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# Staging Euripides' Medea: notebook & retrospective

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Staging Euripides' *Medea*: Notebook & Retrospective

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Senior thesis submitted in partial fulfillments of  
the requirements for the major in Greek and Roman Studies

Reader: Rachel Friedman

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### Euripides and I: A Modern Staging of *Medea*

Euripides' play *Medea* has been revived countless times after his death to different effect, from high school performances in the US to kabuki theater in Japan. It has moved to the big screen, been reprinted as novels – people have listened to it as an audiobook, people have made dance adaptations, and there is a video game titled *Crypt of Medea*. The only thing more storied than *Medea*, in fact, is Medea. In each of these adaptations not only is Euripides' play born anew, but Medea herself rises again from the ashes of her previous incarnation, as she has been doing long before Euripides ever directed his play. Though Euripides gives us the version of Medea's story we are most familiar with, and though many of his original innovations are particularly striking and long lasting – the number one contender would be Medea's slaughter of her own children – Medea was yet another member of the mythological court of ancient Greece, whose fate was to have her life remade with each new telling of her story. The strength of *Medea*, and Medea who inspired it, is her fluidity, something that is reflected in the character herself.

With all this in mind, what in particular drew me to this play as the one I chose to direct? To be honest, nothing did. The choice of *Medea* as opposed to another play was not a choice I made, but rather one I inherited; by the time I became director, *Medea* was widely recognized as the play that was going to be performed. In fact, if left to my own devices *Medea* would not have been the play I chose. I would probably have picked something like the *Philoctetes*, a subtle work concerned with truth and falsehood, or the sister play of *Medea*, *Bacchae*, about the

timeless war between logic and sensuality. In this, I would not have been alone: *Philoctetes* and *Bacchae* both won first place in the City Dionysia, whereas *Medea* placed last. Perhaps ancient Athenians and I just have similar taste, and it's an unhappy accident that this play has been preserved instead of something better.

Obviously, this isn't the case, and my opinions have shifted since starting this project (or else I wouldn't still be here). But the fact is that I feel that part of the original impact of *Medea* has degraded in a way dissimilar to other extant tragedies. A big reason for this is due to our modern sensibilities. Though I think every ancient play runs the risk of losing too much context, *Medea* seems especially susceptible to this kind of deprivation. One example of this is the death of Medea's own children. At the time, I can only imagine the kind of reaction the murder of Medea's children would have had on the audience. In *Medea*, Euripides breaks all the social taboos: his play is opened by a Nurse, someone of unusually low standing, he shows us women with great power far, far beyond what any Athenian woman could ever dream to have, and he subverts the heroism of Jason. Most shocking of these, however, is perhaps the slaughter of Medea's children by their own mother. Not only was a woman – a barbarian, no less – usurping kings, but she would also go as far as the murder of her own children. Underlying this greater upheaval of the natural order are smaller barbs, such as when Athens, through Aegeus, is tricked into hosting the befouled Medea.

However, these kinds of subtleties or subversions of Athenian theater go way over our head. We can feel our own outrage when Antigone is treated unjustly, or Neoptolemus tricks the cripple Philoctetes, but it is harder to get into the right mood for *Medea*. The pieces of the text that do resonate with modern audiences, on the other hand, are those that are strikingly mundane: the story of a hysterical woman has been done to death in any number of TV movies, for

example, so that which might have seemed striking originally can come off as trite. Additionally, the Messenger's pages long speech, while incredibly graphic, is apt not to resonate with audiences, as I found out.

Given that I've just said that a strong sense of vision is necessary to direct this play successfully, the question arises of what I would do with it. Would I be trying to recreate as well as I can the conditions of the play's original performance in 5<sup>th</sup> century Athens? Would I be remaking it in an attempt to redefine what it means to put on *Medea* here, at this place and at this point in time? Do I stick exactly to the text as translated or should I decide to make some cuts and edits; or is the idea that any part of the play could be redundant at any point in time a flawed conception? For the purpose of limiting a potentially limitless procession of questions, I've outlined what might be the most pertinent ones – ones, at least, that I grappled with while designing and directing the play:

1. What are the themes of this *Medea*? What points do I want to make? What feelings do I want to inspire?
2. How do I cast the *Medea*? Who is my crew? What am I looking for in my actors? What am I trying to bring out?
3. What is the performance space I'm going up in? How do I use that space to convey what I want to convey? What are my costumes?
4. How do I portray the chorus?
5. What are the biggest problems facing me?

Question one:

Originally, I liked Medea as an outsider. Medea comes to Greece not quite knowing what she's getting into, a fugitive from her own land, and dependent on Jason for her own survival, which makes his eventual betrayal of her all the more shocking and potent. I think the themes of outsiders and their reception is a potent force in today's world, and the pain of the kind of situations and decisions Medea faces might really resonate with some people. Over time, this was caught up for me in Medea's position as a sorceress/witch/priestess of Hecate/semi-demi-goddess. It's one thing to say someone is different because they come from a far-off land, but Medea's barbarian identity is only partially due to her place of origin.

