

medEia – A SOUTH AFRICAN MEDEA AT THE START OF THE 21ST CENTURY

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Medea is ubiquitous on the stages of the modern world. From Greece and continental Europe, the British Isles and North America the unforgettable protagonist of Euripides' tragedy has travelled further, to South America, Japan and as far as South Africa.

The earliest recorded performances of *Medea* in South Africa seem to be burlesques that were very popular in Cape Town in the mid 19th century¹. These shows were probably attended by British expatriates who, although they were far from home, were being offered fare that would be familiar to Londoners of the same period. In fact Robert Brough's burlesque of Legouv e's adaptation of the *Medea* (*Medea, or, the Best of Mothers with a Brute of a Husband*), which was a great success in London in 1856,² was apparently as popular in Cape Town where it was staged repeatedly in 1858 and during the next decade³. This illustrates the close bond between entertainment in London and the chief city of a far-off colony. During the 20th century, various translations, into either of the official languages, English or Afrikaans⁴, of Euripides' *Medea* or, often, Anouilh's adaptation, were staged.

Gradually, and more markedly from the 1970s onwards, as was the case with the performing arts in general, a stronger local element was introduced into the productions⁵. Thus for example, in 1977, Barney Simon directed a multiracial cast in his version of Grillparzer's *Medea* at The Space⁶, a theatre famous for its support for alternative productions. In 1982 a feminist version of Medea's story⁷, written by the German director Dieter Reible, played in Cape Town. Such readings made South African audiences aware of different and more contemporary versions of the myth. In fact, one interpretation that rendered Medea as representing those oppressed by apartheid had already been written in the 1950s by the poet, Guy Butler. This play, *Demea*, with its attack on official government policy, could not be staged until 1990. Butler had transferred the themes of revenge and 'otherness', here racial exclusion, into modern South Africa, but viewed through the lens of myth and history⁸. This proved to be the first of a series of South African Medea plays to challenge various notions about gender, race, colonisation and exploitation, not only in South Africa, but in the wider world.

1994, the year of the country's transition to democracy, saw a bold and challenging *Medea*, workshopped by the cast, and written and directed by Mark Fleishman with the Jazzart dance theatre group. Physical theatre, movement and

¹ Bosman 1980: 144-48 and 231-36.

² Gowen 2000: 239; Macintosh 2000: 83-4.

³ Bosman 1980: *ibid.*

⁴ Van Zyl Smit 2007 (a).

⁵ Van Zyl Smit 2003 & 2007 (b).

⁶ Astbury 1979.

⁷ *Cape Times*, 5 May 1981.

⁸ Van Zyl Smit 1992: 73-81; Wetmore 2002: 130-41.

dance, and a multilingual script powerfully portrayed Medea's revenge as a product of the exploitation of people regarded as 'barbarian' or 'underdeveloped' by richer and more technologically advanced powers⁹.

While both Butler and Fleishman adapted the ancient difference between Greek and barbarian, between Corinth and Colchis, as a difference in race in order to criticise racial policy and prejudice in South Africa, two Medea plays recently produced in the country seem to have moved beyond this rather limited view. Both dramas have been derived from new Dutch works, but have been extensively refashioned.

The first is *Mamma Medea*, by the Belgian Tom Lanoye. He situated the cultural difference between Jason and Medea in the gulf between Dutch and Flemish, and made the Colchians speak Flemish in iambic pentameters, while the Greeks used colloquial Dutch. Antjie Krog, the poet who translated *Mamma Medea* into Afrikaans, confessed¹⁰ that she first felt tempted to render this difference as a difference of race, or to draw Medea as Afrikaans and Jason as English, but felt that that would make the play one-dimensional and not leave room to exploit other contrasts. She thus refined Lanoye's linguistic division to offer a remarkable range of current Afrikaans. Ironically the primitive Colchians speak a formal, pure, rather old-fashioned variant, while the 'sophisticated' and technologically advanced Greeks make use of several mongrel dialects of Afrikaans. Medea's gradual decline from innocence to experience is mirrored in her speech, which becomes less pure, while Jason's duplicity and lack of principle are revealed by the ease with which he switches to the dialect of Afrikaans his interlocutor uses.

