

OLGA TAXIDOU* and FRANCESCO DALL'OLIO**

***Medea by Olga Taxidou,
Directed by Lee Breuer and Eamonn Farrell.
Mabou Mines Theater, New York, 23-25 March 2018***

Interview with Olga Taxidou by Francesco Dall'Olio

Abstract

Francesco Dall'Olio interviews Olga Taxidou on the March 2018 work-in-progress production of Taxidou's *Medea* at Mabou Mines Theatre, New York, directed by Lee Breuer and Eamonn Farrell, with Maude Mitchell as Medea.

KEYWORDS: *Medea*; Olga Taxidou; Lee Breuer; Maude Mitchell

FDO: Thank you for this opportunity. I would like to start with your previous experience with *Medea*, the show in Georgia in 1997. What is the relationship between the two shows?

OT: Thank you for coming to see the work in progress and for your thoughtful questions. There is no formal relationship between the two versions of my adaptation of *Medea*. I have been very fortunate to have two outstanding but very different companies engage with my work. Each company brings its own history of performance to any text it approaches. I have written elsewhere about the Georgian production and the ways it responded to its own historical moment. The Mabou Mines production¹ directed by Lee Breuer with Maude Mitchell in the title role of-

¹ CREDITS: Medea: Maude Mitchell; Puppeteer/Performers/Chorus: Lute Breuer, Jessica Weinstein, Sam Gibbs, Anthony Leung; Environment: Kalan Sherrard; Puppetry Advisor: Basil Twist; Composer: Jay Ansill; Singer: Alex (Tiappa) Klimosvitsky; Keyboard: Marie Incontrera; Video Design: Eamonn Farrell; Lighting: Lucrecia Briceno; Associate Lighting Designer: Betsey Chester; Costumes: Meganne George; Associate Costume Designer: Peter Fogel; Stage Manager: Alyssa Howard; Assistant Director/Production Manager: Dana Greenfield; Technical Intern: Stephanie Ghajar. This project was made possible by a generous grant from The Roy Cockrum Foundation and support by Judith Scheuer and Joseph Mellicker, and through a residency at The MacDowell Colony.

* Edinburgh University – olga.taxidou@ed.ac.uk

** University of Verona – fra_fra1989@libero.it

ferred a whole new set of relationships between text and stage. This was the first time the text was performed in English so that was quite exciting to see. In general, I believe that once a play-text reaches a company, a director and the actors, the playwright needs to step back. I feel there needs to be trust in the performance process itself. In both cases I was very familiar with the history of the companies. With Mabou Mines especially the whole process of the shift from text to stage is very important and very collaborative, and there is a huge emphasis, in classic avant-garde manner on this process itself. I hope this will become clear throughout this discussion.

FDO: Why *Medea*? Which aspects of Euripides text have drawn you to it?

OT: This is an impossible question to answer. I could respond in a number of ways: I can repeat generalisations about Greek tragedy and Euripides in particular and their relevance for our contemporary world. We could draw many analogies about the ways Euripides's text conceptualises and enacts relationships between east and west, barbarism and civilisation, men and women, autochthony and otherness, citizens and refugees, the politics of motherhood and the politics of statehood. Thematically, this list of binaries could be expanded to encompass more historical and political parallels. This, however, might make for an interesting essay and not necessarily an interesting piece of theatre.

What always draws me to Greek tragedy and Euripides especially is its imminent adaptability, or its translatability, as Walter Benjamin would say. These are works that I think were written along two theoretical axes: they were meant to be performed so theatricality was central (they were blueprints for performance, unfinished works, as it were); and they were already adaptations of myths, so the principles of re-writing, adaptation, and translation were/are constitutive of their very being. We could even draw parallels here with the Brechtian notion of the 'Model', which is based on the principle of reproducibility and not mere and mechanical reproduction.

I am also always drawn to the literariness of the language itself, both the strangeness of the classical Greek, and the ways this has been translated and re-worked in the *longue durée* of its reception history.

Of course, every work is always also biographical, but things like 'intensions' in both literary and personal terms are never fully knowable, and always a kind of fallacy.

FDO: Why a monologue in the first place? Have you reworked on it for the new performance?

