



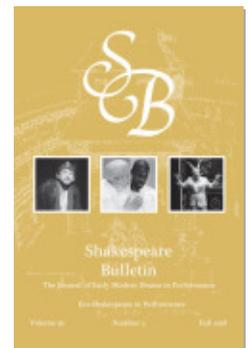
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Pericles Wet presented by Portland Shakespeare Project at
Artists Repertory Theatre (review)

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discrepancy which might be further interrogated. Notwithstanding these questions, it is refreshing to see that this production not only reflected on the potential blind spot in Dutch society but also became an active participant in the debate on institutional racism. While undoubtedly this *Othello* was long overdue in the Netherlands, it remains to be seen how far-reaching its influence will turn out to be.

Works Cited

Janssens, Sander. "Othello is zwart, en dat doet er wel degelijk toe." *Het Parool*, 6 February 2018. Kunst, p. 15.



Pericles Wet

World premiere presented by the **Portland Shakespeare Project** at **Artists Repertory Theatre**, Portland, Oregon. December 1–17, 2017. By Ellen Margolis. Directed by Michael Mendelson. Props design by Karen Hill. Scenic design by Sarah Kindler. Costumes by Sarah Gahagan. Lighting design by Ronan Kilkelly. With Ben Newman (Pericles), Alex Ramirez de Cruz (Hesperides), David Bodin (Antiochus/Simon/Andy), Shannon Mastel (Thaisa/Marina), Murri Lazaroff-Babin (Chorus, Sailor, Diana), Samson Syharath (Thaliard/Cerimon/Chorus), and Andrea White (Dionyza/Chorus).

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What happened to the "fair Hesperides" (1.1.28)? This is the question behind Ellen Margolis's *Pericles Wet*, an adaptation of *Pericles* produced for its world premiere by the Portland Shakespeare Project. An act of recovery, the play is organized around the lives of female characters Pericles meets, or the sequence of punishments he suffers. Having "built a life on the wreckage" of the incest of Antiochus's daughter, Hes, I was still (productively) uncertain, after two viewings of this production, as to whether this was a play about a hero or about the victims such ostensible paragons leave in their wake.

The playwright, at least, was not "interested in punishing Pericles," as she noted in a post-show discussion in early December. Instead, the play seemed invested in the classical concept of *bloodguilt*, a notion difficult for contemporary audiences, accustomed to humanist notions of individual responsibility (or lack thereof), to grasp. Yes, says the play, we are all culpable for the violence suffered by others regardless of whether we were alive or not, related or not to the perpetrator. The morality of

bloodguilt on which Margolis's play meditates derives, interestingly, not from Renaissance England or Ancient Greece, but rather the Bible. Reiterated across no fewer than ten books is the suggestion that the shedding of another's blood generates consequences that pollute the soul, attaching themselves not only to the family of the guilty for generations, but also to their city and nation. For Americans, this is a particularly uncomfortable moral code, suggesting that we all carry around stains unresolved for the harm done to indigenous and enslaved communities. For Oregonians, citizens of a state held as the epitome of settler colonialism, questions of hereditary blame are all the more entangled in national identity.

Pericles Wet critiqued widespread cultural ambivalence toward sexual violence precisely because audiences could understand its arc as a sequence of punishments or a series of recovered women's stories. Take, for example, the role of David Bodin, who doubled as two kingly fathers, one (Antiochus) driven by incestuous lust for Hesperides, and the other (Simon) by the opposing impulse: "I kept [Thaisa] intact until her wedding day [with Pericles]. My job is done." As Thaisa's father, he offered a heartbreaking what-if doppelgänger to Antiochus, but one who does not abuse his daughter. Pericles's decision to marry Thaisa, whose life could for all intents and purposes have brought her to the same end as Hes, seemed a damning indictment of his character; by this choice, he suggested that Hes was unmarriageable and unsalvageable because she had been spoilt by her father, while Thaisa, her mirror in all things but this, was a desirable partner. Thus, Margolis invented the persona of Hes in order to demonstrate how it is that Pericles's inaction in and of itself affirms systemic male privilege even after he leaves her with her predator.

These kinds of mnemonic echoes, what Marvin Carlson calls *ghosting*, were triggered not only by such doubling, but also in costume repetitions. Both Thaisa and then her daughter Marina (both played by Shannon Mastel) wore a yellow dress that visually symbolized those intangible things we pass down through generations. When Marina was forced into sex work, the yellow dress evolved into a crop-top, suggesting something between generations had been shorn, perverted. Repetitions of actors and costumes buoyed playgoers through the disorienting elements that at times signaled timeliness and at others timelessness. For example, in Pericles's seasick hallucinations, iambic pentameter was deployed in allusions to a range of popular seafaring icons. "A pop-eyed man with forearms the size of pigs"; "a mad whale hunter, squinting into the distance, hollering for his harpooneers"; "a talking sponge, a crocodile with a clock in its belly": a list for every generation of audience member.

