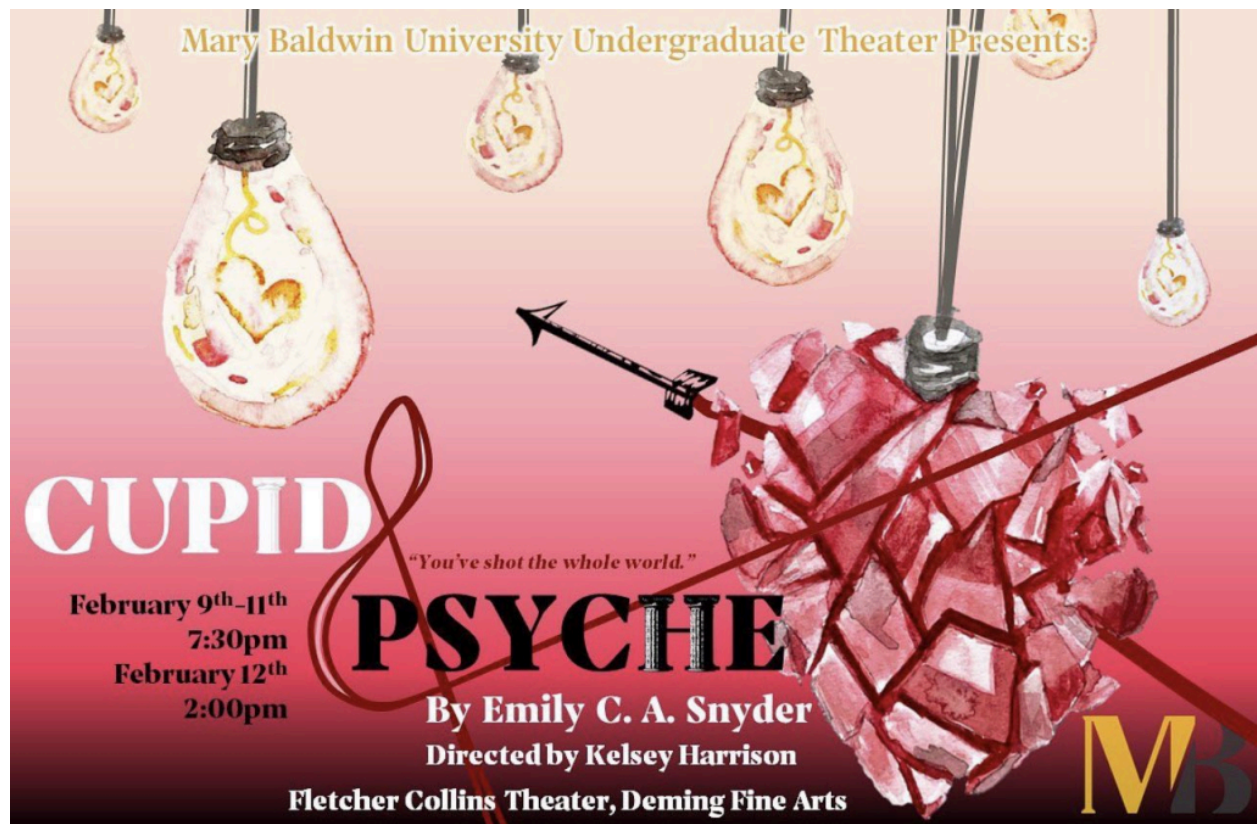


# THEATRE: Cupid & Psyche

## by Emily C. A. Snyder (dir. Kelsey Harrison for Mary Baldwin University Theatre Department)

*Cupid & Psyche* is a dense, rich play. A finalist in the American Shakespeare Center's 'Shakespeare's New Contemporaries' competition, this long verse drama aligns with many of the current feminist retellings of Greek mythology in its refusal to shy away from the horrors of violence, sexual aggression, abuses of consent, while also embracing the absurdist humor created by the pettiness of the gods. Performed by a young cast under Kelsey Harrison's direction for MBU's theatre department, further, this production *specifically* resonated with ongoing occurrences of young male violence. If the word 'incel' denotes the figure of the young man denied sex to which he assumes entitlement, then what happens when Love himself becomes an incel? The answer: violence that consumes the world.



*Arrows of love and death*

Staged in a versatile in-the-round-cum-traverse space that placed the actors in often deliberately uncomfortable intimacy with the audience, the production introduced a rotating pantheon of desirable figures. Brooke Crittenden's mortal Psyche was the literal centre of attention, to the point of upstaging her sister Dareia (Anna Taylor) on her wedding day. Amid the wedding, the goddesses Aphrodite (Maria Sarri) and Persephone (Kijah Wilburn) wandered, sipping from goblets and sniping bitterly at one another. The allegorical figures of Love and Death established a combative binary that forced the play's participants to one extreme or another, emblematic of an absolutist and possessive model of love that must either *have* or *have not* (it was no accident that when Cupid and Psyche had their meet-cute, it was Romeo and Juliet's lines that emerged amid the verse).

