

REVIEW

A fiery, modern blast of Medea

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Gazette Theatre Critic

Catharsis: the Greeks know how to deliver it, like nobody else.

Tuesday night's stunning performance of *Medea* by the National Theatre of Greece at Place des Arts served as a troubling reminder that entire generations of Canadians have probably missed the point of Greek tragedy because they've never seen a quality production of it. The last time this company visited Montreal was in 1984, with *Oedipus Rex*.

Their *Medea* is vital and invigorating, anything but the kind of marble-statue museum theatre one might expect from a state-subsidized company on an international diplomatic mission. Adapted into modern Greek by a contemporary poet, Yorgos Cheimonas, and directed by Niketi Kontouri, who earned her master's degree in theatre from New York's Hunter College, this production arrives like a fiery blast from the female side in the battle of the sexes.

Euripides comes across as a feminist sympathizer, 2,400 years before his time. Any man who might think it's OK to lie about sex stands reminded that no smooth alibi can save a man from a woman scorned.

And what a woman! Lead actress Karyofyllia Karabeti is a diva who makes every moment burn and leave its brand. Her *Medea* has no trace of victim mentality. She may enter bent over like a wounded bird but she's already stalking her kill. Her husband Jason (played to the edge of cad by Kostas Triantafyllopoulos), has made the fatal error of dumping her and their two children to marry a younger, wealthier, woman. He will pay. It's just a matter of how and when.

Thank Zeus that in Greek tragedy the blood and gore happen offstage. Nurses or narrators bear the bad tidings, sparing no details. Melina Vamvaka and Aristotelis Apostikis do the



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honours here.

All of the actors meet their material head on, not overawed, nor inclined to trivialize. The 11-member women-of-Corinth chorus, draped in off-white from turban to toe, arrives via a backdrop of elasticized strips. They move in individualized ripples, seldom in unison. Their voices are both ethereal and savage, stretching the line between woman and beast. Dance savvy is evident in all the cast, particularly Karabeti, who swoops and circles around King Aegeus (Lazaros Georgakopoulos) to court his favour. Choreographer Vasso Barbousi has stylized without falsifying. No gesture is wasted.

Not everything about *Medea* can be termed innovative. Ritualistic experimental theatre has developed its own conventions since it was born in the '70s. The rubberized-vertical-blind scenic trick has been done before.

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