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 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.

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE

Kim Ah-See
Grianan, Auchlunies, Blairs, Aberdeen, AB12 5YA, UK.

E-mail: klwahsee@btinternet.com

Kim Ah-See,
Medical Student, College of Medicine and Veterinary Medicine, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh.

DOI: 10.3399/bjgp12X658412

***Adam Levy and Rachael Stirling in* Medea.**

Photo: Manual Harlan

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

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE
Irene Paterson
Dalkeith Road Medical Practice, 145 Dalkeith Road, Edinburgh, EH16 5HQ, UK.
E-mail: irenepatersonmail@gmail.com

five stages simultaneously, was that you couldn't see what was going on in all the stages. Depending on where you were in the audience you saw a different part of the play. So I missed completely the ending of Lady Macbeth — apparently in a washing machine! Despite this, the scale and visual imagery made it a hugely memorable performance of Macbeth.

Irene Paterson,
GP, Edinburgh.

DOI:10.3399/bjgp12X658403

PRE-RAPHAELITES VICTORIAN AVANT- GARDE

Tate Britain
12 September 2012–13 January 2013

The curators of this large multimedia exhibition have attempted to present the Pre-Raphaelite artists as Britain's first modern art movement, hence the subtitle 'Victorian avant-garde'. One of the curators, Alison Smith says 'I wanted to show them as modern artists rather than soft romantics'.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood began in 1848 with just three young men as its founder members. Rossetti, Holman Hunt, and Millais rebelled against the standard teachings of the Royal Academy. They wanted to return to clean lines and took pre-renaissance art as their example. Being true to nature was what they aimed for and initially they behaved like a secret society, with their initials PRB prominent in paintings such as *Isabella* by Millais. The journal *The Germ* acted as their manifesto. Their paintings were characterised by vivid colours, and depicted intimate relationships realistically and with extraordinary attention to detail. In *Ophelia*, for example, Millais spent a year on the riverbank painting an area the size of a 5 pence piece each day. The true Brotherhood lasted only a few years and, as time passed, different styles developed, with an emphasis on art for arts sake and with beauty as the main theme in many of Rossetti's portraits of women.

Critics at the time were vociferous in declaring their work ugly and jarring to the eye. Millais's, *Christ in the House of His Parents*, was labelled blasphemous and

ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE
Liz Falconer
Minard, Warran Lane, Tavistock, PL19 9DB, UK.
E-mail: lizfalconer@hotmail.com

Charles Dickens was a prominent critic. True to his ideals of depicting realism, Millais had spent time living in a carpenters shop and used his sister-in-law as a model for the painting.

The exhibition follows a series of themes, rather than being in chronological order, and this emphasises the conflicting styles and ideas of the movement. The Pre-Raphaelites attracted extremes of views, either being loved or loathed and often for the same reasons. They were rebellious yet conservative and have been criticised for not being modern enough. Though Millais was a founder member he was later knighted and became President of the Royal Academy.

Lovers of the Pre-Raphaelites will be amazed by the works collected here, as I was, but whether the curators succeed in portraying the Pre-Raphaelites as the forerunners of British modern art remains unclear. The term avant-garde implies something shocking and even ugly, yet often these paintings are romantic and moralistic, and I remain confused about what the Pre–Raphaelites are all about. Perhaps the artists were confused themselves. They set out to disturb the system and to pose serious questions and in this the exhibition has succeeded.

Liz Falconer,
Retired GP, London.

DOI: 10.3399/bjgp12X658395

Photo: Tate Photography

***John Everett Millais,* Ophelia, *1851–1852,* Tate.**