

# S K E N È

Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

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3:1 2017

SKENÈ Journal of Theatre and Drama Studies

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*Founded by Guido Avezzù, Silvia Bigliuzzi, and Alessandro Serpieri.*

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ISSN 2421-4353

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SKENÈ Theatre and Drama Studies

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## Minor Characters in the NT *Medea*

Abstract

This article considers contemporary trends in classical theatre and performance through the lens of the 2014 National Theatre London version of Euripides' *Medea* directed by Carrie Cracknell and adapted by British writer and dramaturg Ben Power. The production team included Australian choreographer Lucy Guerin, who created a radical physicality for the Chorus of Corinthian Women, to a soundtrack composed by electronic pop duo Goldfrapp. As the audience enters it sees two young boys lying on the floor eating crisps and playing a video game while the Nurse looks on. Dressed in modern trainers, wide-legged high-waisted navy cotton pants and a pale blue sleeveless top, she is elegant, professional and in charge. Marketed as the NT *Medea*, the production was also transmitted through the National Theatre's global live broadcast service to cinemas allowing many thousands of people to view the performance in their own cities and towns. When she speaks to the contemporary audience about the Argos, the fleece and blood, her words cross several time frames and spatial locations from Colchis to ancient Corinth to classical Athens, contemporary London and global cinemas, her words refer us to past and present places of private and civil unrest. This article considers the bringing together of the contemporary and the classical in a contemporary setting and behind that the question of theatre, its classical heritage and continuing cultural force.

KEYWORDS: Minor characters, Chorus, Nurse, states, National Theatre, *Medea*

In 2014, the National Theatre London presented the ancient tragedy of Euripides' *Medea* (first staged in 431 BC) in a new version by British writer and dramaturg Ben Power, in a modern production directed by Carrie Cracknell. The production team included Australian choreographer Lucy Guerin, who created a radical physicality for the Chorus of Corinthian Women to a soundtrack composed by electronic duo Goldfrapp. Tom Scutt designed the stunning split-level set. The creative team collaborated during the rehearsal period in a way that ensured that text, stage direction, scenography, dance, and live music, that is, the elements of theatre, and theatricality, would combine to re-tell the story. The relationship of the parts to the whole would therefore provide additional interest for the ways in which they interrogated and responded to the ancient tragedy.

In many ways the NT *Medea*, as I shall refer to it throughout this article, is part of that which Margherita Laera refers to as the "new wave" of Greek theatre that began in the late twentieth century and continues into the early decades of the twenty-first (2013: 31). Noting the frequency of their appearance in mainstream theatres, Laera writes that "Translations and adaptations of Greek tragedy make for a significant part of theatre repertoires and international festival programmes both in

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state-funded and in experimental venues, suggesting that Greek tragedy still manages to attract large audiences” (ibid.). The large-scale state-funded NT production reached a further global audience through the National Theatre Live program (see NTLive 2014) that spawned further reviews of its local cinema screenings (Craven 2014). The London season not only attracted large audiences but its enthusiastic reviews created additional publicity. Charles Spencer’s review for the London *Telegraph* gushed: “At the end of this thrilling and merciless production you leave the theatre feeling both appalled and strangely elated – the sure sign that a tragedy has hit its mark” (Spencer 2014). Critic Michael Billington, however, was less convinced about the effectiveness of the design and choreography, hinting at a discordant performance that was more troubling than pleasing (Billington 2014). Billington’s criticism of the lack of aesthetic coherence in the production inadvertently highlights what is most interesting and disturbing – that discord at the thematic level becomes creative rupture within the theatrical composition. These elements will be given consideration in the discussion of the performance that follows.

