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## Passions of 'Medea,' Brought Up to Date

By D. J. R. BRUCKNER

Every performance of "Medea" is an adaptation. Euripides' text is a highly selective commentary on a hugely popular series of legends about this semidivine psychotic, and we can only dimly perceive aspects of what he meant to say about them. We also have far from perfect knowledge of stagecraft in the fifth century B.C. So even those rare performances given in Euripides' own language are adaptations.

That said, the one adapted and directed by Alfred Preisser for the Classical Theater of Harlem, running until April 28 at the Harlem School of the Arts, is special. Its language is current street talk. Its chorus dances, chants spare lines and occasionally sings to music of striking ingenuity by Kelvyn Fell and David Red Harrington. But this chorus does not carry the burden of the narrative as in Euripides. Here the whole story is told by the three characters: Medea (April Yvette Thompson), Kreon (Arthur French) and Jason (Lawrence Winslow).

This radical personalizing of the lethal conflicts among men and a woman, between different nations, and between mortals and divinities brings out surprising qualities and instabilities in the characters. I suspect that no matter how many versions I see in the future, my perception of them all will be affected by the revelations here.

It is very clear that Kreon, King of Corinth, is not arrogant or unfeeling when he banishes Medea so that Jason will be free to marry the king's daughter; he simply cannot perceive the justice of this barbarian woman's refusal to lose her husband and her sons. And Jason really believes he honors Medea by leaving her and marrying a princess so that Medea's sons will become royal heirs.

As for Medea herself, the transformation is haunting. There is no mistaking her outrage and injury when she spits curses of defiance at both men and reminds them of the murderous betrayals of her own people she committed in the past for Jason's glory. But in this version her tenderness toward her children touches Kreon and Jason at times, and her fury at Jason's betrayal makes her murder of those children appear to be an act of passionate satisfaction.

At 70 minutes, Mr. Preisser's "Medea" is considerably shorter than most, but it sends one away with more to think about than most. It also causes more anxiety and excitement in the audience. Viewers sit on opposite sides of a relatively intimate space, and the rising hostility between Jason

and Medea seems to spill out into the audience. That a couple of audience members uttered audible replies to a few of the lines at the performance I saw cannot be a rare occurrence. It is very hard to remain silent.

Inevitably, in a revision so extensive, some things are lost. The gritty idiom removes the aura of mystery surrounding the action in Euripides' play. And there are other disjunctures. But do they add up to too great a price? Probably not, for most.

This ambitious undertaking puts 19 actors onstage. But of course the overall effect depends most on the principal three. Mr. French gives Kreon the appearance of stunned dignity that is absolutely demanded by Mr. Preisser's reading of the story. Mr. Winslow makes Jason so honestly ignorant of how mortal is his betrayal of Medea that he elicits more pity than scorn. And Ms. Thompson's Medea is a real hell cat, a bundle of contradictions that are all the more threatening for seeming so natural in someone who is half human but who has power no human can control or even comprehend.

### **MEDEA**

By Euripides; adapted and directed by Alfred Preisser; choreography by Tracy Johnson and Angela Hughes; sets by Anne Lomel; lighting by Christopher McElroen; costumes by Kimberly Glennon; sound by Stefan Jacobs; stage manager, Frantz Cayo; fight direction by T. J. Glenn; original music and songs by Kelvyn Bell and David Red Harrington. Presented by the Classical Theater of Harlem, Mr. McElroen, co-founder and executive director; Mr. Preisser, co-founder and artistic director. At the Harlem School of the Arts Theater, 645 St. Nicholas Avenue, near 141st Street, Hamilton Heights

WITH: Arthur French (Kreon), Joan Green (Nurse), Angela Hughes (Fate), Zainab Jah (Choral Leader/Death), April Yvette Thompson (Medea) and Lawrence Winslow (Jason).