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The role of Hermes et.al. in Mary Zimmerman's Metamorphoses: a production thesis in acting

Reuben Mitchell

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, reubentheactor@gmail.com

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THE ROLE OF HERMES ET. AL.
IN MARY ZIMMERMAN'S *METAMORPHOSES*:
A PRODUCTION THESIS IN ACTING

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
In partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

In

The Department of Theatre

by
Reuben Mitchell
B.A., Morehouse College, 2003
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Abstract

This thesis follows the experience of Reuben Mitchell in his portrayal of the characters Bacchus, Poseidon, Vertumnus, and Hermes in the play *Metamorphoses*. It consists of observations on the characters, character analysis, a daily record of the rehearsal process, an overview of the process of developing each of the above mentioned characters, ground plans of the stage layout, a review of the play in Baton Rouge's local newspaper *The Advocate* and thoughts/conclusions on the discoveries made during the experience of the play. All quotations are from the text of Mary Zimmerman's *Metamorphoses*.

Introduction

Metamorphoses was developed by Mary Zimmerman and Lookingglass Theatre Company as an adaptation of Ovid's original *Metamorphoses*. Its world premiere was produced by Lookingglass Theatre Company in Chicago, IL and opened on October 25, 1998.

The Swine Palace Production of *Metamorphoses* opened at the Reilly Theater on November 1, 2006 and closed November 19, 2006. It was directed by Steve Young. The cast was as follows:

Myrrha and others – Rebecca Buller
Vertumnus and others – Reuben Mitchell
Nursemaid and others – Anna Richardson
Aphrodite and others – Nikki Travis
Midas and others – Derek Mudd
Phaeton and others – Mark Jaynes
Erysichthon and others – Nick Erickson
Alcyone and others – Kesha Bullard
Orpheus and others – Ron Reeder
Eurydice and others – Shauna Rappold

The creative and technical crew included:

Set Designer – Nels Anderson
Costume Designer – Ginger Robertson
Lighting Designer – Louis Gagliano
Sound Designer – Eun-Jin Cho

Choreographer – Nick Erickson

Stage Manager – Ellie Sturgil

Chapter 1 – The Characters

In this show I played multiple characters, each with his own history and set of obstacles. However, due to the storytelling nature of this piece, character analysis was very brief, especially in relation to some of the more complex roles with which I have experimented in our acting studio. These characters exist in the here and now and for all time.

Bacchus, or Dionysus as he was known to the Greeks, is the god of wine, agriculture, and theatre. His father was definitely Jupiter, or Zeus but his true mother is not as specifically identified. Most versions of the myth recount he is the son of Semele but others make mention to Persipina, or Persephone as being his mother. Nevertheless, Jupiter's wife Juno was jealous of his adultery and made efforts to destroy Bacchus by deceiving his mother into taking her own life. Jupiter was able to rescue Bacchus from these attempts.

The worship of Bacchus took its form in a once secret annual festival called the Bacchanalia. It was introduced in Rome around 200 B.C. and was originally only attended by women. Later in its history, men were allowed to attend and the frequency of the festival rose to five times a month. The Bacchanalian festival was characterized as a wild and supernatural gathering of mirth, drunkenness and sexual debauchery.

Mary Zimmerman's Bacchus follows the framework of Ovid's portrayal but adds one specific, influential characteristic. In the play, Bacchus is certainly a party-goer and fun-seeker. However, he is also a controlling figure, especially in relationship to Midas, with whom he appears in the first story. Bacchus grants Midas the ability to turn ordinary objects into gold. However, Bacchus warns Midas about the dangers of so much power and its potential for corruption. When Midas realizes the power he has gained costs the life of the one he loves, he

cries out to Bacchus for the remedy. Thus, Bacchus, not Midas, turns out to be the most powerful character in the story.

I found my objective for Bacchus to be very clear to me. Bacchus is alerting Midas to the dangers of the power he desires. Midas asks Bacchus for the ability to turn anything he touches into gold. When Bacchus reluctantly grants his request, Midas soon finds his power to be much more of a burden than a blessing. Midas inadvertently touches his daughter and she becomes a gold statue. As Midas comes to terms with the reality of choice, Bacchus clues him in to the harshness and severity of life's journey with the final speech. "Walk as far as the ends of the earth. Look for a pool of water that reflects the stars at night. Wash your hands in it and there is a chance that everything will be restored." Here Bacchus illuminates the much more difficult path to pure joy that Midas must traverse.

Two distinct archetypal energies are identified in this Bacchus. In his first section of the Midas story Bacchus takes on the archetype of the fool or the drunkard whose only care is to have fun. Transferring this idea into action was especially important for me not only to define Bacchus for the audience, but also to give Derek Mudd, who played Midas, a solid energy with which he could interact. I found myself challenging Midas to consider the consequences of his requests and to hold more dearly to the pure aspects of his life.

In the next section of the story Bacchus reveals himself as a sage or shaman whose objective is to reveal to Midas the path to his healing. Bacchus is much more somber and controlled, commanding the stage and the story much more firmly than before. It is clear that he is in complete control and the circumstances of the story pivot on his suggestions to Midas. He gives Midas a path to finding a more truthful sense of happiness.

Poseidon is the Greek god of the sea, horses, and earthquakes. He was born to the Titans called Cronos and Rhea and was one of six siblings, including Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Hades, and Zeus. When the universe was divided into three parts Zeus received the sky, Hades the underworld, and Poseidon possessed the sea. He was known to have many love affairs, exerting his power on many women of Greece and fathering over fifty children. A festival called Posidea was held every year on and around the winter solstice in his honor.

One of Poseidon's most famous affairs was with Medusa, who at the time of their encounter was a beautiful nymph. After they had sexual intercourse on the floor of Athena's temple, Medusa turned her hair into snakes and made her face so ugly that it would turn any man to stone. Nevertheless, Poseidon had impregnated Medusa and when she was beheaded in her sleep by Perseus, Poseidon's sons Chrysaor and Pegasus were birthed through her neck.

Throughout the course of the play, Mary Zimmerman chooses to mute Poseidon which communicates how much power the gods have over some of the other characters. This was especially clear in the story of Alcyone and Ceyx. Poseidon wields an unrelenting power over Ceyx as a result of the dismissal of the god's power. Poseidon enters and leaves in a very brief moment that is the primary catalyst for all the events to follow and is an incredible presence that hangs over the stories in which he is involved.

