

# Metamorphoses: mary zimmerman's play critique

[Literature](#), [Poem](#)



## **Play Critique: Metamorphoses**

Based on Ovid's narrative poem, published in 8 AD, Mary Zimmerman's *Metamorphoses* is a transcendental work of art with themes of rebirth, romance, power, and consequence. The play is a collection of classical Greek myths, reinvented using contemporary language and featuring a pool as a majority of the set. The body of water, along with the simple yet elegant backdrop of a double door and steps emphasized the theme of transformation of the mind, body, and soul. The lighting accentuated aspects of the set, the actors, and their movements, making the entire piece more impactful. The costumes were simplistic, reflective of the time period, and completely functional despite all of the characters getting soaking wet at one point or another throughout the play. Overall, the design elements worked well together and created a beautifully-done, powerful production by Vanderbilt University Theatre.

The element which, in my opinion, makes this play stand out from most is the incorporation of the pool. As a run crew member, I am fully aware of how much effort went into building and maintaining the pool, and it was not an easy feat but without it the production would not have been nearly as impactful. In literature, passing through water represents a cleansing, or a baptism. The use of water works perfectly with this show because no character is the same at the beginning of their scene as they are at the end. Each transforms in some form, whether it's just their way of thinking such as with Phaeton, or their entire physical being such as Baucis and Philemon. The water is used to symbolize many different things and add emphasis to

the emotions of the characters, especially during moments of intense feelings. When Orpheus is pleading to Hades for his bride back, water rains down on him as he stands in the pool. I believe that in this instance, that since Orpheus is the only person in the pool, it represents the fact that he is neither on Earth nor in Hell because he's still living, and his placement in the water shows that he is in the midst of a journey. The water that pours down on him is symbolic of his pain and all the tears he must have shed due to the loss of Eurydice. The use of water intensifies this scene, more than just the acting alone could have done. Another scene in which the pool makes a huge impact is Myrrha's. I believe that in this scene the depth of the water represents the Myrrha's internal struggle. When she sleeps with her father, they embrace in the shallow water but when she leaves for the night she goes into the deeper water. With her father wearing his blindfold she feels safe, and stable in her desire but when she is alone there is an element of instability. Finally, when her father finds out that he has sleep with his own daughter, she is forcefully submerged in the deepest end of the pool, as this is the breaking point. All emotions are at a peak. When she emerges she knows that she cannot continue on as she is, her baptism, and asks to be transformed into something else. The pool is used symbolically, like with Myrrha's, and literally, such as the naval battle, and it is an integral part of this production because of all the things it represents and the novelty it adds to the entire show.

Another part of the production, which may not stand out as much as the pool to audience members, but definitely made a huge impact, is the lighting. There were over 160 lighting cues for this production, which is rare

considering the length of the play. The lighting was used to draw attention to the speaker, underscore the mood of each scene, differentiate locations, and create symbolism. The lighting also created illusions, such as the gold light making Midas's daughter look like solid gold despite the fact that she was wearing a white and pink dress. When I viewed the show without any special effects I had no clue as to how the director and the technical people would execute this change in form, but after seeing the final production it was flawlessly done. A scene in which the lighting added to the mood of the play was that of Alcyone and Ceyx. This scene had many different lighting cues, each doing something different to enhance the entire scene overall. The first major lighting change was during the naval battle when the lights were flashing to show how chaotic and intense this battle was. This relates to the themes of consequence and power. The battle was the consequence of Ceyx not listening to Alcyone and the chaotic lights and flashes showed how powerless he was against the natural elements of the ocean, Poseidon and his henchmen. Also in this scene, the light changes when Iris is in Sleep's grotto. When Sleep is onstage, everything is very dark showing that this is a place that "the sun never can, even at midday, penetrate with the faintest beams." The darkness contrasts greatly with the bright lighting once Alcyone begins speaking again, representing her place on Earth versus Sleep's home in the gloomy caves. The lighting adds to the theme of transformation just as much as the pool and the plot. In the scene with Eros and Psyche, the lighting enriches the theme of romance. The entire set is given a red hue, which looks beautiful with Psyche's red dress and the white wings of Eros. Red is symbolic of love, passion, and well as anger, three powerful emotions

