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## Orpheus Descending



Her dad was an Italian immigrant from Palermo Sicily who settled in a small Southern town. She remembered that he had bought a monkey while at Caracas, Venezuela; it turned out the monkey was old and on its last legs. What Lady Torrance's family did not realize was that the South would not tolerate disruptions to its social structure, such as when her dad sold liquor to blacks during Prohibition. And soon her dad's orchard garden was in flames and so was he. Those who aided those were "different" had to be punished. Against this backdrop, the heroine of "Orpheus Descending" plots revenge against her husband and a new life with another. Lou Pepe's production of the Tennessee Williams play turns a once lackluster play into a poetic and terrifying piece using the talents of Denise Crosby, Gale Harold, Claudia Mason, and the rest of the experienced cast.

Valentine "Val" Xavier (Gale Harold) is the new kid in town who lands a job at the dry goods store of Lady Torrance (Denise Crosby), partly because of his good looks. Here he meets Carol Cutrere (Claudia Mason), a self-proclaimed exhibitionist who likes to wear lots of make-up on her eyes and considerably little underneath her coat. We learn that Lady is giving her husband Jabe Torrance (Geoffrey Wade) morphine to quell his illness, but she soon finds out that he was part of the gang that set fire to her dad's house, killing him because he aided the blacks. She seeks revenge by getting involved with Val and carrying his child. Unfortunately, Val is the subject of the trances of Vee Talbot (Francesca Casale), a painter and wife of Sheriff Talbot (Andy Forrest). The Sheriff wants Val out of the town before sunrise because he was too friendly with his wife. Thus Val's escape from town and Lady's impending revenge are both in limbo as the play draws to its deadly climax.

"Orpheus Descending" was somewhat of a failure for Tennessee Williams when it first came out. A reworking of the earlier "Battle of Angels," it retells the Greek Orpheus myth through the characters of Val and Lady as Orpheus and Eurydice. It was adapted for the screen as Sidney Lumet's "The Fugitive Kind." Pepe's production doesn't cut corners in tackling the moral issues the play addresses. For instance, the lynching of blacks by whites in the South (for example, the Willie McGee rape case described by Carol Cutrere) are made explicit in this production by the use of some frightful offstage voices. Masks are also employed as the Conjure Man and Uncle Pleasant (Curtis C) arrive and leave the stage, respectively. Uncle Pleasant, in particular is left speechless after the climax, and we are left with the idea that the play is about the capabilities of Southern destruction.

One of the play's most dramatic moments comes when Vee Talbot experiences another of her visions in which she is blinded by "the world of light and shadow." She paints what she sees in these trances as blobs of

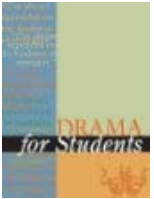

expressionistic light, but we wonder if she's blinded because she has seen so much lynching by her husband's gang. Her feeling is bestowed upon Val, but that feeling of belonging is interpreted by her husband as lust, and Val is confronted by him and his gang of Pee Wee Binnings and Dog Hamma. Casale gives one of the best performances in the play by intuiting what a temporarily blind woman would feel. She also does a bang-up job of portraying Nurse Porter, the jealous woman who figures out Lady's infidelity after she suggests that they give her husband Jabe excess morphine. She keeps referring to a Dr. Buchanan that never comes, and claims to see Lady clearly for she is, an example of the narrow-minded prejudice of that Southern town. Casale is able to play two characters with diametrically opposite agendas, both the visionary and the misguided.

There's so much context to the role of Lady Torrance, but Denise Crosby needs only a sliver of experience in each case to bring the role to fruition. After the chatter of Beulah Binnings and Dolly Hamma kick off the play, we begin in earnest with her former lover David Cutrere (Geoffrey Wade), who had much earlier dumped her while she was pregnant. Wade does a great double role, in both cases as Lady's former lover and now subject of hatred. Crosby's scene with Wade, in which she confesses to having been pregnant, is the first time we realize both the vulnerability and strength that she possesses, even though she regrets the revelation at the end of the scene.

Next come the scenes with Gale Harold in which she tries to buy his love by giving him a job, then has a baby in order to recreate a new world, a task manifest in her creating a confectionary corner for the store so that "young people can come and go." The snakeskin-wearing outsider is deemed a legless bird resting in the wind, before Lady Torrance takes him in. An early indication of Tennessee Williams's creativity as well as Crosby's thoughtfulness is her speech about the death that comes only when we don't want it to, and foreshadows the climax that occurs to Lady and Val when Jabe Torrance comes downstairs with knowledge of their affair. Crosby displays a quiet strength in seeking the vengeance that she craves. She tells Val to don a white jacket for the christening of the new confectionary, even though he has been told by Sheriff Talbot that if she were to stay until the sun goes down, he'll be treated like one of those blacks being lynched. But even Val's motives can not disturb her conviction that she "will not be defeated." Even when "the show's over, the monkey's dead," Lady exudes her Italian spirit of defiance by keeping everything the way she wanted it, despite the consequences. She won over Mr. Death.

The survivor of the play, Carol Cutrere, gets the last say. After exchanging her gold ring for Val's snakeskin jacket from the Conjure Man, she leaves us with the notion that the next generation will be changed, even if the current one isn't. Claudia Mason, whose role picks up fast, but declines rapidly, has a last moment of realization if not triumph. After Orpheus descends, so does the show, but Mason's character lives on.

"Orpheus Descending" plays at Theatre Theater (<http://www.theatretheater.net>) in Hollywood, California, until 21 of February, 2010.

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