Another striking innovation in Lanoye's version, and retained in Krog's translation, is that Medea and Jason each kills one of the children. Here the theme of the breakdown of marriage and of the prevalence of violence in the modern world erases the difference between men and women, barbarian and civilized. Lanoye's ironically titled *Mamma Medea* is a black comedy that attacks opportunism and exploitation¹¹.

The second twenty-first century version of the Medea myth¹², and the one that I will discuss in detail, is based upon a workshopped production by Oscar van Woensel in collaboration with Kuno Bakker and Manja Topper premiered in 1998 in Haarlem for the Dood Paard theatre group. The play was billed as a new, contemporary interpretation of the Medea myth about love and the many truths and lies that relate to it. The basis was the 'life of Medea' as derived from the different versions of the story from Euripides to Pasolini, from Seneca to Müller.

The following phrases and adjectives were used by Van Woensel¹³ to conjure up the complexity of Medea: Granddaughter of the Sun, poisoner, lovesick, deceived, vengeful, witch and magician, foreigner, murderer, pitiful, mother, woman, lover,

⁹ Mezzabotta 1994.

¹⁰ Krog 2002: 7.

¹¹ The play is discussed by Van Zyl Smit 2005: 54-62.

¹² The text of this play is available at:

http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/theater/v033/33.3van_woensel.html (accessed 22 September 2006).

¹³ <http://www.doodpaard.nl/producties/persmedeia.html> (accessed 22 September 2006).

traitor, fugitive, exile, princess, legend, barbarian, irresistible, desperate, incendiary, desolate, tenacious, terrifying. This wide palette that ranges from a character that inspires terror and hatred to one that evokes sympathy and even pity, denotes the range of Medeas that have been created by different artists over almost 2 500 years. While it could be argued that in his great tragedy Euripides captured all the nuances of the description, it is rare for later playwrights to do so. Some prefer to slant the reading to the supernatural, as did the Roman Seneca or the Classical French tragedian Corneille. Others, notably in the late twentieth century, favoured Medea's womanly side and even saw her as a victim¹⁴ of male domination and slander.

The production of *medEia*, designed and co-directed by Brett Bailey with Lara Bye in March 2005, was set in a post-colonial African wasteland. The play which meandered through the set of a squatter camp was performed by the young black actors of THIRD WORLD Bunfight and musicians from South and Central Africa. Brett Bailey has been responsible for a number of highly innovative theatre productions, amongst others the satirical *iMumbo Jumbo* (2003) about the Xhosa chief Gcaleka who went to Scotland to search for the missing head of his ancestor King Hintsa. He believed that its recovery would cure the country of its ills. Bailey's production included the ritual sacrifice of a chicken on stage. The show's run in Cape Town ended on a highly provocative note when, during the last performance, a live chicken was slaughtered on stage. The audience for *medEia*, limited to fifty per performance, were also involved in an innovative and challenging production, albeit of a different kind. The instruction to wear walking shoes to a meeting point on Spier farm (in the neighbourhood of Cape Town) inaugurated a totally new way of watching a play.

First the audience were led on an approximately 10 minute walk into the veldt. Guides with torches shepherded the spectators along. After a short while music could be heard and approaching closer, one could see that it was coming from a group of dancers in the yard of a shack at the edge of a shantytown. (It had been constructed as the set for the film *uCarmen eKhayelitsha*, a Xhosa version of Bizet's *Carmen*.) Actors and audience moved together from one part of the set to the next as the play progressed. It was difficult to keep track but there were altogether about twenty such changes of scene in the course of the play.

Bailey thus challenged the notion of the proscenium theatre in this production. He plunged the audience into the realities of existence in a township and sharpened their perception of the daily lives of the characters of the play. This participation in the daily lives of the township dwellers was intensified when, during a short interval, the audience were offered traditional South African township food: soup in tin mugs and 'vetkoek', a batter cake fried in oil.

