

Choreographic Forum Report
Medusa by Jasmin Vardimon
Friday October 26th 2018, 6.30pm

After seeing Jasmin Vardimon's *Medusa* at Sadler's Wells on 24th October, my mind was awash with potential topics, provocations and theories that might be explored during our Choreographic Forum event the following Friday evening. This whirlwind of thoughts was reflective of the content displayed in the performance. Jellyfish, trees, production lines, male chauvinism, factories, sexual abuse, litter, ropes – there was a lot to digest. While some may have found this collage of themes and content too much (and some of the reviews suggest this is the case), I found it riveting, but what was to be unpacked in the forum event?

The evening began with Helen Morales, Argyropoulos Professor of Hellenic Studies at the University of California, applying her classics and history knowledge to a framing of the work. Beginning, Morales explained how, as a classicist, she was challenged to release her expectations of the Medusa narrative being relayed in the work and asked us, 'what does it mean to be attached to narrative?'. Similarly, I had invited a friend to see the work and join the choreographic forum event who has little experience of dance and is a literature graduate. The subsequent discussion we had of the work focused on the unpacking of and creative approach to the Medusa myth and character (you can read her post-forum response from below).

Morales raised the notion of the dual fascination and repulsion relationship that is often associated with the Medusa myth – men want her, women punish her etc. and, as raised before, the critical response to the work suggests that we may have a similar relationship to this piece of physical theatre. The objectification of Medusa as a woman was a strong theme throughout the work, which Morales brought in to the 21st century by emphasising similarities between the treatment of Medusa and current political unrest. The objectification and victimisation of Medusa is a tale too often heard in today's society, with the Me Too movement gaining power in the past year, highlighting gender inequality, treatment of women and sexual abuse. The Medusa figure, as Morales pointed out, is used as a figure of female anger, consistently emerging during times of significant female revolutionary activity. An analogy was also made comparing Medusa to female politicians, subject to abuse and seen as angry when being assertive and, possibly, a threat to men.

The environmental explorations in the work, regarding pollution and consumerism, were compared to Karl Marx's views, with the production line

and chimneys are signposts. In addition, the double definition of Medusa in the supporting material,

me•du•sa

1. Zoology: a saucer-shaped or dome-shaped, free-swimming jellyfish or hydra.
2. Greek Mythology: the only mortal gorgon, who was decapitated by Perseus

Worthing Theatres, [online]

already suggested the inclusion of consideration regarding sea life. This, as Morales suggested, should lead us to consider which Medusa's were in the production, or rather, how many. Morales shed light on the history of Medusa as a myth and how she has been continually used in modern culture and research, through psychology (Freud), fashion (Versace) and films (*Gone with the Wind*, *The Lightning Thief*), proving that her tale is still of relevance, albeit a cautionary one.

In intriguing contrast, or compliment, to Morales' exploration, our second speaker was Geoffrey Colman, an acting coach who has working with Vardimon on a number of works (as both acting coach and dramaturge), gave us an insightful look in to the thought and creative process for creating *Medusa*. After demonstrating a thought-focusing exercise he used with dancers to engage with character and place, Colman unpacked the layering and structure of the work. How the work's flow was developed through a process of re-watching was of great significance, providing the varied repetition seen in the work, a feature that reflects (perhaps unintentionally) the recurring imagery and tale of Medusa in culture and media. Colman detailed the arduous task of characterising the work done by the dancers and the process of engaging with the storyline and narrative during the creation of the work. Picking up on Morales' question regarding the number of Medusa's seen in the work, Colman discussed the notion of overlapping Medusa's, the layering of character and thematic features that contribute to this relentless power-punching piece of theatre, which does not allow for the audience to rest in comfort, a feature that was highlighted as being very Medusa-like.

The group discussion that followed was full of praise for the speakers and Vardimon alike, highlighting the impact of the work on audience members and the significance of these discussion groups as a wonderful opportunity to dissect a work. While one forum member explained how the work had made them squirm in their seat due to the confronting and powerful nature of the work, I, a constant fidgeter during dance works (apologies to those around me) was still during the performance, being so overwhelmed by the force and power of the dancers, the music and the tale of Medusa.

Discussing *Medusa* and the Choreographic Forum event

If you have ever wondered about attending a Choreographic Forum, but were unsure, please read the following experience of a newcomer and consider joining us for future events!

KS: What were your expectations of the Medusa performance prior to seeing it?

RD: I wasn't expecting a lot of dialogue but I definitely thought it would have more of a narrative. I hadn't been to a dance/choreography performance before so I didn't have much of an idea about what I would be seeing. I expected it to be a retelling of the Medusa myth through dance.

KS: What was your first impression of the work?

RD: My first impression was that it was very layered and open to interpretation. The Medusa myth came through in parts but I think there was a broader theme of gender differences and the idea of industrial capitalism at play. It was quite mesmerising to watch, especially as someone who has little interaction with the medium. The skill of the dancers was astounding.

KS: What was your biggest take away from the performance?

RD: That I should go to more performances like this! I really enjoyed it and I think it gave me a new appreciation for dance and the ability of choreographers to use the body to offer new ideas and interpretations of social issues. I also learnt that

KS: Before attending the Choreographic Forum event, how did you feel the work engaged with the story of Medusa?

RD: I struggled to see the myth throughout the piece and I think it brought in a lot of different themes that maybe pushed Medusa as a character aside. Towards the end however, she became more obvious as a character and a frame of reference. I think it helped when I stopped viewing the piece as a narrative, with conventional character arcs, and started to look at it as a series of vignettes from a dystopian world that reflected glimmers of Medusa, especially towards the end when she really came to life.

KS: What did you expect from the Choreographic Forum?

RD: I expected it to be a discussion of the piece with talks given from people who had some expertise into the theme as well as the piece itself.

KS: How did the speakers frame the work for you?

RD: They spoke after multiple aspects of the piece as well as the Medusa myth. It was good to hear from someone speaking about both the context as well as the performance itself. I felt that I was given a good understanding of the myth and how it was used in the performance.

KS: What was your main take away from the Choreographic Forum discussion?

RD: That the performance wasn't necessarily created to be picked apart. I really enjoyed hearing about the creator's ideas for the work and what she put into it, and especially that she didn't want everything to have a meaning or a quick interpretation. I think this was important to clarify as it allowed the work to stand out for itself as a piece of creativity rather than just a social commentary.

KS: If you could have asked any question or made any comment at the Choreographic Forum event what would it have been?

RD: I think I would have asked about the dystopian setting and what people thought that connection to Medusa was.

KS: How might you explain or describe the Medusa work given your experience of the Choreographic Forum event?

RD: As a performance that used elements of the Medusa myth to create commentary of contemporary social issues but also to build a variety characters and scenes that challenge imagery and creates its own aesthetic.

KS: Would you attend a Choreographic Forum event in the future?

RD: Yes, it was very interesting and I really enjoy engaging with works of art such as this performance on a more analytical basis.

Medusa is now touring around the UK in 2019 – go to <https://jasminvardimon.com/productions/medusa/> for more information.

Worthing Theatres (2018) *Medusa* [online] Available from <<https://worthingtheatres.co.uk/show/medusa/>> [3 Jan 2019]