Poseidon exists in two very different archetypal energies throughout the course of the play. In his first appearance during the story of Alcyone and Ceyx, Poseidon is the image of the archetypal madman or villain. His entire existence in the story is rooted in anger, rage, and blood lust. He relentlessly attacks Ceyx and his crew because of Ceyx's hubris in his disrespect of the god's power. However, in the very next story Poseidon shows us the opposite side of his

being. He is the hero who saves the life of Erysichthon's mother, transforming her into a little girl who is now able to live her life anew.

Vertumnus is the god of seasons, change, and plant growth. According to Ovid's telling of the *Metamorphoses*, he was able to change form at will. He uses his ability to change into an old woman to trick Pomona, the goddess of fruit trees and orchards, into marrying him. A temple honoring Vertumnus was erected in Rome on Aventine Hill around 300 B.C. after the arrival of his cult. To this day, there is a festival honoring him, the Vertumnalia, held every year on August 13th.

The most pleasing part of Vertumnus' personality in the play is his sense of humor. Mary Zimmerman gives us a character that is shy and unsure of how to move through life but is also lighthearted and carefree about life, characteristics that do not dissuade him from making attempts toward his goals. In finding himself and what he wants he is also able to have fun, and in doing so he is a fantastic character to watch and play.

Archetypically, Vertumnus is both the lover and the shape shifter. As he tries to win Pomona's love, he goes through several different shapes, or costumes, to convince her that he is the one she should choose. Each of his incarnations is also a part of himself that he is willing to display when necessary. As the actor, that gave me much with which to play. As the costume changes came and went, I had to constantly adjust and reevaluate each tactic I used to persuade Pomona. At one point I wanted to charm her, at another to sell to her, and still another to impress her into believing I was the love of her life. Because these tactics had to be executed as quickly as the costumes, it was a fully embodied workout.

Hermes is the Olympic god of boundaries, orators, wit, athletics, weights and measures and is the chief messenger between gods and humans. His name gives us the word

“hermeneutics” which can be described as the development of theories of interpreting and understanding texts. The center of the cult of Hermes was at Pheneos in Arcadia, and the festival in his honor was called Hermoea.

Hermes was the son of Zeus and Maia, born on Mount Cyllene in Arcadia. Zeus impregnated Maia during the night when all others were sleeping, and Hermes was born the next day. During his first day of life he invented the lyre by covering a tortoise shell with animal hides and antelope horns. He then captured Apollo’s herd of cattle. When Apollo accused Hermes of the theft, Maia claimed that Hermes had been with her the entire night and there was no way that he could have taken the herd. When Zeus arrived to the argument, he sided with Apollo and demanded Hermes return the cattle. During the debate, Hermes began playing his lyre which soothed the angered Apollo who agreed to let Hermes keep the cattle in exchange for the instrument.

Hermes affects events for many characters in the play and appears in multiple stories. Zimmerman maintains his role as a messenger not only in a traditional sense but in a dramaturgical sense as well. When he appears he is a bringer of news and information, delivering Ceyx’s lifeless body and later the blessing of long life and wealth for Baucis and Philemon. He is a patient and forgiving god who cares about the people he encounters and carries out his duties with grace and beauty.

As an archetypical image, Hermes is the threshold guardian who moves through all worlds in search of the fulfillment of his purpose. In the myths of Ovid, he is one of three gods that can pass between this world and the Underworld without hindrance, Hades and Persephone being the other two.

Hermes also carries some traits of the archetypical warrior, a skilled and competent fighter who only fights when he must for the benefit of the greater good. In the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, Hermes mournfully tells Eurydice that Orpheus has turned to see her and that she must remain in the underworld forever. Then he sorrowfully escorts Eurydice back to the Underworld, leaving Orpheus behind to lament the loss of his bride. The guardian side of Hermes is at work here as he dutifully approaches the painful task of dashing Orpheus' hopes and taking Eurydice away to Hades and Persephone. It is the only thing that he can do.

Chapter 2 – Bacchus

-What does my character say about himself?

Bacchus:

“It’s Bacchus. I hear you have a follower of mine.”

“Yes, Silenus. He wandered from our group as we passed close to town and I hear he is with you.”

“I’m grateful that you didn’t turn him away, Midas, that you took care of him and saw that he didn’t drown in his condition. And I’d like to present you with a gift.”

“I can’t.”

“I’m sorry.”

Despite his fun-loving and carefree ways, Bacchus committed to his friends and cares about the welfare of the people around him. He is thankful and gracious and looks to help others whenever he can, even when it means he must teach a lesson.

-What do others say about my character?

Midas:

“Yes you can. You must. Take it away now.”

Bacchus must have extreme power for Midas to believe this so wholeheartedly.

-What is my character fighting for?

Bacchus is fighting to enlighten Midas that wealth and power do not bring happiness.

-How do I resemble/differ from my character inside/outside?

Bacchus and I share a need to help others find their way. I enjoy assisting friends with life dilemmas they face and it seems Bacchus is certainly trying to help Midas with the dilemma he faces. However, Bacchus is more of a wild and free spirit. He is a drinker and a party-goer and has certainly been a part of many more mirth-filled festivities than I could ever imagine.

-How does my character move?

Bacchus moves like a man with nowhere to be. His steps are never in line with his body, and his head never faces forward. He leans either forward, backward or to one side. His eyes search and his feet are ready to dance. There is the rhythm of bebop in his body that never leaves him even in times of reverence or sorrow.

-Other inspirations for my character:

One of the most influential inspirations for Bacchus is Mardi Gras. Every year since I have lived in Baton Rouge I have been in some way affected by the images and sensations of the carnival experience. It is one of the defining events of my life in Louisiana. So when preparing to play Bacchus, I spent a great deal of time researching the history of Mardi Gras and the images from celebrations past.

Mardi Gras is actually a celebration that began during the time when Rome was initially adopting Christianity. Instead of prohibiting all forms of pagan rituals, the church decided to incorporate many of them into the religion. Every year in mid-February the church would allow its followers time to purge themselves of debauchery and merriment before the liturgical season of Lent.

Bacchus is the vessel for the Mardi Gras festivals and rituals that I have experienced. He is the godly light and the shadowy darkness of laughter, sensuousness, and drunkenness that I have observed during my time here.

-The Process

Bacchus was quite possibly the most flamboyant and extravagant character I have ever played, and he was, as my father would say, “big fun” to live with throughout the seven weeks of this show. There were moments with the other characters, especially Hermes and Vertumnus, that gave me difficulty and perhaps a little grief. However I could always count on Bacchus to lift my morale and encourage me to move forward.

