



Preview: A Trip into myth with young troupe

**UCSD-connected theater artists wed 'Orpheus' story
to fresh ideas**

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When Orpheus and Eurydice step onstage for their wedding at the University of California San Diego this week, the more plugged-in revelers in the audience will already have witnessed the couple's bumpy courtship unfold online.

The live portion of this new take on Greek myth from the young theater troupe The Trip will take place inside a studio at the Molli and Arthur Wagner Dance Building.

But that performance will be just the climactic component of a broader storytelling arc that also takes in a series of "prequel" videos posted on The Trip's website, plus film sequences that will bring outdoors imagery into the theater.

Such a fluid, boundary-testing approach to theater is a signature of The Trip, a still-fledgling outfit whose leader, Tom Dugdale, is one of the most-watched directors to come out of UC San Diego's graduate program in recent years.

It also dovetails with a broader movement in theater toward explorations of site-specific, immersive and otherwise unconventional modes of theater.

That trend has manifested in New York with such groundbreaking (and popular) shows as "Sleep No More," "Here Lies Love" and "Natasha, Pierre and the Great Comet of 1812," all of them set outside traditional theater spaces.

And it has bloomed locally with La Jolla Playhouse's 2013 Without Walls Festival and its broader WoW series, whose latest production, the just-announced "The Grift," premieres in January. (Like the "Macbeth"-themed "Sleep No More," "The Grift" will play out in a hotel — in this case the historic Lafayette in North Park.)

Dugdale, his Trip co-founder Joshua Brody (they launched the company in 2012) and their fellow artists have staged their own variations on such concepts, with a roving WoW Festival production of "Our Town"; a remixed "Macbeth"; and a site-specific family

drama called “All the Rooms of the House,” done in an old barracks at Liberty Station.

While “Orpheus & Eurydice” may not be immersive in quite the same manner, Dugdale still sees parallels between its multi-platform approach and the feel of the earlier works.

“I see one goal of site-specific work as being to stretch the boundaries and test the limits of what’s possible in theater,” says Dugdale, who is playing Orpheus opposite Jenni Putney as Eurydice.

“While part of ‘Orpheus & Eurydice’ is being staged in a proper theater, I see the (online) chapters, and the way the natural world will be included via video in the live performance, as a kind of site-specificity — in the sense that the show is inhabiting other spaces beyond just the theater itself.”

Between worlds

The Orpheus story seems a worthy choice for such boundary-crossing, since the original myth famously journeys from earthly life into the underworld.

What most people remember about the ancient Greek saga is how Orpheus, a supernaturally gifted musician, travels to that realm of the afterlife in a quest to retrieve Eurydice (who has died of a viper bite) and bring her back to the land of the living.

With his music, he succeeds in charming the underworld gods Hades and Persephone into relinquishing his young wife. But just as the couple have nearly reached freedom, Orpheus forgets the gods' admonition not to look back at Eurydice. When he does so, she is gone for good.

Those elements of the story, Dugdale says, are all included in The Trip's version. But the idea behind incorporating the videos was to dramatize where the main characters came from and how they got together in the first place.

“Here’s one of the most romantic couples in (history), and yet no one gives them a courtship,” as Dugdale puts it. “No one talks about how they met and what that might have been like.

“(So) if you watch the videos and then watch the performance, that’s maybe the fullest version of the project. But we’re designing it so you can enjoy the performance without seeing the videos. And we’re

actually also working on incorporating the videos into the front of the live show.”

The idea of romance figures prominently in Dugdale’s work just now. Besides “Orpheus,” the 33-year-old artist (who received his MFA at UC San Diego in 2010) is also working on two stage projects that will go up in Romania.

One is an adaptation of the Euripides tragedy “Alcestis,” in which the title character agrees to give up her life so that her husband can be spared death.

The other is a stage version of the 1996 Lars von Trier film “Breaking the Waves,” about a devout woman whose paralyzed lover commands her to sleep with other men; she does so in the belief that it’s the will of God, although it comes at a steep cost.

(The Romanian connection is via Gábor Tompa, UC San Diego’s head of directing, who is a native of the Eastern European nation and runs a theater there.)

“I guess all three of these projects, they’re all romances in some way,” says Dugdale, who in 2012 was a winner of the prestigious Princess Grace Award in theater. “I really feel like ‘Orpheus &

Eurydice' is a very romantic work. (And) I am just becoming interested in how flimsy this line or this membrane is between life and death, for a variety of reasons right now.

“That theme runs through all these projects — and ‘Our Town,’ I guess, as well.”

One other element that runs through the work, and is particularly fitting in this case: music.

Dugdale, who typically composes music for The Trip's works, is collaborating with audio designer Nick Drashner for the “Orpheus” soundscape.

“The music will be around a lot, because the myth itself is sort of drenched in music,” Dugdale says. “You get to this question, what does a god of music look like today?”

Dugdale's pursuit of such wide-ranging, multilayered projects, meanwhile, might serve as inspiration for creatively distracted, want-to-do-it-all young artists everywhere.

Long before pursuing directing, he attended an acting conservancy. Then he studied opera singing.

“(So) my background has just been mashed up and interdisciplinary from the start,” he says.

“And this work in many ways is a reflection — and I hope it’s a good thing — of how it’s hard for me to focus on one thing.”