Fronting up to Seneca’s Medea

Introduction

Initially it will be useful to outline my mixed motives for presenting a production of Seneca’s Medea as my personal contribution to a recent Pacific Rim seminar in Christchurch, the theme of which was ‘Love and Death in Latin Literature’. The production certainly was overdetermined. It goes without saying that there is a certain amount of love and death in the Medea, along with many other interesting things: anger, madness (perhaps), jealousy, horror of the most tragic kind and a kind of pity, not only for the children and Jason, possibly, but also for the protagonist herself.

I was also fascinated as someone more familiar at grappling with the difficulties of Greek drama by the particular challenges presented by a Senecan text, not that I ever subscribed to the notions that they were not written for the stage, whatever that means, nor even performable. One can perform the telephone directory, if so one wishes, and I have no doubt that exponents of ‘Dada’ and the theatre of the absurd have already done so in the past, in the name of art and drama. No, for me these are unreal questions and irrelevant, and have been more than adequately addressed by numerous scholars.1

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On the other hand, I was concerned to test the assertion in the laboratory of the theatre that the Senecan play was ‘inferior’ to its Euripidean predecessor. Euripides’ version is a play which I have experienced more than once on the stage as an audience member and actually consider fundamentally flawed, especially in terms of the characterization of Jason. However, a fifth century Athenian audience may well have reacted differently to the arguments Jason puts forward in defence of his ‘betrayal’ of Medea. Typical of the damnation of Seneca’s drama through faint praise, however, are the comments of Pratt:

The greatest need in the criticism of this (Senecan) drama is to understand its legitimacy as drama of a new kind in the ancient tradition. It cannot be explained as an inferior imitation of Greek tragedy because, though inferior, (my italics) it is not imitative in the strict sense of the word and has its own nature and motivation

Also, I was keen to explore whether this Neronian text could speak meaningfully to a modern audience in New Zealand in the modern era. Respectful and antiquarian productions of the ancient masterpieces are an irrelevance to modern theatre, which should rather be conceived of as ‘a laboratory for the social imagination’, according to the German philosopher Wolfgang Heise. This is a quotation from an interview with the modern German dramatist Heiner Müller, who was himself more deeply influenced by Seneca’s Medea than the Euripidean version in the composition of his Medeamaterial and Landscape with Argonauts.

However, to return briefly to a comparison between Euripides’ version and that of Seneca:

a) In Seneca the play opens with an intricate and menacing monologue by Medea rather than with the expository prologue of Euripides. This monologue brilliantly foreshadows the thematics

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2 Pratt (as in n.1) 34.
Prudentia 40.1&2 (2008) 64
Facing up to Seneca's Medea

and linguistic imagery of the whole play - well described and analyzed by Boyle in Tragic Seneca.³

b) The arguably 'inorganic' Aegeus scene has disappeared.

c) There is only one 'agonistic' conversation between Jason and Medea, before the finale.

d) The intervention of the messenger is remarkably truncated, so that we are treated rather to Medea's subjective and gruesome speculations on the fate of Creusa and that of Creusa's father, as the dramatic action accelerates headlong towards the spectacular climax.

e) The Chorus is hostile to Medea, being made up of loyal Corinthians.

The Senecan innovations focus attention primarily on the figure of Medea, as the playwright explores the psychopathology of her rage and jealousy in terms reminiscent of the De Ira. The play becomes an interrupted monologue providing the protagonist with both an immense challenge and, at once, an immense opportunity for a bravura display. Such is the power and range of the language and rhetoric with which she is afforded by the playwright. Heiner Müller's Medeamaterial,⁴ about which I will have more to say later, is itself largely a monologue, taking Seneca's lead to its logical conclusion. Costa declares tepidly that 'the other characters are a foil to her passionate dialectic.'⁵ Pratt complains that 'there is little gradation in the portrayal of her throughout the play,'⁶ which is arrant nonsense as we see, and hear her, as a disappointed, but still loving wife, a tender yet murderous mother, as tyranny's victim, a vengeful sorceress, exultant in triumph, but, most of all, as the

³ Boyle (as in n. 1).
⁴ Printed first in Theater Heute, Nr. 6. (Berlin, 1983).
⁶ Pratt (as in n.1) 84.
ultimate 'other', a perfect example of 'alterity', a stranger in a strange
land, and as Pratt concedes (p.84),7 'the negation of the moral order'.

