Euripides' Medea: A timeless drama

The National Theatre of Greece Directed by Niketi Kontouri, with modern Greek translation by Yorgos Cheimonas

Stephen Griffiths
4 August 1998

Recent performances of Euripides' *Medea* by the National Theatre of Greece in Sydney and Melbourne allowed Australian audiences to appreciate one of the dramatic classics of the ancient world.

First performed in 431BC, Euripides' play is astonishing in its capacity to traverse the 2,400 years since it was written and resonate powerfully with modern audiences. Based on the ancient myth of Jason and Medea, the play investigates the pyschology of betrayal and revenge.

Jason and Medea, who were forced to leave Iolkos have taken refuge in Corinth. Both are regarded as outsiders, but Jason has the possibility of establishing a position of standing for himself in the community. In order to do so he conspires to abandon Medea and marry Glauce, King Creon's daughter. Ancient Greek custom does not legally recognise Jason's union with Medea -- he is free to marry Creon's daughter.

Medea, who has committed her life to Jason, is enraged:

'It was everything to me to think well of one man,
And he, my own husband, has turned out wholly vile...
... I am deserted, a refugee, thought nothing of
By my husband -- something he won in a foreign land.'

Rather than accept Jason's betrayal and her own humiliation, she vows to stop the marriage and exact her revenge. It is the most savage and complete that she can devise -- to poison the prospective bride and her father, and then murder her own two boys. This reprisal is executed with unwavering and bloody precision.

The play concludes with Medea triumphantly departing Corinth on a chariot of the sun, her dead children at her feet. Jason is denied burial rights or even the possibility of a final embrace of the lifeless bodies of his children. He is thus condemned to eternal isolation, his impotent curses refuted by Medea:

'What heavenly power lends an ear
To a breaker of oaths, a deceiver?'

From the first compelling moments of this one-act play the audience is drawn into contradictions confronting Medea: to challenge injustice and betrayal or accommodate to it and the financial security and comfort it could bring.

Euripides questions many social norms of the period. While Medea has no legal rights, she is the sorceress grandchild of the Sun God and therefore able to articulately explain her actions and passionately act on her plans. Medea's passionate arguments fly in the face of the Greek tradition that only the male has the ability and right to lucid, rational argument. Jason although regarded as civilized by Greek society, is by contrast weak, compromised and cowardly.

Medea also challenges ancient Greek society's decree that the greatest glory for a woman was to bear children, provide sex and to fulfill the demands of her husband.

She declares:

'Still more, a foreign women, coming among new laws,
New customs, needs the skill of magic, to find out
What her home could not teach her, how to treat the man
Whose bed she shares. And if in this exacting toil
We are succesful, and our husband does not struggle
Under the marriage yoke, our life is enviable.
Otherwise, death is better. If a man grows tired

Of the company at home, he can go out, and find
A cure for tediousness. We wives are forced to look
To one man only. And they tell us, we at home
Live free from danger, that they go out to battle -- fools!
I'd rather stand three times in the front line than bear
One child.'

Born in 484 BC, Euripides, the last great tragedian, was the first Athenian playwright to use the chorus as a commentator, to use contemporary language in his plays, and to interpret human suffering without reference to the wisdom of the gods. Rather than the humanity's actions being determined solely by the gods, Euripides strove to discover the motivations of his characters, and in so doing force the audience to examine some distasteful truths about society.

Greek theatre initially developed from the early festivals of the god Dionysis -- the god of fertility and wine, later the god of pleasure and civilisation. At these festivals men dressed in goatskins, acted as attendants of Dionysis and chanted his praises to signal the coming rebirth in the spring. From these primitive forms, the chorus developed and became the heart of ancient Greek theatre.

Two different types of theatre evolved, the tragedy and the satyr or comic plays. In fact, the word tragedy comes from the Greek words tragos meaning goat and ode meaning song. By the fifth century BC, a six-day festival was held in Athens each year. While the main source used for the tragedies were the ancient myths, the poets reworked these myths to elaborate moral or religious truths.

Euripides' plays seldom won the prize for the best tragedy at the annual festival. Perhaps they were too penetrating for the comfort of the citizens of ancient Athens. While Euripides was not as popular as the other great playwrights of fifth century Athens -- Aeschylus and Sophocles -- his plays were in greater demand in the ensuring centuries and he is more quoted by subsequent writers than all other ancient Greek tragedians.

His work, however, should not be regarded as that of an isolated individual, but the product of the astonishing growth of Greek philosophy, arts, science and democracy over the previous 100 years. For the first time humanity was beginning to examine itself and its world, not wholly through the prism of religious doctrine. And what it saw is recognisable and reverberates with us today.

Much can be said about the National Greek Theatre's production of *Medea*. Production and staging were stripped bare of anything that may distract from Euripides' verse. Costumes were stark. The atmosphere was further enriched by the eerie vocal improvisations of Betty Kikolesi. Medea wore a deep slash of red body makeup across her face: an external display of the elemental fires that raged inside her, as well as giving the impression of self mutilation from her pain. Karyofyllia Karabeti, one of Greece's leading actresses, as Medea, brought an almost knife-edge intensity to the role.

The National Theatre of Greece gave only six performances of *Medea* in Australia. It is due to be performed in New York in September.