

Medea

Reviewed by Jennifer Penton for ArtsHub, 7 June, 2015

La Boite Theatre Company presents Euripides' Medea in a new, award winning adaptation by Suzie Miller.



Image: www.laboite.com.au

Hailed as perhaps the most wicked mother of all time, Medea is often remembered for all of the wrong reasons. No matter how she is portrayed, the audience cannot avoid the ugly truth that she ends the play by murdering her own children.

However, in Miller's new adaptation, an alternative line of thought is explored – that Medea kills her sons out of mercy rather than out of revenge. Whilst this idea already existed before Miller's play, until now it has been a little known and under-explored concept.

In turning our understanding of the story upside down, Miller has built a feminist revisiting of this classic story and in turn has achieved the impossible: to create a version of Medea with whom we can sympathise. In this new text, Medea is recognisable for all of her strengths, but she is nuanced and complex in a way that is not often seen. In Miller's writing, Todd MacDonald's direction and Christen O'Leary's stunning performance, the audience is faced with a Medea that looks like someone we might know, or even more disturbing, someone a bit like ourselves. No longer can we demonise her, because in this performance she appears in her most human form. Funny, clever and in love with her husband and children, she is someone we can identify with.

But what does this mean for us as we watch her climb the stairs towards her children, knowing what she is going to do? From the very start, the audience follows Medea's request

to stay silent and we are therefore complicit in her crime and as guilty as Medea in the events that unfold. Across time Medea has become the martyr for infanticide, but how do we come to terms with ourselves if we can no longer blame her for this tragic deed but instead feel sympathy and recognition?

Artistic Director, Todd MacDonald shapes this work beautifully and draws out the complexities within this text. His real achievement here is that the work is perfectly balanced, acknowledging the enormous pain and suffering that Medea creates, whilst also humanising her and drawing out her great strength and wit. Christen O’Leary is also captivating as the eponymous Medea and brings forth qualities such as humour and sexuality that are easily overlooked in the face of this story’s tragic overtones. Helen Christinson also provides powerful support as Medea’s nurse and the Princess Glauce, who is finally given an onstage presence in this adaptation. Likewise, Damien Cassidy is effective in his portrayal of the aloof and detached Jason, offering us only glimpses of what lies behind his façade. Vocal group, The Australian Voices, also offer their distinct sound to this performance, honouring the traditional purpose of the Greek chorus with a modern twist.

However no review of La Boite’s *Medea* would be complete without mentioning the visual magnificence of Sarah Winter’s design. A ring of wax and melted candles circles the stage – perhaps a nod to Medea’s reputation as a witch – and a grand candelabra rises up from centre stage, an image as strong and powerful as Medea herself. The infinite nooks and crannies, which reveal themselves throughout the play, create a sense of mystery and magic as Medea goes through her ritual preparation of herbs and potions. The candles themselves are built into the lighting design and become an essential part of the aesthetic atmosphere. La Boite’s space has also been transformed here, with the round stage expanding out into the aisles to create interesting new platforms and performance spaces.

La Boite’s *Medea* proves that this epic tale can still surprise audiences and that Medea herself has not yet spoken her last word. The season continues until 20 June and whether you are familiar with the story or not, this performance is an excellent place to experience it.

Rating: 5 out of 5 stars