

Phaedra and the Minotaur | Ustinov

Phaedra is a woman on the edge – as one might expect: it's not ideal to fall in love with the son of your betrothed, and it's *definitely* not ideal to fall in love with him on this, the day of your wedding.

Benjamin Britten's *Phaedra* (1975) tells the tale of Phaedra, Hippolytus, and a one-sided love affair. Phaedra's dreams of marital bliss are scuppered when, on the day that she and Theseus are set to wed, she catches sight of her fiancé's rather dashing son, Hippolytus – and falls head over heels in love with him. Believing her infatuation to be the work of cruel goddess Aphrodite, Phaedra sets about pouring libations and building temples in the hopes that the goddess might appreciate her efforts and show a little mercy. But Aphrodite won't budge an inch, and what follows is a tangled tale of desire, rage, false accusation – and poison. (No further spoilers).

Britten's score is paired with poet Robert Lowell's (*Life Studies*) translation of playwright Jean Racine's *Phèdre* (1677) – and whilst both are powerful in their own rights, together they pack a real punch; piano teases lyric, lyric flirts with piano – and the production's set happily stands aside for the flirtatious show. Bar a piano (and its rather excellent pianist, Richard Hetherington), there are only three items on stage, all of which lie covered with white sheets (again, no spoilers). It's a cold, hard space, barren of anything which might distract from the show's central performance. Which is lucky, because it's a performance worth concentrating on.

Christine Rice is not only a powerhouse of a mezzo-soprano (her voice rich and full) but an impressive actress to boot. I overhear two audience members commenting on the rarity of such a double pronged threat; it's not always the case, the pair suggest, that a killer voice comes along with some serious acting chops. But Rice brings both to the table. In one rather brilliantly conceived moment, she picks up the sheet in which Hippolytus's body was until recently covered (alright, slight spoiler) and proceeds to wrap herself in its pale folds. Standing alone in the centre of the stage, Phaedra looks – however briefly – just as we might imagine the goddess who spurned her to look; a mortal woman empowered by the strength of her passion. It's a striking image, and one that lends the production some bite.

So far – so good. I spend the interval straightening out my classical myth intel (who loves *who* again? And who is related to her, and who has got on the wrong side of the gods this week, and, and, and...) before heading back in for the second instalment of the night: Kim Brandstrup's dance piece, *Minotaur*.

Things in the studio have changed since last we sat. Gone are the white sheets and the piano player. Instead, a huge red splash adorns the back wall of the box stage, and a single bed – on which lies a girl dressed in burgundy – has been nudged into view.

Minotaur tells the story of Phaedra's sister Ariadne (Laurel Dalley Smith) – who, like her doomed sibling, is also pretty hard done by when it comes to love. After falling for slayer-of-the-beastly-Minotaur, Theseus (Jonathan Goddard), Ariadne is thrilled to spend a few moments in his monster-murdering arms. But as far as Theseus is concerned, this is all more of whirlwind / casual relationship – and before the night is out, he abandons his lover without so much as a "see you around". Ariadne is utterly consumed by grief; that is, until she catches Dionysus' (Tommy Franzen) wandering eye.

Brandstrup's piece is split into five parts; we move from 'Combat' (i.e. Minotaur slaying) to 'Seduction', through to 'Departure' and 'Lament', and end with 'Deus Ex Machina', and each part skips into the next with confidence and style.

It's always a wonder to see dancers communicate without words. A touch here, a spin there. Brandstrup's choreography is wonderfully natural; it doesn't feel like we're watching Dance with a capital 'D', but simply a physical expression of love, desire, grief. The whole thing is rather hypnotic. *Phaedra* is fantastic – but for me, it's the second portion of the evening that really ups the ante.

It's a very strong double bill of a night – and a testament to the creative vision of the Ustinov's new Creative Director, Deborah Warner. More where this came from, please.

Tickets available from the Theatre Royal website: theatreroyal.org