OT: As the original text gives so much space to our understanding of *Medea*, I thought it would be interesting to get the whole story from her perspective. However, this perspective is not reduced to the 'point-of-view' of a specific psychological character, i.e. that of Medea. This version of *Medea*, and this view of the function of the monologue, opens up the whole idea of 'dramatic persona' as a kind of *gestus* through which I hope we get the whole play. I have to admit that I did not start with this idea in mind and then try to implement it. I think that I simply followed the original text and re-wrote most of it to be spoken by her. This is the no-

tion of dramatic persona as a type of ‘performing machine’ (and I had not read Heiner Müller when I wrote this text over twenty years ago). Many of these reflections on the idea of a non-psychological notion of character of course derive from Greek tragedy itself, but also from my engagement with the specific performance of Maude Mitchell and the ways she approached this idea of the monologue, as something that does not only give us insight into a specific dramatic role, but that can possibly embody the whole play.

It does mean that a number of challenges are posed for the performer, as the language is very demanding, fluctuating between high poetry and the everyday, and containing both dialogue and choral sequences. It needs a performer who can embody many and sometimes contradictory performance traditions from Naturalism to Epic, from classical recitative to everyday speech, from eastern traditional modes of stylization (as in Noh and Kabuki) to modes that come from soap opera and cinema. Maude Mitchell was able to embody and integrate all these traditions and bring them to her acting of Medea. Her training in the Meisner technique certainly helped to move away from a psychological take on the character, and to open the role of Medea up so it encompassed both her ‘internal world’ and the ‘external world’ of the play. For example, even the stage design with the altar of Hecate as a central piece, could be read as somehow portraying Medea’s internal world, not necessarily her psychology, but her body itself, so important in a play that deals with the politics of reproduction. Again, these ideas were not thought out by myself prior to the rehearsal process, and artificially imposed. Quite the opposite, watching the rehearsal and the work-in-progress, allowed me to better understand how this kind of monologue can function on the stage.

I had, however, seen Maude Mitchell perform Nora in the Mabou Mines *Dollhouse* directed by Lee Breuer. This was an outstanding performance for which she won an Obie, amongst other awards. I saw in that performance the ways the actor could at once embody a role and its reception in the genealogy of that role, I saw how Nora was both a specific character and a prism through which the politics of the play could be read. There is an astonishing moment when Nora leaves the Dollhouse and encounters what is in effect the role of women, the politics of gender in the twentieth century and beyond. In shutting that door behind her she foreshadows Molly Bloom’s emphatic “YES” (as we know, James Joyce was a huge Ibsen fan), but also looks back in the long genealogy of theatre to other instances where women crossed that line between the private and the public, the *oikos* and the *polis*. In my mind this *gestus* of Maude Mitchell as Nora also echoed Medea’s first address to the chorus, “Women I have left the house . . .”. Interestingly, when Maude Mitchell speaks that line in my adaptation (“Women, I have left the house, shut the door behind me, forever . . .”) she walks into the audience. When Nora leaves the Dollhouse, her final speech is performed not on the central stage but on a balcony. This crossing of that liminal space between the stage and the audience, happened organically. It was Maude’s idea and came out of the rehearsal process. In my mind it also quoted her leaving the stage as Nora. When I saw Maude Mitchell in *Dollhouse*, I thought to myself that she would make a terrific Medea, not necessarily in my version. That this came about was a matter of good fortune.

In addition to the monologue I wrote a new “Song to Love”, which is a series

of couplets, the first line of which is always “What is this love?”. Lee Breuer suggested that this sequence be shared as a question/response between Medea and the musicians, making them a type of chorus. This sequence ends with “The pain of childbirth I'd trade / For relief from this love”, directly quoting the famous line from Euripides but also re-writing it.

So, in many ways this version of a monologue somehow syncopates all the roles in the play into one. What the rehearsal process, Lee Breuer's re-ordering of the text, and the work-in-progress brought out, are the ways that this monologue could indeed be opened up on the stage to encompass all the other aspects of the play.

FDO: How did you work on the adaptation of the text for this ‘work in progress’ with Mabou Mines?

