

Acting Edition

Medusa Undone

by Bella Poynton

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|| SAMUEL FRENCH ||

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MEDUSA UNDONE was first produced in 2014 by Pandora Productions at the Garage Theatre in Long Beach, CA. The play was directed by Sonja Berggren with set design by Yuri Okahana, lighting and sound design by McLeod Benson, costumes by Rachel Engstrom, and stage management by Caitlyn Dominguez. The cast was as follows:

MEDUSA Deneen Melody
ATHENA NIKE Karen Wray
POSEIDON Derek Long
STHENO Cailin Lowerre
XENA (Formerly **ECHO**) Carmen Guo

MEDUSA UNDONE was subsequently produced in 2019 by Post Industrial Productions at the New Phoenix Theatre in Buffalo, NY. The play was directed by Maura Nolan Coseglia with set design by Josh Robinson and Ashlyn Zgoda, lighting design by Chris Cavanaugh, sound design by Bob Van Valin, costume design by Andrea Gollhardt, fight choreography by Anna Krempholtz, and stage management by Leyla Gentil. The cast was as follows:

MEDUSA Anna Krempholtz
ATHENA NIKE Paige Allison Donatelli
POSEIDON Brett Klaczyk
STHENO Becky Globus
XENA (Formerly **ECHO**) Diane Di Bernardo

MEDUSA UNDONE was produced by Otherworld Theatre Company in Chicago, IL in 2019. The play was directed by Tiffany Keane Schaefer with set design by Hannah Beaudry, lighting design by Claire Sangster, costume design by Beth Laske Miller, intimacy design/direction by Jennifer Mickelson, fight choreography by Kai Young, and dramaturgy by Lauren Nicole Fields. The cast was as follows:

MEDUSA Mary-Kate Arnold
ATHENA NIKE Jessica Goforth
POSEIDON Michael Jay Bullaro
STHENO Grace Gimpel
XENA (Formerly **CLEA**) Christina Jones

CHARACTERS

MEDUSA – Female, twenties, a mortal woman from the sea.

ATHENA NIKE – Female or nonbinary, thirties to forties, the Goddess of War and Strategy.

POSEIDON – Male, thirties, the God of the Sea.

STHENO – Female or nonbinary, thirties, Medusa's immortal sea-gorgon sister.

XENOCLEA (XENA) – Female, forties to sixties, the high priestess at the temple of Athena.

SETTING

The first three scenes of the play take place in the temple of Athena Nike. The last scene takes place in a dark cave on the coastline of the Island of the Dead.

TIME

Back when the world was new, and Gods and Goddesses roamed the Earth side by side with mortals.

AUTHOR'S NOTES

- *Medusa Undone* is not an adaptation of a classical work; it is an original play with no classical precursor.
- Euryale is pronounced: (you-rye-uh-lee)
- Stheno is pronounced: (they-no), but there is no vibratory sound on the "th" meaning it sounds more like the "th" in the word "thesis" than in the word "they."
- Xena is pronounced: (zay-nuh)
- **Due to the difficult nature of the content in this play, an intimacy choreographer should always be utilized for any production or staged reading.**
- Content warnings and trigger warnings for sexual abuse and violence should be visible in the lobby of the theatre in which this play is produced as well as in the program. If possible, crisis services and intervention service information should be made available to audience members.
- In production, the sounds of the rape should go on for at least **one full minute**. I realize that this is quite a long time, but that is the point of the play. I want the audience to be forced to sit through the uncomfortable nature of these sounds and be left grappling with

these hard concepts during intermission and beyond. Obviously, this is something that needs to be rehearsed and explored in an auditory sense. Please cast actors who are comfortable rehearsing such material, and again, **please use an intimacy choreographer**. It is important that the audience knows exactly what they are hearing even if they cannot see it. I understand this is both difficult to discuss and rehearse, but it is important to the structure and vision of the piece.

ACT ONE

Scene One

*(At rise, the ancient temple of Athena Nike. It is dark, and cavernous here – more like an abbey than a temple. In the center of the room is a stone fountain. **ATHENA** is a strong-looking woman with the eyes of a man – somewhere between male and female. Before her stands another woman [**MEDUSA**], soaked to the bone, and covered in the muck of the sea.)*

ATHENA. Why me? Why do you wish to serve me?

MEDUSA. Because there is no one else worth serving.

My sisters told me about a place where you could see the sun rise from below the horizon to the very middle of the sky and back down again.