It's not just that Medea's lives and those of the Corinthian women "aren't the same", as Medea tastefully puts it; Medea is undeniably on a whole different level from anyone besides maybe Jason (which helps explain why he is the only one who isn't afraid of her). Medea is both a witch who is skilled in poisons and spellcraft and the granddaughter of Helios, god of the sun. On the other hand, Jason is the great-grandson of Hermes, though on his mother's side, which may have made it less efficacious to the ancients. To put it another way, Medea's alienation is almost literally bound up in her DNA, which makes the tragedy, at least to me, even more tragic. This is the tack I wanted to take, and I like how Lars von Trier and Pasolini deal with the same thing: emphasizing Medea's otherness through her uncanniness. Pasolini accomplishes this by emphasizing Medea's 'barbarian' connection with the earth and her arcane sorceries – the ring of fire Medea invokes at the end of the film and the way her face is superimposed over Glauce's death are two good examples. Von Trier manifests Medea's eeriness physically through her encounter with Creon in a foggy swamp, where Creon is unable to locate Medea while they talk. This uncanniness is something I wanted to explore both in the acting and the set design, as I will address later.

Ultimately, this led me to something else I wanted to express in the production, more of a feeling than a theme per se: that of inevitability. To me, inevitably has always seemed a sort of undercurrent to tragedy, for a few reasons. The majority of tragedies are based off widely understood stories already in circulation: myths and stories as far back as Homer and further, with characters and arcs that are at least partially recognizable. Due to this, there's always some premonition of a grand conclusion. Stories in Greek tragedy will never peter out or amount to nothing in the same way something like *Waiting For Godot* or other plays might. We can never know to what extent each of the performances felt strange or familiar to their original audiences, but to me every reading holds echoes of past stories and foreshadows its own ultimate conclusion. It is that inevitability, the one I personally experience, that I wanted to express.

One decision I made very early on was for the chorus to be in Greek, though the significance of that now is different than from when the idea was originally proposed. The chorus is a kind of bridge between Medea's world and the world of Jason, Creon and the other Greeks: they agree to aid Medea and help her plans, but at the same time their Greek sensibilities and essential inability to empathize with Medea often leave them verbally at odds with her. The Greek of the chorus and the dancing that accompanies it is something I planned to have play into Medea's uncanniness. I think the origins and association of the chorus with ritualistic aspects of Greek religion fit into this schema nicely. For most people in America, even modern Greek is something they're not used to hearing, much less ancient Greek and MUCH less ancient Greek sung in meter. This, combined with the dancing, will almost seem more alien than anything I can make Medea do. On the other hand, the chorus essentially isn't saying anything beyond the mundane and the obvious – "You're right, Medea! Jason is mean! You shouldn't kill your children!" – which leads to what I consider a charming disconnect between presentation and

content. This comes off well even in the parodos: the chorus talks about how their singing will help Medea overcome her grief, but the accompanying dance seems to us anything but soothing; rather, it seems vaguely strange and almost ominous.

To put it another way, the *Medea* I imagined is a play where a cast of characters desperately try to stave off an awful outcome that they can see cresting the horizon but which they are powerless to stop. I think what gives this idea teeth is the fact that this play was performed right as the Peloponnesian War was breaking out. In some ways, *Medea* feels like a sort of intermezzo: it looks back to past heroism, in the form of Jason's journey for the fleece, and forward to future heroism in the form of Aegeus' imminent son, Theseus. In Athens the Persian Wars had ended and a new civil war was about to begin. If I can, I wanted to inspire dread. Failing that, uneasiness. Failing that, I could at least make things seem odd and tense. To do this seems to me not only to do *Medea* justice, but to accentuate the fact that Greek theater can invoke these sorts of feelings without resorting to any sort of modernizing scheme.

Question two:

A good friend of mine, a fellow director, once told me that your production team was a group of people who could do what you wanted to do, but better than you ever could. I think that, so far, this is the most accurate conception of a production team that I can think of. Though Euripides in Athens most likely had supreme control of his production, in actuality I can never control as much of the production as I might like to. To this end I gathered a choreographer and music director for the chorus, a set designer, a lighting designer, a production manager, a stage manager and a costume designer.



Besides the crew there were, of course, the actors. Another major decision I made is to use three actors and have them cast in multiple roles, instead of one role for each character. Part of the reason for this is the fact that only six people came to audition; even if I'd decided to cast every person who came to audition, we still wouldn't have enough people for all the named characters. With three actors, I made sure I kept only the people I thought were very good and also abided by a Greek convention which I think is interesting, in the way that it makes both actors and audience members think differently about the relationships between different characters; Creon and Aegeus, for example, never meet in *Medea*, but the fact that they are played by the same actor forces one to think about the similarities and discrepancies between the two.