OT: Lee Breuer is a very generous director. When I gave the text to him and Maude Mitchell for their consideration and when they agreed to do it they had carte blanche from me. I admired their work for many years, had taught it, had run workshops with them, so I felt I understood their theatrical aesthetic well and respected it. However, Lee Breuer discussed with me every single change he dramatically made to the text. I have to stress that these changes were made in order to accommodate other aspects of theatricality that he introduced to the production process: the chorus of spider puppets, the Jason-puppet, the introduction of original music. All these elements needed to be theatrically integrated and this involved shifting the text around a bit. And not a word of my text was changed. I wrote a few small additional sequences as part of the rehearsal process, but Lee discussed with me every change he wanted to make. As I said, he didn't really have to, as I believe this is part and parcel of the process, but he did, and I am grateful for this, as I think it added further to and inflected this quality of adaptability I mentioned earlier that comes with the original Euripides text.

FDO: The play contains many references to present-day consumeristic culture and migrations issues: are they a part of the original script or did you add them during the rehearsals of this particular performance?

OT: All these references are there in my version, which was written before this performance. The text is littered with them. I wanted to draw the contemporary parallels not so much through narrative analogies or metaphors but mainly through sudden shifts in language and register. I think most of the contemporary references appear through the use of language that refers to the ‘everyday’. I don't think I use any contemporary place-names or direct references to events. I hope that the shifts in language and style (high, literary/everyday colloquial, *pathos/bathos*), which admittedly might be somewhat jarring in places, might create a kind of jolt in the audience, a kind of estrangement rather than a simple and direct identification with our own contemporary reality.

FDO: From your perspective as a researcher on the relationship between traditional tragic forms and modern theatrical currents, how was the experience of actually working on a contemporary adaptation of a Greek tragedy which inspired Sene-

ca too, and what were the most inspiring or, contrariwise, difficult or disheartening aspects of it?

OT: The only disheartening aspect was that we all wished we had more time to work on it. Like any exciting performance this one made the original Euripides text feel both more familiar and more strange. Re-writing, both through language and performance, is, as I have mentioned throughout, so central to the whole trope of tragedy, and this project once again made that very clear to all of us, I think. I am always astounded at how much you can play with the conventions of classical Greek tragedy, and how strong they still remain. I firmly believe in the power of tragic form. This is why, despite my writing a monologue, I think that the actual performance in a sense had to deconstruct performatively that idea of the monologue, so it could also encompass the chorus, Jason, the Nurse, etc. This was very revealing for me. It is as if tragic form was pushing through on the stage, demanding more theatricality.

It is impossible to either re-write and/or perform a play like *Medea* without also quoting the long history of its reception as a literary text and as a performance text. This also became apparent through Lee Breuer's detailed knowledge of world theatre. Seneca's text was one that Lee and Maude worked with very closely. It is indeed one that I also love. The final lines that are projected onto the altar "Bear witness where you go / The Gods no longer exist", are the closing lines from Seneca's *Medea*. It was Lee's idea to use these. I think this worked very well as they were projected somewhat hazily (Eamonn Farrell, the assistant director and lighting / video designer worked on this), enough to add a metaphysical dimension to the political and domestic drama, but the audience had to 'look twice' in order to decipher the lines, so it couldn't act as the final word. I was particularly happy with this inclusion of Seneca as his *Medea* was one that influenced my re-writing.

FDO: As explained in the Q&A section following the performance the day I saw it, it took form during rehearsals, thanks to a continual work of collective experimentation. According to you, which were the main developments and in what ways did you collaborate with the company?

OT: As I mentioned earlier, I was not heavily involved with the actual rehearsal process nor did I particularly want to be. Lee, Maude and I had had a series of very detailed discussions about the text and these were on-going throughout the rehearsal process as well, but I was not there, present throughout the first three weeks. It is my belief that the shift from page to stage is a delicate one, and the theatre makers need the space to do what they do best. Sometimes the presence of the writer can be detrimental. For me, from the moment the rehearsal started Lee was the author/*auteur* of the production. However, as his idea of authorship for performance is always a collective and collaborative one, so was the process. The analogy that Lee uses is that of a musical 'jamming session'. As in any jamming session to work, all the participants need to be very accomplished in their own instruments but also receptive and open to the ideas of others. Lee proved a very insightful and creative conductor of such a session, that I think brought out the best in everyone's talents.

FDO: How did you adjust the script to the performing space and general acting requirements? To what extent has the text undergone changes? Is it too meant to be in progress?