My first impressions of him were conservative given his history. I saw him as a drinker and a party-goer but I did not see him as loud and boisterous as he turned out. At the first read, I touched on some of his exuberant energy, especially in saying Midas’ name but still never really got the full grasp of his excitement until a couple weeks into rehearsal.

When we first staged the Midas scene, the pool was dry and the “god platform” on which I made my entrance was yet to be built. It was rather difficult to have a sense of how grand a god Bacchus could be. His Bacchanalian landscape had yet to be built. One of the first notes given to me by Steve Young, the director, was that I could take as much time as I wanted with Bacchus’ entrance. He had the idea of Bacchus entering with some sort of southern Louisianan musical style and throwing beads into the audience. As soon as he gave me that note, I realized how far Bacchus could actually go. The further along we got in the process, the more that idea hit home with Bacchus.

As more set pieces were put together and the god platform was erected, I could see what would be the most difficult aspect of playing Bacchus. When standing on a platform 20 feet in the air, dead in the center of the Reilly Theater, it becomes difficult to be understood when you speak. Vocal warm-up was exceedingly important during this process. We absolutely would not have been able to be heard in that space with that staging if it were not for Christine Menzies and her dedication to the health, strength, and flexibility of our voices. I can personally account for the benefit of her presence in our process. I would not have been heard as Bacchus, or any other character for that matter, if it had not been for her.

The day that the water was pumped into the theater, everything about the show changed. The most significant shift for playing Bacchus was the reverberation that I could now feel off the water when I spoke from the god platform. Water has some odd acoustic properties, and I was surprised by how responsive it was as a vocal reflection surface. It actually assisted me in my efforts to resonate in the Reilly, making Bacchus' words much easier to communicate to the audience.

As we moved closer to opening, I had to start playing with Bacchus' props and getting a feel of what they did. One prop was a large gold colored goblet from which I drink "wine" during my entrance, and the chalice that I ended up with was absolutely perfect. It was about as large in diameter as a grapefruit, about four inches deep and could hold a manageable amount of "wine" (water!). I made sure that the "wine" present in the chalice was warm because when I drank from it, most of the water would pour down my chest and soak into my costume. If the water was cold, it was difficult for me to speak.

My only other prop for Bacchus was my bag of beads. This was so much fun. During rehearsals, I tried to be as conservative as possible with the bead throwing because the stage

crew would have to pick them all up. However on the night of the first preview the crowd was mostly comprised of students and when I started throwing beads into the audience they got boisterous and had a whole lot of fun. I could see them waving their hands and hear them shouting to me during my entire entrance. The more they shouted the more beads I threw. Even with the loud zydeco music cue playing over this section, I could hear them calling to me, “Over here!”

Bacchus’ costume was actually rather impractical. I wore a toga of sorts, that draped over my right shoulder and hung down to my shins and a frilly multi-colored mask that somewhat limited my vision. I remembered being worried that I might rip the toga when I ascended and descended the step to the god platform. That much hanging fabric scared me and I never felt I could live as energetically as possible for fear of injury. The mask was notorious for snagging beads while I was throwing them into the audience. On one night, the mask caught the beads so tightly that I had to remove the mask completely and play the scene without it. I would much rather have had a tuxedo and a black bandana around my face with eye holes cut into it. I do wish Bacchus’ clothing has been much more streamlined and modernized.

Bacchus was a fantastic character to play. I had an extraordinary time with him during school matinees. He was always good at lifting my energy and propelling me through the rest of the play.

Chapter 3 – Poseidon

-What do others say about my character?

Narrator:

“But Poseidon and his Henchman had arrived.”

“From the briny deep, Poseidon heard her prayer,
pulled her into the water, and changed her back into the little
girl who used to play along his shore.”

Mother:

“Poseidon, if you remember me, come and save me now.”

Poseidon is always aware of things that are happening and people who need him.

-What is my character fighting for?

In the story of Alcyone and Ceyx, Poseidon is fighting to annihilate Ceyx for the hubris, or rebelliousness, he shows toward the gods. In the tale of Erysichthon, Poseidon is fighting to save Erysichthon’s mother from greed and neglect.

-How do I resemble/differ from my character inside/outside?

Poseidon is the character in this play that I most resemble. The movement between extreme rage and extreme care is an emotional swing with which I am quite familiar. Poseidon is a complete person who makes decisions that may be based on knee jerk reaction and not meditated response, a characteristic that is very much a part of me and my life. Just like myself, he is always passionate about what he has to say and how he chooses to say it.

-How does my character move?

Poseidon moves like an athlete. He is strong, agile and flexible because he spends most of his time in water. When he walks his stride is effortless and he is ready to run or swim in an instant.

-Other inspirations for my character:

Some of what I did as Poseidon in the Alcyone and Ceyx story was based on an old Warner Brothers Merrie Melodies cartoon called "What's Opera, Doc." In the beginning of the short, we see a muscular shadow cast onto stone controlling the powers of thunder and lightning. The owner of the shadow turns out to be Elmer Fudd who is, of course, hunting "wabbits." It was that image in my mind that was the seed for Poseidon's interaction with Ceyx and the rest.

-The Process

Poseidon was "the strong, silent type." He was also the most completely developed character I played. I was able to feel more sides of his personality than any other character. At one moment he was angry and bitter, the next remorseful and full of regret, and then proud and heroic.

The first scene in which Poseidon appears is the story of Alcyone and Ceyx. During the first rehearsals, I was unsure as to what direction I wanted to take Poseidon's interaction. Poseidon enters the scene with his henchmen and terrorizes Ceyx and his shipmates on the high seas, killing everyone aboard. It seems that Poseidon's actions are a direct result of Ceyx's hubris as god of the sea. Ceyx defies the power of the god's, unwilling to acknowledge his own fragile humanity. Ceyx scoffs at Alcyone's warning of the dangers at sea and the power of

a sea storm, insulting Poseidon's supremacy. The moment of hubris begins at Alcyone's warning about the perils Ceyx discredits. I imagine that Ceyx's arrogance and neglect of Alcyone along with his inability to accept his own mortality angers Poseidon, which causes him to lash out against Ceyx in retribution, killing him and his crew as punishment.

In the first weeks, I was curious as to how much physical torment Poseidon would inflict on Ceyx and his crew. I thought of how Poseidon would interact with the other characters of ways to physically communicate the threat to the audience. As it turned out, I was to have no actual contact with Ceyx or his crew. Steve Young blocked the scene before we played on our feet with it, and it was already set that I would be conducting my rage from the god platform. This was actually a little disappointing. I had just spent almost the entire Midas scene in the same spot and I was hoping that in this moment I would have an opportunity to interact with others in this fantastic pool of water on the stage, but alas, it was not meant to be.