Because of this, versatility was a big thing for me when I was casting the actors. Medea, of course, has a different face for everyone she interacts with. Though Medea is onstage for the entire play, every Medea ideally only shows up for one scene. Medea is like a snake: slow and sweet, but quick to bite, and I wanted to really hit those abrupt changes well. When Medea comes out at the beginning of the play, for example, she is slow and sugary sweet, acting with patience and cunning to win the women of Corinth over to her side. When she is outmaneuvering Creon, on the other hand, she is lightning-fast in turning the tables and forcing Creon to accept her supplication. At the same time, Medea's character has a progression from the rational, politic person who wins the chorus over in the first scene to the dark sorceress that kills her children and rides off in a chariot during the last scene, and foreshadowing and effecting that change are things I wanted the actress playing Medea to work on. The longer the show goes on, the more the audience needs to realize they never understood Medea at all – in fact, that they probably couldn't if they tried. This emphasizes both the subtlety of Medea's characterization and forces

the audience to consider it against the backdrop of the play as a whole: that is, the otherness of the play as a product of a long dead civilization and the otherness of Medea share a bond. What part of Medea is universal, what part of her is familiar only to an ancient Greek mindset, and which part – say, the part of her which is divine – is neither?

I wanted my actor for Jason to be able to portray him as someone who is a bit more than just the power-hungry jerk which the text – at least explicitly – paints him as. I like conflicted Jason, though of course he's still in the wrong. At this point in his life, Jason doesn't really have much going for him; his days of sailing are long past, he's a bit washed up. The only option left for him, as he sees it, is to try to find the best position he can and settle down. I can't imagine this wasn't a serious matter, that anyone would so wantonly break an oath to the gods. We also weren't there when this pitch for marriage was made: did Creon approach Jason, or Jason Creon? Was he getting strange looks every time he tried to go shopping in the marketplace? Was he planning for Medea to stay in Corinth, or was it him that convinced Creon exile was the right choice? It turns out that Medea is the person we get 95% of our exposition from, but she speaks so eloquently and skillfully that it's easy for us to forget that. We only get vague hints of how the situation has been developing from other characters, such as when Creon tells Medea he's heard "the threats against his house". Creon doesn't elaborate on this, so it's up to us to imagine what else Medea has been saying or doing that we don't know about.

I want there to be ambiguity in Jason's character both because it leads to a greater depth of character and also because there are specific sides of him which would have sounded reasonable during the original production: no doubt any Athenian man would tell you women can't be trusted and wouldn't think twice about jumping into bed with another man given the chance. Given the citizenship law recently passed in Athens at this time, perhaps Jason is right to

worry about marrying a foreigner. Finally, can anyone blame an epic hero for seeking fame? If nothing else, we know Jason is being completely sincere when he says fame is the only important thing to him. Though Jason will probably never be a sympathetic character for the modern day audience member, we can at least offer him the possibility of understanding his point of view.

The third actor has to play Creon, the Tutor, Aegeus and the Messenger, which can seem like a tall order. Each of these characters are striking a different note and, to be completely honest, I was at a loss as to what to make of the messenger, who has three pages entirely devoted to a huge monologue about Creon's gruesome death, without interruptions. How do I play that? It'd be too easy to make it silly, since it can seem silly to us; the true challenge is making the audience take it seriously. The tutor and Creon seem the easiest to play, especially if they are played relatively straight; the tutor is a jaded old slave and Creon is a suspicious tyrant. Even here, though, things aren't so cut and dry, and I consider Creon to deserve at least as much sympathy as Jason, if not more. To emphasize this I told Tabraiz to make Creon seem as scared as possible of Medea, since fear is the emotion his hatred stems from, as he is willing to tell us quite bluntly.

Aegeus is an interesting case because I knew flat out I would not be able to capture all the nuance of his character. Aegeus is a king of Athens in a play that went up in Athens, but try as I may I was unable to come up with a satisfactory way of communicating the significance of that to the audience without sitting them down and talking them through it beforehand. To ameliorate this, I made Aegeus as naïve and likable as I can. I consider his portrayal in *Medea* generally positive, but with particular nuances – his stupidity, to put it bluntly – which call into question how Athens was supposed to view him. I made sure to fill Tabraiz in on all these features of

Aegeus' character, and hopefully some of that subtlety came across in a way the audience can understand.

The Messenger was hard until the end, but during the second to last run through before the play went up I told Tabraiz to mostly forget about the Messenger as a character. Instead, I wanted him to focus on the events the Messenger depicted and the characters the Messenger describes. If the Messenger is saying something Jason said, act like Jason. If Glauce is dancing, act like Glauce. If Creon is dying, die like Creon. I think ultimately this was a good choice and made what could have easily been a boring monologue much more enjoyable, since in effect the audience was now watching a whole medley of characters, rather than one man talking for fifteen minutes. Unfortunately, the audience laughed at some of the Messenger's speech, specifically when Medea spread her arms to embrace her culpability in the murder. I think this stems from a lack of familiarity in what, under my direction, became a very movement heavy production. With no facial expressions, actors were forced to adopt a whole new body language to communicate their feelings, and sometimes this came off in a strange way to the audience.

