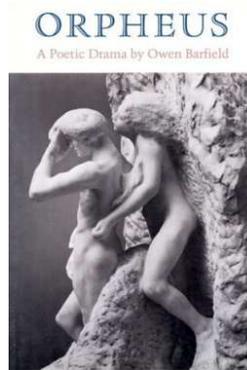


ON DIRECTING OWEN BARFIELD'S *ORPHEUS* by James Loren



At Oxford University in the early 1930's, a group of young writers formed a society that they named the Inklings, which met on a weekly basis for literary discussions and to share each other's latest work, generally in the areas of romantic fiction, fairy tales and poetry. Prominent among them were C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkien, Charles Williams and Owen Barfield. Tolkien, Lewis and Williams' writings are well known, some being the subject of major theatrical and television film productions.

Owen Barfield met and became friends with Lewis in 1919 when they were both undergraduates at Oxford. Barfield's active participation in society meetings was infrequent, due to his having to go to work in his father's law firm in order to support his family (see below). Nevertheless, he remained a lifelong friend and unofficial mentor of Lewis and wrote some highly praised but lesser known poetry, fiction, philosophy and drama, including in the latter genre *Orpheus, A Poetic Drama*, written at Lewis's suggestion. Lewis praised it highly in a note printed in the original program:

I await with great interest the public reaction to a work which has influenced me so deeply as Barfield's *ORPHEUS*. On the technical side it presents us with a variety almost as rich as that of the *Shepherd's Calendar*. I hope that this will not be mistaken for virtuosity. The alliterative lines, the trochaics, the couplets, the blank verse and the lyrics are in reality so responsive to the different states of being they embody that they serve the same purpose as dramatic orchestration. They mediate a drama which the Orpheus in each of us will understand best if he

at first leaves the Eurydice in him free to follow the images and the melodic development. It is a mystery (not a 'problem') drama. It executes in us a re-union of which we always stand in need, never more than at present.

*Orpheus* was produced only once, in 1948 in Sheffield, England, where it ran for five performances, after which it was not produced again until 2015 in Los Angeles, California. It was not even available in print until 1983 when John C. Ulreich Jr., while working on a study of the Inklings, came across some mention of the play in the correspondence between Barfield and Lewis, contacted Barfield and, with Barfield's approval, brought the play to publication with The Lindisfarne Press. However, the play has not received a full production since 1948.

Why has the play not been produced again for sixty-seven years? Is it the subject matter? The Orpheus myth is universally known, having been subject matter for Virgil and Ovid and the subject of poetry, music, painting, fiction, drama and film throughout the last two centuries. Is it the obscurity of the author? In response to that question, Dr. Jane Hipolito, series editor for the Owen Barfield Literary Estate, provides the following comment:

When Barfield was a young man, his creative writings were widely known and attracted much attention. This was the decade immediately after the First World War, when there was considerable enthusiasm for new ideas and new approaches, and there also was considerable support for the traditional – and there were many, many publishing venues, several of them new. During those postwar years, Barfield published numerous poems and short stories, and he also published two important nonfiction books. But then the Great Depression took hold, and the whole economic situation became very difficult. Among other things, many publishing firms went out of business and those that did not reduced their publishing activity considerably. (email correspondence with the author)

Dr. Hipolito goes on to say that the coming of World War Two had a similarly devastating effect on publishing in England. It was during those years that Barfield took up the practice of law for his livelihood, continuing to write in his spare time.

Is it the poetic nature of the play? The plays of Shakespeare, Moliere, Christopher Fry, T.S. Eliot and other verse dramatists are perpetually being performed. We have already seen C.S. Lewis' appreciation above. Is it the large number (60+) of speaking roles? With costume and makeup changes, actors play multiple roles in plays all the time. Why did it escape the notice of English critics in 1948? A search of The British Newspaper Archive yielded no results. Whatever happened or didn't happen at the time, Barfield did not pursue publication or further productions but, fortunately, retained one typescript copy of the play.

John Ulreich, upon his first reading of that copy, was struck with the power and beauty of the play, as he states in his afterword in the Lindisfarne edition:

Though I was more or less prepared for an exceptional insight into Barfield's genius, nothing that he or Lewis had said about the play quite prepared me for the immediate experience of it, or the shock of recognition: here is the evolution of consciousness made flesh, the thing itself in human form, the myth made fact as imaginative experience. (p.111)

This, though I could not have expressed it so eloquently, was my initial response as well. As Ulreich was moved to take the play from typescript to publication, I was moved to attempt to bring it from print back to the stage.



*Orpheus mourns Eurydice*

Full disclosure: I hold two degrees in Theatre, have taught at a number of colleges and universities, and have lived and worked in the film and theatre communities in Los Angeles for many years, and had never heard of Barfield until I was introduced to his work by Dr. Hipolito. She is a retired English professor at California State University, Fullerton, and chairperson of the Owen Barfield Society. Further, I had never heard of his *Orpheus* until, at a baroque music concert, she handed me a copy of the play and invited me to read it and see what I thought of it. After several readings over as many weeks, I called her and told her that I felt that I simply had to direct it; it was the play I had been waiting for all my life. At the same time that I was filled with this enthusiasm, all of the questions listed above were bombarding my thought processes, along with a few more: First, might I be the only one to “get” this play the way I do? Is there an audience for it? Second, how would or could I stage it if given the opportunity?