OT: Performance texts, I think, are always in progress. And here we have much to learn from the Greek tragedies themselves. On the one hand, they adhere to very strict performing conventions, while, on the other, they are open to the risk and ephemerality of the performance process itself. Personally, I believe that you can do anything with a text on stage – that the performance has its own autonomy. Of course, you can also fail. I don't think that a playwright can control the various lives that their work has on the stage. They can like some more than others, but they cannot control them. For example, we all know how notorious Samuel Beckett was, and his estate is, about how his plays can be produced. And I have certainly seen some pretty bad productions of his plays, but I don't think you can stop them happening. I have also seen some very exciting installations based on Beckett plays, that may not have been possible while he was alive. So the risk that live theatre involves needs to be shared by the writer as well. And in this respect, I was very, very fortunate, as I approached a company and a director whose work I knew well and in whom I had absolute trust.

FDO: The show was heavily dominated by images of spiders: there were puppeteers moving spider-puppets, and a web circling all around the stage. What was their main function and who developed this idea? Is it somehow rooted in the script or was it integrated during the rehearsals?

OT: The idea of using the image of spiders as such a potent symbol on the stage came from Lee Breuer and Maude Mitchell, and we discussed this early on, almost a year before the rehearsal process began. I liked the image of Arachne very much. Her own story has parallels with that of Medea. She is from Asia Minor; she is a mortal who challenged the goddess Athena (who is also critically presented in my text); she is only turned into a spider after the *hubris* she commits in winning the weaving competition against Athena. Her craft then becomes her punishment. As a symbol of monstrous femininity she also parallels Medea. Interestingly, Athena uses Hecate's herb to transform her into a spider. This works well with the presence of Hecate's altar on the stage.

Theatrically Arachne offers a very potent symbol on the stage, both delicate and deadly. As a stage property the web is a very versatile object; it functioned as a curtain, and a physical stage for the Jason puppet, as even perhaps a metaphor for Jason's colonial expedition; visually there were many parallels between Hecate's altar and the spider's web.

The idea of the puppet spiders was also Lee's and he discussed this with the wonderful puppet designer, Basil Twist, who was the Puppetry Advisor. In turn Basil, introduced Kalan Sherrard, who created Hecate's altar and all the glove puppets (using real bones for their legs) and the whole scenic Environment.

These puppets (with the work of the puppeteers Lute Breuer, Sam Gibbs and Anthony Leung) functioned as a chorus of sorts for Medea. They underlined her connection with both artistry and sorcery.

FDO: As an expert of Craig's theatre, what was your reaction to the use of puppets on stage and what the implications of Jason being reduced to a small visible figure to be handled by Medea herself, while being magnified verbally in Medea's own passionate and desperate monologue?

OT: I love puppets! Unlike Craig, I don't think they should replace human actors, although I don't think that he really believed that either. The puppet in much of the modernist experimentation in acting and staging functions as a trope that helps to rethink the art of the actor. The relationships between psychological expressiveness and stylization, between interiority and physical action, between presence and absence are all highlighted through the presence of the puppet. The relationships between the puppet, the actor, the dancer and even athlete are radically re-worked in much modernist experimentation. I have written about this elsewhere and I don't want to bore you here.

However, and very interestingly to me, Lee was not aware of my work on Craig and modernist puppets. I, on the other hand, had seen his show *Peter and Wendy*, which used puppets with Basil Twist, and knew of his work in puppetry. So, when he suggested the use of puppets I jumped at the idea!

I think that the combination of actor and puppet on the stage, as we had here, is a particularly potent one. Especially, when 'huge' emotions are involved like rage, vengeance, desire, and mourning. The combination of actor and puppet sheds light on the art of both these performing modes, helps to avoid melodrama and easy psychologism. The use of puppets, I think, is especially apt in performing the great visceral emotions of Greek tragedy, as the ancient Greeks themselves believed that the emotions were not simply a matter of interiority, but were also and always externalized. So, *menos*, *oistros*, *ate* etc., visited their victims from the external world and did not solely reside in their psyche.

I think puppets help to materialize this idea that the strong emotions of this play do not solely derive from Medea's internal psychology. And, it takes a very strong performer to act with puppets. The scenes with Medea and the Jason puppet (with Lute Breuer as the puppeteer) are very evocative and powerful. It also shows how we as spectators can empathize with both animate and inanimate creatures on stage. At the same time, this also invites us to marvel at the art of both the actor and the puppeteer.