¹⁴ For instance Jackie Crossland in *Collateral Damage: The Tragedy of Medea*, 1992 and Christa Wolf in *Medea-Stimmen*, 1996. See also Hall, Macintosh & Taplin 2000 and Van Zyl Smit 2002: 101-22 for further examples of feminist reinterpretation of Medea's story.

Bailey described Van Woensel's script¹⁵ as 'written in verse without punctuation, character allocation or stage directions: a stream of dramatic consciousness' and said that he found the text 'both liberating and highly challenging'¹⁶. Bailey pruned the text to suit his staging which incorporated a strong framework based on the Voodoo religion as practised in Haiti. This was noticeable not only in the design of certain of the sets, but played an important part in Medeia's reaction to her betrayal by Jason and her method of vengeance.

The first scene was set in a yard with a shack as backdrop. In the centre of a sandy patch, there was an elevated stone platform with a tall wooden post in the middle. Around this centrepiece the African women who made up the Chorus danced and sang. Musical accompaniment was provided by percussion instruments, such as rattles and sticks beaten together. Those familiar with Haitian voodoo would immediately have recognized that this scene contained the basic layout for worship. The Centre post, or poteau-mitan, represents the chief deity, Legba, who is associated with the sun and justice¹⁷. The platform is the pé, which may also serve as an altar¹⁸. In addition, the African women of the Chorus were clad in white dresses and headdresses, as worn by the houn' sihs¹⁹, the women who make up the Voodoo chorus. Bailey fused the world of Colchis with the African reality of the setting, but at the same time depicted this world as dedicated to the beliefs and practice of Voodoo which replaced the traditional association of Greek tragedy with the worship of Dionysus.

An unusual device employed by Bailey was to have Medeia continuously represented by two actors: the young Medeia who was clad in gold cloth, and the older Medeia whose face was grey-white, covered in ash to symbolize her sorrow and suffering. The young Medeia led the dance while the older Medeia waited, silent and still, at the side. Showing Medeia at the two most important times in her life was in line with the achronological presentation of the action. The young Medeia in her beauty, in love and happy, would become the mature woman, harrowed by her experience of love and betrayal. At the same time when the older Medeia was the focus of attention, the presence of the younger was a constant reminder of her former state.

Into this primitive community of Colchis, as across many parts of Africa, 'men with arms crash through remote villages looking for booty, sex, adventure'²⁰. This was graphically demonstrated when the back wall of the shack fell away and behind the shack a scene of fire, rape and pillage was revealed. Jason and the Argonauts had arrived. The Nurse sombrely warned that worse was to come. The audience was prompted to follow the actors into the backyard where the first meeting between Medeia and Jason took place. In spite of the violent action and menacing

¹⁵ *medEia* was premiered in the spring of 1998 in Haarlem and then toured in Holland and Belgium. It was staged in Ljubljana in 1999 and in Norway in 2000 with further performances planned for Holland, Belgium and Germany in 2000-1.

¹⁶ Programme notes for Spier production, March, 2005.

¹⁷ Rigaud 1953: 8.

¹⁸ Rigaud 1953: 15.

¹⁹ Rigaud 1953: 20.

²⁰ Programme notes for Spier production, March 2005.

appearance of the insurgents (bare-chested and clad in red trousers and hoods), Medeia fell in love with Jason at first sight. After a wakeful night consulting the forces of nature and her ancestors, she decided to follow her heart. She danced for Jason and asked him to take her away. She was prepared to lose everything as long as she could have his love and go with him.

The scene changed again. Actors and audience made their way along a path lit by candles in plastic bottles and came to a primitive village scene. This represented the rural, ancestral home of the Colchians in the township. It is still the case in South Africa today that many people return to the rural villages from where their families originate when pivotal decisions about their future have to be made. Medeia's face was daubed with mud while the chorus spoke and yelled in Xhosa. Two men with ox horns on their heads gave Medeia advice²¹. Their viewpoints were opposed: the one supported her: 'Love is what you need'; but the other said no, this was wrong and love was nothing. This announced one of the central themes of the play: whether there was any truth behind the popularisation of 'true, everlasting love'. Medeia knew that it was wrong to betray her people and leave with Jason, but she wanted to follow the voice of her heart. She took the Golden Fleece and made her way to Jason. The Chorus' song of sorrow warned of future suffering. The women carried flaming torches reminiscent of the lighted pinewood sticks carried during the Voodoo fire worship, while the dancing Xhosa priests could also be interpreted in the light of the expression of spirituality and connection with the divinities expressed by the dance of the Voodoo cult.

