



The Medea

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Jack Hanley · November 6, 2007

[*Editor's Note: You can read a synopsis of Medea [here.](#)*]

Wide Eyed Productions is inaugurating their new company with a mesmerizing and brazen take on Euripides's *The Medea*. Don't expect to sit back and simply admire this classical monument; Wide Eyed is determined to wrap you inside a living drama. Director Kristin Skye Hoffmann writes in the program note that the production is brought "into the world of anti-time" and that the desire and deeds of Medea "are the same at our core." She proves this throughout, but not by the expedient route one would expect—i.e., contemporizing the language, replacing the tunic with suits, etc. No, her direction is too bold, too fresh, to make those obvious choices. She sticks with the English rhyming verse of Gilbert Murray's renowned translation; clothes her actors in the wares of ancient times; and her Medea grips a dagger, not a gun.

What she does contemporize is the pacing, the tonality, and most importantly the internal lives of the characters and their interpersonal connections. Greek tragedies are well equipped for grand orations that too often turn actors into talking statues. But no statues are on display in this production; Hoffmann has directed not only the language spoken, but she has excavated the thoughts and emotions that give rise to the language. Hence, the characters listen, they think, they stare earnestly (sometimes wickedly) into each other's eyes, and we wait, captivated, for what will emerge from their swirling minds.

Beautifully contrasted with the characters' immediate humanity is the Chorus who mesmerize us with their ethereal presence. Their movement is finely crafted, and ingeniously used to modulate the pacing. Even when they're perfectly still, standing (or sitting) in the ambit of the action, they appear completely engaged in what is at hand. And it is by these actors' dedication, that we at times find ourselves as members of the Chorus who must listen and sympathize and guide Medea from her awful course of action. They deliver their lines in clear, crisp unison—but not always. Sometimes they speak in a surprising polyphonic mode; like voices cascading, but never muddled. A few missed beats could have easily disengaged the audience. But impressively not one was missed.

All around this is a well-tooled ensemble, and Jeremy Pape's lighting design is evocative and always symbiotic with the action and the mood. But I must pay special attention to Amy Lee Pearsall's performance as Medea. It is truly a tour de force (a descriptive I rarely use.) When she first enters she is dragging her body onstage by her hands, her legs appear paralyzed. It is a risky choice that might come off as melodramatic, but there is great depth in the meaning of her unusual entrance. It's as if Jason's transgressions have thrown her back into the primordial soup, yet now she is climbing out, and slowly becoming a newly evolved form of womanhood—one who sees her vengeance not simply as a means to justice, but as the beginning of a new world order, an order where woman hold their men by their throats. I was held breathless when she emoted:

I know how full of fears a woman is,
And faint at need, and shrinking from the light
Of battle: but once spoil her of her right
In man's love, and there moves, I warn thee well,
No bloodier spirit between heaven and hell.

With the help of Hoffmann, Pearsall finds the sardonic wit and dry humor of Medea. It's an important discovery because it allows our contemporary perspective to see this character not as an ancient relic of metaphor, but as a smart, fearless woman whose self-confidence is admirable in the 21st century. And though it is terrifying to watch her slit the throats of her children, she has made a sacrifice for the sake of

AUTHOR Euripides
TRANSLATED BY Gilbert Murray
DIRECTOR Kristin Skye Hoffmann
PRODUCING COMPANY Wide Eyed Productions

her conviction. So, can we admire Medea? It's the troubling question Hoffmann and Pearsall leave us with. I doubt I'll ever confidently answer it, however I can confidently say that Pearsall's performance is one of the finest I've ever witnessed on the stage. It is mystical and a wonder to behold.

Most of the actors in this production deserve high praise. Sky Seals skillfully creates a flesh and blood Jason. He finds the complexity in his character, and avoids turning him into a one-dimensional, arrogant womanizer. And when Jason is ultimately undone by Medea, well, I cried.

Andrew Harriss gives a dynamic performance as the attendant, and Melissa Johnson and Sage Seals prove that children do not need to be cast to play children—competent adult actors work just fine. Unfortunately I must make mention of the opening monologue delivered by Liz White playing the nurse. She needs some help. Though her presence is strong and poised she rushes the language, and consequently her enunciation suffers. It's not the easiest monologue to perform because, frankly, it's long and tedious. Cutting it down could help, but rushing it surely does not. Hopefully she has already fine-tuned her performance.

It was a thrill to see the Wide Eyed team live up to their company's name. They bring to their inaugural production a precise and focused vision, and a creative vitality. It's an exhilarating and haunting show that deserves a much fuller run. If you miss this one you should certainly keep your eyes wide for whatever they do next.

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