ATHENA. You can see the sunrise from anywhere on land.

MEDUSA. I've never seen it. I've come from the sea.

ATHENA. Are you looking for protection?

MEDUSA. That's part of it, yes. From my parents and sisters.

ATHENA. They cast you out?

MEDUSA. No. I left on my own. I want to use my time well. I only have so much of it.

ATHENA. And what would you do with your time here if I were to let you stay. Do you wish to use magic? Or offer praise to the Gods?

MEDUSA. I'll worship in whatever way you think useful.

ATHENA. Not many share your sense of dedication.

Still. Young women cannot simply wander into my temple, proclaim their loyalty, and become priestesses. It's not that easy.

MEDUSA. I didn't simply wander here. I came with great purpose. And I don't think it will be easy.

ATHENA. Oh. I see. You think you're clever.

MEDUSA. No. I think I'm capable.

ATHENA. All right. I'll give you as fair a chance as anyone.

Tell me a story. Entertain me. If I like what I hear, you'll stay.

MEDUSA. What – kind of story?

ATHENA. If I told you, it wouldn't be fair.

MEDUSA. But – I have no idea what kind of stories you like.

ATHENA. That's the idea.

(MEDUSA thinks for a moment before she begins.)

MEDUSA. I only have one story of my own.

When I was a child, my parents told me and my two sisters to share everything, but my sisters were much stronger than me, both immortal, so I was the one left out. Always cold, always hungry, and always begging for scraps. So, one day, I came up with a plan, and set out from the reef to seek out the great monster Scylla. Scylla is tied to both my mother and father by blood, so really, she's family. But I'd been told she was dangerous and never to look for her. Still, like all curious children,

I didn't listen. I thought she might understand my dilemma, being hungry and all. So, when I finally found her cave, I stood there and told my story. And then, to my surprise, she very gently slipped one of her six heads out to greet me.

ATHENA. This is ridiculous; no one has ever seen Scylla and lived.

MEDUSA. It's the truth. I might be clever, but I don't tell lies. They say my face gives me away.

Shall I finish the story?

ATHENA. I can predict the rest. You tricked her somehow, and she –

MEDUSA. No, see – just like you – I had been taught that Scylla was so fast, and so cruel, that no one could come near her and live. But it's just not true. She was kind.

ATHENA. I suppose you'd have me believe the two of you laughed and drank wine and shared stories about how best to lure sailors to their death?

MEDUSA. She picked me up with one long arm and said that I reminded her of the past and future both, and then taught me how to make the sound she makes. The one that gives warning to the sailors when she's close by? She told me to use the sound whenever my sisters were cruel to me, and when I arrived home, that was exactly what I did. The next time I was forced to go hungry, I simply impersonated my new friend, and watched my sisters go pale with fear. I have not been hungry since.

ATHENA. Where is your proof?

MEDUSA. I give you my word.

ATHENA. I barely know you. What good is your word to me?

MEDUSA. Ask Poseidon if my word isn't enough. He knows it to be true.

ATHENA. What do you know of my uncle?

MEDUSA. Nothing. It's just a saying. Poseidon knows all of what happens in the sea. So, he would know. That my story is true.

ATHENA. What business have you with him?

MEDUSA. No. No business. You don't understand my meaning. I have never met him and do not wish to.

ATHENA. Good. Don't speak of my uncle again. It upsets me.
Are you through?

MEDUSA. Yes. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to offend. Thank you for seeing me.

I'll be on my way.

(MEDUSA starts to leave.)

ATHENA. Wait. I quite liked your story. No matter if it's true or false.

I've needed someone to scrub floors and pour wine.

MEDUSA. Are you saying I can stay?

ATHENA. Not so fast. There are rules first. Have you known a man?

MEDUSA. I know many men.

ATHENA. You know what I mean. Have you known men intimately?

MEDUSA. Do you mean to ask about men? Or about intimacy?

ATHENA. It's a simple question! Have you been with a man, or not?

MEDUSA. No.

ATHENA. Good. Only virgins can be Priestesses. Consorting with men can ruin your abilities to predict the future and manipulate the elements.

MEDUSA. How?

ATHENA. Men, by their nature, are destructive. They'll destroy everything if you let them. Foresight requires concentration, and men have a way of muddying that.

MEDUSA. And will you teach me magic and foresight?

ATHENA. Not me. The other priestesses might, if you have the talent.

