Orpheus’ Descent Into the Neurointensive Care Unit

Francesco Brigo, MD

The myth of Orpheus and Eurydice tells the story of a mortally wounded woman (Eurydice) who is taken to the Underworld and whose poet-musician lover (Orpheus) enters the Underworld to save her. Orpheus is allowed to bring Eurydice back on the condition he not gaze at her as they return to the surface of the living, a test he fails at the last moment. Among many things, the story is about the impossibility of bringing the dead back to life.

In 1859 Hector Berlioz revised and adapted previous operatic versions of the myth composed by Christoph Willibald Gluck, and in 2014 Italian director Romeo Castellucci staged it at Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels as a drama in the neurointensive care unit.

Captions behind the singer playing the role of Orpheus tell the story of a young woman affected by locked-in syndrome following basilar artery thrombosis. Orpheus’ descent to the Underworld is represented by black-and-white images projected on the screen showing a journey toward the ICU where the woman lies in her hospital bed. Captions advise the audience that the opera is being broadcast live to her, and in the final scene of the production, the images show her wearing headphones relaying the song of Orpheus direct from the opera house.

The staging uses the Greek myth as a template for the frustration and grief experienced by relatives of patients with coma, persistent vegetative state, or locked-in syndrome, and the hope against impossibility of bringing their loved ones back to a normal life.

This is the first instance of an opera production using Orpheus and Eurydice to address issues in neurology and neurointensive care, and it is an example of how cinema, theater, and opera are powerful tools to convey emotional states and can also play a role in increasing public awareness of issues in medicine and ethics.