Question three:

Set is a topic that greatly excites me. I love the idea of conveying emotion through space, and using space as a reflection of Medea's character. Pasolini and Von Trier, strangely enough, both seem to gravitate towards large open spaces, but my goal for set is the opposite of that. The quad outside the Vogelstein became the choice for the play pretty early on, right after our first meeting with Rachel Kitzinger. It does make a lot of intuitive sense, both aesthetically and in terms of how it makes my job easier: it already has a rectangular, stage-like appearance. I like the idea of putting up *Medea* outside, as well, as it would have been in the city theater.

Going up inside a tent was the idea of my set designer, Zeke, after I told him I wanted the set to be claustrophobic and oppressive, to communicate visually the themes of oppression and uncanniness I elaborated on earlier by confining the audience to a predefined space much smaller than a typical theater. I liked the idea immediately. There's a nebulous kind of relationship between inside and outside in *Medea*, both literally and metaphorically, and I think the tent allows for some interesting ways of playing with space. We hoped to get a space around 40x40, though we had to compromise. I wanted to be able to totally enclose that space by hanging fabric off the sides of the tent. My goal was to make the inside as dark as possible. The lighting in the tent was to be mainly string lights of different colors, which I thought would add to the alien atmosphere.

With tent and lighting decided, I had to decide on the specifics of what to put into that set. My vision for the set involved two parts: the left part of the stage being the passage to Corinth, whereas the right part of the stage would be Medea's turf. The platform was to be around 3 feet off the ground, and would be decorated by a few props. Medea's turf was to contain a tent (Medea's house) and a colonnade which will have string lights wound around it. Medea's color scheme is red and black, Corinth blue and maybe white for modern Greece associations, or maybe a dark blue and some other color opposite of Medea.

Ultimately, the set ended up being almost completely different than I had imagined it. We were unable to get a tent of the size we needed, and the tent we did get was surrounded with unsightly water barrels. In a last minute decision we moved the entire stage outdoors, and used the big tent as a backdrop. In many ways this changed the dynamic of the set, though in some ways I was able to retain my original aesthetic. I kept the string lights, and in order to preserve the sense of confinement I had originally been aiming for I had them crisscross through the top

of the stage and layered them at the sides to give an idea of a sort of cage in which the actors were trapped. The effect seemed to me to work, as actors were always precipitously close to bumping into the edges of their ‘cage’. We kept the tent for Medea’s house, but the platform was removed. Though I had originally wanted the platform to indicate a visual separation between the ‘civilized’ world of Corinth and the ‘barbaric’ world of Medea, I accomplished a similar thing by layering a path of paving stones from the entrance of the tent, which petered out and dissolved as it got closer to Medea’s house. The implication here was of course that the world of Corinth failed to encroach on Medea’s territory. The actors, due to the lighting from the string lights not fully covering the center of the stage, were often rendered as silhouettes, which as the night progressed added to the body language-centric acting by emphasizing their bodies. Medea’s tent worked especially well for the final scene, where Medea emerged from a hole in the roof of the tent to tower over Jason during their final confrontation.

For costumes, I drew a lot of inspiration from Sir Tyrone Guthrie’s 1957 production of *Oedipus Rex*. I love the idea of masks – Medea was the only character with a *half*-mask that only covers her mouth, the implication being that her real face is also a sort of mask. In the ancient theater, masks let people sitting further back see an actor’s ‘face’ more clearly, but here they’re not being used for visibility purposes; they’re more there to add to the atmosphere and encourage people to work with their bodies. My plan for Medea was to dress her up in semi-barbaric clothes – barbaric in the Greek sense, not a loincloth. The Greek characters wore more “Greek” clothing, though I was not trying to recreate a Greek fashion show. My worry was that if I tried to completely accurately reproduce clothing it might seem a bit tacky, so I opted for layering of cloth and general, ambiguous clothing in many cases, specifically with the chorus.

Another aspect of the 1957 production I borrowed for my costumes is the idea of color coding. I designed each character with a specific color in mind, both to correspond with what I saw as certain aspects of their character and to enable easy differentiation in a cast of three people. The Nurse and Messenger were white, the Tutor green, Creon gold, Aegeus blue, and both Jason and Medea were black and red. The chorus are dressed in neutral colors, grays and browns, to accentuate both their position as a gestalt entity and their intrinsically reactionary nature.

