

The Review

Theatre reviews

MEDEA

By Euripides. Adapted by Mike Bartlett
Citizen's Theatre, Glasgow

Euripides was unique among the great Greek dramatists for showing sympathy to the subjugated, particularly women. Indeed, traditional audiences did not warm to *Medea* when it was first performed. But today, this undiluted tragedy of love, hatred, and madness provides fertile ground for this powerful new adaptation by Mike Bartlett.

In this modern *Medea*, the city of Corinth is swapped for an ordinary British street, the banality of which is juxtaposed against the play's horrors. At first, terraced homes seem too small to contain Euripides' explosive drama. But the portrayal of the volatile Medea (Rachael Stirling) as intelligent, witty, and even likeable provides a weighty emotional conflict. Her insights garner the ill-advised sympathy of the audience who experience Medea's oppression and suffering acutely, even while recoiling from her psychological irrationality and murderous intent. Her convulsions of rage are well delivered by the shocking and oftentimes funny script.

Rather than forging triumph from victimhood, Euripides illustrated how it brutalizes the victim: Medea is not improved by her oppression, but corrupted by it. Betrayed by her husband Jason (Adam Levy) who leaves her for another woman, her mental health is devastated and she is engulfed by thoughts of violence, delusion, and despair. In a self-mutilation scene where she maims herself by reaching into boiling water (in full view of her son) the impression is of a mad witch's lair, with

Adam Levy and Rachael Stirling in Medea.



Photo: Manual Harlan

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seething cauldron and eerie atonal music accentuating a warped and dangerous mind.

Medea brutally murders Jason's new bride in a calculated act of savagery, recounted in frightening detail by Medea's quavering friend Pam (Amelia Lowdell). Her retribution is most terrible for its premeditation, proving that despite brief moments of clarity and her denial of insanity, Medea's decline has been inexorable. Her madness is not innate and indifferent, but borne out of a well-defined hatred. At the terrifying climax, self-harm and revenge coalesce into Medea's final and most horrifying crime.

In Euripides' original, the 'mechane' device was used to simulate Medea flying away *deus ex machina* in the chariot of the god Helios. At the close of this modern adaptation, Medea again surveys the theatre from above, atop the impressive stage setting of her ruined, smouldering home. Framed by a blood-red and almost Grecian sky, Medea cradles her son's body with her shattered sanity fully displayed, a stark final flourish to conclude Bartlett's successful and piercing translation of Euripides to the modern stage.

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2008: MACBETH

Based on Shakespeare. Adapted by
Grzegorz Jarzyna
A TR Warszawa production
Edinburgh International Festival

The Lowland hall at Ingliston, a vast hangar-like space, was transformed into a contemporary theatre for the Polish production of *Macbeth* at this year's Edinburgh International Festival. Conjuring the atmosphere of bombed out buildings, a bunker, a ruined castle, it was an ideal setting for a performance that referenced horror film and video games.

The play was transposed to Iraq during the American Occupation. Duncan as King of Scotland was commander in chief, Macbeth one of his generals. It starts abruptly with a powerful scene of command control; computer screens flicker with multiple imagery as Duncan and his men are orchestrating a battle. The noise of helicopters grows louder. Macbeth presumed to be in one of the helicopters has been told to retreat, he disobeys, lands, and then kills the men praying there who are presumed to be terrorists or insurgents. Macbeth does not shoot the one man left alive but brutally kills him with a knife foreshadowing the killing of Duncan and the many other murders in the play.

The witches' prophecies were spoken by a Muslim woman wearing long black clothes and a hijab. Lady Macbeth comes on stage in a tight red skirt and black jumper as if she might have come home from the office. Later at the banquet she wore a kimono and played the torments of her conscience in a sort of trance with movement suggestive of sleepwalking. The 'doctor' who talks to Macbeth at the end of the play about Lady Macbeth's sleepwalking was played by a tall woman with short blonde hair who looked straight out of a science fiction film. As they talked, the sound of the witches laughing and screeching echoed around the set. Another scene of drunken, debauched soldiers recalled the abuses of Abu Ghraib.

The transposition of *Macbeth* to Iraq worked well for a play about the corroding effects of the psychological, sexual, and political aspects of pursuing ambition by evil means. At times the scale of the set dwarfed the actors. Another consequence of the huge set, and use of effectively