This is a point developed and elaborated with great force by Tony
Boyle in terms of the play's Neronian context and the exploitation
of the myth of the Argonauts:

The Argonautic and related myths were ... inherited by Senecan
tragedy already encrusted and elaborated with the semiotics of a
negative critique of the development of civilization.8

It is indeed an interesting sidelight that the construction of the
figure of Dido, who steals the sympathy of the reader and subverts
the integrity of the hero of the Aeneid, was deeply influenced by
the Medea of Apollonius of Rhodes, while Vergil's Dido herself was
instrumental, along, probably, with Ovid's Medea, in the sympathetic
construction of the Senecan Medea by an author, Seneca, who it
seems was radically out of sympathy with the prevailing ethos of his
own day, with its fascination with 'bread and circuses'.

**Directorial Choices**

How then to communicate the private and individual (the
psychological/psychopathological) and the public/political
(possibly subversive) messages of this text, not only to a modern
audience, but to a particular modern audience in a particular
place, space and time? One cannot overstate the influence of the
partnership which should exist between director and designer in
making initial decisions. Antonin Artaud, the great, if tragically
unbalanced theoretician/director (and admirer of Seneca) of the
French theatre of the thirties and forties was insistent on this
partnership in his *The Theatre and its Double*.9

A Christchurch artist, Rudolf Bolee, with whom I had worked
before, was commissioned to read the translation and produce a

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7 Pratt (as in n.1) 84.
8 Boyle (as in n.1) 135.

*Prudentia* 40.1&2 (2008) 66
Facing up to Seneca’s Medea

model set in advance of the rehearsal process. Rudolf’s plan and
model, designed for the acting area of the University Theatre in
Christchurch, clearly made a demarcation between Medea’s space/
house and the palace of Creon. Also, as primarily a painter, he
chose a pattern of symmetrically contrasting black and white areas
overlaid with contrasting geometric shapes, which were designed
to impose a discipline of movement upon the actors. Rudolf’s
feeling from reading the text was that the human agents, apart from
Medea, were constrained by office, rank, race, gender and social
expectations.

His choice of a double space was in keeping with Sutton’s comment
that ‘the Medea... requires a two-building set’. I had already seen
Pasolini’s film of Medea, where Medea’s separate house, outside the
city walls and her isolation there with the boys added considerably
to the pathos of her plight.

It was on studying Rudolf’s model, with its clinical patterns
of white and black, with my team of actors during the course of
preliminary discussion, that I came up with the notion, almost
light-heartedly at first, that we should set the play in a modern
mental hospital. I think one of my actors prompted this idea by
declaring roundly that Medea was ‘blankety blank nuts’. We could
then dissect the case of Medea by observing her behaviour and the
delusional systems of the patient as the text unfolded. The cast were
keen, especially Jenny Alexander, my Medea, who was already, as
an American, a stranger in a strange land.

However, at the same time as I wished to exploit Seneca’s
psychological interest in his protagonist, deriving inspiration from
the De Ira and some passages on the destructive nature of rage in
the Epistulae Morales, I was very much aware of the warnings of
Artaud, as articulated in The Theatre and its Double:

Psychology, which works relentlessly to reduce the unknown to the
known, to the quotidian and the ordinary is the cause of the

10 Sutton (as in n. 1) 11.
theatres abasement and its fearful loss of energy ... both the theatre and ourselves have had enough of psychology.  

If we destroy the mystery, we destroy the joy of theatre itself. We decided, therefore, to present, dissect and examine, but attempt neither to explain nor judge Medea herself, but simply perform the text, as honestly as possible, given the initial directorial choice, in the hopes that in rehearsal and performance the complexities of the text and of Medea’s personality might develop and emerge, if not ever be resolved.

The Nurse’s analysis of Medea’s condition (vv. 382-396) provided for one of the more satisfying moments of the interpretation, akin as it was to Seneca’s description of the ugly face of anger at De Ira, 1.1.3:

But you have only to behold the aspect of those possessed by anger to know that they are insane. For as the marks of a madman are unmistakable - a bold and threatening mien, a gloomy brow, a fierce expression, a hurried step, restless hands, an altered colour, a quick and more violent breathing - so likewise are the marks of the angry man; his eyes blaze and sparkle, his whole face is crimson with the blood that surges from the lowest depth of his heart, his lips quiver, his teeth are clenched, his hair bristles and stands on end, his breathing is forced and harsh, his joints crack from writhing, he groans and bellows, bursts out into speech with scarcely intelligible words, strikes his hands together continually, and stamps the ground with his feet; his whole body is excited and ‘performs great angry threats’; it is an ugly and horrible picture of distorted and swollen frenzy - you cannot tell whether this vice is more execrable or more hideous. (Trans. J. W. Basore, Loeb).