The NT *Medea* will probably not join the select group that Edith Hall and Steph Harrop refer to as the “‘canon’ of path breaking productions” of the play (2013: 2). This category might include: Heiner Müller’s Cold War era version *Medeamaterial* (1982) (see Müller 1984; Campbell 2008; Michelakis 2013); Deborah Warner’s with Fiona Shaw as Medea for the National Theatre, Dublin in 2000 (see Monks 2003); or Wesley Enoch’s retelling of the Medea myth from an Australian Indigenous perspective in *Black Medea* (2002) (see Monaghan 2013). I argue here that the NT *Medea* is not groundbreaking in this way but it warrants close attention for the way it restructures the hierarchy of classical theatre and develops a new way of engaging with contemporary audiences. This is not to claim universal relevance for the production but its opposite – it is finely attuned to a contemporary audience, while mindful of past productions (Winship 2014). In cynical postpolitical times, the production somewhat naively, perhaps idealistically, attempts to engage contemporary audiences on matters of social and political importance, while leaving open the question of its possible referents both near and far. The performance hints at the social upheaval of wars brought about by the reckless behaviour of autocrats and despots apply. But it also applies, as Hans-Thies Lehmann puts it, to modern societies which face “the abyss gaping just beneath everyday reality: the rivalry of all against all” (2016: 113), which we understand as the battle for power and wealth at any cost.

This study of the NT *Medea* is from the perspective of Theatre Studies, one of the two academic disciplines, with Classical Studies, that as Hall and Harrop put it, were “born at the meeting-place” of ancient Greek and Roman drama (2013: 2). Of the methodological tools available to Theatre Studies, the approach taken here is to focus on the theatricalized language of the new version of Euripides’ tragedy; the vocal, gestural and bodily performativity of the actors; and the materiality of the stage objects. It engages throughout with the activity of interpreting and critiquing the production in relation to its contemporary setting. The close reading of the play in performance then considers its status as a contemporary adaptation of a classical play and arrives at the proposition that what sets this version of *Medea* apart from other recent versions, and enables it to stand up to close critical analysis, is the way it effectively takes the tragedy away from its mythical heroes and redistributes the affects

of pity, fear, and horror among mortal beings. The lesser or minor characters emerge from within the framework of tragedy as embodied subjects, whose social and psychic lives are profoundly disturbed by the events they witness.

The interest is not therefore in how emotive Helen McCrory is as Medea, or how distraught Danny Sapani makes his Jason. Rather the question that concerns this article is about the suffering of others, which is powerfully voiced by the Nurse and danced and sung by the Chorus. By these means, as the argument hopes to conclude, audience attention is hailed by the performance of the lesser or minor characters, that is, by the empathetic Nurse, the embodied suffering of the Chorus, the innocence of Creon's daughter, Kreusa, and the children. The argument is that there is a coherent approach to the NT staging of the mythical characters – Medea, Jason, Creon, and Aegeus – that presents them as aristocrats and sycophants, motivated by self-interest and devoid of moral character. Jason's claim that his marriage to Kreusa is for the benefit of Medea and the children drops like a weight onto the shreds of his moral authority. The aristocrats have power and material wealth, but in this production their neglect of the moral obligations that are supposed to keep city-states reasonably well run is highlighted. Looking beyond the time of performance, the shift of the tragic perspective from the affairs of leaders onto its impact on the everyday resonates for the duration of the live performance and perhaps beyond, with life outside the theatre.

### 1. A Claim for Attention

The NT *Medea* begins, as does Euripides' text, at Jason's house in Corinth. In this production, the modern interpretation of the play announces itself as the audience enters to see a set that depicts a modern house in the contemporary era. The stage lighting is soft and picks out reflective surfaces, suggestive of a hyperrealist rather than realist picture. The fourth wall of the house is absent to expose the interior of the split-level house set upstage. The ground floor is a once chic but now neglected house with glass doors leading into a verdant garden. Two empty swings are visible through the glass doors, setting an ominous signifier of the absence to come. An upper mezzanine level of the house will double as the streets of Corinth, and Creon's palace so that the stage picture resembles an oddly distorted vertically layered streetscape with the palace above and Medea's house below. An angled staircase, at stage left, connects the two levels (see NTLive 2014). As the audience enters, the Nurse sits on the staircase watching and waiting. She is a young contemporary black woman with short cropped hair, dressed in modern trainers, wide-legged high-waisted navy cotton pants, and a pale blue sleeveless top. She appears elegant, professional, and waiting to speak. Tom Scutt's design uses the contours of the curved Olivier Theatre stage to suggest the classical orchestra on which are placed items of domestic furniture suggestive of a modern family room. Two young boys lie on the floor eating crisps and playing a video game under the watchful gaze of the Nurse. At this stage of the production, the audience sees an all-black cast bringing the inter-racial dimension to the play to the surface for the spectator's additional consideration. At lights down, the Nurse commences an ad-

dress to the audience in a strong voice that simultaneously addresses present danger and the past in which these well-known events have already taken place and will be shortly repeated for the audience.