MEDUSA. Why can't I learn from you?

ATHENA. Because I don't teach.

MEDUSA. The Goddess of Wisdom doesn't teach?

ATHENA. I find it dull. I am most fond of being the Goddess of Law and Justice. It's by far the most exciting.

MEDUSA. You're also the Goddess of War, as well. Teach me to fight, instead.

ATHENA. Oh, I don't fight either. Not since the siege of Troy. I only plan and strategize.

I would be a terrible teacher. Patience isn't one of my virtues.

MEDUSA. I could learn by observing.

ATHENA. You don't understand. I am only served. I don't perform magic myself.

MEDUSA. Then, what do you do? How do you spend your time?

ATHENA. I am a Goddess. I spend my time doing whatever I please.

(ATHENA turns to leave. MEDUSA chases after her, but ATHENA exits.)

MEDUSA. So where do I go? – What – who should I – Are you letting me stay?

(From the other side of the room, the High Priestess, XENOCLEA, responds.)

XENA. Yes. She is.

MEDUSA. But she never said –

XENA. She did, in her own way. She would have killed you if she wanted you gone.

MEDUSA. Is that how –

XENA. She treats all guests? Yes. She is the Goddess of War, after all. What did you expect? Laurels and lute music?

MEDUSA. How did you know what I was going to ask?

XENA. Because I can see.

What you're going to say before you say it.

MEDUSA. Ha! No... Truly?

Like the Oracle? Why are you not off inhaling fumes with the Pythia in Delphi, then?

XENA. I did. Until I got too old. A terrible thing, getting old.

MEDUSA. You served the Oracle?

XENA. I *was* the Oracle.

Until another girl came. Who could see more than I could. One girl can't be the Oracle forever.

Girls grow up. They see less and less. I'm Xenoclea. Xena.

Now, give me your hand.

(XENA reaches out for MEDUSA's hand, but MEDUSA pauses.)

Don't be stubborn. Come on, give it here.

(**MEDUSA** gives **XENA** her hand.)

Can you use magic?

MEDUSA. Not much.

XENA. You'll learn.

MEDUSA. But Athena doesn't teach.

XENA. No, but I do.

MEDUSA. Are you a priestess?

XENA. High Priestess.

MEDUSA. Oh – High Priestess! I didn't think –

XENA. I would be so old?

MEDUSA. That's not what I was going to say.

XENA. Yes, it was.

MEDUSA. Stop doing that!

XENA. An early lesson: lying to me isn't in your best interest. Now, tell me about your magic.

MEDUSA. I can move water.

XENA. What else?

MEDUSA. Just water.

XENA. Just water...

MEDUSA. And sometimes, when I'm on land I can –

XENA. That's enough –

(**XENA** drops **MEDUSA's** hand.)

MEDUSA. Wait – you didn't let me finish. I have more to say!

XENA. You don't need to say any more.

MEDUSA. You haven't even asked my name!

XENA. I don't need your name either. I'll ask for it when it's necessary.

Until then, we have more than enough work to keep you busy.

(XENA points out a rag to wash the floor.)

The floors need a good scrub. Understood?

(The sound of a large bell.)

Athena is calling the priestesses to ready the temple for Poseidon. He arrives on the next tide. I suggest you get started.

MEDUSA. The sea king is coming here? I thought Poseidon didn't leave his domain?!

XENA. For his favorite niece, he does.

MEDUSA. Then I have to leave.

XENA. Leave now? After all your begging and pleading to stay?

MEDUSA. When she mentioned Poseidon, I didn't imagine she actually *knew* him.

XENA. You thought she was questioning you to hear the sound of her own voice?

What? Are you afraid of him?

MEDUSA. My family is in his service.

XENA. Well, yes.

MEDUSA. Is it that obvious?

XENA. Have you seen yourself?

(XENA gestures to the seaweed in MEDUSA's hair.)

MEDUSA. Please don't tell anyone.

XENA. It's no secret. Trust me.

MEDUSA. Should I be worried?

XENA. I don't know. I'm not you.

MEDUSA. I mean – is he well-tempered? Does he anger easily?

XENA. He's Poseidon. Decide for yourself.

MEDUSA. Is there a place for me to hide, at least? He'll smell the salt in my hair and know I don't belong here.

XENA. If you want to leave, you'll have to wait until tomorrow. The storm has already reached the shore. It's too dangerous.

