

## **REVIEW: 'Raising Medusa' raises interesting story, styles**

**By Rob Cline, Cedar Rapids Gazette, 4/3/09**

**IOWA CITY** - When the Greek Chorus spoke its first three-voiced line at the beginning of Barbara Lau's "Raising Medusa," I groaned inwardly. The device, whether found in a Woody Allen film or a Margaret Atwood novel, is a risky one, rife with opportunities to be both grating and clinched.

I wondered if Lau — a Mount Vernon resident and prizewinning poet — could avoid those pitfalls in this, her first play.

As the members of the near-capacity audience at Riverside Theatre for Thursday's premiere of the play could attest, Lau does more than steer clear of problems. She offers up a loving and lovely examination of a mother and teenage daughter struggling to connect. And, as it turns out, the chorus concept works quite nicely.

Lau's work is brought to life by an excellent cast of women under the direction of Mary Sullivan. In addition to the chorus — Jody Hovland, Kristy Hartsgrove and Jaclyn June Johnson — the play stars Nancy Youngblut as the mother and Laura Tatar as her daughter Maddie. In their roles as the rhyming, wisecracking, encouraging members of the chorus, Hovland, Hartsgrove and Johnson interact directly with Youngblut's character. The three also tackle additional roles, most notably as Medusa (Hartsgrove), her mother Ceto (Hovland) and Maddie's troubled and troubling friend Ven (Johnson).

There are no weak spots in this cast. Johnson walks right up to the line beyond which lies overacting, but she nimbly avoids crossing it. Hartsgrove and Hovland offer an affecting take on the relationship between the cursed Medusa and her desperate mother. For her part, Youngblut is completely convincing and sympathetic as the harried mother.

But the linchpin of the production is Tatar's performance as Maddie. Her portrayal of a daughter becoming someone her mother can't even recognize is exceptional. Despite the dramatic and dark turns her character's story takes, Tatar never overplays a moment nor descends into parody. And with a flinch, she wordlessly executes the play's most devastatingly emotional moment.

Early on, the lighting design seemed to leave too much in shadows (although it may have been a case of missed marks), but on the whole, both scenographer Scott Olinger's set and Renee M. Bell's costumes are excellent. At times, parallel action on the sides of the stage is difficult to take in due to the width of the set (which features both Greek columns and the necessary details of a contemporary home).

Speaking of parallels, Lau uses the Medusa myth as a gloss on Maddie's story. The cast sells it well, but it isn't wholly effective.

Medusa is unjustly punished by Athena and desperate for death — a far cry from even the most dramatic features of Maddie's story. Lau offers a better comparison when she has her chorus recall the story of Orpheus to the mother.

Throughout the play, however, the power of story and poetry to both obfuscate and clarify shines through.