Since I was tethered to the god platform that stood over 15 feet off the floor directly upstage in the center of the space for this scene, I wanted to make the absolute best of my position. During rehearsals I found an old scepter prop from *The Tempest*, ironically enough, in the prop closet. In orchestrating Ceyx's demise from atop the god platform, I summoned the storm and threatened the crew (of Ceyx's ship that is) with the staff. While playing the scene with this prop, I really got the sense of conjuring magic and godly power which made me feel much more a part of the scene.

Poseidon's next appearance is in the story of Erysichthon. In the story, Poseidon rescues Erysichthon's mother after he sells his mother to a merchant. Upon her rescue Erysichthon's mother is transformed into a little girl and her life is renewed at Poseidon's hand. Early on in the process Anna Richardson, who played the mother, and I, experimented with a variety

possibilities for the physical life of the rescue. As a matter of fact, there was an entire rehearsal dedicated to physical experimentation. That day was especially helpful for this moment in the play. Anna and I settled on a simple yet effective cradling position that would be used to lift her from the merchant's boat.

When we first played the scene in the water, the physical life came alive in a much more profound way. As we rehearsed, Anna and I executed the initial cradle that we found in the movement rehearsal. However, as we were experimenting during our down time Anna and I found a physical interaction that sealed Poseidon's complexity. After carrying her from the boat, I placed her on her feet and we played and splashed in the water together. It was a very youthful and exuberant moment that felt perfectly matched to the text. Following this Anna had some dialog with Mark where she swears by the god of the sea that she is the only person on the beach where she is playing. As I came over to carry her away, she climbed on my back and I swam underneath the water while she rode above the surface, like a dolphin and its handler. This one moment of physical life for Poseidon solidified the complexity of the character for me. In the scene before this he is seething with rage and bent on vengeance, but in the scene following he is transformed into a caring father-figure whose only concern is another person's happiness and safety.

The only real difficulty with synchronizing Poseidon's actions with the technical aspects of the production which involved coordinating my movements with the storm sound cues in order to make it seem that I was the one causing the chaos. It actually took quite a few rehearsals to feel comfortable working with the sound cues. Nevertheless, I was really able to play with it during the run and find a sense of rhythm with the cues, making the actions my own.

When we got to the performance my interpretation of Poseidon evolved throughout the run. In the Alcyone and Ceyx story, his torment of Ceyx began solely as a fit of ire. However, as the run went on, there was an evolution in the way Poseidon reacted to what he did to Ceyx. His first reaction was one of anger, but the rage gave way to a realization of the ruin he had wrought on human lives and what followed were moments of regret and sorrow. This was not in the text and I do not know whether the audience perceived this but I was very aware of what was going on with Poseidon and I did not want to stand in its way. It gave me a sense that he was genuine and flawed and much more human than we normally give gods credit for.

Chapter 4 – Vertumnus

-What does my character say about himself?

Vertumnus:

“He adored her.”

“I live for these trivial moments!”

“...I know him as well as I know myself, and I warrant, I guarantee, that his eyes are for you alone. Consider that he’s young, attractive, healthy, and strong. Your tastes, too, are the same, for he likes trees and gardens almost as much as you. Besides, he’s fun and takes on various disguises- it’s a game he likes to play.”

“I don’t know. I thought-“

“I’m embarrassed-“

Vertumnus is consumed with Pomona. He is infatuated with her and will do and say anything to be with her. I am especially impressed by his boldest tactic of disguising himself as an older woman figure, someone in which Pomona could confide, and praising himself while in disguise. Of course, it does not get Vertumnus what he wants but in its own quirky, weird way it is rather ingenious.

-What does my character say about others?

Vertumnus:

“...But you, miss, are lovelier still.” (about Pomona)

“...The way you’ve been keeping to yourself is no good, it’s a sad violation of nature, as well as a waste. A lover is what you need to make you complete as a woman. You’d have many choices, I think. As many as Helen.” (about Pomona)

“There was a girl like you named Myrrha, and she too ignored Aphrodite. She wouldn’t fall in love. There were suitors everywhere, but she was blind to them. Finally, Aphrodite had had enough, and seized her with a passion.”

“...But the old nurse would not give up.”

“Someone must have heard her prayer-for she did change.” (about Myrrha)

“And then she was gone.” (about Myrrha)

Vertumnus cares about everyone and does not wish harm on anyone. However, I was surprised at his attempt to scare Pomona into liking him. It seems Vertumnus tells the story of Myrrha in an effort to frighten Pomona with the agony of not accepting a suitor. I thought that it was out of character for the way I imagined him in the scene leading up to the Myrrha story. That could possibly be why the telling of the story does not convince Pomona to be with him.

-What do others say about my character?

Narrator:

“There was however, one suitor, the god of springtime, Vertumnus. He was (in love) with her-more than all the rest.”

“In the manner of the shyer gods he used to disguise himself, would put of the clothes of a farmhand, wear a straw hat and a working man’s shirt and stick hay stalks behind his ears, to look like some storybook yokel.”

“When that produced nothing, he thought he might hold in his hand a pruner, trying to look like a field hand who tends the grapes in their arbors. After the complete failure of that, he came with a ladder, to seem as though he were bound for some nearby orchard to gather apples. With wigs, costume, and makeup, he once tricked himself out as a soldier, romantically returned from foreign wars. Another time, he set himself up as an ordinary fisherman fishing in her path of the chance she might pass by. He waited from dawn to dusk, passing from boredom to terror and back again.”

“One day he put on an old woman’s dress and a wig and wandered through the green, green hills until he saw his beloved standing in the lavender.”

“And he began to tell her.”

“This story got Vertumnus nowhere.”

“When at last the god revealed himself just as he was, much to his surprise, he had no need of words.”

These lines offer most of the insight into Vertumnus’ character. Almost everything he is can be found in these lines. He is a shy god who is in love with Pomona more than any other suitor for her. He will try anything, even risk humiliation and ridicule to have a chance at her love.

-What is my character fighting for?

Vertumnus is fighting for Pomona’s love and the range of tactics he employs to get her is quite impressive. He goes through six costume changes and narrates an entire morality play for her, all just to win her favor.

-How do I resemble/differ from my character inside/outside?