Another change of scene took the action back to the urban, shantytown landscape. Jason was waiting, casually smoking a cigarette. Medeia had brought him the Golden Fleece. The lovers kissed. This was immediately followed by the narration of Medeia's murder of her brother. It underlined Medeia's determination to give her all for her love, but showed that even Jason, hardened adventurer that he was, was shocked. This hinted at the future violence to come.

The suspense about the ultimate nature of the relationship between Jason and Medeia, the fate of their children and the nature of Medeia's revenge that usually forms the core of the structure of plays that deal with the Medea myth, was deliberately downplayed by the device of juggling the chronology of the events. The deliberate dislocation of the chronological chain was taken over by Bailey from Van Woensel's script. Another example of these jumps in time, showed the older Medeia, shortly after the start of their voyage away from Colchis and the murder of her brother, with her hands red, now also guilty of the killing of her children. A scene where Medeia lit candles in her new home made clear that she had brought her religious beliefs and practice to this very different world. The candles represent the sungod's supremacy in the Voodoo cult.

²¹ These Xhosa tribal customs, the traditional way of daubing the body with clay for an important ceremony and men wearing the ox-horn headdress, represent the primitive heart of Colchis calling on Medeia to stay. However, different cultural layers are superimposed. As this is South Africa and the priest is shouting in Xhosa, it seems at first glance like a tribal ritual. However, daubing with clay and ox-horn headdresses are also used in Voodoo ritual, and as other features have already suggested, Voodoo ritual constitutes another element in this multicultural performance.

The theme of the quest for 'perfect love', as portrayed in pop songs and mass culture, which was dominant in the Dood Paard production, was set in a wider context. The Chorus sang some of the tags about love: 'love hurts', 'love is a battlefield'. They added to this their insight about the powerlessness of women 'everywhere all the time', but, in spite of this knowledge they too were powerless to prevent the action from taking its course: 'I can't stop it. I am the Chorus.' This introduced another strong theme: the powerlessness of women. Women were shown to be unable to control their own destiny, let alone influence the course of history. Their role is to suffer and at most to bear witness. The Chorus was thus a constant witness to the dramatic actions without being able to intervene in the tragedy²². However Medeia, by her action, revolted against this passivity.

By switching from scenes showing the times of happiness with Jason, to scenes of loneliness and suffering, Bailey emphasised both these themes. A scene aboard the *Argo* portrayed Jason and Medeia in love as they travelled to Greece with the Golden Fleece. The scene was played out to the accompaniment of quiet singing of love by the Chorus, again taken from popular hits by groups such as the Beatles, the Beach Boys and others²³. Jason and Medeia made love and promised each other that their love would last forever. Medeia was on top and after their embrace she smoked a cigarette, thus portraying her calm conviction that she was in control of her life. This was undercut by the old Medeia appearing on a neighbouring platform dangling the two dolls, used to symbolize the children, over the edge. Thus, once again the theme of the inevitability of Medeia's love story was indicated. Happiness in the present would turn to anguish later. In a later scene Jason and Medeia were again in a boat called the *Argo*. This time it was a simple rowing boat placed in the veldt. They were on their own and still in love. However, this scene of happiness was undercut by the Chorus commenting that Medeia did not know that this voyage aboard the *Argo* was the worst trip she had ever taken²⁴.

As the company and the audience made their way to yet another scene, an open-sided shack revealed an actor clad in what could be termed 'African dictator's costume', a military uniform and cap and sunglasses. A banner strung across the shack proclaimed that this was 'His Excellency for Life, King Pelias'. The actor representing Pelias lounged on top of a washing machine in a room crammed with other home appliances and luxuries, such as TV-sets and music centres, so that it resembled a furniture store. All these goods, so common in the first world, are shown to serve a different purpose here. The lack of practical value of a washing machine or TV set in a location without electricity is obvious. However, it is implied that for Pelias the value of these appliances is simply that his power derives from his having more material possessions than others. The vanity of that claim is at the same time underlined by the fact of their uselessness to him in any practical terms. Pelias represents third world leaders who bankrupt their countries to increase their own wealth which ultimately leads to total waste. The difficulty of finding a solution to his

²² In this respect they resemble the ancient Greek chorus.

