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Play Review - Khameleon Productions' *Medea*: Oxford's first BAME play

Directed by Francesca Amewudah-Rivers
May 23–May 26, 2018
O'Reilly Theatre
Keble College, University of Oxford
Oxford, United Kingdom

Reviewed by **Rosa Andújar**
King's College London

With prominent themes of betrayal and revenge, Euripides' *Medea* is at heart a story of marital infidelity. As a result, many modern adaptations and productions tend to present its heroine as a woman wronged and scorned, particularly with a view to illuminating gender dynamics. Khameleon Productions' recent adaptation of the play focuses more on the Medea's "otherness", presenting a protagonist who is above all in an acutely disadvantaged position, generally excluded from society. Khameleon's *Medea*, the first BAME (Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic)¹ production that the renowned university has ever hosted, effectively capitalizes on Euripides' complex portrait of a foreigner in an unsympathetic land, producing a unique play which resonates powerfully in today's immigration-anxious global North. This approach coheres with Khameleon Productions' general aim to diversify the general drama scene at Oxford, which continues to be a predominantly white space.² In particular, the play foregrounds the larger themes of foreignness, belonging, and isolation via an original and stand-out chorus which blends music and movement with spoken word. Staging a drama which features an all BAME cast and crew in the aftermath of the Windrush scandal in Britain — in which the UK Home Office wrongly detained and unlawfully deported British-born subjects from the Caribbean — might guarantee immediate attention and relevance,³ but the play was additionally (and coincidentally) performed the very same week that Oxford University published its admissions statistics, which revealed that several of its constituent colleges had not admitted a single black student across consecutive years.⁴ Khameleon's *Medea* consequently took on added resonance, resulting in an electrifying and highly moving play, an exceptional achievement for a student production.

¹ BAME, Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic, is the official term to describe ethnic minorities in the UK, i.e. any member of a non-white community.

² On Khameleon Productions, the Oxford BAME drama society, please see Vanessa Dos Santos, 'Oxford's students are diversifying their theatre scene': <http://www.gal-dem.com/oxfords-students-are-diversifying-their-theatre-scene/> (published 23 May 2018, and last accessed 24 July 2018).

³ For more on the (to date ongoing) Windrush scandal please visit: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/topics/c9vwmzw7n7lt/windrush-scandal>

⁴ On the 23rd May 2018, the day on which Khameleon's *Medea* premiered, the Guardian published the article "Oxford faces anger over failure to improve diversity among students", which contained the sub-headline "Figures show one in four of colleges failed to admit a single black British student each year between 2015 and 2017": <https://www.theguardian.com/education/2018/may/23/oxford-faces-anger-over-failure-to-improve-diversity-among-students> (last accessed 24 July 2018).

From the outset it is clear that the play adapts Euripides' *Medea*, at times radically, rather than simply performing it in translation. Director Francesca Amewudah-Rivers dabbles with Robin Robertson's free-verse translation of the text in order to produce a concentrated and punchier version of the play, consisting of eight short scenes plus four outstanding choral odes featuring entirely new text. Though the scenes roughly correspond to the ancient play's six episodes, *parodos* and *exodos*, Amewudah-Rivers' version features a large degree of innovation. The prologue is, for example, delivered by two female figures tied to the household rather than an identifiable single nurse. In fact, the entire opening is far shorter than that in the Euripidean version, because the play cuts down the role of the tutor, who only appears briefly to interrogate Medea after Creon's pronouncement. Khamoleon's *Medea* likewise eliminates the famous interaction between the nurse and the chorus as they respond to Medea's off-stage cries. Instead, the protagonist is ushered onto the stage almost immediately, making the play, in my view, more in line with Seneca's *Medea*. Similarly, the messenger who relates the impact of Medea's gift to Creon's new bride is removed; in his stead stands an actor performing an elaborate Indian classical dance which enacts not only the princess' pleasure at receiving the crown and silk, but also her and her father's subsequent deaths. The director's interventions also extend to the ending of the play. The final word does not come from Medea, but rather from the same two nurse figures who opened the play, as they reiterate some of the sentiments they expressed at the outset, creating a neat frame. The play in fact ends with the chorus, who deliver an electrifying performance featuring entirely new text which mixes spoken word by Simran Uppal, lyrics from English rapper Stormzy's "Blinded by Your Grace", and the US slave anthem "Wade in the Water", producing an immensely captivating hybrid song which I discuss below. Such tinkering works for this adaptation, and, in my view, makes the original source text more accessible to a 21st century audience.