NURSE            Listen.  
                       There's a story that has to be told.  
                       You who've come here today  
                       Have come here for this.  
                       Listen.  
                       (Euripides 2014: 3)

With these opening lines, the new version of the play reveals its anti-Aristotelian stance, breaking the unity of time and place by positioning the Nurse, and the audience, in the here and now of both real and mythical story time. The theatre establishes the 'here' and 'this' – but the Nurse and, to an extent the audience, are both inside and outside the dramatic frame meaning that the present adheres to and tempers the drama. This contrasts with Philip Vellacott's translation for the Penguin Classics edition, for example, which has the Nurse speak from within a story that has already begun before the play commences and continues uninterrupted. Here she adheres to the fiction from inside its dramaturgically closed system:

NURSE            If only they had never gone! If the Argo's hull  
                       Never had winged out through the grey-blue jaws of rock  
                       And on towards Colchis! . . .  
                       (Euripides 1963: 17)

The use of the second person plural in Power's adaptation (2014) is a radical departure from this translation along the lines of Bertolt Brecht's interruptions of tragedy's closed dramatic structure in the name of epic theatre and critical spectatorship. The NT *Medea's* transtemporal *mise en scène* adds to this distancing effect. It flows from modern gestural systems to mythic text. The Nurse sits in an informal gestural mode with her arms resting on her knees while she narrates the events, now deeply regretted, that precede the performance. She speaks of the Argos, the fleece and blood, Colchis, ancient Corinth and Athens, indicating that she has taken the journey with Medea, and is also a foreigner:

This land is not our home.  
 I wish to the burning earth beneath my feet  
 We'd never come here.  
 I wish that ship, the *Argo*,  
 Had never sailed to our town.  
 They came to find a fleece  
 A thing of myth  
 And they brought destruction.  
 Real, leaking blood.  
 (Euripides 2014: 3)

She continues to narrate the story of Jason, the Golden Fleece (disdainfully as a “thing of myth”), Medea’s love for Jason, her murder of family, betrayal of country, and marriage and exile in Corinth. Then how “the wheel turns” (4) with Jason’s betrayal, Medea’s grief, rage, and banishment. She characterizes Medea’s love for Jason as not “mad” as in the Vellacott translation but horrible: “Medea / Fell horribly in love” (3). The modern setting creates a distancing effect that asks the spectator to view her as a figuration in an apocryphal story that takes the responsibility of story-telling, of unleashing such a tale, seriously. She finishes the opening speech with a quiet, solemn appeal to the audience before preparing the space for the entrance of Medea, whose wails are heard below stage:

I ask you  
 Who watch in darkness  
 Can there be any ending but this?  
 We are all of us trapped in this pain.  
 There is nothing for us  
 But this story  
 In this place  
 For ever.  
 (6)

The spoken text is in contemporary free verse and apart from smatterings of “rivers of woe”, “broken hearts” and “deadly passion” (5), there are few figures of speech. The Nurse knows what will happen, as does the audience, and no amount of embellishment will change the ending. The language appears transparent leading us to a theme embedded in the language that also flows through the stage and set design that features see-through walls into Creon’s palace as well as the glass patio doors of Medea’s house. The voice of the minor character speaks with clarity and authority. Thinking about the efficacy of tragedy on the bourgeois stage, Hans-Thies Lehmann affirms a role for “voices, individual voices, in a space where I see and hear” (2013: 89). The NT *Medea* expands the role of the Nurse giving her vocal powers to address the spectator while the scenography, including the on stage representation of the wedding party, reveals the tragedy to those who watch “in darkness”, although it stops short of showing the killing of the children.