The Nurse’s lines - Seneca’s verse is rather more economical than his prose - are as follows:

Erratic her ecstatic gait, like some maenad filled with god, who rages now upon the snowy peak of Pindus, or on the ridge and crests of Nysa,

11 Artaud (as in n.9) 77.
Facing up to Seneca’s Medea

she rushes to and fro in a frenzy of haste,
the signs of an uncontrolled rage on her face,
her face aflame, her sighs wrenched deep from the heart,
she cries out in floods of tears, then laughs
out loud, a symptomatic model of hysteria:
all doubt, threats, rage, complaints and groans.
Which way will she incline? Where base her threats?
(382-91)

Artaud’s passionate plea that ‘the theater must give us everything
that is in crime, love, war, or madness, if it wants to recover its
necessity’, also seemed relevant to our text, as did, ‘Without an
element of cruelty at the root of every spectacle, the theatre is not
possible. In our present state it is through the skin that metaphysics
must be made to re-enter our minds’. By cruelty in theatre Artaud
does not simply mean the gratuitous display of blood and pain,
although that may be involved, but especially he seemed to mean
the mental cruelty enforced on the free spirit of individuals by
the rigidity of society and its institutions, ‘The Theater of Cruelty’,
writes Artaud, ‘has been created in order to restore to the theater a
passionate and convulsive conception of life, and it is in this sense
of violent rigor and extreme condensation of scenic elements that
the cruelty on which it is based must be understood’.

It seems to me that the rigours of the Stoic system, of a ‘civilized’
and essentially patriarchal system, is precisely the type of rigidity
to which Medea’s passions and beliefs, her witchcraft, her alterity,
present a critical antidote, or, at least, an alternative world ‘system’
well worth exploration.

12 Artaud (as in n.9) 83.
13 Artaud (as in n.9) 93.
14 Artaud (as in n. 9) 103.
15 For a different, and very influential view of the play in relation to Stoicism,
see M. Nussbaum, Therapy of Desire. Theory and Practice in Hellenistic Ethics

Prudentia 40.1&2 (2008)
In production Artaud's emphasis is very much on the visual at the expense of the written text. With this I cannot wholeheartedly agree, especially having composed the English version of the text that I directed, and having been trained in an Anglo-Saxon tradition of venerating the verbal text. However, as it turned out, directorial decisions created a fruitful disjunction and tension between text and spectacle, between 'lexis' and 'opsis', while specially commissioned electronic music, composed by Roy Montgomery, provided a disturbing and mysterious soundscape.

Problems and Solutions

Once the decision to set the play in modern times and in the specific environment of a mental institution had been made, it was essential that properties and costumes were as authentic as possible. Genuine hospital furniture and equipment were borrowed, apart from the electro convulsive shock therapy machine, which did service for Medea's chariot of fire, her 'usual escape'. Accordingly, within an abstract and stylized set, real objects were present, all black and white (apart from a red telephone, this primary colour being suggested by Spielberg's use of the child's red coat and shoes in Schindler's List, itself inspired by the similar use of colour in prose in Thomas Kenneally's Schindler's Ark). The essentially binary set mirrored the bi-polar condition of Medea's mental state, the schizophrenic attitude of society itself to the care of the mentally ill.

More of a problem was how to accommodate the mythic characters into this modern environment. We decided that the characters other than Medea would be drawn from the personnel or human resources which one would expect to find in a mental institution. Ironically, as the play took shape in rehearsal it seemed to me that Medea appeared healthier, in her mental state, than the functionaries whose task it was to imprison and treat her.

Accordingly, the Nurse became literally a nursing sister; Creon a ward orderly and cleaner; the Chorus (of two), staff nurses; Jason the senior psychological consultant; and, in a bold comic stroke, the messenger an extremely chatty tea 'lady', full of gossip. The
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Facing up to Seneca’s Medea

driving notion was that everything these individuals said was a projection of Medea’s own consciousness, of her dreams, fears, and fantasies, of her memories. This placed an extraordinary strain upon the concentration of the performers other than Medea, who was actually speaking and playing ‘herself’. It was necessary for the actors to be involved in the physical banalities of hospital life, while giving tongue to language and meaning completely at odds and incompatible with their movements and gestures.