Desire, in this play, must be satisfied or destroyed. Aphrodite ordered Cupid to kill Psyche, but he instead fell for her, and the play turned on the switch of Cupid from Love to the 'beast' of Passion. The sinister work of this came out most powerfully in the production's treatment of invisibility. The gods were largely invisible, allowing Austin Cox's initially quiet Cupid to develop a disquieting, creepy association with Psyche, whispering in her ear, touching her from behind, often in ways that were overtly comic or playful, but which demonstrated precisely the entitlement with her body that anticipated his rage when refused. Crittenden presented a defiant, powerful Psyche – this was a woman who had no difficulty standing up to her sisters, her father, to those around her, but faced with an invisible tormentor, became increasingly distressed and exposed as the world collapsed around her and her sisters in particular turned against her.

The production's violence was all the more disquieting for its cruelty and abruptness. This was a play in which almost no love relationships were required: Aphrodite and Persephone were aloof, sarcastic, dispassionate; pretty Adonis (Louis Altman) mooned after Cupid, who lusted after Psyche, and everyone expressed their unrequited love – or obsession – through cruelty, culminating in the shocking moment of Cupid not only killing Adonis by snapping his neck, but then instituting a cycle of violence in which Altman's body was repeatedly resurrected and killed again, the company gathering to sing as Cupid transformed into the beast and wreaked havoc on Adonis's body – ostensibly as revenge for Adonis's role in keeping him and Psyche apart, but more generally as a transformation of entitled and possessive love into the act of ultimate possession: the taking of another's life for oneself (with particular credit here to Rosemary Richards and JP Scheidler's intimacy and fight choreography, which beautifully captured the *intimacy* of the acts of killing suffused with something which may have been love). And from here the play devolved into murder as a result of Psyche's curse of Cupid, condemning all who love to death, and thus de-peopling the world.

The cast found humour to break up the relentless bleakness: Libby Mrechant's Brontes and Quinn Yuka's Chrysos, as the lovers/husbands of Psyche's sisters, had some nice light moments of absurdity before the murders began, and Cox's Cupid was often endearingly clumsy in his attempts to approach someone whose heart he could not simply take. But that humor served to throw into relief the simmering rage that exploded into monstrosity, and Cox came into their own as Cupid stalked the stage, a silent and deadly killer. The production's choice to keep many people present in the playing space furthered the cruelty of the slaughter, with powers watching on and allowing it to happen. And this affected the human characters. Taylor was especially magnificent as Dareia, beginning the play with joy at her own wedding but quickly shifting to resentment of the attention Psyche drew, then to outright hostility as she – in conjunction with Ashlea Stone's Livia, Psyche's other sister – identified Psyche as the cause of the deaths. In one of the darkest sequences, the two sisters went to the Oracle, a menacing Cupid in disguise, to get guidance, and were commissioned to murder their father, Thanos (Sage Mocko). The sequence in which Dareia and Livia debated who would wield the knife was stunningly measured; Taylor and Stone's flashing eyes veered between *almost* tearful and piercingly resolved, and while Livia wavered, Dareia drew her resolve from touching her pregnant belly, deploying and perverting motherhood as the rationale for her bloody deed in the culmination of an arc that insisted on the self as the overriding priority. And this, to me, was what this production in particular understood – that for all this is a play about love and death, it is suffused by a narcissism that comes from a misunderstanding of what love is, that understood love as being about one's own feelings rather than about someone else. And by committing to the selfish, violent choices made in the name – and really *only* in the name – of love, the company beautifully showed how 'love' itself becomes deadly.

Perhaps because this is what I took so strongly from the first half, I found the play's second half – in which Psyche has agreed to be with Cupid in order to take him out of the world, and in which the play invests more in

their connection despite the circumstances in which it began – more difficult. The production had so effectively communicated Cupid's violence that questions of love and healing felt, to me, far away. But Cox and Crittenden made the relationship work, both finding the nuances in the negotiation of their unique and lonely connection to one another, separated from all the world, and then indulging in self-sacrifice as Cupid effectively sacrificed himself to follow Psyche to hell after Aphrodite, Persephone, and Adonis united to kill her. And this allegorical self-sacrifice felt key to what hope the production managed to find – the discovered ability to locate love in the other person rather than in one's self, the development of empathy. That the production's turn to healing happened in almost entire darkness (lit initially only by Johnny Williams III's beautiful chiaroscuro effects from a handheld lantern) helped focus that healing separated from a broken world, while also not erasing the fact that the violence caused by obsession had caused perhaps irreparable damage to that world. And by rejecting the dichotomy of Love and Death, by refusing the impulse to either Have or Destroy and instead embracing something in one another, the production and play offered the map for another way of being – and of being with one another.