



Collected comments/reviews for *Medea*

'...splendid performance of a splendid play last night. It brought some old memories flooding back (I studied Medea, in Greek, for O level!), as well as remembering everything I knew about Ancient Greek theatre and its traditions. It was absolutely brilliant, as usual and the remarkable that the play hasn't aged at all - as relevant as it has ever been.' C. G.

'We thought Medea was brilliant. Well done! I thought the chorus worked particularly well, you could feel their anguish about the children's impending doom. It was very moving and thought-provoking. The discussion was a good idea too. Another triumph for the Fringe!' M. C.

Medea by Euripides

Alton Fringe Theatre, Saturday 4th December 2010

“She’ll do such things” a spine chilling prophecy, fixes our attention in the opening scene. What is Medea capable of doing? She will commit most heinous of crimes, the murder of her own children. Euripides confronts the audience with a stark truth that, put in extraordinary circumstances people will do extraordinary things. “She’ll do such things” could easily read “We’ll do such things”. Does she not embody evil? Only in so far as society has allowed her evil acts. The philosopher Edmund Burke’s oft quoted phrase „all that evil needs to triumph is for good men to do nothing” is apposite; the bystander and the perpetrator are as one. Society may shout in righteous indignation and decry the acts as evil and the work of „monsters”, but these acts are done by people, Euripides uncomfortably reminds his audience of that fact.

How then does a drama company transport us to ancient Greece; deal with such terrible crimes and at the same time challenge the modern audience without losing the essence of Greek tragedy? The answer is quite simple, brilliantly. From the mood setting, instructive prologue (Mike Biddiss) and the hauntingly tonal voices of the cast to the apotheosis of Medea at the close, we were held rapt, appalled and moved. Tim Guilding (Director) must be applauded for the choice of play, a brave decision when others may have gone for something in tune with the approaching Christmas season, he has gone for a subject which has been all too prevalent in our national news over the past years. Guilding’s direction allows the play to speak for itself and draws fine performances from all the actors.

The unfolding tragedy is signalled by the impassioned plea of the Nurse (Catherine Gerlach) to recognise Medea’s fragile and frightening state of mind. Tutor to Jason’s children (Penny Cushing) responds with cynicism and intrigue. Medea (Barbara

Rayner) barbarian princess and sorcerer, granddaughter of the Sun God, spurned wife of the Argonaut hero Jason (Richard Hames) coldly plots the murder of her husband's new wife Glauke and Glauke's father King Kreon. Her fury at being rejected, treated as an unwanted foreigner and banished ultimately leads Medea to take the most terrible decision to kill her children as an act of supreme revenge on Jason. Rayner's commanding and controlled Medea is contrasted by the rather louche attitude of Hames's Jason which heightens the spiteful and bile filled exchanges between them. The fallibility of men is accurately portrayed by King Kreon (James Willis) and King Aegeus (Morris Hopkins), both allowing their characters to show frailty in their decision making. Throughout the production we see and hear from the Chorus of Corinthian Women, they express the multitude of opinions and emotions, yet remain bystanders to the emerging horror. To act in chorus is a difficult task and timing needed to be perfect, yet the chorus worked beautifully, complementing and linking the action. When Medea has poisoned

Glauke and Kreon, the news is broken by a Servant (Lesley Willis) in such graphic terms we pity the messenger. Medea determines to kill her children (puppets were used to good effect to portray the children) as the final act of revenge, though for a moment she vacillates so convincingly that we would believe she will not go through with it. But the die is cast. Men of Athens, and probably men today, would be expected to preserve their honour and carry out their plans. So, Euripides has Medea act like a man to preserve her honour in the face of rejection and exile. The audience's reaction to the death of the children was palpable.

The whole drama was enhanced by the company wearing masks as in the tradition of Greek theatre. At once the masks were anonymising and individual giving an ethereal effect to the performance. The separation of the audience, male and female, added to the effect. Once again, Alton Fringe Theatre have produced a challenging and thought provoking work. It was literally breathtaking, many in the audience sat quietly at the end just contemplating what they had experienced. We were warned throughout the play that "She'll do such things", this superb production did not stint from uncovering some unpleasant truths. Not so much enjoyable as a deeply engaging experience.

S.G. 5.12.10

Medea by Euripides

Alton Fringe Theatre, Amery Hill Studio, Friday 03 December 2010

If 'hell hath no fury like a woman scorned', and if Hell ever needed to recruit a poster-girl for that adage, then it need look no further than to the sorcerer-princess Medea (Barbara Rayner). Alton Fringe's take on Euripides' Greek tragedy about the Princess of Kolchis documents the aftermath of the Prince of Iolkos Jason's (Richard Hames) infidelity to Medea, her subsequent torment, her decreed exile by the King of Corinth (James Willis) and ultimately the medley of violence Medea the 'barbarian' metes-out not only on her enemies, but also toward her own two sons. According to director Tim Guilding, Medea is the Fringe's first venture back into Greek tragedy since 1993 and all told, it was well worth the 17 year hiatus. The production lasts a mere 80 minutes in which Medea and the chorus of Corinthian women are present on stage for more or less the entire duration, and it is testament to Rayner and the chorus' stamina that they held a rapt, warm audience throughout (who incidentally were segregated by

gender in a gesture towards Greek theatrical tradition). Rayner's Medea was as icy as the weather outside and despite her pain at being jilted by Hames' confident, aloof Jason (of *Argonaut* fame), it was difficult to feel empathy for a sorcerer who struggled to keep her sociopathic tendencies in check and when it comes to the penultimate scene whereby she breaks the necks of her children, there is more than a whiff of Magda Goebbels about her. Elsewhere, Willis' stately, if not naive Kreon played nicely against Morris Hopkin's somewhat more comic, bohemian Aigeus, King of Athens. Meanwhile, watching helplessly at the unfolding of a tragic inevitability were the Nurse, Tutor and Servant; slaves in other words, played adeptly by Catherine Gerlach, Penny Cushing and Lesley Willis respectively, their performances conveying the pain and bewilderment of witnessing Medea's horrific vengeance.

The entire cast wore bespoke masks which added a haunting, ethereal feel to proceedings, and the direction was unfussy, letting the performances speak for themselves. Puppets were used in lieu of humans to depict Medea's doomed sons, which considering their fate at the hands of their mother was probably a wise health and safety decision. That said, the form and features of the puppets were distracting at times; their gormless faces edging on the cartoonish and out of kilter with the rest of the production – but at this point I should declare a personal aversion to puppets, and when it comes down to it, they are a useful foil in this instance, and Medea demonstrated that you don't need to be attached by invisible strings to be a puppet; Kreon et al were suitably played, cajoled and manipulated by this strange mix of sorcerer, human and deity. No doubt there is more to be discerned from this fantastic production; the emergence of feminist critique, the consideration of blame for what happened, and even the politics of exile and immigration; what it must be like to be cast from security and wealth into wilderness and potential death? These however are questions for another day, for another dream, when the fallout from Medea's brutality has dispersed and the horror of watching children being murdered has subsided, if indeed it ever can lessen. A cry of 'bravo!' would be a disrespectful exclamation after what occurred on stage, so instead I'll sign off with a congratulations to the Fringe who continue to wrench audiences out of a comforting malaise, making them sit-up, think and pause. A great evening out.

J.G. 3.12.10.