

BLIND LOVE

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photo by Tom Carr

*"Beauty is truth, truth beauty," – that is all
Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know.*

John Keats "Ode to a Grecian Urn"

by Jeff Grygny

The myth of Cupid and Psyche is among the strangest, most mysterious tales brought down to us from the ancient world. It reads first like a horror movie, then a love intrigue, then a quest, and finally a spiritual epiphany. The earliest recorded version is in the Roman writer Apuleius' marvelously titled novel *The Golden Ass*, which combines urbane cynicism with devotion to the goddess Isis (it's about a man's adventures after he is turned into a donkey by an irate witch). Like Isis, Psyche is one of the few female characters in Western mythology to go on a quest; the myth has since mutated into *The Beauty and the Beast*, which modern audiences know best from the Disney musical: now that's a story with staying power. *The Beauty of Psyche*, a charming jewel-box of a play currently in production by the Milwaukee Entertainment Group, gives the old tale a fresh spin, while keeping the dreamlike aura of the original.

Under the direction of playwright JJ Gatesman, the spirited cast delivers brisk storytelling that balances between emotional realism and high fantasy. With actors playing multiple roles, the tiny stage becomes the cosmos, populated by the humans, gods, demigods, and animals of the classical world. In the elegant setting of the Brumder Mansion, with lush costumes, live music directed by Donna Kummer, nifty shadow effects, and a finely-sculpted goat puppet, the overall experience is pleasingly rich—like entering one of the antique books in the mansion's cabinets.

The play begins with Psyche in captivity, tended by a figure she can only see as a shadow—a creepy scenario, to be sure. In Apuleius' version, Psyche is a hapless soul, impulsive and always on the brink of giving up. Gatesman's heroine is a feisty lass who scolds her erstwhile captor, writes songs, and makes her fateful choices deliberately. On the other hand, while the First-Century Cupid is a bad boy, often drunk and unruly, this Eros is genteel and soft-spoken, with few discernible faults, save maybe a dumb naivete. The problem is Eros' mother, Aphrodite. The Goddess of Love holds a grudge against the lovely Psyche, and, as Greek Goddesses tend to do, sets all kinds of difficult conditions for her survival. Naturally Psyche breaks the rules—not before warming up to her well-meaning jailer—and thus initiates a quest for various hard-to-obtain items of the kind familiar to players of first person video games. (Note: it's always a good idea to win the sympathy of whatever supernatural beings you come across.) But the heart of the play is in the conversations between Psyche and Eros as they gradually come to understand one another.



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Under Gatesman's direction, the characters seem to embody different elemental qualities. As Eros, Jake Konrath brings a stillness, as if echoing the heart's inner depths; Shannon Nettlesheim Klein plays Aphrodite like fire and ice, with stylized theatrical gestures. She also plays the mysterious masked Persephone, Queen of the Underworld, as if weighted with the shades of regret (in this version Persephone rules alone, having lost Hades to a fateful accident). Kellie Wambold plays the goat-god Pan with the effervescent whimsy of a babbling stream, accompanied by Paige Bourne as her silent satyr sidekick. And in the role of Psyche, Brittany Curran carries the story admirably, conveying a hero's persevering resourcefulness and a very human mixture of feelings.

Some philosopher, clearly on the side of the angels, once remarked that one cannot truly see another without loving them. It is a sentiment far from the temper of our contentious times, but one worth at least remembering. It's at the center of *The Beauty of Psyche*—which is why it's a perfect show for a Valentine's Day evening.

Milwaukee Entertainment Group presents

The Beauty of Psyche

by JJ Gatesman

playing through February 22

<http://milwaukeeentertainmentgroup.com/the-beauty-of-psyche-2/>

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