It is this oscillation between the timely and timeless that the late Barbara Mowat argued, in *The Dramaturgy of Shakespeare's Romances*, was the cornerstone of the genre's aesthetic experience: early modern romances "expand the implication of tragic and comic perspectives, juxtapose tragic and comic effects, include death and weddings, throw open the world to gods, spirits, beasts, and monsters, and force the spectator to oscillate between (or to experience simultaneously) sentimentally naive responses and a sophisticated awareness of the ironic" (27). While at times this simultaneity proved challenging in the scope of a relatively bare stage performance (which is to say, without culturally specific costumes, music, props, or other set elements to indicate the rules to which the fiction of the play adhered), Margolis's play ultimately employed that oscillating experience in the spirit of her source to successful effect. Upon the death of Thaisa, Pericles could not stand the sight of his newborn, Marina. Cradling her, the ship's skipper (Murri Lazaroff-Babin) suggested they might sell the baby. The skipper then abruptly returned Marina to Pericles in order to be swept offstage in a comic swordfight smacking of Popeye the Sailor Man. Then, just as quickly, the scene shifted to Cerimon, a wise woman haunted by the desires of abused women, such as "I wish he would be lost at sea" and "a room with a lock would be a heaven," whispered by the chorus offstage. In the span of two minutes we shifted from a conversation about human trafficking, to a stage feat fit for *The Pirates of Penzance*, to the exigency of the #MeToo movement still trending on Twitter the week of the premiere. Thus, an ideological point about the gradual enculturation of women into socially accepted sexual violence came in gradual waves: ebbing by allusion to childhood cartoon, cresting on timely timelessness of slavery, and retreating on the naiveté of body comedy. If playgoers had not the point at first, they could not have missed it by the conclusion of this sequence.

These oscillations were clever insofar as they tricked one into thinking that the moments of comedy (and in Margolis's efficient eighty-five-minute script there are many) were a relief, a respite. Really, they seemed to force one to remain uncomfortably between emotional states, jarred by the sudden transitions in tone. The design of the play reinforced this as none of the sound effects or props were themselves stable signifiers. In a satisfying nod to period techniques, tin was used for thunder, pouring out a pitcher summoned the mental image of a bath tub, and an elegant hand-operated wind machine stood for all of the literal and figurative open oceans between moments of child endangerment. The only real backdrop was several floor-length curtains used interchangeably as pillars of a palatial hall, ship sails, and a parched seacoast.



Fig. 12. Chorus (Andrea White), Samson Syharath, and Murri Lazaroff-Babin in *Pericles Wet*, dir. Michael Mendelson. Portland Shakespeare Project, 2017. Photo by David Kinder, courtesy of Portland Shakespeare Project.

Doubling and instability proved to be key techniques, serving as the lynchpin to the denouement. Marina was picked up while hitch-hiking by the actor Lazaroff-Babin, who had already played several different characters by this point. The position of his one moveable piece of clothing, which had signaled a lord's sash and a pirate's bandana, was now arranged as not to clearly mark anything specific about this new character. When he offered Marina a place to stay, she panicked, thinking this was another predator, and asked to be let out of the truck. As far as the audience had been trained to expect from his previous roles, this was another potentially predatory man. Then, as Diana, he explained: her place to stay was a convent. This moment exposed audiences' own expectations, clarifying how acculturated to and anticipatory of male violence we are. In the play, we were made to realize how easily we would see another pedophile in the habit of a nun.

Director Michael Mendelson, Margolis, and managing director Karen Rathje expressed in the talk-back their own shock at the relevance of the production. When the first act was commissioned two years ago, sexual assault seemed too timely. Rehearsing for a spare three weeks in the fall-out of the Harvey Weinstein allegations and opening in tandem with the

Dustin Hoffman accusations, the timeliness seemed all the more tragic. Had no progress really been made in the intervening time from conception to performance? All of the male-identifying performers confessed grappling with this issue. In the opening moments of the show, Hesperides told the audience the word we would hear the most was “water.” The textual heartbeat of the play, however, was the phrase “it’s not your fault.” When asked about this, Ben Newman, who played Pericles, pointed out that while many characters say this to him, he never says it to anyone else. That phrase began to echo outside rehearsal; he was realizing how often we say this to one another, as if words can excuse the bloodguilt we carry around, generation after generation.

What happened to Hesperides? As a matter of happenstance, none of the female-identifying actors joined the discussion, and so the playgoers ended up asking questions around their absence, primarily in relation to Hes, played by Alex Ramirez de Cruz. Samson Syharath revealed Ramirez de Cruz had “found” a special skill for this production: the ability to cry like a newborn. She produced the sound effect live offstage for the two prop infants in the show. Audiences were only made aware it was her when Pericles held baby Marina, for the last time, over his dead wife. Ramirez de Cruz, as adult Hes, would at this point step just into the edge of the spotlight, uncannily mewling. Her voice created a sonic community of one-time girls whose absence after the show—rendering them unable to describe developing a performance about abuse from a woman’s perspective—was felt all the more keenly.

Works Cited

Mowat, Barbara A. *The Dramaturgy of Shakespeare’s Romances*. University of Georgia Press, 1976.