I immediately identified with Vertumnus’s shyness with women. I have such a hard time introducing myself to women with whom I am interested. I fumble over my words. There are awkward moments of silence, and I have no idea what to say in order for the conversation to go where I want. In fact, I have some of that difficulty in all of my verbal encounters where success is important and the stakes are high. I constantly find that I am saying the wrong thing at the wrong time and my words eventually compromise my purpose. That is exactly how I imagine

Vertumnus. He is a shy, unsure person who never does know that he is enough. He is unsure of himself and uses tricks, rather than truth, to get the things he wants.

-How does my character move?

I feel that when Vertumnus has an idea of how he wants to approach a situation, he moves very eagerly and directly toward his objective. He is fleet-footed and determined to carry out his plan. When he fails, he is lethargic and hesitant to move to something else. He is very strong and agile, however, and is capable of some extraordinary feats of athleticism. He also has nimble hands that are capable of manipulating even the smallest objects with ease.

-Other inspirations for my character:

In the development of Vertumnus, I was inspired by many of the great black comedians of the past forty years. For the moment when Vertumnus dresses in the costume of the old woman, I played with images of archetypical older black women first given to us by Moms Mabley, Flip Wilson, and Richard Pryor, among others. I also looked to more contemporary images, like Eddie Murphy in *The Nutty Professor*, Martin Lawrence in *Big Mama's House*, Dave Chappelle and "Chappelle's Show". All these sources were vital in my growth with Vertumnus and how he interacted with Pomona and the audience.

-The Process

When I first learned that I was to play a character who put on a dress I was a little apprehensive about the whole thing. It was not because I am homophobic or prejudiced against anyone or any way of living but rather that I know the history of black men in this country being

emasculated by the oppressive forces of our society. However, once I began to fully discover Vertumnus and all that he was, my apprehension faded and the story of Pomona and Vertumnus became a very enjoyable and rewarding part of my experience.

The first staging of this story was given to us by the director and it eventually proved to be ineffective. The excessive activity and the multiple costume changes required in the scene hindered character interaction. Mr. Young went through several incarnations of the scene and settled on an idea that was unsuccessful in honoring the relationship. Finally, the actress playing Pomona, Kesha Bullard and I experimented with our own ideas and played through some of them during one of the breaks. We came up with a fast paced scoot through the scene played on the downstage section of the pool deck that kept Vertumnus flexible and Pomona accessible. As we played through the scene, Mr. Young watched our work and approved of what we had discovered.

As we experimented some more with the beginning of the story it became obvious that there could be no real sense to the rhythm of the scene without having the multiple costumes Vertumnus uses in his attempts to get closer to Pomona. So the request was made to have those items at rehearsal to figure out exactly how the scene functioned with them.

In the scene, Vertumnus goes through five costume changes, all requiring him to get back to his suitcase, remove the old costume, and put on the new one. He uses each costume as a different tactic, whether it is to charm, lure, excite, or convince Pomona into giving him a chance at love. During the first week with all of the costumes at hand, it seemed we would never be able to make this work. Then one day during rehearsal someone had the brilliant idea to have Shauna, who was narrating the scene, assist me with dressing on stage which ultimately made the scene a great deal easier and quickened the pace as the director hoped.

Pomona and Vertumnus are the only two characters in the play whose storylines continue past the story immediately following. In the text both stay on stage while Vertumnus and a narrator tell the story of Myrrha, the girl who falls in love with her father. During the story, Kesha sat on the edge of the god platform directly stage right of the waterfall and I stood just to her right. The first challenge for me during this section was figuring out how to stand during the scene and not hurt my back! At this point in the story I had changed into Vertumnus' old woman costume and the physical/vocal life that I chose for the old woman was that of many of the older black women archetypes that I encountered in my past. Much of it was influenced by the talents of Moms Mabley and images of Eddie Murphy as Anna Pearl 'Mama' Jensen Klump in the movie *The Nutty Professor*. My head was thrown back, my hands were resting on my fake breasts, my feet were turned out and my back was bent in a reverse "C", somewhat similar to Tiger Woods' follow through, but without the athleticism.

Breathing was very difficult during this story. I would become winded after running up and down the pool deck for two or three minutes. Directly after that I would adorn the old woman costume, contort my body in whatever way I was contorting it and try to speak to a house of 300 people. In putting my body in the position that I did for the old woman, my breathing channel was not as open as it should have been and I was still wet from my previous scenes. The weird winds of the Reilly would hit my body, causing my muscle to contract and limit the flexibility in my channel. This scene became a good test of my ability to breathe and speak under adverse conditions. I am very proud that I was able to maintain my composure and not lose my voice or most of my resonance during this scene.

In playing through the Myrrha scene I remember sometimes feeling like a voyeur. The story is about Myrrha a girl who refuses to fall in love. The goddess Aphrodite decided that

Myrrha should be punished for not accepting love and casts a spell on her causing her to fall in love with her father, Cinyras. With the help of her nursemaid Myrrha tricks her father into making love to her by making him wear a blindfold when they meet. As he falls more and more in love with her, he removes the blindfold, finds his daughter is the one with whom he is in love and almost kills her in his anger.

In the scene Nick Erickson, who played Cinyras, and Rebecca Buller, who played Myrrha, engaged in sexually suggestive choreography that would leave the audience physically and vocally disturbed. Throughout the rehearsal and the run I never could quite shake the feeling that Vertumnus and Pomona were displayed as voyeurs, covering their faces while looking through their fingers and watching this sexual train wreck that unfolded. I am not quite sure if it was the play itself or the staging in our particular production. It is a question I still consider.

In performance, I was most surprised by the audience's response to Vertumnus as the old woman. The initial image of a man in a wig and gown is certainly funny and I was fully prepared for that reaction. The voice I used for the old woman was very funny, if I may say so myself! However, it was the placement of Vertumnus's lines during the Myrrha scene that caught my attention. At pivotal points in the story, Vertumnus would inform the audience about what part of the story was to happen next and, not so directly, remind them story was being told in order to win him Pomona's love. At a certain point in the beginning of the story, I dropped the old woman voice for my own in order to keep the attention on the primary action of Myrrha and Cinyras. However, even though I had temporarily abandoned the old woman bit, there were certain Vertumnus lines that would make people laugh. This is the one that I remember the most vividly. It comes right before the sexual encounter of Myrrha and Cinyras:

Aphrodite:

She continued down the corridor, clutching her nurse's arm for support. The hall is apparently endless, but then – too soon – they arrive at the door.

Nursemaid:

Your girl is here.

Vertumnus:

Part Four: Unnameable.