The play opens with two figures sweeping the stage, which is not only eerily lit (in an excellent lighting design by Christina Hill) but also full of birch trees as well as a wooden cage, the product of set designers Lewis Hunt and Isabella Rooney. This simple and naturalistic set complements the pared-down text resulting from Amewudah-Rivers' interventions. This simplicity and naturalism, however, stand in contrast with the highly coordinated words and movements of the nurses. Their role, as I indicate above, has been altered from that of the original play: instead of a single nurse, we have two figures, who only appear to deliver the play's prologue and epilogue, creating a neat framing device. Though they deliver a simplified and shorter version of Euripides' prologue, these two women are entirely harmonized, speaking in sync and frequently finishing each other's sentences. This creates a powerful sense of echo right from the start, as can be seen in the play's first words:

NURSES. Listen!

NURSE 1. You, out there. We ask you to...

BOTH. Listen.

NURSE 2. To the howls and the growls and the sounds of the ground.

BOTH. Listen.

NURSE 1. To this story of love and loss and light and life and...

NURSE 2. Darkness.

BOTH. Listen.

These lines, though they do not exist in the original, grab the audience's attention immediately, not only by their simplicity but also by their frequent assonance and alliteration. As mentioned above, these two nurses, played by Maryam Rimi and Ore Laniyan, also deliver the play's final spoken words:

NURSE 1. You out there. We ask you again.

NURSE 2. Were you listening?

NURSE 1. Did you hear?

NURSE 2. The howls and the growls and the sounds of the ground.

NURSE 1. The death of one hope and the birth of a new one.

NURSE 2. The blackening of the air.

NURSE 1. The screams of nightmares.

NURSE 2. The stories.

NURSE 1. The tales.

NURSE 2. The teachings old and new.

BOTH. The voices.

NURSE 2. Of this passion play.

NURSE 1. But what is left for us to say?

NURSE 2. Except.

BOTH. Could there have been another way?

NURSE 2. And now all that's left is...

BOTH. Silence.

Sound cuts out. Both NURSES look at each other with a smile.

NURSE 2. And then...

In this manner, Amewudah-Rivers ends the play with the same synchronized duo which opened the play, an act that extends and applies the echo effect to the entire frame of the tragedy. Though their part is brief and limited mostly to the beginning and end of the play (unlike in the Euripidean source text), the nurses manage to blend simplicity and complexity by means of their plain words and coordinated movements.

When the nurses vacate the stage after their prologue, Medea emerges, accompanied by a humming chorus. The protagonist and her attendant collective are all dressed in black and with half of their faces and bodies painted in elaborate white patterns that draw from the art of the Ori stemming from Yoruba practices (and featured in Beyoncé's *Lemonade*), which produces an almost mask-like effect (Fig. 1). Chorus and heroine appear and move almost as one, continuing the complex choreography that was indicated by the nurses' movements. Medea and the chorus occupy the remainder of this first scene, without interventions from any nurse or tutor, unlike in the original

source text. The audience is therefore presented with a Medea who launches immediately into her famous opening speech, a large part of which is addressed directly and almost accusingly to the audience. From the outset, Charithra Chandran's Medea (Fig. 2) is genuinely convincing, managing somehow to be both frightening and intriguing. Throughout her various scenes, she commands the audience's attention with careful and mesmerizing movements that are frequently in contrast with the nervous comic energy of male characters such as Jason and Aegeus (played by Joel Stanley and Karekin Johnson). Indeed, both men deliver several well-timed jokes in each of their interactions with Medea, comic elements which furthermore amplify a continual sense of uncertainty and anxiety. For example, in his first scene in which he confronts Medea, Jason narrates briefly his and Medea's history, outlining the events that led them to Corinth. His summary ends with the glib remark: "Anyway, enough about the 'Labours of Jason'...", which, delivered with a cheeky smile, automatically garnered a laugh from the viewing audience, as a joke that was clearly meant to equate Joel Stanley's suave hero with the more well-known hero Heracles.