Question four:

The chorus is not an easy thing to deal with precisely because they were nigh indispensable in Greek theater and completely irrelevant in ours. The chorus is not only the bedrock of Greek theater, it is the oldest part of it: the monologues and dialogues of later Greek theater all emerged from the original singing and dancing of early choruses. The chorus was as divisive to the ancients as it is to us. Different playwrights were seen as alternately increasing or diminishing the “power” of the chorus (Euripides being seen as one of the latter), and even Aristotle had a particularly strong opinion as to the chorus and their function. This problem of ambiguity was exacerbated by the fact that most of the members of my chorus were not actors and, indeed, joined on the assumption that little to no acting would be involved. With the actors I tried to make the process of developing characterization as collaborative as possible: I would take them aside and ask questions about their history, certain scenes, how their characters felt about certain things and how they felt it was appropriate to react. As I did this, I would insert my own viewpoints and guide them when I thought their answers were too nebulous, a good example of this being the Nurse’s opening scene, where I guided her more and more towards a melodramatic opening.

With the chorus, the combination of a large group of people with general inexperience made this approach unfeasible. I attempted to describe the chorus many ways in the hopes people would pick up on some part of it: as an amoeba, as a flock of birds, or some other gestalt entity. My point with these examples was that the chorus, though composed of separate parts, ultimately had a very intimate awareness of itself and its component parts and would react accordingly. Ultimately, in order to help explicate this idea, we had the chorus do flocking exercises in order to get into what I considered the proper mind frame. In these exercises everyone would act according to what everyone else did: if one member of the chorus moved their head, the others would as well, similarly to the way flocks of birds turn in flight.

Though this exercise helped the chorus understand what I meant by acting in unison, they often took it too literally, clumping together and moving identically. In the end, we were able to get the choral look I wanted: a chorus which is aware of the action of all its members but still confident enough to act individually. The actors also had to learn to interact with the chorus, which changed their dynamic: when the chorus is onstage, you constantly have someone else you need to take into account when you're talking. Once the problem of the choral 'attitude' had been resolved, I needed to assign specific blocking to the chorus members. One problem chorus members cited was finding appropriate ways to express their emotions which would still adhere to a structure common amongst all chorus members. We came up with a fixed set of poses and body positions which chorus members could utilize according to the situation: that is, we had two or three poses for shame, some for fear, some for support, some for outrage and so on.

This fixed the problem of how the chorus would react to events onstage, but not how the chorus should move as a whole. To facilitate a sense of choral unity and purpose, I assigned certain stage directions to every scene, which often amounted to a fixed beginning and end point.



For the scene with Creon, for example, I instructed the chorus to start around Medea, bow when Creon came in, and end the scene standing close to Medea to give the impression of supporting her. By giving the chorus a beginning and end point to work with while providing them with stock gestures they could draw from, I was able to both lay down a sense of structure and allow for some individual ingenuity.

Question five:

There ended up being big production problems, some of which were structural and some of which were personnel related. For things related to set and production development, there ended up being two levels I needed to go through: Gray and the GRST department. This led to two opportunities for things to go wrong, and they did. Some people didn't communicate to Gray in a timely manner, and the GRST office was often opaque with regard to how things were progressing. I also had trouble getting in touch with my costume designer, Miranda – it turned out halfway through production that her Vassar email had stopped working and she hadn't gotten any of my emails about costumes. On the whole, I was worried some members of the team weren't invested enough. Zeke was always happy to talk about the implications certain parts of the set would have on my interpretation of Medea's characterization, while Ben was mostly interested on how I wanted the lights, with less of a focus on why. The result of all of this was that I was often not certain of the status of many elements of the production until past the point necessary. The set ended up not being assembled until the day of the show, which left many of the actors dissatisfied and led to some design choices I hadn't anticipated – for example, the lighting in the center of the stage ended up being darker than I had anticipated.

However, there are specific problems I dealt with as well. The first was considering what to do with the children and the chariot of the sun. Both of these are things that, I think, can seem

very tacky if I stuck too much with the original sensibility. I dislike the idea of having two actors, real children or otherwise, walking around in some scenes; in fact, I almost feel like there would be a way to have it more efficacious without real actors. I think children are often hard to take seriously. Most of the time they are not as good at acting as adults. When I saw the production of *A Winter's Tale* in the orchard, they used a very abstract puppet for the child character, and a stagehand would make the puppet run and dance and such, and it seemed more in line with the aesthetic than having a real child actor would be. Omitting children lets actors set the pace of the acting. I also like the idea of the children being something that the viewer constructs for themselves, rather than something I delineate for them. In addition to that, I was worried about my ability to direct children and the possible difficulties of dealing with their parents. Ultimately, however, I decided to include the children. One reason for this was that the children were introduced to me, and I didn't have to go out searching for them, and another is that with the play rapidly approaching I hadn't been able to come up with what I considered an effective alternative. The children, since they ended up not being in very many scenes anyway, ended up working fine: the biggest problem was their tendency to fiddle with the masks.