The adaptation adheres to the tragic events and the ending brings about the expected closure. In the final moments, Helen McCrory’s white Medea exits on foot lugging the bodies of her dead sons. Without the intervention of the *deus ex machina*, she heads to Athens and the sanctuary offered to her by Aegeus. However the last words are given to the Nurse and not the Chorus in a further re-allocation of speaking parts. In the Vellacott translation, the Chorus expresses its collective acceptance of the will and power of the gods:

Many are the Fates which Zeus in Olympus dispenses;  
 Many matters the gods bring to surprising ends.  
 The things we thought would happen do not happen;  
 The unexpected God makes possible;  
 And such is the conclusion of this story.  
 (1963: 61)

The classical ending offers a philosophically compromised or reduced proposition in favour of reinforcing the hierarchical relationship between gods and men. In Power's version, the Nurse replaces the Chorus to bring the play to its close. In a speech that is uttered from the same space as the opening address, she returns to her earlier themes for closing remarks. Here as elsewhere in the play, the NT *Medea* redistributes the role of the mediator from the Chorus to the Nurse, and gives her agency as a thinking subject. Her final speech is both longer and more political than the Chorus cited above. She states:

We are not subject to our own wills  
Our own desires  
But to the fates and fortunes  
That the gods hand to us.

The future is turned  
Before our eyes  
Into wrenching heartache.  
Turned to ashes  
And to splinters.

From today I know  
That truly  
Hope is dead.  
I ask you again  
You who watch.  
How can there ever be any ending but this?  
First silence.  
Then darkness.

*The Chorus are with her. The lights fade.*  
(Euripides 2014: 61)

The emphasis is again on the 'you' repeated throughout and thereby collectively embracing the audience as sentient beings engaged at the end of the performance in processing the tragic experience and perhaps relating it to the present. Here the combination of tragedy and theatre is reaffirmed as complex reflections that take place 'before our eyes'. Hans-Thies Lehmann in his recent study of tragedy and theatre finds a continuing role for tragic theatre in contemporary culture as a reminder that our world is hardly a triumph of rationality and moderation. He writes:

Belief that one might discard tragedy in an age where matters are negotiated in learned discussion amounts to a fallacy, with ruinous effects in social and aesthetic terms (to say nothing of the theory of the theatre). (2016: 7)

Without suggesting that the creative team began with this proposition as a starting point, the interplay between the Nurse's measured reflections and the Chorus' violent absorption of the Jason and Medea conflict suggests its concerns



are with the “ruinous effects” of personal and public warfare. The following section traces the ways in which the NT *Medea* manoeuvres its interpretation of the play for the contemporary period around the figure of the Nurse and the Chorus.

## 2. *Medea* on Stage

There have been significant new versions of *Medea* in the last two decades and in this respect Cracknell and Power follow the trend in theatre adaptation, in which a company commissions a new version of a classical or modern text rather than a more conventional or faithful translation. Cracknell is also known for her acclaimed direction of *A Doll’s House* at the Young Vic in an adaptation of Ibsen’s modern classic by playwright Simon Stephens.

*Medea* is notably a play about a woman – a foreigner, a victim of her husband’s infidelity, a marginalized and maligned figure – who passionately refuses to submit to patriarchal power and authority and commits the unspeakable act of infanticide. One of the most notable productions of *Medea* in the last fifteen years is the Warner/Shaw version, directed by Deborah Warner with Fiona Shaw as *Medea*, first performed at the National Theatre, Dublin, in May 2000, followed by tours to the UK and US. Maurya Wickstrom wrote about Shaw’s *Medea* as a terrorist figure with the capacity to “ignite the theatre world”, and whose non-compliance with the world of Jason and Creon represented a “new source of energy and courage” in a global condition in which “there is absolutely no outside position” (Wickstrom 2004: 183). Wickstrom’s logic is derived from her reading of Hardt and Negri’s theory of Empire which she understands as:

a definitively new form of political, social, and productive organization, one for which there is absolutely no outside position, one that is corporeal, cellular, and biological in the reach of its power effects, and therefore called by Hardt and Negri “biopower”. (177)

Wickstrom writes that when Shaw’s *Medea* sends the poisoned dress to the Princess, she effectively “explodes the pain of the other, the marginal, into the heart of power” (183). *Medea* here is the main protagonist, who draws attention to herself through difference that turns to extremism. But reflecting on that performance ten years later, there is also a sense in which the Shaw/Warner *Medea* is bourgeois, white, and privileged; is she less marginalized than she is emotionally wounded? Aside from the affective power of Shaw’s *Medea*, and the direction and staging that supports it, the Warner/Shaw performance can be said to operate within a conservative hierarchy of characterization. Aside from the children, who are given prominence, reviews pay scant attention to the Nurse, the Chorus or the Messenger. Now having ignited the theatre world, her extremism might have exhausted the character’s potential, and our interest in her.