In this respect the Nurse had a relatively easier task, especially when the actor was instructed to behave like Louise Fletcher’s ‘Big Nurse’ in the film of Ken Kesey’s One Flew over the Cuckoo’s Nest.

As she administered drugs and needles to an imprisoned and isolated Medea in that ‘terrible place’, it became clearer and clearer that, as noted before, like Jack Nicholson’s character in Cuckoo’s Nest, Medea was probably the only sane person in the asylum, whatever ‘sane’ means. The only adults that I have ever seen that can uninhibitedly give public expression to genuine feelings of joy and despair are the so-called mentally challenged that attend Christchurch’s sheltered workshops.

Creon was required to act/speak the king, while sweeping floors, smoking cigarettes and keeping up to date with his turf accountant. Some audience members found the separation between Creon and Medea and their lack of interaction distracting and unsettling, although the isolation of Medea in this awful place was brutally exposed. In a scene which these same audience members found more satisfying because of actual confrontation, Jason, as chief psychiatrist, played mental games with his patient as he watched, observed and recorded her responses to his stimuli. The implicit abuse of the consultant’s power here made the scene extraordinarily powerful. The Messenger - a stand up female comedian - enjoyed her cameo role.

The Chorus, set apart in their own space, listened in, condemned Medea as mad, bad and dangerous, and gossiped with the Nurse, listening to her diagnoses of Medea’s problems, filed cards
throughout the action of the play, until required to administer by main force the final, brutal and shocking, treatment to Medea. Their odes gave eloquent tongue to a criticism of post-lapsarian civilization and the dangers of breaking natural barriers. Arduous rehearsal and a willing cast eventually eroded the technical difficulties. However, a major flaw in the initial decision to proceed in this way did emerge. It was difficult for the audience, I am sure, to tell if and when or, if ever, the characters, other than Medea, spoke 'propria persona'. Also it was possible, as some colleagues and some of my students thought, that, by so clearly identifying Medea as 'insane' from the beginning, one at once destroyed the essential 'will she/won't she' tension in the play and that, within the fiction of this performance, she was already 'guilty', in society's eyes, at least, or perhaps 'not guilty through reason of insanity'. One of my student's responses was interesting:

By setting Medea in a mental hospital, a straitjacket is imposed on our responses to the play, and we lose the freedom to judge Medea and her actions on their merits. We are also safely removed from the need to confront directly, and as reality, the awfulness of what she does. Instead we are offered a haven of a perhaps mad Medea occupied by obsessive bed-making. She may, or may not, have killed her children, but the setting means this no longer matters. She is now completely powerless, emasculated, woman as victim. Her power and dreadfulness have been drained away and she can only be an object of pity.

While accepting the strength of some of these criticisms, I was at pains to point out in discussion with the class that the criteria of criminal insanity are questionable at best, and that, in the not so distant past in New Zealand, the then treatment of mentally disturbed patients would now itself be considered criminal and constitute a cruel and unusual punishment, while there are/were cases of people being held in such institutions quite unnecessarily.

Also, from a Brechtian point of view, this 'alienation effect' most certainly ensured that the audience could never settle into a state of self-satisfied and comfortable superiority vis-à-vis the behaviour
Facing up to Seneca’s Medea

of the characters, while it, the audience, made comfortable ethical judgments on the merits of their respective behaviours. The audience were constantly challenged to make some sort of sense of what was before them, to examine the emotions both performed and, more importantly, aroused. Seneca himself makes no concessions to his audience, but challenges the audience through the lack of an expository prologue, his willingness to express his meaning with all the available complexity of rhetoric, through mythical allusion and learned geographical and meteorological catalogues. These latter themselves provide for the educated audience an implicit expression of a belief in a settled, ordered, measurable and explicable cosmos, the validity of which Medea, acting secundum naturam suam ‘according to her own nature’ herself calls into question.

Medea in New Zealand

To return to the production: whether or not the mental hospital concept was a total success is questionable. Nevertheless, its implications were thought through carefully and made a kind of sense in terms of the study of Medea’s ‘case’, as it were. Too often seemingly inspirational ideas (let’s set Macbeth in medieval Japan, The Winter’s Tale in Russia, Romeo and Juliet in a modern metropolis ...) are forced through into production with too little appreciation of how the setting will impact on the reception of the piece, especially in a particular environment. On occasions, as in the cases of Branagh’s Hamlet, McKellen’s Richard the Third and Baz Luhrmann’s Romeo and Juliet such experiments come off brilliantly. Too often, however, too little attention is paid in theatrical production to the cultural baggage brought with them by the audience.