Although Chandran's performance is outstanding, the play's best feature is the chorus. Many people involved in modern productions of Greek drama gripe about the problems and difficulties of staging a chorus today. Khameleon's *Medea* delivers a satisfying solution, entirely rewriting the chorus in the form of four new choral pieces which draw from an impressive range of BAME musical traditions to create a unique hybrid song. As mentioned above, the final song consists of a mixture of spoken word by Simran Uppal, into which is woven rapper Stormzy's "Blinded by Your Grace" as well as the slave anthem "Wade in the Water". Similarly, the second song features spoken word by Zad El Bacha, alongside American rapper Kendrick Lamar's "How Much Does a Dollar Cost" and the Christian hymn "Amazing Grace". These disparate elements are not simply woven together into artificial song: the new choral ode highlights the natural points of convergence in the lyrics of each of the original components. For example, in the final chorus, Uppal's spoken word partly consists of a translation of a Vedic prayer to the sun, since this song is meant to correspond to the choral ode that is initially addressed to Helios in Euripides' play (in the Greek, lines 1251–70). Vedic calls to the sun deity seamlessly give way to Stormzy's lyrics, which easily continue many of the sentiments expressed in the prayer to the lord of light, all of which are neatly complemented by the biblical tones of "Wade in the Water". If we think about the manner in which ancient Greek tragic choral odes incorporate and evoke a variety of lyric genres (e.g. paeans, the ritual lament, epinicia), we can see that this chorus retains crucial features of its ancient forebear, despite its new and non-mythological text.

These choral odes, however, are moving not merely because of their novel mixing of musical and performative genres (spoken word, hip-hop, and church hymns). Rather, the efficacy of this new hybrid song stems from its striking content, which speaks directly to pressing contemporary political and social matters, in particular the continued exclusion of BAME communities in Britain. The opening of the first choral song, built on

the repetition of the word “lies”, summarizes the plight of these communities, many of which were established in the aftermath of World War II:

Lies
They said, come and build
Lie
They said they wanted us
Lie, Lie
We came to build upon the streets
Paved with
Lies
We built our homes out of Unemployment and spit
We built our homes out of crooked
Backs factory air and tired feet
Lies, lies
Squeezed ourselves into cramped
Rooms,
Lie
Down
Dreams die

Here, the chorus draws an explicit parallel between Medea’s plight in Corinth and the current reality of many BAME peoples in Britain, who were encouraged to migrate to Britain in order to help with the post-war reconstruction efforts. Most of these migrants were from the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent, areas which had been previously colonized by Britain and therefore part of the larger British Commonwealth. This connection is furthermore made even clearer in a subsequent line from Theophina Gabriel’s spoken word: “For 70 years we called it home”, which is an explicit reference to the landfall of the ship HMT *Empire Windrush* in 1948, which brought the first large group of migrants from the Caribbean to Britain.⁵ The choral songs thus speak of disillusion, anger, and frustration, providing a more intimate glimpse into the conflicting emotions of the migration experience. With songs that communicate real, rather than mythological, events, this tragic chorus successfully connects ancient and modern.

As one of the ancient plays most produced and adapted in the modern world, *Medea* has had a great appeal to contemporary writers, especially for its foreign heroine on a predominantly Greek stage. Her perceived “otherness” has facilitated an exploration of a variety of issues, particularly minority racial and cultural identities in the contemporary world. From Henri-René Lenormand’s 1931 adaptation *Asie* to Luis Alfaro’s more recent *Mojada*, Medea’s story has been transposed to various contexts for this purpose. With

⁵ For more on this historic ship and its 70th anniversary celebration which was recently approved by the British parliament, please visit <https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CDP-2018-0140> and <http://www.windrush70.com> (both accessed 24 July 2018).

its cast of all-BAME talent, both backstage and performing, as well as its mesmerizing chorus, Khameleon's *Medea* is a worthy successor to this tradition.

Images



Figure 1. The Chrous with patterns inspired by Laolu's art of Ori (pictured here: Tumi Olufawo). Photo by Ebubechi Okpalugo. Make-up by Shivaik Shah, Lee Simmonds, Isabella Rooney.



Figure 2. Charithra Chandran (Medea) with chorus. On the right: Rore Disun-Odebode (chorus). Photo by Ebubechi Okpalugo.