²³ The full list is on pp. 40-2 of the script. See note 12 above.

²⁴ It should be noted that the Voodoo moon goddess, Erzulie, is often represented by a model boat, and is also the goddess of love.

misrule is indicated by the phrase 'for life' in his title. This lifts out another perpetual problem in the developing world, the reluctance of leaders to adopt a modern and representative form of government.

The theme of xenophobia became pronounced when Corinth turned Medeia into an unwelcome stranger, an outsider. There was talk about Medeia, and about her dark powers. Medeia's alienation from the local inhabitants was vividly portrayed by a scene where she was surrounded by puppets, not human beings. There was the further implication that the puppets were controlled by hidden forces, the rulers of Corinth. The relatively primitive stage of Corinth's 'civilisation' was pointed up by Medeia having to transport containers of water on her head, as still is the practice in many parts of Africa (in the absence of piped water), while her babies were strapped to her body (in the absence of a pushchair or some such amenity). Coca Cola signs sardonically evoked the pervasive presence of American neo-colonialism, which has found a toehold even in this poor and primitive settlement.

Another scene in Corinth showed Medeia in a cage, holding a baby. The cage indicated her situation: she was a stranger in Corinth, barred from taking part in normal life there, but unable to return to the home she had betrayed. The Chorus related how Jason was having fun with 'rich white women'. He promised he would come home, but she had to wait.

The audience were taken back to the scene of the arrival of Jason and Medeia in Corinth. King Creon welcomed Jason as a hero and Medeia as his wife. Jason was bathed and clad in a suit similar to Creon's. He also put on dark glasses. The resemblance to a member of the Ton Ton Macoute in Haiti pointed to another facet of Jason's character. As Argonaut he was a violent adventurer by sea and land. In Greece he adapted to the reigning fashion of macho display and behaviour.

A scene of singing, dancing and jubilation left Medeia silent. Jason was shown paying court to Creusa. She was a young girl in a gymslip, emphasising the age difference between Jason's new love and Medeia. The cliché of husbands abandoning their wives for new, younger partners was thus evoked. The women of the chorus went about their daily business in the background. Again the emphasis was on the inability of women to influence the course of events they witness. Their situation puts into relief the treatment of Medeia and her reaction to it. She is a woman who rebels against this passive role, albeit in horrific fashion.

There followed a scene of happy family life with Jason and Medeia in bed in their house in Corinth and the Chorus narrating how they lived there and had two sons. Medeia took care of the children. It was beautiful to see life growing from love. This scene was a strong counterpoint to the previous one where the family was shown disintegrating. Choral narration then took the story briskly forward: Medeia became lonelier as things changed. She was alone in their small house while Jason was out all night dancing. The Corinthian women were afraid of her and she was sad and afraid. She was now a woman wondering where, when and how things had gone wrong. Jason no longer loved her body and had forgotten his oath that they would always be together.

In contrast to Medeia's isolation in their house, Jason was shown being fêted by Creon. He sat drinking with the other men in a shebeen where he was celebrating

his 'bachelor' party. The male world of drinking and partying has no place for women and their problems.

Another scene at their house showed Medeia realizing that her life with Jason was over. What was to have been 'forever' had ended. Jason was still celebrated at parties as a great hero but she had no part in his life. When he came home and she tried to reproach him for his ingratitude, he, in his drunkenness, refused to listen to her but claimed that he was assuring their future. They would be rich. If Medeia had not come with him she would still have been a 'stupid little priestess in a stupid little country'. She only had to be reasonable and everything would be fine. Here Bailey stayed quite close to Euripides. When Medeia refused to accept his decision, Jason raped her. This shrill contrast to their former lovemaking illustrated the disintegration of their love. Medeia's anger turned to threats of revenge. She cursed Jason to wander as a foreigner in strange lands. As Medeia thought about the past the young Medeia sat silently in the room embodying all that was now lost.

