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Posted: Sun., Oct. 31, 2010, 5:15pm PT

Persephone

Warren Leight's fanciful treatment envisions the tale as performed by a 19th-century theater troupe.

By MARILYN STASIO

When theater people think of "pretty," they often think of the Ridge Theater, an avant-garde company with a lush aesthetic. Or they might just think of a lush actress like Julia Stiles. That works, too, especially with this extremely pretty thesp playing the title role in the company's extremely pretty production of "Persephone." Warren Leight's fanciful treatment envisions the Greek myth being performed by a 19th-century theater troupe enamored of such wonders of modern technology as electricity. Like its leading lady, this multimedia mashup of romantic music and dreamy imagery is luscious, if a bit vapid and ultimately soporific.

The "Phantom of the Opera" vibe of the artificially decrepit interior of BAM's cavernous Harvey Theater proves the ideal setting for Bob McGrath's directorial concept for this collaborative production, which takes place both onstage and in the dressing rooms of a vintage proscenium playhouse.

Jim Findlay has designed a gorgeous set that allows simultaneous views of these dual staging areas. From the angled perspective of an observer standing in the wings, the audience can watch the ethereal pageant play being performed beyond the footlights and the earthier backstage action taking place down front.

Scribe Warren Leight, a nimble wordsmith who copped a Tony for "Side Man" before going on to TV gigs ("Law and Order," "In Treatment"), adopts a convincingly stilted 19th-century idiom to relate the mythic tale of how the beautiful Persephone (Stiles), the daughter of Zeus (Sean Haberle) and Demeter (Mimi Goese), was kidnapped by the lovesick god Hades (Michael Anthony Williams) and dragged off to live in the underworld. A pomegranate is involved, and Stiles makes a feast of it.

Faces frozen and arms akimbo in the rigid performance attitudes of the period, the TVstar (currently on "Dexter") and her bevy of attendant nymphs deliver their poetry-speak like adenoidal dolls, while striking amusingly frigid poses in their stage tableaux. But they are never less than lovely in the gossamer costumes designed by Jane Alois Stein.

Leight's script for the backstage drama is less ambitious, settling as it does for such conventional

conflict situations as star tantrums and the machinations of envious ingenues. Haberle and Goese put some oomph into the more fundamental clash of egos between the troupe's demagogue manager and his ambitious partner and former wife.

But this is pretty dull stuff and rather beside the point of the production, which has more to do with the sheer beauty of the show.

The inventive contributions of John Ambrosone (lighting), Jamie McElhinney (sound), Bill Morrison (film), and Laurie Olinder (projections) give the production a mesmerizing quality that is positively (pass the 'shrooms, people) '60s-style psychedelic. Translated into the period of the play, the theatrical effect is like being trapped inside the Magic Lantern that Nicholas, the company projectionist (Williams), anxiously fusses with.

Enhancing all that visual muchness is the hypnotic score by Ben Neill and Goese, a romantic swell of symphonic brass and percussion that rises and falls like an unstoppable tidal wave. The effect is ultimately numbing -- but what a nice way to drown.

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