There is also another Craig connection that came out of the rehearsal process. And that is through Ellen Terry, Craig's mother. Maude's costume included a neck piece around which her gown was draped, of a green beetle-like construction. This was Maude's idea, and it was a direct reference to Ellen Terry's famous green beetle dress that she wore in her role as Lady Macbeth in 1888. This gown was adorned by 1,000 iridescent beetle wings (shed naturally), has been more recently restored, and is very significant in the history of costume design. Of course, we did not use real beetle wings, and when Maude suggested the idea to the costume designer, Meganne George, she came up with the idea of using green fake finger nails. However, the impact was very strong as at least one audience member picked up on the reference to Ellen Terry, as became clear in one of the Q&As.

"Things have a life", says Winnie in *Happy Days*, and things on the stage certainly have a life and a long one at that. When dealing with literary texts, we are

able and have the critical tools to spot allusion, citationality, intertextuality more generally. The same surely is true of the languages of the stage. In this instance, Maude's quoting of Ellen Terry's gown as Lady Macbeth, was also a way of alluding to another play that also deals with the politics of motherhood. And as this kind of quotationality always generates more interpretation, we can even read into this the difficult relationship between Ellen Terry and her son Edward Gordon Craig. Of course, all these thoughts derive after the work in progress. It is amazing how much meaning one simple object (a beetle wing / a fake nail) on the stage can generate.

FDO: Now I'd like to talk briefly about two moments of the performance, which particularly struck the audience. The first one was how Medea's children were presented on stage: they were marionettes moved, and talked to, by Maude Mitchell, telling them the story of Jason's journey while washing them and preparing them as if they were going to bed. For the audience this was a very important moment in the show, concerning the relationship between Medea and her kids. What is your opinion?

OT: The marionettes used for the children were in the Japanese Kuruma Ningyō style, which derives from the older form of Bunraku. It is associated with the telling of epic tales and religious ritual. Lee had actually studied this form of puppetry in Japan, and it was he who suggested this style for the children. Of course, it was modified, and I think it worked well to help Medea narrate her back story, which at least in terms of Jason's exploits of conquest, entailed many epic elements. The bath scene also allowed us to see Medea as a caring, loving mother. It helped create that ambivalence in her character and in our feelings towards her, which is so crucial for tragedy. In terms of ritual, the bath scene also mirrors death ritual (the cleaning of the body before sleep / the cleansing of the body before death).

FDO: The other striking moment was when Medea, towards the end of the performance, started climbing over the rows of seats, talking directly to the audience, as if the audience itself had somehow become a sort of Chorus to be addressed and the stage were all of a sudden enlarged. Was this part of your original idea or was it an acting innovation?

OT: This was Maude Mitchell's idea, and it sprung from the rehearsal process. It was indeed a magical moment and I was fortunate to be there when she turned to Lee and said 'shall I go out into the audience?', and if I remember correctly Eamonn Farrell said something like, 'Yes, turn the audience into women'. And while Maude ventured out into the audience, I could also see this gesture as quoting her role as Nora, when Nora leaves the Dollhouse. This is the sequence when Medea addresses the chorus of women, "Women, I have left the house . . ." and the house here was also the 'house' of the stage. The sequence also re-wrote many of the famous women / feminist lines of Euripides, like "The rivers run backwards / and the world starts again . . .". It also has many contemporary references to credit cards, supermarket queens, 'difficult, hormonal women', and while Maude is walking through the audience she is performing both the roles of Medea and Jason. I am very pleased that you found this moment striking. Such implicating of the audi-

ence does not always work, and can even be manipulative. I think in this instance it was very effective. And once again this allowed the audience to marvel, up close, at the art of the performer.

FDO: What was the function of the masked, silent woman on stage and what did the actual lack of the Chorus imply? Was it perhaps because it was lacking that those of us who knew Euripides' text at that point felt turned into one?

OT: Jessica Weinstein played the role of the masked narrator at the start and the end of the piece; she also turned into a chorus and Medea's confidant throughout. Although, there was no chorus in the traditional sense, the convention of the chorus was re-worked through the role of The Cleaner (Jessica's role), the function of the spider puppets, who in places were a chorus for Medea, and of course, the role of the musicians. Jay Ansill composed original music and with Alex (Tiappa) Klimovitsky and Marie Incontrera performed live. These musicians also formed a type of chorus, as there were moments when they took part in question / response exchanges with Medea. And, of course, the whole audience is turned into a chorus at the moment when Medea crosses the line that separates them from the stage.