A new element was introduced into the domestic world: the two Medeias looking after the home and children, examined the axe, originally used by Jason in his raids. This is a fresh way of auguring Medeia's potential for violent action. Just as Jason used the axe to exert his will, Medeia is planning to resort to violence. The traditional motif of Medeia preparing a dress that would kill Creusa and Creon was preserved. The actual destruction of Creon and his daughter was not shown, but Jason was shown crying over his loss. Medeia was no longer afraid or hesitant but felt that she was a virgin again (this idea comes from Seneca's *Medea* l. 984) and that a new life was beginning for her. She had learnt that only the strong survive. As the audience moved to a new scene, the bodies of Creon and Creusa covered by sheets were surmounted by the legend 'King Creon R.I. P.'.

The murder of the children was in keeping with the setting in the township, but combined facets of Voodoo ritual with the ending of Euripides' tragedy. Medeia called the boys for a bath. The bath, an ordinary zinc tub as used for laundry and washing in the shantytowns where there are no built-in facilities or running water, was placed on the stone pile in the centre of the yard, the altar or pé. Medeia laid her children upon the altar and prepared for ritual sacrifice. As the chorus danced to drumbeats and a soft song, the two Medeias, each holding a baby (doll), plunged it into the bath with the words 'Don't cry, just die'. Then the old Medeia took the babies out of the bath as the Chorus asked whether she was leaving in the Sun's chariot. The ritual was completed by Medeia dedicating her sacrificed children to the Sungod. Where Euripides' protagonist declares that she will convey her sons' bodies to the temple of Hera Akraia and there institute an annual feast and sacrifice in their honour, Bailey's Medeia dedicates them herself to the chief god of Voodoo, the Sun, who in Greek mythology of course, is Medeia's grandfather who rescues her from Corinth. In Bailey's version Medeia does not have to flee; she has been received back into the company of women. She is an example of how dangerous it is to put all one's trust in the popular conception of true love, everlasting love as promised by popular songs. But her story is far wider. It not only exposes the cynical manipulation of private lives by powerful men, but also the brutal culture of looting and raiding in the modern world. Unscrupulous adventurers like the Argonauts deprive poor nations like the

Colchians of the little they have. Here the Golden Fleece may represent the mineral wealth of much of the third world. The sterility of this looting is highlighted by the ludicrous collection of His Excellency for Life, King Pelias. Medeia's experience in Corinth also reveals the power of xenophobia to wreck people's lives. The positive side of this innovative conclusion is the solidarity of the women. Even after Medeia has committed the ritual murder, they take her back into their midst. The support of women is what gives her the strength to shout out at the end: 'To everyone who doubted me, I am saying "Fuck you!"'. Then she joins the young Medeia and the other women in their dance.

Bailey's *medEia* was a bold undertaking. It took the audience into the desolate circumstances in which many people live. The audience participated in the life of a shantytown for the duration of the play. They smelled the dust, saw the rudimentary structures that served as shelters and sat on the bare benches or on the ground like the inhabitants of squatter camps. The production was an ensemble effort with the dialogue reduced and much of the narrative coming from the Chorus, either sung or spoken, in English or Xhosa, in unison or by individuals. By representing the events in the relationship between Medeia and Jason in achronological sequence Bailey succeeded in highlighting the harsh differences between the times of love and happiness and the times of betrayal, hatred and revenge. Medeia's shocking murder of her children was portrayed quite brutally but was an indictment not of Medeia only, but of the treatment she had received from Jason and from society. The Medeia of this play is a survivor, but she survives at the cost of losing all illusions about life and love. The elements of Haitian Voodoo blended easily with the corresponding elements of the Greek myth and gave an added dimension to the events set in Africa. Bailey's reworking of Van Woensel's concept spread the themes of the play far wider than love, but also encompassed the plight of the poor and exploited in the modern world. To them Medeia's defiance may well seem like an heroic act.

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