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Caeneus and Poseidon

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In "**Caeneus & Poseidon**," a new verse play at the Dragon Theatre, reluctant bride Caenis runs away from her wedding to the king, hooks up with a god, and then transforms herself into a man all in one morning.

For most people that would be enough anecdotes to last a lifetime, but the play actually keeps going for two more hours after that.

This show started as a one-act five years ago, now staged in Redwood City as a full play for the first time.

Caenis (non-binary actor Nicky Martinez) flees the wedding feast because she just plain doesn't want to settle down and become a wife and mother.

Truth be known, she'd rather not be a woman at all, despite the fact that ancient Thessaly seemingly offers very few broad-minded options for that sort of thing.

But she stumbles on Poseidon, god of the sea, horses, earthquakes and casual sexual harassment (Michael Wayne Rice), who offers her one wish in exchange for a one night stand, and, presto, now she's a man, Caeneus.

This is all based on a slightly obscure Greco-Roman myth, although writer Bridgette Dutta Portman and directors Amy Crumpacker and WM Diedrick Razo transition the story into an explicitly trans-centric modern mindset.

Caeneus becomes a great warrior, returns home where nobody recognizes him, sweeps his former childhood BFF (Sharon Shao) off her feet and gets in a tiff with some centaurs.

Meanwhile, Poseidon is intent on playing takesy-backsies with his wish-granting, so offended is the archaic god by the idea of a woman becoming a man -- or as Caeneus sees it, becoming the man he was all along.

Portman pens a gorgeous script with reams of verse that with a few exceptions sound natural and unpretentious, neither casual enough to spoil the mood nor flouncy enough to come off as silly.

And translating the classical theme of metamorphosis -- in an ancient storytelling tradition where women can become men, men can give birth, and gods can turn anything into anything -- into a 21st-century story about identity is a smart and inspiring move.

But "Caeneus & Poseidon" lacks focused direction. Most of the cast spend their scenes milling about, shuffling their feet, and making constant, distracted half-gestures with their hands (once you notice the first time it'll start to drive you nuts).

Scene changes are awkward and too frequent, and the blocking seems half-hearted, with actors appearing uncertain where to be or conversely like they're paying too much attention to where they are.

Lead Martinez makes a sufficiently dashing figure in hero mode (a good rule of thumb for actors: If the part includes a sword fight, it's almost always win-win). But fidgeting and downcast eyes bedevil the performance too often.

(Although Martinez does nail a couple of critical monologues that juice into the role where it counts.)

Of the big parts, only Rice, a veteran actor with the most fun part of the show, and Shao, who displays what you might call a natural disposition for the classical tragedy vibe, appear truly committed.

Everyone else, though not bad in their right, needs a firmer hand, and "Caeneus & Poseidon" in general should be much fleetier, trimmer and more hard-driving than it is right now.

Lindsey Eifert put together truly gorgeous costumes -- a tricky feat in a show that has to tread a fine line of looking sufficiently fantastic without overdoing it. (The only problem is a distracting cape that always seems to

be in the way of the king, Daniel Joyce).

And the occasional music grants a pleasing, twangy, slightly anachronistic atmosphere that helps the audience feel acclimated.

But somebody has got to turn up the volume on the rest of this program.

"Caeneus & Poseidon" plays through April 2 at the Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway in Redwood City. For tickets and information, call 650-493-2006 or visit DragonProductions.net

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