

HELL HATH NO FURY

Damien Cassidy draws on years of experience for his new role in a classic Greek tragedy, minus the toga

CAT LINDSAY

When the curtains open on La Boite Theatre's scorching reimagining of classic Greek tragedy *Medea*, don't expect to see any togas.

The ancient tale of *Medea* - written by playwright Euripides and first performed in 431BC - of a woman betrayed and her visceral revenge on those who wronged her, has been transported to the modern world through a compelling new adaptation by Suzie Miller.

Award-winning Brisbane actor Damien Cassidy, who faces off as the hero Jason (of the Argonauts fame) in a murderous love triangle with two powerful female protagonists, says the *Medea* myth has fascinated audiences for thousands of years and still resonates today.

"For whatever reason, the Western world just can't seem to shake this story of the wronged woman and her decision to not take it on the chin, but to boldly articulate a righteous revenge for the wrongs done to her," Cassidy says. "*Medea* the play was really shunned at the time it was written - it didn't win the play festival award that year - literally - even though Euripides was already an established playwright.

"Even back then, people didn't know what to do with it because the lead character *Medea* doesn't get her comeuppance. She's unapologetically strong, resolute in her right to control her own fate, to shape her own identity in the public eye."

With La Boite's new artistic director Todd MacDonald in the director's chair, Cassidy will be joined on stage by powerhouse performers Christen O'Leary as the scorned *Medea*, and Helen Christinson, who portrays the beautiful young love rival.

"When Todd called me for this role, on the face of it, I'm wrong for it. Not being fleecy or golden of hair, nor bold of stature, I am certainly a contemporary choice for the role," Cassidy laughs. "But when he talked me through his vision for the work, I realised it was a challenge I couldn't say no to, so I'm very, very much looking forward to the next few weeks as we finish creating this work. It's going to be absolutely cracking."

A broadly experienced writer, performer and creative producer, Cassidy, 41, has been immersed in Brisbane's performing arts scene for more than 20 years.

Born to Australian parents in Buckinghamshire in the UK, he moved to Brisbane with his family at the age of 12 and attended Marist College Ashgrove.

A brief stint studying economics at the University of Queensland saw him "run screaming from quantitative analysis" to the warm, liberal arms of the arts faculty, where he studied modern history, English literature and drama. "I was very, very passionate and began to get performance projects come my way in the industry, things like touring schools productions, and I was starting to get interested in composition and live performance," he says.

"I left uni with a stupidly small amount of my degree still to go, but by the age of 21 in 1995, I had already done probably 10 semi-professional theatre productions and a couple of tours."

Cassidy's first professional stage production was in 1996 when he performed with Zen Zen Zo physical theatre company at the old Princess Theatre in Woolloongabba.

Later career highlights include winning a Matilda Award last year for his role as Dr Rank in La Boite's production of *A Doll's House* for Brisbane Festival and a string of film credits including feature film *Kokoda*, television series *Sea Patrol* and *The Strip*, and shorts *Seersucker* and *When the Tide Turns*.

Recent stage credits include *Empire Burning* for Metro Arts and *Beckett x 3* for Queensland Theatre Company and, in 2012, he wrote and co-produced *Clowntown*.

"It's been a broadly ranging career," Cassidy says. "Probably the big break for me was recognising early on that on the east coast of Australia so few people who are interested in writing or the performing arts get to a position where they can sustain their career financially with one skill set,"

he says. "So rather than call myself a performer or a writer, I'm that loose term of creative producer where I have experience across film, online platforms, events and theatre, and can call on a broad skill set."

As an event producer, Cassidy has developed and presented festival works, regional tours, music programs and a range of other live media. He has worked as a producer for some of Queensland's flagship organisations, including Queensland Theatre Company, Brisbane Powerhouse and Brisbane Festival - where he produced the highly successful 2012 Spiegelent Program. "I think Brisbane is one of the best places in the world to make a base," he says.

"There are just hundreds and hundreds of young creatives coming into my field of work."

Medea, La Boite's Roundhouse Theatre, Kelvin Grove, May 30-June 20. Tickets: laboite.com.au

THE WORLD JUST CAN'T SEEM TO SHAKE THIS STORY



Starring role: Damien Cassidy plays Jason in *Medea*. Picture: Dylan Evans

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