The NT performance pivots towards Helen McCrory’s critically acclaimed white *Medea*, the protagonist and star attraction, who as one critic claimed “gives the performance of her career as *Medea*” (Spencer 2014). Michaela Coel’s Nurse, on the other hand, hardly rates a mention in most reviews despite the fact that she,

along with the Chorus, is on stage for the greater part of the performance. Spencer's review focuses entirely on Medea describing how she "paces the stage like a caged and goaded animal, desperately dragging on roll-up cigarettes" (ibid.). Another critic comments on her "scorching emotional power and searching psychological acuity" (Taylor 2014). The NT *Medea* warrants all these descriptions but like Fiona Shaw's white and well-dressed Medea, McCrory's character's marginality is relinquished in favour of assimilation into modern bourgeois society. With that she loses some of the mitigating circumstances, such as her vulnerability as a foreigner and her low status, becoming instead a woman who takes revenge on her husband by killing their children in a 'tragic' act of family violence. As a tragic figure, Medea is accorded more *gravitas* than this reductive account admits, but her appearance creates a productive dissonance with her words directing attention away from her towards more sympathetic and vulnerable figures such as the Nurse, the Chorus, and the children, including Creon's daughter, who is traded in marriage to Jason and who never speaks. McCrory's Medea is unsympathetically portrayed as casual in cargo pants and singlet top, then with whisky in hand to meet important visitors, such as Aegeus, she is elegant in the pale chiffon gown that she also wears to kill her children. In doing so, she arguably kills the children as an elegant Corinthian woman rather a fugitive from Colchis.

The argument is that the major characters, especially the biracial couple, Medea and Jason, are represented as a bourgeois couple with social aspirations, who are in fact rivals. Jason gets the advantage when, some time prior to the dramatic time of the play, he makes an agreement with Creon for an advantageous marriage. There is a note of truth in Jason's triumphant claim that his forthcoming union with Kreusa is a good investment:

JASON            Think what you like!  
                       I am marrying Kreusa to ensure our safety,  
                       Yours and mine and the boys'.  
                       (Euripides 2014: 23)

Pleased that his patriarchal obligation to his first family will be honoured, he criticizes Medea for ruining his plan, for being so ill-disciplined and envious that she has made it impossible for herself – "You could have stayed here / You could have been happy again" (ibid.). Reminding Medea of how he raised her from barbarian to bourgeois, he states:

JASON            I civilized you!  
                       You'd never known law or justice,  
                       You were nothing when I found you,  
                       Now you talk with kings and cry to gods.  
                       (22)

This tense marital dialogue drips with Jason's hypocrisy and Medea's scorn – he is, she replies, "the most callous, the most sick-hearted of men" (23) as he stands rationalizing his behaviour to her. The language is stripped of its poetic embellishments in the Power's version, giving it an air of business-like efficiency, heightened intensity, and pace. Lehmann's recent reflections on dialogue and spectator-

ship in theatre offer an insight into the wider conflict that plays out in this scene. He notes, “dialogue is only the shadow of conflict; we must infer what cast it” (Lehmann 2016: 217). In the theatre, the *mise en scène* works indexically to infer the material origins of the conflict. In the NT *Medea*, it is the aspirational impulse of modern life that aspires for more power and more wealth in a way that mimics the aristocrats and tyrants that preceded it. Creon is the representative of this figure and his daughter is the means to it.

McCrary and Sapani work hard, night after night, to convince the audience of the truth of their deeds but there is also the impression that there is not a lot more we can learn from this tragedy from the point of view of its major characters. It is difficult, as many scholars from George Steiner to Hans-Thies Lehmann have noted, to do tragedy in the modern era. As Helene Foley puts it, tragedy can “slide into soap opera”, or comedy, citing examples of audiences laughing at Deborah Warner and Fiona Shaw’s *Medea* in the United States during its 2002 tour (Foley 2013: 138, 144). Or are the roles “too enmeshed in negativity (both philosophically and theatrically)” for the contemporary era’s taste, as Olga Taxidou asks (2017: 49). Violence and negativity are the physical and affective dimensions of tragedy but laughter threatens its undoing. This discussion leaves Jason and Medea at this point to consider those who listen to and observe the tragedy, the minor characters: Jason’s Attendant, the Nurse, the Chorus, and the audience.