Many nights when I spoke this line the audience laughed! I could not believe it. I talked about it with some of my cast mates and we all decided it was nervous laughter from the audience. Upon more reflection, I feel that it was a combination of the audience's tension due to the context of the scene and the severity of what was about to happen - a daughter making love to her father, and the absurdity of Vertumnus' concise description of the events. The audience had to laugh to fight off the shock of the moment.

Vertumnus was my most surprising role in the play. Each night was different with him, more so than any of my other characters. I learned more about myself and my capabilities through playing him than through playing Hermes, Bacchus, or Poseidon. I would very much like to visit him again one day and give him another shot.

Chapter 5 – Hermes

-What does my character say about himself?

Hermes:

“The god of speed and distant messages
A golden crown above his shining eyes
His slender staff held out in front of him
And little wings fluttering at his ankles...”

Hermes knows who he is and where he is from. He understands the importance of his role, and is aware of the things that he is able to do to fulfill his role.

-What does my character say about others?

Hermes:

“She had come into a new virginity
And was untouchable; her sex had closed
Like a young flower at nightfall, and her hands
Had grown so unused to things that the god’s
Infinitely gentle touch of guidance
Hurt her, like an undesired kiss.”

“He has turned around-“

“Old man, old woman, ask of us what you will. We
shall grant whatever request you make of us.”

Hermes is delicate and sincere with the people with whom he comes in contact. He recognizes beauty in people and is understanding of their faults.

-What do others say about my character?

Narrator Two:
And when, abruptly
The god put out his hand to stop her, saying
With sorrow in his voice

Orpheus:

He stood and saw how, on the strip of road
among the meadows
with a mournful look, the god of messages
silently turned to follow the small figure
already walking back along the path
her step constricted by the trailing graveclothes

Narrator One:

It happened one night that Zeus, the lord of the heavens, and
Hermes, his son, came down to earth to see what people were really like.

All the other characters refer to Hermes caring about and having curiosity in other people. He is concerned for the welfare of those around him and invests much of himself in the welfare of strangers.

-What is my character fighting for?

Throughout the course of the play Hermes is fighting for equilibrium. He is the mediator of every situation, the bringer of information who balances every story in which he appears.

-How do I resemble/differ from my character inside/outside?

Hermes and I are more different than we are alike. He is drawn to the beauty and balance of a situation while I find that I am attracted more to the ugly and imperfect aspects of life. I do believe in the value of other people and their lives, just as he does. However, Hermes moves

through life with a grace and an elegance that I lack. It is this way of living that is the most prominent difference.

-How does my character move?

Hermes is very athletic and graceful. He moves swiftly from one place to another and makes almost no sound at all as he waltzes along. He runs very fast but his effort is imperceptible, and in every moment his body takes on an almost poetic form.

-Other inspirations for my character:

As Hermes is one of the Olympic gods, I decided that in my preparation to play him I watched videos of Olympic athletes in order to gain a sense of the effortlessness I imagined in his movement. I studied races by Michael Johnson, Allen Johnson, Carl Lewis, Jackie Joyner-Kersey, among others. I was also heavily influenced by ballet and modern dance traditions. As these physical forms came together I was able to construct the physical energy of Hermes, which in turn informed and inspired my vocal development to move along the same paths of beauty and ease.

-The Process

Out of all four of the characters that I played in *Metamorphoses*, Hermes is the one that I wish I could do one more time. He was beautiful. He spoke eloquently, moved gracefully, and had a presence in the life of the play even when he was not on stage. He had stunning entrances and exits and interacted with some of the most memorable characters in some of the most recognizable stories in the show. He was my favorite.

The first thing I noticed about Hermes is that about half of what he says in the play is written in blank verse, and half of that was in iambic pentameter (Hooray, Mary Zimmerman!). Furthermore, all of the lines written in this form were in the second half of the Orpheus and Eurydice story, which clued me in to the type of attention the playwright wanted us to give to this story. The first images in my mind were very ethereal and otherworldly. I imagined orchestras playing sweeping melodies when I read Hermes' lines.

There were many ideas that we all had about the play that could never be totally realized without the water. Hermes' first appearance in the Orpheus and Eurydice story was one of them. When Hermes first appears here, he enters just as Eurydice is bitten by the serpent, emerging from the water to carry her back to the underworld. We often talked about theoretically about the execution of this moment but when the scene was first staged in the water, the life of the moment was instantly much more powerful than any conversation could conceive. In the moment Shauna Rappold, who played Eurydice, is "laid to rest" on the downstage center portion of the deck surrounding the pool by Ron Reeder, who played Orpheus. Hermes then enters the scene from underneath the water and gently rolls Eurydice into the pool. He carefully manipulates her floating body upstage to the underwater entrance, guiding her away to the Underworld. In this moment Hermes solemnizes Eurydice's death and grieves with Orpheus in his loss. It was a moment that we knew would be powerful and touching image, even in rehearsal.

My one greatest challenge in my development of Hermes was his interaction with Eurydice. In the last half of the first Orpheus and Eurydice section, the narrator gives a contemplative description of Orpheus breaking Hades' rule and turning to view his bride in desire to see Eurydice. As this happens Hermes repeatedly lifts Eurydice and carries her away

from Orpheus after every small chunk of narration. Each time the action for this moment is replayed moving closer to Orpheus' outstretched hand. Shauna and I were determined to find movement to which we could connect. We had worked with some ideas in the movement rehearsal, but never really found anything with which we could be physically and artistically comfortable. As we experimented during our downtime one day during rehearsal, we found a floating pirouette-styled movement that really spoke to both of us. This was movement that was retained for the performance. I felt a real sense of accomplishment and pride in this moment. It was one of the few in the show that was truly created by the performers.

The staging in the next section of the Orpheus and Eurydice story was not the original staging given to us by the director. We really were not allowed to experiment with where we wanted the scene to go and to be honest, I do not remember what the original staging was because we only went through perhaps once or twice. However, I do remember Ron, Shauna, and I not feeling comfortable with it and eventually coming up with the final version on our own.

As we were contemplating how to uncover this section of the play, I can recall all of us wanting to incorporate some kind of suspension, a sense of the tension between Orpheus, Eurydice, and the Underworld. Furthermore, we wanted to infuse more of our Suzuki actor training into the piece and use the struggles of Suzuki in our performance. What materialized in the midst of brainstorming and experimentation was an elegant series of pushes and pulls with Eurydice working stage right, Orpheus working stage left, and Hermes working the center stage. We each had lanes of movement that played towards and away from the center section of the audience, speaking as we faced the audience and silent when turned away. The three of us actually developed all of the movement for this section in the stage left vomitorium during our down time in rehearsal. For me it was the most collaborative moment of the process. I felt the

luckiest of the group, for it was in these moments that I was able to speak Hermes' most beautiful and image-filled speeches while standing center stage in a pool of water. We all knew that we had created something special.