As it turned out, performing Seneca’s Medea in an emergent post-colonial culture made for interesting resonances. The Maori population of New Zealand, the tangata whenua, the people of the land, are still, early in the twenty first century, suffering from the effects of land seizures and commercial exploitation initiated in the nineteenth as a result of European invasion, conquest and colonization. The modern (European dominated) New Zealand
government is attempting to address injustices caused by the Land Wars through the application of the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi (1840), much to the annoyance of a goodly proportion of pakeha (non-Maori), New Zealanders. Accordingly, the emphasis in the Choral odes on empire building, colonialism and commercial exploitation did seem to strike a chord with the predominantly white New Zealand audience. Students have a similar response in New Zealand to Petronius’ and Juvenal’s satirical attacks on the destructive effects of Roman civilization, and Tacitus’ comments of the same type in Agricola and Germania on the ‘noble savage’.

Heiner Müller

As mentioned before, the influential modern German dramatist Heiner Müller found Seneca’s Medea fascinating for similar reasons. Müller in an interview in Der Spiegel, explained Jason’s story as the earliest myth of colonization in Greek legend:

The end signifies the threshold where myth turns into history: Jason is slain by his boat... European history began with colonization... That the vehicle of colonization strikes the colonizer dead anticipates the end of it. That’s the threat of the end we’re facing, the end of growth.

Müller’s comments on imagery in his work and in the cinema seems relevant also:

To return to our example of Fantasia, the metaphorical function of the Disney film is to reduce the symbolic force of images to one meaning, to make them immediately allegorical. The imagery one finds in the early Russian cinema, on the other hand, is like a torrent of metaphors at the heart of Elizabethan literature. Here metaphors are constructed as a visual protection against a much too rapidly changing reality .... A world of images is created that does not lend itself to a conceptual formulation and cannot be reduced to a one-dimensional metaphor. That is what I try to do in my theatre.

Müller’s play, partially autobiographical, deeply pessimistic about the future of European civilization, seems a useful place to close this
Facing up to Seneca’s Medea

paper on ‘Fronting up to Seneca’s Medea’. As an original playwright Müller reworked Seneca much more radically than any translation possibly could or should, but I would like to close with a couple of quotations from his verse text to demonstrate the modern afterlife of Seneca, first from Medeamaterial:

Watch your Mother stage a play for you
You want to see the new bride all aflame
The bridal gown of the barbarian has
The gift to weld an alien skin with death
Wounds and scars they make a splendid poison
The ash that was my heart is spewing fire
The bride is young Her hide is smoothly stretched
Not wasted yet by age nor any breeding
It’s on her body that I write my play
I want to hear your laughter when she screams
Before midnight she will be all aflame
My sun will rise at Corinth’s nightly sky
I want to see your laughter when it rises
And share my joy with you who are my children
The groom he enters now the bridal chamber
And now he places at the young bride’s feet
The barbarian’s bridal gown the bridal
Present soaked in my sweat of submission
Now see the whore she struts before the mirror
And now the gold of Colchis seals her pores
Planting a field of knives into her flesh
The barbarian’s bridal gown it celebrates
Its wedding Jason of your virgin bride
The first night will be mine It is the last one
She screams now Have you ears to hear the scream
Like Colchis screamed when you were in my womb
And still screams Have you ears to hear the scream
She burns Hey laugh I want to see you laugh
My play it is a farce Why don’t you laugh
What tears for the bride my little ones
My traitors No you did not cry for nothing
I want to cut you right out of my heart
My heartflesh My remembrance My beloved
Give back to me my blood out of your veins

Prudentia 40.1&2 (2008)
Robin Bond

Back into my womb you who are my entrails
Will collect her debts today.
Today is payday Jason your Medea

and now from Landscape with Argonauts:

In the splendid mating of protein and tin
The children lay out the landscape with trash
A woman is the familiar ray of hope
BETWEEN THE THIGHS
DEATH STILL HAS HOPE
Or the Yugoslavian dream
Among the broken statues on the run
From an unknown catastrophe
The mother in tow the old ones with her yoke
FUTURE in rusty amour travels along
A flock of actors passes in step
DON'T YOU NOTICE THEY ARE DANGEROUS THEY ARE
ACTORS.....

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