### 3. Minor Characters

The argument here is that to look away from Medea to the other characters on stage is to enter the dramatic world of the minor characters. After Medea persuades Creon to let her stay one more day, and Jason that she is reconciled, Cracknell and Guerin use the split level stage to show the wedding party with Jason and his young bride on the balcony of the palace. She twirls in his arms in a yellow frock. A live band is visible through the glass doors as the Chorus stands awkwardly clapping to the music. Creon’s daughter, dancing seductively, is a lamb to the slaughter; Jason appears immobile in his suit, and awkward with the young princess in the palace. Meanwhile, the audience watches Medea prepare the poisoned gift.

In this instance, the stage picture highlights two features: the Chorus of women gathered as a collective on the upper level, and the Nurse attending to Medea on the ground level. In this way, the major characters are shadowed and doubled by the minor characters, who are involuntarily implicated in the catastrophe to come. Those on stage and in the auditorium witness the combined effects of Medea first wailing and throwing herself on the stage floor, then preparing and executing four murders, and of Jason partying and then losing everything. These onlookers perform “the spectating function”, which as Lehmann writes, is inscribed into the *mise en scène* as a consequence of the production team’s “thinking reflection about the relationship between the stage and the audience” (2016: 216). The dual concept of “thinking reflection” refers to the idea that in making the theatrical work, the creative team thinks about how the stage appears from the spectator’s point of view and how she or he

might then reflect on what was seen and heard. Michaela Coel's Nurse, together with the insistent movement of the Chorus, animated by choreographer Lucy Guerin, attract an attentive spectatorial gaze. The minor spectacle in the production is their appropriation of dramatic space beyond that usually accorded to the lower social ranks. As Creon, Jason and Medea's social inferiors, their vocal and performative interventions raise their importance, inviting a politically inflected analysis of theatre's engagement with gender, race, public speaking and embodied subjects. I suggest they do not constrain Medea so much as frame her, claiming the first and last words on stage, leaving us with thoughts beyond action.

#### 4. The Nurse Speaks

Ian Ruffell's study of the role of the Nurse in Greek tragedy and *Medea* in particular provides a useful point of comparison for an assessment of the Nurse in the *NT Medea*. As he points out, the use of the Nurse in Euripides play is unusual:

This is not the first (and will not be the last) time that such low status figures were used in Greek tragedy, but their role in *Medea* in setting up the plot is striking, not only for their sole occupation of the stage for such a long time and the extent to which the play is set up from their point of view, but in terms of its set of associations which they bring. (Ruffell 2014: 65)

The Nurse is also, as he points out, a moral agent whose conflicting loyalties and dilemmas constitute "the moral centre of the play" (81) and continue to do so for modern audiences. These questions hinge, as Ruffell also suggests, on the direction of the play in performance. Considering Michaela Coel's young, well-dressed and outspoken Nurse, it is also apparent how she differs from the elderly servant imagined as the companion to Medea and carer of the children. There is also the question of when she exits the stage. In Euripides' text, as translated by Vellacott, the Nurse exits the play at l. 821, shortly after she observes Medea's meeting with Aegeus, and it is unclear if she returns at all. As Ruffell writes, she may be morally complicit, but:

This suggestion turns on whether the nurse returns with Medea at 214 and stays on stage to be brought into the plan at 820–3, and exits with the children at 1076 to take them to their death (and perhaps fetches Jason at 866, and is involved with the gifts for Creusa at 951). (80)

In the *NT Medea*, in between the Nurse's speaking position at the beginning of the play and her additional speech at the end after Medea exits with the dead children, her non-speaking and subordinate position in the performance is on view. She is present on stage in her delimited role as servant. She watches, listens, comes forward when her Mistress calls, fetches and helps wrap the poisoned gift, brings the sons in from the garden, and takes them to the palace. Failing to acknowledge her interrelationship with the minor characters, Medea instructs the Nurse in an imperious way using the pejorative term "girl", hence, "You, girl, go with them / And bring them safely home" (Euripides 2014: 41). The Nurse then brings the sons back from the palace and is ordered to prepare a bath for them. Feeling the Nurse's

fear, Medea commands: “Do not speak to me”, thus denying her moral agency (44). The Nurse then exits. The Chorus witnesses Medea leave the stage to perform the murders and the Nurse re-enter “*covered with blood*” (54). The Nurse is not only present at key scenes in the performance, but cruelly brought into Medea’s plans, yet she also decentres Medea’s self-presumed centrality, indicating and embodying the spectator’s function.