To answer the first question, I decided to see what some of my fellow actors thought of it, so I invited the company of a play, *The Lady's Not For Burning*, in which I was acting, to join me for a table read. Since *The Lady...* is a verse drama, I thought they would be interested and adept at a reading of *Orpheus*, and on both counts, they were. Later, I did the same thing with a group of my non-actor friends. Both groups found the play to be beautiful, exciting and accessible and thought it ought to be produced.

This led to the second question, which breaks down to a multitude of other related ones: where, when, how, with whom, in what form, and how to fund it?

Having no clear path towards a fully designed, rehearsed and executed production, I thought I would use what assets and associations I had and mount a public, staged reading of the play.

Dr. Hipolito, her husband Terry and I agreed that we would produce it at a friend's small, 55-seat venue called Theatre Unlimited in North Hollywood, California on two consecutive Fridays, April 17 and 24, 2015, as a benefit for The Christian Community Church, North Hollywood, and that the Hipolitos would finance it. Interestingly, it turns out that the 1948 production was staged as a benefit for The Christian Community Church as well, that one being in Sheffield.

Theatre Unlimited, in spite of its name, is quite limited in space. The stage opening is 20 feet wide and the depth is irregular, with one half of the backstage wall back 14 feet from the apron, the other half, back 20 feet. It is what is known in the world of theatre as a "black box." Putting on a play of the scope and grandeur of *Orpheus* in such a venue would be a challenge that would require some imagination, ingenuity and theatrical magic.



*Rehearsal at Theatre Unlimited*

*Orpheus* is written in four acts comprising ten scenes and around sixty speaking roles. After a careful analysis of the play, I concluded that it could be performed by two choruses, one of men, one of women, each comprised of six performers, who would each read four or five separate parts in addition to their choral lines. The actors would perform with scripts in hand, miming nearly all hand properties called for. Scene locations would be suggested by the placement of various chairs, cubes and a rectangular bench in various configurations about the stage, along with a simple, but effective lighting design.



*Orpheus surrounded by the animals*

The cubes would be used for the boat in which Charon ferries Eurydice across the river Styx,



*Charon and Eurydice crossing the Styx*

the chairs for the thrones of Persephone and Hades, and the bench for a rock at the seashore, various rocks in the forest, a couch for the sleeping Eurydice in the underworld, and the sacrificial altar at the end of the play.



*Hades, Persephone and the sleeping Eurydice*

For costumes, my actors would perform in rehearsal/workout clothing in neutral gray tones. In order to distinguish the various choruses and scenes from each other, the chorus members would have unifying and distinct fabric accessories. The full chorus of six men and women would use gauze scarves in blue for their first appearance as Nereids, or sea spirits, green for their appearance as forest spirits,



*Orpheus, Eurydice and a Tree in the Forest*

and blue for their appearance as river spirits in an underwater grotto.



*Cyrene, her son Aristaeus and Chorus. (Musicians in background.)*

The women would wear purple as the chorus of Danaids (those women who married and then killed their husbands in obedience to their father, Danaeus) in Hades and the actors playing Hades and Persephone would wear long purple sashes that came nearly to the

floor. (see photo on p. 7) The Satyr and the Maenads, or followers of Dionysis, all would wear bright red, which they could use to dramatically enhance the effect of the moment when they tear the forlorn Orpheus to pieces. This was accomplished by having the screaming Maenads circle around Orpheus, who dropped to his knees, crying “Eurydice” as they caused the red gauze fabric strips to flash up in the air like flying blood.

With these simple costumes, colorful accessories, simple staging and effective lighting, I hoped to create the impression of an intimate, modern mystery play.

In the early planning stages, as I studied the play, I felt that it also needed incidental music to tie the scenes together and help the actors and the audience experience the successive atmospheres and moods of the play. The more I thought about it, the more I became convinced that there simply had to have been music in the 1948 production. Finally, in an internet search, I came upon an itemized list of holdings in the Owen Barfield collection in the Marion E. Wade Archive in the library of Wheaton College in Wheaton, Illinois, read through it, and there it was: *ORPHEUS: Incidental Music to the Modern Poetic Drama of Owen Barfield for Flute and Harp by Fiona Leon*. Having been introduced by Dr. Hipolito to Barfield’s grandson Owen, who is the executor of the senior Barfield’s literary estate, I told Owen what I had found and asked if he might authorize the Archive to provide me a copy. He was pleasantly surprised to learn that it even existed and immediately sent a letter of introduction and authorization to the Wade Archivist. Soon thereafter, I had a photocopy of the music, which consisted of some 18 numbers with headings indicating the act, scene and moment in the play for

which each had been written, along with some notes from Barfield to Ms. Leon with suggestions for further changes. More about this later.