Jessica, who is also a very accomplished performer, acted at least in my mind as a kind of sounding board for Medea, as a character of common sense, the low version of Medea's high pain, as she was envisioned as a cleaner. I was very surprised to see that this was the role the Lee had decided to present with a mask and in a faux-classical gown. The mask, of course, was made of paper, perhaps alluding to a fading, worn out classicism. Originally, a hard mask was meant to be created, but we thought it might be more effective to have paper mask, which itself quotes a classical convention. This again, placed more demands on the art of the performer, and Jessica Weinstein was able to smoothly and convincingly move between a number of roles.

FDO: As both a classicist and a movie lover, some aspects of the performance reminded me, in some way, of Pier Paolo Pasolini's cinematic adaptation of *Medea*, especially the emphasis on Medea's foreignness. Other viewers have seen in it also some connection to Christa Wolf's *Medea. Stimmen* (*Medea: A Novel in Voices*, 1996). Are the film and the novel in any way related to your own adaptation?

OT: I think every performance of *Medea* will inevitably also engage with the performance history of the play, and with its overall reception. Most of us come to a performance having seen or read other versions on stage, screen or in literary renditions. And I truly believe that it is a mark of a good performance that it can mobilise within the audience its ability to at once empathise but also to see critically and almost meta-theatrically other versions that it may quote. And this is a pleasurable act too. So in a sense every *Medea* opens up a whole field of *Medeas* – just as in translation studies we have 'field translation'. Of course, Pasolini's version is very significant, in its portrayal of Medea through Maria Callas as a sorceress, but also in framing the story with a human sacrifice that in itself proposes an interpretation of 'the birth of tragedy through fertility ritual', very much influenced by the primitivism of the '60s and '70s (and in Pasolini's particular fusion of tragedy and Christian ritual, Dionysus as the Crucified, to paraphrase Nietzsche). It also helps

us to understand the killing of the children not as an aberration but as a ritualistic sacrifice (and in Seneca, for example, this sacrifice also saves them from slavery). So, yes, Pasolini's version is important but so is Lars von Trier's, so is Ninagawa's Kabuki inspired stage version (whether we have seen them or not), but these references are not direct, they do not neatly map onto each other. They are related through their central source text, as it were, the original. Of course different viewers will see different connections. For example, I had not read Christa Wolf's version when I wrote my adaptation, but I do not doubt that parallels exist. As I mentioned at the start of this discussion, adaptability is a central mode especially for tragedy in performance. This mobilises a whole network (like the Arachne's web) of connections, some deliberate, some not, some from the text, others from the performance and the audience. There is no deterministic relationship between them and the link is always Euripides.

When we talk about tragedy in performance, I think, what is at work is the opposite of a kind of 'anxiety of influence', whatever we may call that; something that goes against the fetish of 'originality' and 'newness' (again Brecht's idea of the 'Model' comes to mind, and indicatively his first 'Model' was based on his production of the *Antigone* of Sophocles based on Hölderlin). In discussion with Lee Breuer about adaptation and performance he used the Duchampian idea of 'the Readymade', which I think is very apt too. Together with the idea of the musical jam, I think this work in progress opened up my text in performance in ways that at once paid homage to the Euripides text and to its long history of re-writing and performance.

FDO: After this three-day performance run what's the future of this project in your view? Do you feel the need to further develop this 'work in progress', and how?

OT: I know that Maude Mitchell and Lee Breuer and the company would like to develop this project further and then present it in the Mabou Mines theatre in New York, hopefully followed by a tour to international festivals. Lee's seminal work *The Gospel at Colonus* will be revived at Central Park in New York this September, and the APGRD at the University of Oxford has been in discussion with me to plan an event celebrating Lee's work on Greek Tragedy. So, we hope to take at least a version of this *Medea* there too. The experience was extremely rewarding for me as it shed light on both the original and on my adaptation. But performance is a lived experienced event, and we hope to engage more audiences with this project, to bring out yet more surprising and hopefully wondrous moments.







