

Entertainment > [Theater & Arts](#)

# Review: Transgender Greek myth hits the stage in Redwood City



Scott Ragle/Dragon Productions

Nicky Martinez stars as Caeneus, a figure in Greek mythology who was born female but changes into a man, in “Caeneus & Poeidon,” a new play.

By **SAM HURWITT, CORRESPONDENT** |

PUBLISHED: March 16, 2017 at 10:00 am | UPDATED: March 16, 2017 at 10:12 am

In her new play at Redwood City's Dragon Theatre, Bay Area playwright Bridgette Dutta Portman conjures up a Greek myth about a transgender hero.

The basic outline of "Caeneus & Poseidon" is from actual Greek myth, about a male warrior who was born female. After the young woman Caenis is raped by Poseidon (in the play it's a more deliberate transaction), she asks the sea god to turn her into a man, and he grants the wish with the added bonus of unbreakable skin. Portman takes those bare bones and fleshes them out into a deeper exploration of gender and identity.

The Caenis of the play has never felt comfortable as a woman and feels the transformation into Caeneus is just bringing out the man he always should have been. Poseidon is furious about the request, having very fixed ideas about the role of women — an entrenched dogma that every other man in the story seems to share.

Originally a one-act for the 2012 San Francisco Olympians Festival, "Caeneus & Poseidon" now premieres as a full-length play as part of Dragon Productions Theatre Company's 2nd Stages Series.

The Dragon production is simply staged by co-directors Amy Crumpacker and Wm. Diedrick Razo. David Donovan's set consists of just a few pieces — a couple of pillars and two short staircases — moved around into different configurations, with the suggestion of a shoreline painted on the floor. Lindsey Eifert's costumes are similarly simple, faint suggestions of ancient dress.

Nicky Martinez's Caenis is palpably miserable, panicked and desperate at having to marry the king that was her childhood playmate. Martinez's Caeneus is at least much more comfortable in his own skin, with a completely different bearing, but remains melancholy and ill at ease, in fear of being found out and in disgust at the undisguised misogyny fellow men feel free to share. Of course, it might have helped had Caeneus not moved right back to the town where he lived as Caenis.

Sharon Shao is an upbeat presence as Caeneus' best friend Hippodamia, who's so resigned to her lot in life that she can scarcely conceive of anything else. Caenis' father Elatus (a glowering Scott Kravitz) is a raging brute. We don't meet Caenis' dreaded fiance King Pirithous until later, when the supposedly new-in-town Caeneus has struck up a friendship with him (again), but Daniel Joyce's young Pirithous goes back and forth between boys' club bonhomie and prickly insecurity, aware that people belittle him behind his back.

Michael Wayne Rice is a forceful, charismatic and prideful Poseidon, enraged both at being tricked and at a woman choosing to be a man instead of doing women things and leaving man stuff to the men.

If that sounds awfully rudimentary, well, so is the reasoning. Alexander Ortiz exudes cool confidence in one key scene as a centaur chieftain (with no particular attempt at a centaur costume or horselike movements or anything like that, just attitude). Regina Kohl, Mylissa Malley and Elena Ruggiero act as a mocking chorus of seductive, rumor-mongering sea nymphs that follow Caeneus everywhere, speaking in rhyming poetry or simply whispering and laughing somewhere unseen.

Portman is transparent in her use of the ancient tale as a mythic representation of a more general trans experience. Poseidon embodies judgmental, gender-essentialist insistence that the transgender person is deep down still the gender assigned at birth, while Caeneus never wavers on his transition, no matter what consequences he may face. Even if the way some of these ideas are expressed sound modern, the story serves as a reminder that trans identity is certainly not just a modern phenomenon. What's changed is the way it's talked about — and that it's talked about at all.

*Contact Sam Hurwitt at [shurwitt@gmail.com](mailto:shurwitt@gmail.com), and follow him at [Twitter.com/shurwitt](https://twitter.com/shurwitt).*

---

## **'CAENEUS & POSEIDON'**

By Bridgette Dutta Portman, presented by Dragon Productions Theatre Company

**Through:** April 2

**Where:** Dragon Theatre, 2120 Broadway St., Redwood City

**Running time:** 2 hours, one intermission

**Tickets:** \$27-\$35; 650-493-2006, [www.dragonproductions.net](http://www.dragonproductions.net)

---

---

Tags: **Theater**



**Sam Hurwitt, Correspondent**

**SUBSCRIBE TODAY!**

ALL ACCESS DIGITAL OFFER FOR JUST 99 CENTS!