The chariot was also difficult to figure out how to render effectively. Unlike some other decisions in the play, this only went through one iteration. The important thing was to keep the staging of Medea soaring over Jason: this represents not only Medea's "triumph", but her connection to the divine world and her physical inaccessibility, as well as pointing towards her flight to Athens. Having seen some pictures from other contemporary *Medeas* during Matthew Wright's lecture, I was convinced a vertical blocking was the only correct way to do this final scene. Once we had figured that out, there was only one place which was elevated in our playing space: the tent. To achieve this effect, we set up a ladder inside the tent and had Medea emerge

from the top of the tent during the final scene. The hole in the tent was tied with string and, due to the low lighting at the performance, was not able to be seen by the audience.

Another large problem was the integration of the chorus and the actors. For a large part of the production process, the chorus and the actors are doing different things; the chorus, during their rehearsals, focuses on singing and dancing, and the actors focus on acting. For a show to be a success, the chorus has to be integrated and act successfully with the actors, and vice versa.

Ultimately, the play rose beyond any of the problems that plagued it. Though there was much we hadn't practiced before the show went up, such as the final scene with Medea and Jason, the ultimate effect went as well as I had hoped. The biggest problem during the actual play was a mistake with the fog machine, but this didn't take away from the gravitas of the performance. At this point, the play is about a month behind me, and I have had time to pause and reflect on what the experience was of putting on an ancient piece of theater in a modern context. Five minutes before the play went up, in the big tent that served as our backstage area, I told the cast members that this was no longer my play, but theirs, that once I left them and they went onstage they were free to do whatever they wanted, even if it involved butchering the text or stripping on stage. Some things I thought were more or less important were lost on the actors: Yael didn't embrace the witch aspect of Medea as much as I'd expected, Yvette was convinced that Jason and Medea were in love the whole time (no one else was).

This is the same kind of relationship Euripides has with me. Euripides didn't write *Medea* for me, nor even with me or anyone like me in mind, but I am the one in whose hands the text was placed and it is my job to make it relevant, affecting, and entertaining, still. Some things are gone and will never come back; the looming threat of Sparta, or the machinations of Corinth. Some things will never go away – love, hate, murder, regret. To communicate the play as well as

I could, I made the old things newer and the new things older. *Medea* exists in a limbo, trapped between Greece and us, and this seems to me the most proper and prudent way to make sure it still belongs to both Euripides and I. By doing this, I can make sure we experience both worlds: we can have the realization there are many things that we will never understand, and the powerful emotions it makes us feel anyway.

## Medea Notebook

### 3/8 Tablework Notes:

Today, I first met with the chorus, where I told them all about the structure of Greek tragedy (parodos, ode/stasimon/ode/stasimon/ode/stasimon). We discussed the implications of choral action/nonaction, choral unity (the chorus considers themselves one entity), the interaction between chorus and actors, and a ton of technical stuff: specifically, people were worried about singing/dancing/timing/masks/etc. They seemed interested and hyped. After a half hour I brought the actors in and laid out the mythic backstory of Jason and the Argonauts, Medea and how things get to this point, then talked about the fluidity of the mythic tradition and the way in which this is the first example we have of a story where Medea kills her children (possibly). I also mentioned that the play got last place in the festival the year it was performed, to try and undermine our ideas of what constitutes classic/great works. I asked each actor if/how what I said about the backstory/mythic tradition/dramatic tradition affected how they viewed their characters or how they'd thought about their characters during the readthrough. My Medea was very interested, and she said it had given her a lot to think about. Jason talked about how she was thinking about her role in the sense that Jason is a hero, which she didn't consider before, and also how to 5<sup>th</sup> century Athenians a lot of his points would have seemed valid. Aegeus said he was considering how to play Aegeus knowing what comes afterwards (that Medea becomes his concubine).

### 3/9 The First Rehearsal

#### **How it's worked:**

Tonight we did: dance warmups with Taylor, vocal warmups with Michael where he explains what's going on, and then launched into the dancing and singing.

#### **How can it improve:**

We should take some time to discuss the Greek at the beginning, Michael kind of went right into it.

I need to make specific observations about the dance, and I can hit Michael up for the music at any point.

Let's have a point at the very beginning where we discuss what specific lines we're going to go over today and what is happening in the play at that time.

I think we're going to need to cut down on the dancing, make it a little more simplistic.

#### **Dancing:**

I like the intro where they step out.

I think a big problem with a lot of this is that many of these people have never danced at all before.

I definitely don't think I want any jumps. I think less legwork would be good, though I really like the armwork. Since I might like robes or other robe-like things for the costumes, less leg movement would be good. The step after the scoop in the intro seems like it wouldn't work well.

I don't want anything too snappy or too fast. Limit legwork and turns, especially turns that are fast and which use a lot of legwork. Could we have them walk around each other instead of jumping past each other?