The other major scene in which Hermes appeared was the story of Baucis and Philemon, the story at the end of the play. During rehearsal, I am reminded of my thoughts of this being a fairly straightforward scene to play. I thought it was a simple and beautiful way to end the show, and I initially hoped to keep it honest and pure. However, Steve Young seemed quite focused on squeezing a large amount of, in my opinion, contrived humor out of this story. I can remember very few acting choices in this scene that I actually made. The first day we worked with it, Mr. Young directed Nick Erickson (Zeus) and I to come up with voices for the portions of the scene in which we were disguised. He also directed us to mimic each other's movement as we reacted to doors being slammed in our faces. The UNICEF boxes that we used as our handout collection devices were also his idea.

Now, I cannot claim that I am the easiest actor with which to work. Sometimes I can be downright stubborn and cantankerous. However, I was very annoyed and discouraged with the way in which the director's handled us. He hijacked our spontaneity, which is what actors use to do their job, and ended up creating a Walt Disney version of *Metamorphoses* by adding unnecessary comedy and inappropriate sound effects. I felt this section of the play was one of the prime examples of a beautiful story ruined by misguided direction. If I ever displayed any resistance, it was because his direction did not fit the play. Had this been Christopher Durang it might have been a different story. This was *Metamorphoses*.

Since Hermes existed much more in the water than any of my other characters, my greatest technical challenge in playing him was simply keeping myself on my feet while working

in the pool. At the beginning of the second Orpheus and Eurydice section, I was to step down into the pool one foot at a time. The first time we staged the scene I slipped on the pool bottom and almost bit the deck. Ellie, our tenacious stage manager, installed shower mats in strategic places, one right underneath my entrance, and they really helped to solve this problem. I also had some slippage while entering the pool during Baucis and Philemon but was able maintain my balance long enough so as to not embarrass myself during the run of the show.

Another thing that I ought to mention about Hermes is that for about half of the run, I could not hear what I was saying when I spoke his words. Because of the extensive time I spent under the water during the show, I developed three cases of swimmer's ear, two in my left ear and one in my right. For about half of the run, I used earplugs during all of my scenes in which I played Hermes. Since his most common entrance or exit was from underneath the water, I can attribute most of my pain and anguish to him. I was even taken to the emergency room by the Swine Palace staff as a precaution. They told me I had no permanent damage. Thanks, Hermes.

This show was the first I had been in since my time at Canada's National Voice Intensive during the summer of 2006. Nowhere in *Metamorphoses* were the lessons I learned there felt more greatly than with the role of Hermes. With him I felt resonance, flexibility, imagery, and personalization. I still know all of his lines, and I will always be ready to play him. He was my favorite.

Chapter 6 - Conclusion

Before coming back to school to do this production, I spent five weeks at Canada's National Voice Intensive in Vancouver, B.C. It was certainly the most influential experience in my theatrical career, and arguably the most influential experience of my life. When I departed from the Voice Intensive, I felt there was nothing I could not do on stage. That was the way I approached my work on this play.

With *Metamorphoses*, I felt more fearless and unapologetic about my work than I had ever felt before. I was willing to be larger than required, louder than expected, and infinitely specific by paying more attention to the sensations, culture, language, and world views of my characters. My awareness of the on-stage surroundings was more acute than it had ever been, and I was finally beginning to taste the fruits of my labor. Because of this, I needed to be very careful.

The reaction to the show was amazing. People approached me that I did not even know to tell me the show had affected them and changed their opinions of theatre and acting. Some had even said it was the best show they had ever seen. All of this praise coupled with the way I felt about my work in the process of building the show was a dangerous blend for me. It became very easy to rest on my laurels and cruise through the rest of my final year in graduate school. I could have simply said to myself, "Ok, I've got it. And there is nothing else for me to do now." That would have been about as far from the truth as possible.

As I am writing this, my class and I are about to open our studio production of *The Merchant of Venice*. If I have learned anything in my three years here, it is that I will never get it. Success in one show never means success in all. Theatre is entirely about rediscovering the sensation in your loins that moves you to act and react with the people on stage with you. A

character will never live in memory, and will only live in discovery. It is never easy. In fact, discovery can be dangerous and painful. There are times when one cannot discover all that is needed to pull it off, but that is the journey. Whatever success I had in *Metamorphoses* means very little. It is what I have learned about myself and my work through the process of *Metamorphoses* that will inform me. Through that, I can become a better artist.

Appendix 1 – Review from *The Advocate*

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The Advocate

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Main Edition

SECTION: C; Pg. 01

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HEADLINE: Rise to challenge *** "Metamorphoses" production tackles tough scenes

BYLINE: ED CULLEN; Advocate staff writer;

BODY:

Swine Palace's production of Mary Zimmerman's "Metamorphoses" is a challenge on all theatrical fronts - set design, lighting, sound and acting that involves a lot of physical work on stage.

The show, which opens tonight, works - for the most part.

Wednesday, a packed house saw "Metamorphoses" on Pay-What-You-Can-Night.

PWYC audiences are tough since more than a few of the people in the seats are students there as a class assignment.

The students, along with the rest of the more than 270 people in the building, gave the show an "A" along with a standing ovation.

Whether the show deserves a standing ovation is debatable, but the people who saw it Wednesday night thought it did.

Zimmerman's 2002 Broadway hit borrows from about a dozen Greek myths in Ovid's epic poem, "Metamorphoses." Ovid was born 43 B.C. and died sometime A.D. in exile. His smarty pants, sophisticated

work has lost little over the centuries

There is nudity in one scene toward the end of the continuous 90-minute play. This came as a surprise - the nudity - to a woman seated behind me who greeted

the frontal, male nakedness with a heart-felt "Oh, my God."

This scene with Eros and his lover, Psyche, pales, however, to the fully-clothed Rebecca Buller and Nick Erickson as Myrra cursed by Aphrodite with lust for Myrra's father, Cinyras.

The scene is supposed to make normal people uncomfortable, and normality was apparently in the majority Wednesday night.

Buller does some physically demanding acting with grace and control that make the scene all the more horrifying.

The problem comes with Zimmerman's and, ultimately, director Steven Young's effort to keep a sardonic and sometimes laugh-out-loud commentary going through Ovid's play.

