musical, ‘A Legacy of Stone’

In recent years, scholars and artists have offered new looks at some old villains: The monstrous female figures of myths, legends and fairy tales. “Wicked” gives us a sympathetic view of the Wicked Witch of the West from “The Wizard of Oz,” while Sleeping Beauty’s nemesis Maleficent has been presented in a more positive light in the most recent film franchise.

Medusa, a figure from much further back in history, is now undergoing a similar reexamination. Her distinctive look, with snakes emerging from her scalp where there should be hair, has terrified people for millennia. So has her terrifying superpower: One glance by her can turn anyone into stone.

It’s the stuff of nightmares, to be sure. But how did she get that way? Ancient accounts, such as Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, tell us Medusa was beautiful before being cursed. How did she become a timeless symbol of female rage?

That question is explored in the new musical “A Legacy of Stone,” which UC Santa Barbara student-run Shrunk Heads Production Company will stage Oct. 16-18 in Lotte Lehmann Concert Hall on campus. The work was created by composer/lyricist Chelsea-Cameron Hastings, a fourth-year composition student at the College of Creative Studies.

Hastings opens the show with a song called “A Story You’ve Heard.” “It references the fact that most of society views Medusa as a monstrous creature,” they said. “But when I look back at the oldest versions of her story, that’s not what I see.”

Indeed, in Ovid’s version, the god Poseidon sexually assaults her in a temple to Athena, a goddess Medusa served as a priestess. (In other versions, she willingly gives in to him.) Athena, outraged by this violation of her sacred space, turns her into the gorgon we are all familiar with.

“Today, the image Medusa is very much a symbol among victims of sexual assault,” Hastings noted. “She symbolizes the strength of survivors. I didn’t know that before working on this project.”

So why did Hastings want to write a Medusa musical in the first place? “It was kind of inspired by my mom — in a good way!” said the Bay Area native. “The character of Medusa I have painted is very much inspired by the strength I see in my own mom, along with the kindness and joy she spreads.

“My mom’s favorite holiday is Halloween,” they added. “I grew up loving witches and other emblems of female power which have gotten demonized. When I was about 16, she dressed up as Medusa for one Halloween. So I had that image in my brain!”

As a composer, Hastings points to such influences as the late Duncan Sheik (she calls his “Alice by Heart” one of her favorite musicals), and Anais Mitchell, creator of a hit musical also based on Greek myth, “Hadestown.”

“There are also some references to Lin-Manuel Miranda — specifically in the character of Hermes, who raps in a British trap style,” Hastings added. “I hadn’t written in that style before, but it fit the character really well.”

The show utilizes a nine-piece, onstage orchestra. Each of the major characters has their own sound, as they are accompanied by a different combination of instruments.

“Medusa’s ensemble consists of guitar, vibraphone, cello, viola and piano,” Hastings said. “Different instruments are used in different ways. All nine only come together in a few places, including the exit music and one of the very last numbers.”

Lena Wessel sings the title role, and is also the current president of Shrunkn Heads Productions, a company with a long if somewhat fuzzy history. (She reports finding blog posts from 2004 referencing the troupe.) She's a fourth-year biochemistry major who has a passion for musical theater as a hobby — a description that fits many members of the troupe.

"A lot of people in Shrunkn Heads are STEM majors," she said. "It is a great outlet for people who wouldn't normally get the chance to do musical theater. I think some of the most impactful art sometimes comes from people who do not make it their career."

Hastings, who very much does want to make a career in music, came to UC Santa Barbara as a singer-songwriter.

"When I first got to the College of Creative Studies, one of my professors mentioned that someone (in the program) had written a musical years ago. In about five seconds, I decided that's what I wanted to commit three years of my life to.

"I spent my first year here writing the book, the vocal score and the piano score. My second year, I orchestrated it, and workshopped it with a cast. Last year, my junior year, we put on a showcase production featuring about an hour and a half of the full script. I then pitched it to Shrunkn Heads, which chose it as the first show of their first three-show season."

Like so many composers before them, Hastings has discovered that writing a musical allows her to explore deep themes that are difficult to delve into in a single song.

"Overall," Hastings said, "this is a story about who has power and who gets to wield it; forgiveness, and who gets to give it; and the issue of what do you want vs. what you really need."

"A Legacy of Stone" will be performed at 7 p.m. Friday, Oct. 16 and Saturday, Oct. 17 and 2 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 18. Tickets are \$15 general, \$10 for UCSB students with IDs (plus fees). For more information, go to:

<https://www.shrunknheadsproductions.org/>. Tickets can be purchased online at cur8.com/40906/project/141947.

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