which are displayed during this scene. It helps to set the tone of the entire scene. The lighting is dark, without being disconsolate and bright enough to have made me feel a spark of hope for the couple. The balance of this scene really made it stand out, in my opinion. One lighting change that I would make would be during the final scene, when Midas is reunited with his daughter. The light was gold, which would have reflected the happy mood and remind the audience of the reason for Midas's journey, but it made it hard to see the expressions of the actors. Being able to view the show with effects and without really allowed me to see the importance of the lighting in this show and how fundamental it is to making this an emotional, yet relatable production.

The costuming of Vanderbilt University Theatre's Metamorphoses reflected the time period in which Ovid's narrative would have been set, using elements of Ancient Greece. However the most impressive part of the costumes is that fact that they stood up so well to being drenched with water and there were no wardrobe malfunctions. The colors used made it difficult to discern between wet parts of the fabric and the dry. As I sat backstage, I was impressed by how dry some of the actors appeared despite being knee-deep in the water just a few scenes ago. I liked how the silhouette for most of the females was the same, with the lace/mesh bottoms and a short dress over the top, which made the outfits seem very loose and non-restricting such as with Greek drapery. The design also made the costumes easier to move in and less likely to be weighed down by the water. There was also cohesiveness present in the male costumes, with brown tops, ruffles, and the tan pants. These colors worked beautifully together and the simplicity

allowed me to focus more on the actor's movements, words, and expressions. Actors whose costumes stood out the most to me were Persephone's and Poseidon's. Each of them used colors other than the standard brown, cream, and orange. During Orpheus' visit to Hell, the costumes were used to create contrast on stage. Everyone on the left side of the stage was wearing predominantly black, while the right side was wearing white. This was reversed with Hades, who was wearing all black but standing on the right, and Persephone who was in white. I really like the contrast just within Persephone's ensemble. Her dress looked soft and elegant but was juxtaposed by the black, stiff neckpiece. I think this exemplifies the power she holds on Hades himself, especially knowing the story of how their marriage came to be. Poseidon's costume stood out because of its unique color. He is the only character to wear blue and it looks especially nice during Erysichthon's scene. When Poseidon enters to transform the mother, the stage is lit to the same hue as his skirt and it really emphasizes the color. The black offsets the brightness of the blue and really adds an aura of authority. One costume I didn't like was Eurydice's, especially as she followed behind Hermes. There were so many elements to her costume, the bottoms, the dress, and the robe, but none of them were cohesive, including the colors. The gray belt, with a black outline, on her cream dress didn't exude the same simplicity as the other characters and the addition of the robe really offset everything. She was practically wallowing in the robe and it distracted me from actually enjoying the scene. I enjoyed the mix of contemporary fashions with ancient ideals. I am not sure that all of the costumes were designed to reflect the themes of the play, as I couldn't make

a connection with many of them, but they worked well with the use of water and did not hinder the actors from performing to their fullest capabilities.

Altogether, the design choices implemented in *Metamorphoses* created a cohesive, influential show, as made obvious by the numerous positive reviews. Being able to see everything come together from Crew View, to the final performance was a very unique experience for me. Being present at each showing made me realize how important audience participation is in this show as well, as the actors are able to feed off of the reactions of the audience. The set designer and director did a great job at including the audience because of the proximity of the seating to the set and the fact that the actors often used the floor space around the pool. This enabled the play to be more comedic and the actor-audience interaction balanced out much of the darker content. The entire script is built on metamorphosis, or the transformation of characters and places and ideals. The set, lighting, and costuming made the themes of this production clear to me and made my entire experience working with this show enjoyable.