Make things that are a little too exaggerated less so. Smooth out the sharp angles.

Galloping: I don't like it. Nothing too fast, nothing too sharp, nothing involving legs too much.

### **Vision:**

As I've said, inevitability, claustrophobia, caught in a track that will lead inevitably towards doom. So, choreography: unsure, timid movements would work nicely.

The chorus starts off being like 'Medea no' but then immediately after she talks to them they're like 'Medea yes!'

The chorus as emblematic of themes of the play, chorus as reverberating and emphasizing certain actions via their movements.

We started off doing some warmups; what's my vision of the chorus? I've got to get some specific tips out to Michael and Taylor after this.

I think we will need to cut down on the dancing, it's a bit much as is, but let's see it in action.

How do I work the chorus singing in Greek into this, instead of it just being a gimmick?

Something to do with Medea's witchcraft, maybe?

### **Working on Costumes:**

So I'd like Medea to have a sort of color coding; what I mean is that I'd like Medea's costuming (and, by extension, the people that interact with Medea) to reflect the kind of different moods she expresses/different personas she takes on. I'm thinking something like red for a furious Medea and blue for a manipulative Medea, for example. Then we could have other characters reflect this color scheme, with something like saturation used for their emotional/physical proximity to Medea. So, something like Medea in striking red and blue and Jason in a less saturated red, since when dealing with him Medea is pissed, and Creon in a blue, since Medea is more manipulative than incensed when dealing with him.

For example, if we think of the furious, raging Medea that comes out when she talks to Jason and the colder, more calculating Medea that comes out in her conversation with Creon.

3/27 Meeting With Zeke and Ben regarding set

Today I wanted to discuss set, the chariot, and the children to get some ideas on what I was going to do with these. We are going to get a tent for Medea to go up in, probably forty by eighty. We are going to have a platform, but positioning remains under debate. I decided a long time ago

I want string lights to lend a kind of oppressive, uncanny atmosphere (I think string lights do that but then again I think string lights can do anything). Ben didn't pitch in as much as I was hoping. Me and Zeke had a huge discussion: turns out tents cost a huge amount of money, so we are going to talk to SARC and ask to borrow one of their tents. I really hope we can because if not the tent idea might go up in smoke. Speaking of smoke, we talked about the idea of a fog machine. This evolved from discussion of staging and set placement: originally I wanted three different platforms at different heights, to make the space kind of confusing and awkward, but now I'm considering a configuration of columns and just one platform. If we put string lights on the columns it would make for some eerie lighting. We also plan to have a smaller tent inside the tent, and that will be Medea's house. We wanted to nail down set design that night, and I think we got pretty far, but we didn't finish (partially I hadn't eaten all day and I needed to eat). Things I'm thinking about: a visual divide between Medea (barbarian) and Jason (civilized), maybe pull a Pasolini and put some fetishistic icons up here and there, or some bones? Will consider.

3/28

Questions on what to do about the children and the chariot. I'm not sure I want real children, but we could ask around, many people have children. The only idea I think would work well for the chariot so far is some shadowplay, with many some serpents outlined in shadow on the walls of the tent. How about: string lights go dark, we have floodlights in back and they silhouette the chariot. We went to SARC and they have tents, but not as big as the one we're looking for.

3/29 rehearsal:

Hmm. I've realized this rehearsal schedule probably won't work. We have three weeks until the show. That means we have three hour long rehearsals where the chorus meets the actors, and only 6 choral rehearsals total... but the chorus has 6 pieces to learn. I think we're going to need to pare down the complexity of the pieces by a bit if we're going to have them learn Greek AND a dance in two weeks. Hm. I also need the chorus interacting with the actors more. There's three ways we can do that: have the chorus sit in on actor's rehearsals, have the actors come to the choral rehearsals, or make all new rehearsals. Let's see how much we can learn before I settle on an option. The actors can definitely get this down, I'm just worried about the chorus and integrating them. I'll make the dances simpler and more repetitive.

3/30 rehearsal:

Chorus again. This dancing actually looks pretty impressive. I think we can work this.

4/2 chorus rehearsal:

Today we recorded the singing of the chorus, so that if they don't remember the greek when the time comes we won't be in too much trouble.

4/3

It's tough acting without the chorus, but we're going to bring them in on Wednesday and hopefully it'll be a little earlier. It was the scene where Medea announces she's going to kill her children. We went over and physically talked about the pros and cons of killing one's children (preserves your honor BUT makes people think of you as a monster, etc.) and it REALLY helped the scene, having to keep all those ideas moving in your head at once.

4/04

We started with the intro scene, with the Nurse (Yvette) and the Tutor (Tabraiz). We worked out some vital parts of the tutor's character: he is an old man who cares about the children, but is also sharp and cynical. Because of this, he often condescends the Nurse, who we have as a young woman (contrary to what Euripides might have expected). We did this because I think the opening monologue makes more sense to audiences as a young Nurse who is still naïve and optimistic; this also pairs well with the Tutor. I instructed Tabraiz to make both his gestures and his words sharper, as well as to cut down his fidgeting.

