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Theater/Dance Review (NYC): 'Alcestis Ascending: A Rock Myth'

By [Jon Sobel](#) | *Friday, July 12, 2013*

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Once I attended a Cuban-American wedding. Never before had I seen such carousing, such inexhaustible group energy. The revels, I later learned, lasted hours longer than I and my palefaced friends did. Now, too many years later, I've seen my first Cuban-American theatrical event. Though *Alcestis Ascending* lasts a scant hour and a half, it hums with the same buzzing, muscular energy I felt at that wedding.

Euripides' play *Alcestis* is among other things a



Photo by Corey Rives

meditation on death. But like the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice, at its heart beats a juicy love story. A new reworking of the myth by playwright and director Seth Panitch and Company HavanaBama accentuates the passion. Passion energizes the love between the Thessalian King Admetus and his wife Alcestis (Jeff Horger and Alianne Portuondo). It fuels Admetus's parents' lust for life as they, like everyone else, refuse to give themselves up so that their son may live. It quickens the bodies of the three Fates, who dance erotically around a comically hunky Apollo (Frank Egusquiza). And it crackles through the veins of Hercules (a fiery Rayssel Cruz, who almost walks away with the show), seeking hospitality just after Alcestis has sacrificed her life for her husband.

It comes about this way: Apollo, having been banished to life among the mortals for a period, repays Admetus for his kindness during that time by intervening with the Fates to allow the king to live past his prescribed lifetime, provided that someone can be found to willingly take Admetus's place. Alas, only loyal Alcestis offers her life for his, and just after the awful trade is carried out, Hercules arrives, halfway through his Labors and looking for a place to crash. Swallowing his grief for the sake of hospitality, Admetus welcomes his friend, but when Hercules finds out why the king's household is so sad he undertakes to travel to the underworld and bring Alcestis back to the land of the living.

Unlike in ancient Greek theater, where much of what we'd call the action takes place offstage, Panitch's conception brings everything to the forefront. The Fates laugh as they "cut the threads" of doomed mortals. One sensuous scene features a dancer portraying a horse. Comical servants mug and prattle. A Latin-rock score by Tom Wolfe thrums through dance after dance. And Admetus begins his quest for a volunteer in the public square, appealing first to the common people, who profess to adore him, in a potently humorous scene in which the large cast spreads partway around the audience. Next up is a feast at which he beseeches his fellow nobles, who, though proclaiming they are in his debt, can proffer only a meek servant girl (Diana Hernandez) who turns out not to be a volunteer after all.

The final failure comes in the encounter with his parents (Roberto Salomon and Vitica Sobrino), one of the few scenes in which I felt I really missed something because of the play's bilinguality. A good part of the story is conveyed through Osnel Delgado's evocatively choreographed dance, the rest

via a combination of English and Spanish, with some characters (like



Photo by Corey Rives

Admetus) speaking English, some (like Alcestis and Hercules) Spanish, interchangeably to each other. I don't understand much Spanish, but these powerful performers' physical acting – the passion they channel so well – is usually enough to convey what's going on during the Spanish speeches. But when Admetus's father Pheres delivers in Spanish a tempestuous and relatively lengthy argument, I can't follow it and wish I could. Another such moment comes at Alcestis's death.

Though she speaks Spanish to Admetus's English, Portuondo's acute presence and the design of the dialogue made sure I almost always knew, more or less, what she was saying. But I didn't get her last words and wish I had.

Fortunately such moments are few. The movement, pace, and forceful performances from the gifted cast make the time zip by. I never once lost focus, even when my brain wasn't understanding the words. And what's impossible to miss is the deep, even desperate love between the king and queen. There's a gorgeous sequence when after all other hope for someone to take Admetus's place is gone, Alcestis demands why "you never asked *me?*" It's the key moment in the drama; it's when we really learn what a paragon of love and devotion she is. In a parallel scene after she's gone, we witness how lost Admetus feels without her. He grovels in the dirt and wails like a baby as Hercules tries to get him to buck up and come with him to Hades and retrieve her. Here and elsewhere the fertile collective imagination of Panitch and his cast and creative team bring us a whole dimension not available to Euripides's theatrical tradition. Like ancient Greek drama, there's nothing naturalistic about this show. Unlike ancient Greek drama, it revels in florid passion. Whether you understand Spanish or not, I don't hesitate to recommend it to anyone interested in vibrant theater, creative interpretations of ancient myth, or artful, earthy dance.