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# Review: Médée (Lost & Found Opera)

by *Will Yeoman* on May 17, 2015 filed under *Classical Music | Opera* | [Comment Now](#)

**Innovation, intimacy and insight: this is what opera should be about.**

### **Fremantle Arts Centre May 15 2015**

You could say Medea had form. She'd already chopped her little brother into pieces, scattering the bloody chunks before their father King Aeëtes to slow his pursuit of Medea and her beloved Jason, who'd just relieved the King of the Golden Fleece. She also persuaded the daughters of King Pelias, who'd sent Jason on his quest in the first place, to dice their father up and cook him in magic herbs to guarantee eternal youth. Double murder and filicide were always on the cards.

Lost & Found Opera has form too. Notorious for dishing up "lost operas in found spaces", the Perth-based company founded by Thomas de Mallet Burgess and Christopher van Tuinen and launched less than two years ago has already taken us into hotel rooms, synagogues, art galleries and kitchens with a series of small-scale operas by the likes of Poulenc, Menotti and Jake Heggie. Performing Darius Milhaud's 1938 opera *Médée* in a former lunatic asylum was always on the cards.

In librettist Madeleine Milhaud's take on Euripides' c.430BCE tragedy, Médée's dumping by Jason after ten blissful years and two children in favour of Créuse, daughter of their host King Créon of Corinth, sends the scorned woman off the rails. She seems

finally to accept her banishment, assured by Créon and Jason of the welfare of her children, whom she must leave behind. Then she goes ahead and despatches both Créon and Créuse with a poisonous wedding gift unwittingly delivered by the children she subsequently slays, all to spite Jason. Happy families.

Yes, the story's a strong one. But the strength of this production lies less in the tale than in the telling. This is a seriously creepy experience, akin to finding yourself trapped inside somebody else's nightmare. If the little girl with the bird mask beckoning you to enter isn't enough of a hint, the heavy door slamming shut after the capacity audience of 50 have taken their seats in this dark, dank claustrophobic room with its loam-dressed floor and adjoining cell should do the trick. Not to mention the pale-faced servants lying inert beneath a dining table or sitting slumped in one corner, like mannequins threatening to spring to life in some surreal Chekovian drama.

Which, of course, they do, for they are the Chorus, sung with icy perfection throughout by Kris Bowtell, Bonnie de la Hunty and Amy Yarham. This in contrast to Ileana Rinaldi's despairing nurse, Simon Meadows' first furious then grief-stricken Créon, Katja Webb and Richard Symons' first insouciant then defeated Créuse and Jason, and Fiona McAndrew's unhinged Médée. All near-perfect, too, but with an incipient terror in their voices which grows and multiplies like a pestilence in lurching, staggered and staggering emotional crescendos until there is nothing left. Lights out.

The production is a triumph of design and direction. Matthew McVeigh's grunge and graffiti creates fissures in a dining room which can only be described as Bourgeois Grotesque. The small cell where the two girls – director Burgess and McAndrews' own two daughters Iseult and Beatrice – make of that what you will – contains a bath and more graffiti and is emblematic of the Underworld. Another room off to the other side of the stage houses the musicians: Musical Director Christopher van Tuinen on piano, Katie McKay on violin and viola and Ashley Smith on clarinet and bass clarinet. Holly Boyton's superb pseudo-Edwardian costumes with their echoes of straightjackets hint at the Fremantle Arts Centre's early history as an asylum.

For his part, De Mallet Burgess and van Tuinen have gone for

maximum intimacy of the most confronting kind, with the front row a mere half a metre at most away from the singers at one time or another. Bodily and facial gestures assume far greater significance than they would on a standard opera stage, with every bead of sweat surrounding every rictus visible. The voices are felt in the gut, like the low pedal tones of an organ.

Milhaud's transparent, polytonal instrumental music, orchestrated by van Tuinen, is spun out with a grim fervour shot through with ironic lyricism by the ensemble. It finds its visual analogue in the nurse's knitting quietly by the cell like a solitary Fate foreshadowing Créuse's agonised writhing on the table like a fly trapped in a web (no pun intended) as she burns and struggles against lengths of garment fastened to wall fittings. The psychological and mythical allusions are unmistakable.

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***Médée* is on at the Fremantle Arts Centre until May 24**