MEDUSA. I've left his domain to venerate another God – he surely won't take to it kindly!

(The bell rings again.)

XENA. I have to go. Athena is waiting.

MEDUSA. Don't leave me here.

XENA. Stay hidden in one of the alcoves. He's not expected for a few hours yet.

MEDUSA. Bring me with you to the ceremony?

XENA. Only priestesses can go deeper into the temple. I'll come for you before daybreak.

MEDUSA. Daybreak?!

XENA. Shhh – stay quiet! And stay put.

(XENA exits.)

MEDUSA. Wait, please – don't –

(MEDUSA is left alone and terrified. She stares at the fountain for a long moment. The sound of the trickling water is eerie and somehow loud in the silence. Then, there is a loud thunderclap outside of the temple and

MEDUSA *is startled and turns around to see a young PEASANT MAN [POSEIDON] standing at the temple doors. His clothes are drenched and torn.*)

PEASANT. Don't scream! I won't hurt you. I got lost in the storm –

MEDUSA. Where did you come from?

PEASANT. Out there.

MEDUSA. I can see that.

PEASANT. I'm soaked through from the rain, and I need a place to warm up. Where's the fire?

MEDUSA. No fire. Just a fountain.

PEASANT. More water.

MEDUSA. Always more water.

PEASANT. What kind of temple has no fire?

MEDUSA. Athena's.

PEASANT. So that's where I am. Will you offer me sanctuary?

MEDUSA. I can't. I'm not the right person to ask.

PEASANT. You're the only one here.

MEDUSA. The others are busy. Praying. I'm...on watch.

PEASANT. A woman? On watch?

MEDUSA. Of course, there's a woman on watch. No men are allowed in the temple.

PEASANT. So far, you are doing a terrible job.

MEDUSA. You snuck up on me!

PEASANT. So, I did. Can I – keep the watch with you, then? Just until the storm is over?

MEDUSA. No – you can't! You shouldn't be here to begin with.

(Another crack of thunder.)

PEASANT. So, you're going to send me back out there?
In this?

MEDUSA. It's not me. I didn't make the rules!

PEASANT. But you're following them. I'll die out there.
You'd kill a helpless peasant?

MEDUSA. I'm sure there are other places to stay.

PEASANT. Nothing nearby. I wouldn't last the night.

(Thunder. MEDUSA hides behind the fountain.)

It's just thunder. Zeus is angry. Or very pleased. What
are you so afraid of?

MEDUSA. The storm brings the tide, and the tide brings
someone I'd rather not meet.

PEASANT. Who?

MEDUSA. None of your business.

PEASANT. Oh, you can trust me.

MEDUSA. I don't even know you.

PEASANT. But if you don't tell me I won't be able to
stop wondering. I'll just sit here. Staring into space.
Thinking about who it could possibly be...

(A long pause. MEDUSA cannot stand it.)

MEDUSA. Fine! Fine. Poseidon is coming here tonight!

(The PEASANT bursts into laughter.)

PEASANT. Poseidon? That's nonsense. Poseidon doesn't
show his face on land.

MEDUSA. That's what I said, but the High Priestess told
me he visits often.

PEASANT. I always thought he had to stay in the sea.

MEDUSA. Apparently not. He's a God. I suppose he can do anything he likes and go anywhere he pleases.

PEASANT. Is he looking for you? Did you offend him somehow?

MEDUSA. No! Not yet – but – I might – It's a long story.

PEASANT. You know – I once heard, about a sea nymph whose head was ripped right from her shoulders for angering one of his minions!

MEDUSA. That's just a story.

PEASANT. Is it? How can you be sure? All stories start somewhere, don't they? I once heard one about a gorgon who spoke to him rudely and he –

MEDUSA. All right. I've heard enough!

(MEDUSA stands and pulls her shawl up over her head. She goes to the temple doors.)

PEASANT. Wait, wait, wait! Where are you going?

MEDUSA. I'm running away! I can't stay here. You're right. It's too dangerous.

PEASANT. No, don't! You can't go wandering off in a storm like this.

MEDUSA. I'll be fine! I was raised in the water.

PEASANT. This is different. The ocean is warm, but you'll freeze out there tonight. And who knows, maybe he won't even notice you.

MEDUSA. Do you think so? Could I pass for someone born on land?

PEASANT. Hmm. No. Not really. We stand taller.

(MEDUSA tries.)

And sit stiller.