The rhetorical arc of the opening and closing speeches sets out the role of theatre as a space of gathering, narrative and witness, and marks its ontological limitations. These limitations are to do with theatre’s incapacity to enact change, bestow agency or sustain life beyond the opening and closing of the ‘curtain’. The Nurse is no exception but what she is offered in the NT *Medea* is an expanded political role in a coda. Her final lines “Hope is dead”, “First silence” and “Then darkness” describe the aftermath of the catastrophe (61). Three time frames have come into play: European antiquity to which Medea and Jason belong; the Hellenistic period of the play’s first performance in which a restricted democracy co-exists with wars between feuding cities and states; and a troubled Western democracy set within a globalized world in which the performance takes place.

## 5. The Chorus of Corinthian Women

The production team included Australian choreographer Lucy Guerin. She creates a radical physicality for the Chorus of Corinthian Women, who speak the text, sing original music composed by Goldfrapp, and perform Guerin’s choreography (Williams 2014). Conspicuous on a modern stage for their massed entrances in matching dresses, like bridesmaids, the Chorus (comprised of wives, sisters, daughters, mothers) enters after the Nurse’s first speech “*carrying preparations for a wedding*” (Euripides 2014: 6). These preparations are interpreted on stage as floral dresses draped over arms, signifying they will attend Jason’s wedding. They initially disapprove of Medea’s “morbid self-pity” (7), but are won over by the case she makes about women’s condition, the “fate of a wife”, their being “without agency”, and “subject to his [their husband’s] will” and their eventual “abandonment” (9). Solidarity is established between the Women and Medea, on the basis of empathy: “We’ll keep silent for you, You wretched woman” (11). Gradually the dignity and vocal elegance of the Chorus, expressed in spoken word and song, gives way to Guerin’s a-rhythmic, asymmetrical choreography. Having finished with Medea, the Chorus moves to the upper stage level and can be seen behind the glass patio doors at the wedding party. Rather than offstage as convention dictates, Jason’s wedding is made visible in a transparent gesture that contrasts with Medea’s misery below. Later, the scene in which the sons arrive with the gift and its fatal consequences is played out for the spectator to witness:

*As the Chorus speak, we see the wedding banquet. Medea watches her Sons present Kreusa with the package. The wedding party begins. Medea watches. (41)*

As Medea’s ultimate plan takes shape, the women of the Chorus descend the staircase to create a critical mass around Medea. They dance a pounding, discord-

ant, possessed series of movements that disrupt the unity of not only the Chorus as an ensemble, but the individual bodies of its members. Arms, legs, and torsos flail in different directions as if a sovereign self no longer controls them. They form a composite image of disjunction, rupture and dissonance. Here the Chorus invites the audience to think about dance and its role in the performance. Michael Billington for *The Guardian* found the Chorus an “oddity” in the play (along with Scutt’s set design), rejecting how they seemed to “move strangely from being straitlaced women in print frocks to quivering members of a seemingly avant-garde dance troupe” (Billington 2014). But thinking about the minor characters rather than Medea, the Chorus members do not reflect her state of mind so much as it protests against what takes place in their city and its effect on the collective psyche of its people: the terror they feel at the dissolution of the state. The dance gives material embodied form and shape to the shock, panic and trepidation of the many – women, slaves, and foreigners – at the actions of the one, here Medea. When at the end of the play Jason returns to the house and the mayhem, the Chorus dances again. They are still in their frocks but thick bands of mud line the hems, resonating with their view that in Corinth “the very soil is cursed” pulling everyone into its dark moral spaces (Euripides 2014: 55). The dance movements flip the attention from major to minor characters, from Jason’s anguish to the Women of Corinth’s contamination by the events. The remonstrations of the body here gesture powerfully about what happens to a powerless civilian population in times of political upheaval. With the death of Creon and the emotional implosion of Jason, governance of the city has broken down. This socio-political reading of the play is made possible by the production’s elevated role of the minor characters. It represents a shift in the performance of the play from a psycho-emotional revenge tragedy, as it is most often played, to a more political, democratic, focus on citizens rather than leaders. The Chorus, whose asymmetrical gestures seem to effect “an *explosion* of the suffocated interior being into an unrepresentable, fragmentary, symptomatic form”, expresses affective responses to the violence at hand (Woloch 2003: 24).

