

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Hadestown Is Heaven-Sent

David Sheward · Wednesday, July 13th, 2016

There was a while there when it looked as if the original American musical was on the intensive care list. Jukebox tuners, British imports, and adaptations of movies dominated. But in recent years, innovative shows such as *Hamilton*, *Fun Home*, *Next to Normal*, and *Dear Evan Hansen* have revitalized the genre both on and Off-Broadway. You can add *Hadestown*, currently at New York Theatre Workshop, to the roster of imaginative fare engaging younger audiences.



Nabiyah Be and Damon Daunno in *Hadestown* Credit: Joan Marcus

Songwriter Anais Mitchell and director Rachel Chavkin, who also co-developed the piece, adapt the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice into a folksy, down-South tall tale of love versus commerce. In the Greek legend, minstrel Orpheus follows his dead beloved Eurydice into the underworld and, with his golden voice, charms the realm's dread lord into releasing her. In this retelling, Hades is a heartless industrialist who sings of building an immense wall around his underground factory, Hadestown, to keep poverty out. (Sound like a certain presidential candidate?) Here Eurydice becomes a sexual slave to Hades, selling her soul for the financial comfort her lover, the idealistic artist Orpheus, cannot provide.

Mitchell and Chevron also throw in elements of the story of Persephone, the goddess of the spring who must join her husband Hades in his subterranean stronghold for the earth's six months of winter. Persephone is an enchanting good-time gal spreading joy and moonshine during her stay above ground and rebelling when she must take the train to Hadestown. The two couples' star-crossed affairs clash in a heart-wrenching conclusion. A rumbling-voiced version of the messenger god Hermes narrates the tale and a trio of back-up singers act as a Greek chorus of Fates.

Mitchell's infectious score combines roots music, bluegrass, dixieland, and pop for a heady and satisfying gumbo. Chavkin employs the same kind of intimate, environmental staging that distinguished her productions of *The Royale* and *Natasha, Pierre, and the Great Comet of 1812*.

Damon Daunno and Nabiyah Be display sweet voices as the doomed lovers and Amber Gray is an entrancing Persephone. Chris Sullivan delivers a rowdy Hermes while Lulu Fall, Jessie Shelton, and Erica Sweany make for a sassy, close-harmony set of Fates. But the real star here is Patrick Page as the terrifying Hades. His basement-level bass shakes the foundations of the theater like a earthquake, sending shockwaves of evil charisma through the spines of every theatergoer. It's the most electrifying portrayal of a musical villain on or Off-Broadway.

May 23—July 31. New York Theatre Workshop, 79 E. 4th St., NYC. Tue, Wed, 7 pm—Sat, 8 pm; Sat, Sun, 2 pm; Sun, 7 pm. Running time: two hours and 20 mins. including intermission. \$99. (212) 460-5475. www.nytw.org.

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