Reuben Mitchell, who's very good in this show, is too flip in the incest scene.

There are other places where this show is just an inch off. What could be a really funny scene in which Mark Jaynes as Phaeton complains to a poolside shrink (Anna Richardson) about his sun-god dad, Ron Reeder, drags. Jaynes is a good comedic actor, but Reeder's scat jazz accompaniment adds nothing to the scene. Richardson, good in the other roles she plays in the show, is not the actor Jaynes needs to play off in this scene. Jaynes is going 90 to nothing only to be slowed by Richardson and Reeder.

Unlike some Swine Palace productions, there are no hired professionals in "Metamorphoses." A mix of graduate and undergraduate students make up the cast. This is good in that the play gets an effusion of youthful looks and enthusiasm, not so good because with a collegiate cast comes unevenness in acting ability.

Derek Mudd, playing Midas as we might expect to see the man with the golden touch making a pitch to the Downtown Development District, is good. He's funny, suave, flawed and convincing as the father who unintentionally turns his daughter into a golden statue. Buller, as the daughter, again shines more as a dancer than an actress.

She's used to good advantage in another physically demanding scene as "Hunger," who's been inflicted upon Erysichthon (Erickson).

This is audience participation theater whether the audience wants to participate or not. A 30-foot by 16-foot, 4,000-gallon swimming pool is the dominant feature in Nels Anderson's set.

In the Erysichthon scene, Erickson turns Gallagher.

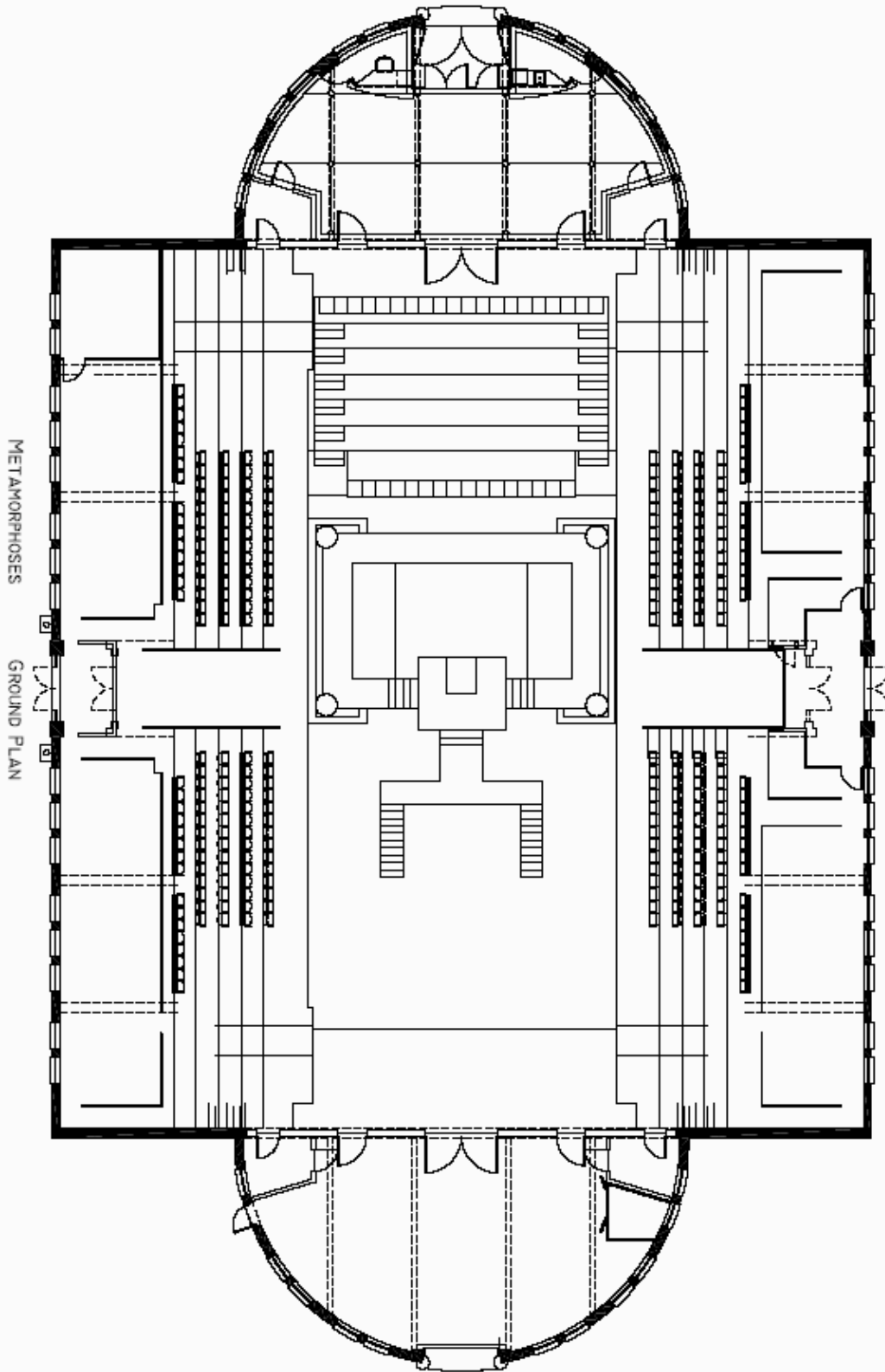
People on the front rows of the three-bank theater get wet. If you sit down front, stick a poncho in your back pocket.

Production manager/technical director James Murphy is the man behind the swimming pool construction. If anyone deserves a standing ovation, it's Murphy.

Taking production bows, too, are costume designer Ginger Robertson, lighting designer Louis Gagliano, sound designer Eun-Jin Cho, stage manager Ellie Sturgill and choreographer Nick Erickson.

Other cast members are Kesha Bullard, Shauna Rappold and Nikki Travis.

Appendix 2 – Ground Plan



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Vita

Reuben Mitchell was born and raised in Greenville, NC. After attending a small university in his hometown, he transferred to Morehouse College in Atlanta, GA where he earned his B.A. in Drama. After graduation he worked as an intern for Actor's Express, a regional theater company in Atlanta, where he understudied for the regional premiers of *Bel Canto*, *Blue/Orange*, and *The Goat or Who is Sylvia*. He was recently seen in *Samarkand*, directed by Nobel laureate Wole Soyinka, at The Shaw Center's Manship Theater. Reuben is a recipient of the Barry Lee Memorial Scholarship and would like to thank the Calhoun family for their support and generosity.