Cracknell has said she was drawn to dance for its non-narrative quality, but more particularly, she was drawn to “the muscularity, physicality and depth of meaning in Lucy’s work” (Winship 2014). Guerin has said of her role in the production, “We don’t want a translation of text through movement” asserting instead that, “Dance is not as pointy, not as direct a medium as theatre” (ibid.). For Cracknell, “Dance is interesting because it makes you very active as an audience member. You’re being asked to make sense of it, to find meaning in it. It’s not literal, it’s not tied down to narrative” (ibid.). The use of dance, especially the choreography of Lucy Guerin, contributes to the democratization of the classical *Medea*: the chorus of women performs a double movement of witness and protest. In doing so they gesture towards a democratic and feminist protest against what happens to Medea, to Creon and Kreusa, and at what Medea is threatening to do and does.

I have suggested that a theme of transparency guides the translation and design and shows the terrible effects of secrecy and betrayal. The Chorus demonstrates the embodied states of disorder and upheaval that effect civic life when those holding executive power take matters into their own hands.

## 6. Tyrants and the People Who Suffer

There is a sense in which the Nurse's speeches are deeply melancholic expressing not the desire for a better future but its loss. This "temporal orientation", to use Hall's phrase (2013: 24), is towards the past and future from the point of view of the present. This multiple temporality draws productively on the contingency of live theatre, that is, its capacity to bring events before an audience in the present, as in the "you" and "here" that the Nurse indicates in her opening speech. The implied pastness of the events are the actions re-performed on stage night after night, and the future the audience occupies in relation to that past, aware that the world is not run by "learned discussion" (Lehmann 2016: 7). That is, the performance holds the view that 'we' continue to live in a world in which tyrants, oligarchs and the amorally ambitious cause people to suffer. In elevating the position of the Nurse and the Chorus as the representatives of the people or publics, the performance foregrounds conflict, disagreement, dispute, betrayal, and broken promises. I am suggesting that NT *Medea* asserts its continuing existence and laments its limited capacity to alter the fates and fortunes of modern life.

The question of whether the Nurse and the mode of direct address to the audience achieve some kind of "direct intervention in the political sphere" of the democratic state remains to be considered (Lehmann 2013: 87). In asking this question, I apply Lehmann's question about the efficacy of new creative practices in the face of political upheavals in many parts of the world. I want to suggest that the Nurse straddles what Lehmann also refers to as "the curious twilight zone between political activism and aesthetic practice" (ibid.). Sitting on the staircase, a twilight in-between space neither on one floor nor the other, she speaks as a narrator reflecting on the action on the ground. The stairs as a place of speech evokes a Brechtian distancing effect, her female form, speaks back to the patriarchs of democracy past and present. As dramatic characters, the Nurse and the Chorus, all women, participate in, witness and judge events as citizens. What is more, despite the Nurse's sense that the story is never ending, the performance delivers a sliver of hope for the spectator in bestowing a degree of agency on her as an independent speaker both inside and outside the dramatic narrative.

In conclusion, I suggest that the performance invites comparisons between Creon, Jason, and Medea, as a ruling family with an elite entourage and the power to command, with failed regimes in which people suffer dispossession and are forced into exile as refugees. Lucy Guerin's choreography is a locus for the bodily displacement that follows rupture at the level of the state and its insistent presence marks this adaptation as a distinctive approach to the tragedy. The bringing together of the contemporary and the classical in a contemporary setting sets up the question of theatre today, its classical heritage and its continuing cultural force. These larger questions are not so much imposed on the performance but raised by the *gravitas* and ambition of the National Theatre's first performance of the play. These elements suggest the lines of thought that mediate the relationship between major and minor character, the relationship between audience and character, and the suggested reorientation from the major to the minor character at the point at which connection between the stage and the auditorium takes place. Cracknell and

Power's elevation of the minor character, especially the Nurse resonates with critical commentaries on the Nurse figure in classical and Shakespearean drama.

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