

NYTimes Critic's Pick

# Review: The Metamorphosis of ‘Hadestown,’ From Cool to Gorgeous



Standing from left: Reeve Carney as Orpheus, Eva Noblezada as Eurydice and Amber Gray as Persephone in the musical “Hadestown.”

Credit...

Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

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By [Jesse Green](#)

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All your favorite Greeks are heading somewhere in “[Hadestown](#),” the sumptuous, hypnotic and somewhat hyperactive musical that opened on Wednesday night after its own [twisty 13-year road to Broadway](#).

Eurydice descends to the underworld; Orpheus follows to retrieve her. Persephone spends six months aboveground living the good life of summer and song before returning for six months below with Hades. (He’s her husband.) Hermes, of course, has wings on his feet. And the Fates (at least in this version) are always darting about, minding everyone’s business.

But watching “Hadestown” unfold so gorgeously at the Walter Kerr Theater, I found myself thinking of other Greek characters: those lucky few saved from heartbreak by radical metamorphoses.

That’s because “Hadestown” — written by Anaïs Mitchell, developed and directed by Rachel Chavkin — has itself been radically transformed. What’s onstage at the Kerr is almost unrecognizably different from [the version I saw at New York Theater Workshop in 2016](#). There, it was garbled and precious, too cool for its own good, let alone Broadway.

The gods, [or more likely Ms. Chavkin and her creative team](#), have saved “Hadestown” on its way uptown — via Edmonton and London — by turning it into something very much warmer, if not yet ideally warm. The story is clearer, the songs express that story more directly and the larger themes arise from it naturally rather than demanding immediate attention like overeager undergraduates.

All this has been done with hardly a change to the plot, which cleverly grafts its two myths into one. In Ms. Mitchell’s telling, Eurydice (Eva Noblezada) winds up in hell because of the frost and famine that follow when Persephone (Amber Gray) pays Hades her annual conjugal visit. (Classically, Eurydice just dies of a snakebite.) And because Hades (Patrick Page) now has a thing for Eurydice, it’s the jealous Persephone who convinces him to let Orpheus (Reeve Carney) take her back.



Patrick Page as the rapacious king of the underworld in “Hadestown.”

Credit...

Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Even Hermes, who doesn't really belong in either story, has been recruited to narrate, contextualize and kibitz. And why not, if it gives [the great André De Shields](#) a chance to slide around in silver sharkskin? It's he who tells us — in what is now, correctly, the opening number — that what we're about to hear is “a sad song” no matter how jaunty it sounds. Also that he's “gonna sing it anyway.”

That's a pretty good précis of the original myths, but Ms. Mitchell, [fascinated by them since childhood](#), has taken them further as she expanded the material from song cycle to concept album to show. In the story of Orpheus and Eurydice she tugs on the tension between art and domesticity: What good is beauty if you're hungry? And the struggle between Hades and Persephone naturally becomes a parable of climate change, in which the despoiling of the earth is akin to infidelity.

To make these points, “Hadestown” moves the tale to an earth that resembles sassy New Orleans, with hell a demonic foundry. As such, Ms. Mitchell's score combines folk, pop

and Dixieland with rhythmic work shanties and, for the lovers, ethereal arias. All of it sounds great in swinging arrangements for a terrific seven-piece onstage band.

Other than some reordering, that's mostly just as it was three years ago — at least on the surface. But if there's one thing this "Hadestown" is pushing, it's the idea that what really matters is happening where you can't see it.

Underneath the hood, a million small adjustments have been made, especially to the lyrics, which have shed some of their pop haze in favor of specificity. The Fates, a girl-group trio, now feel more integral to the action, not just witty commenters on it. And a new chorus of five hunky workers expands not only the sound but also the theme of security attained at the expense of freedom.

Yet the most obvious transformation is visual: "Hadestown" is now performed on a proscenium stage instead of in a miniature Greek amphitheater. Though still high-concept, Rachel Hauck's single set depicts a recognizable idea of place: a basement jazz joint that miraculously turns into the furnace room of Hades' factory. This is emblematic of the production's choice to deliver the story to the audience in as close to the Broadway manner as the material can accommodate.

In truth, it can only accommodate so much. "Hadestown," even with the heat turned up, is still a somewhat abstract experience, mediated by several layers of narration from Hermes, the Fates and many of the songs. A feeling is as likely to be described as enacted, and Ms. Mitchell develops her larger themes mostly through metaphor. This can get tiring; even though so much of what happens happens beautifully, I began to feel it would be better shorter.

Image



Mr. Carney and Ms. Noblezada as the show's young lovers.

Credit...

Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

The main story suffers most from this problem: Outside of their arias, Orpheus and Eurydice are blandly written and thus performed. What starts off as a smart riff on “Rent” — poor bohemian girl falls for musician who can’t finish his song — soon becomes vague and merely pretty. Attempts to complicate the characters’ psychology backfire, and their climactic ascent from the underworld, the one thing that worked perfectly downtown, now doesn’t. They merely walk in circles.

Luckily, the second story is direct and vivid throughout. Mr. Page, [rocking a Leon Redbone look and rumble](#), makes an electrifyingly malevolent Hades, even without playing up the Trumpian parallels that have overtaken the material. (One of his songs, written more than a decade ago, is called “Why We Build the Wall.”)

And Ms. Gray, never better, [makes something quite brilliant out of Persephone](#): a free spirit, a loose cannon, a first lady co-opted by wealth yet emotionally subversive. When, as part of the curtain call, she sings the score’s loveliest number — “I Raise My Cup” —

you at last wish the show would slow down so you could live in the glowy moment forever.

Along the way there, Ms. Chavkin has probably come as close as anyone could to selling a cerebral downtown story as state-of-the-art Broadway entertainment. Like the sets and musical arrangements, the costumes (by Michael Krass), the lighting (by Bradley King) and the sound design (by Nevin Steinberg and Jessica Paz) are as good as it gets.

The result is just as busily beautiful as Ms. Chavkin's production of "[Natasha, Pierre & the Great Comet of 1812](#)" — and more coherent. Which almost gets you over the hiccup that a show so fundamentally despairing ("It's a sad song") is now so aggressively welcoming.

Don't let that distract you, though, from its quiet point, buried in a lyric near the end: that we sing the sad song again and again the way we play solitaire: "as if it might turn out this time."

For "Hadestown" — if not yet for us — it has.

*Follow Jesse Green on Twitter: @JesseKGreen.*

Hadestown  
Walter Kerr Theater

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