4/05

At this point the chorus came in and we had to do a lot of work with them. We did the opening of the play up until Creon leaves. Since this is the first time the actors and the chorus had worked together, I mostly watched to see what kind of position they would take. The chorus were definitely very fragmented in this rehearsal. I focused on picking out certain reactions I liked and strengthening them: Alice patted Leah on the shoulder, Leah cocked her head at a certain time to consider what Medea was saying. I told the actors to talk a little bit more to the chorus, under the assumption they would hear everything they were saying. I also focused on specific lines which I wanted the chorus to react to: "I've decreed your immediate exile" was probably the biggest.

4/09

We brought the chorus in for an extra rehearsal today. We worked from Creon to the part where Medea kills her children. I wanted to really nail the part where Medea kills her children, because it's such an important scene. I considered it important to delineate the progression of the chorus from not convinced to completely on Medea's side. To that end, I cut the text up into certain segments that we could walk through. I led the chorus from being shocked, to intrigued, to fiery, etc. When Medea announced she would kill her children, I told the chorus to scatter so she would have to round them back up.

4/13

We worked on the opening a bit. The Nurse moved around a lot less during this opening monologue and I liked it, so we kept it. The actors still weren't off book, which worried me. Today was mostly detail stuff, hitting certain lines: for example, I told the Nurse to be a little more mocking on the line "old tutor to Jason's sons". Medea also needed to be a bit louder in order to be heard from inside her tent. This was also a big rehearsal for body language. We did the Messenger scene today, which is a huge monologue, and body language is very important. We split the speech up and walked through body language for each part; overall, Tabraiz was being a bit too fidgety. I had him pantomime specific actions as he was doing it: dance when he described Glauce dancing and put an imaginary crown on his head when she did the same. We also went through the final scene, which is very emotionally intense. I'll have to find out an effective way of staging this vertically.

4/16 earlier rehearsal

This was a very short rehearsal due to technical difficulties (we didn't have Tabraiz or most of the chorus). We focused on the Nurse's intro speech: Yvette was having trouble playing this effectively, so I told her to amp it up and make it very melodramatic. I think it worked well.



4/16 later rehearsal

We worked on the Jason scenes today. I wanted to really work on the dynamic of Jason and Medea. It's interesting: Yvette is convinced Jason and Medea still love each other. Yael, not so much. I think that the disconnect in their views actually works towards their characters. We also worked the chorus into the scene: for the first Jason/Medea encounter, I had the chorus act like a jury, hearing the arguments from both sides. Yvette had some problems coming up with gestures: she kept slapping her thighs, which works a few times but isn't so good if it gets repetitive. Introducing a broad vocabulary of body language is important. I also wanted to meter the speech a bit. I inserted some pauses and quickened some lines, especially in Medea's final speech to Jason.

4/18 earlier rehearsal

We did the intro scene with the children (we finally have the children now). The kids are pretty good and easy to direct, which I guess makes sense since they're professional actors. I gave them mostly simple directions: in the intro scene with the Nurse and Tutor I had the two adults try to speak away from the children and had the children sneak up on them to eavesdrop, which I think works well. I also had them look a little scared during Medea's outburst – it's their mother screaming murder, after all.

4/18 Later Rehearsal

I asked Yvette to make the intro even more melodramatic, I think the energy was a little low. This rehearsal was mostly to make sure the show itself is running smoothly: I wanted to get the timing for the odes down, make sure everyone knew their cues, and were off book. Sadly, this was not the case, so we worked on it for a while. We also worked on the gestures. I think the initial scene with Jason and Medea came out really well today, there was the right amount of tension and I'm hoping Jason isn't coming off as too intrinsically awful. We also played around a bit with the Aegeus scene. There's something that's a little inherently comedic in Aegeus' naivete and goodwill and that's something I've decided to play up. I made him seem more confused on what is a pretty obvious oracular riddle and I made him get very excited about his plan of Medea coming to Athens which, let's face it, isn't the greatest work of genius in this play. I think it works: he's likable and silly. without coming off as unsympathetic.

4/19

Worked a lot with the children again today. Today was mostly making sure people had their lines down and fine tuning gestures, since the play is only two days away. Alice had some very good poses as the chorus and we finally have the costumes in, so people are really starting to take to working with masks. All my notes were on things I wanted more or less of: I wanted Creon to be a bit sharper, I wanted less hand waving from the chorus. I think the show looks good and will go well.

4/20

Not much to say. We did two full run throughs and cue-to-cues today; lights, odes, everything, just going over everything and making sure it all went smoothly. We practiced with Medea coming out of the tent. The show is tomorrow and I think it will be wonderful.