I am not a musician, so I couldn't immediately determine what I had in hand or if it would work in this new staging, sixty-seven years after the original production. A friend played a sampling of the overture on the piano for me and it appeared to have an impressionist quality similar to the music of Ravel or Debussy. This sounded promising, but I wasn't to know for sure how it would fit until the Monday rehearsal prior to our first Friday evening performance. I found and engaged a harpist and a flutist willing to examine the music and prepare it for a public performance.

I gave copies of the music to the musicians and got to work casting and rehearsing the play. Due to scheduling conflicts, many of my first choices in actors were unable to commit to the project and I had to reach out to friends in the Los Angeles theatre community for referrals and take whoever responded with interest in order to fill out the cast. As it turned out, the actors I found were not only right for the parts I gave them, but also eager and committed to this unusual project – a poetic drama by an unknown author, with music by an unknown composer, that had never been produced in the US. The commitment and love of everyone for the project intensified with each rehearsal as we penetrated more deeply into the text and as Barfield's mythical world opened to us. We gathered at my apartment, the living room of which was large enough that I could tape down the dimensions of the Theatre Unlimited stage and, over seven consecutive Saturday mornings, block and rehearse the reading.

Several weeks before the opening, I brought the musicians and the cast together so that the actors could hear the music and the musicians could hear the play for the first

time. Several things were immediately clear: first, the music beautifully underscored the action of the play and would help the transitions from one scene to the next (which would have to be done in full view of the audience); second, it would have to be judiciously trimmed in places to synchronize with the scene changes; and third, that I would place the musicians on stage, behind the actors, and they would perform it live.

There was a fourth realization, one more problem to solve: how to end the play. If Fiona Leon had ever written music for the ending, it was not included as a number in the score in the Wheaton College collection. Scene iii of Act IV ends in a tableau with a dialogue between the voice of Persephone and the Second (female) Chorus, speaking for Demeter, wherein Persephone asks for and receives Demeter's approval and blessing for her part in this drama, ending with the following speech prophesying the fate of Orpheus and Man's future:

**Second Chorus**

He shall ascend Parnassus awake and find his soul:  
Proteus shall work unsleeping for ever; and forms shall flow  
As the meanings of words a poet has mastered. It shall be so  
That Zeus shall abandon to Cronos the antique starry crown,  
And softly out of Olympus the high gods shall come down,  
Shedding ambrosial fragrance in clouds that forever abide,  
And earth shall be covered with blushes and make herself sweet as a bride.  
And her light shall be liquid as honey, her air taste good like bread  
In the mouths of them that dwell upon earth, and all shall be fed.

*(p. 112)*

My solution was to break up the speech into seven lines, counting the first and last couplets as one line each, and assign them to the whole cast, two actors per line, to be read cumulatively, thus: two of the women would turn downstage to read the first couplet very softly, two more would join the first two for the third line, two more for the fourth, and so on until the ending couplet, read by the whole cast in a joyous crescendo

climaxing in the last clause, “and all shall be fed.” Then a blackout, lights up again, and the musicians would repeat section 2 of the Overture for bows.

I contacted two theatre friends, one a lighting technician, the other a stage manager, and put together a lighting plot for the play employing the lighting instruments and switchboard on hand at the theatre. So I had now assembled all of the elements of the performance and everyone was working on it. All that remained (and all we had) was one opportunity to bring everyone - actors, musicians and crew - together on the Monday evening before the first Friday performance, the first time many of the company would be setting foot in the space, and painstakingly fit and stitch it together. That night, everyone was focused, disciplined and patient and by the end of the night, we had the pieces assembled.

The first performance came together with only minor hitches, which were addressed before the second performance. Both performances were met with the enthusiastic delight of our audiences.

Having seen the play through to a modest but successful staged reading, in view of the limitations we faced, some of which ultimately proved advantageous, I believe that it has been demonstrated that the play can be performed effectively either on an intimate or a grand scale. It is my hope that this humble “North American Premiere” will be followed by other productions in both educational and professional venues. Barfield brings the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice to such vivid, passionate incarnation and peoples it with characters of such wit, charm and sensibility that sympathetic chords are struck in all who witness it. There is an audience for the play now, in these days of

political and spiritual upheaval, and this timeless myth of love, loss, reunion and redemption has as much or perhaps more relevance now than it had in 1948.

In closing, I would like to express my gratitude and that of the entire cast, musicians and crew to Owen Barfield, Executor of the Owen Barfield Literary Estate for his gracious support, to Professor John Ulreich for uncovering the play and bringing it into print in his beautifully published edition, and to Drs. Jane and Terry Hipolito for bringing the play to my attention and for so generously allowing and enabling us to bring it to the stage.

The 2015 production of Owen Barfield's ORPHEUS and access to a photocopy of the incidental music composed by Fiona Leon for ORPHEUS were by the kind permission of the Owen Barfield Literary Estate.

Copies of the play may be downloaded *gratis* from the Owen Barfield Literary Estate website at <http://www.owenbarfield.org/orpheus/>.

Photos courtesy of Richard Michael Johnson.