

Fit setting for deranged Medee

OPERA

Medee

Darius Milhaud

Lost and Found Opera

Fremantle Arts Centre

REVIEW ROSALIND APPLEBY

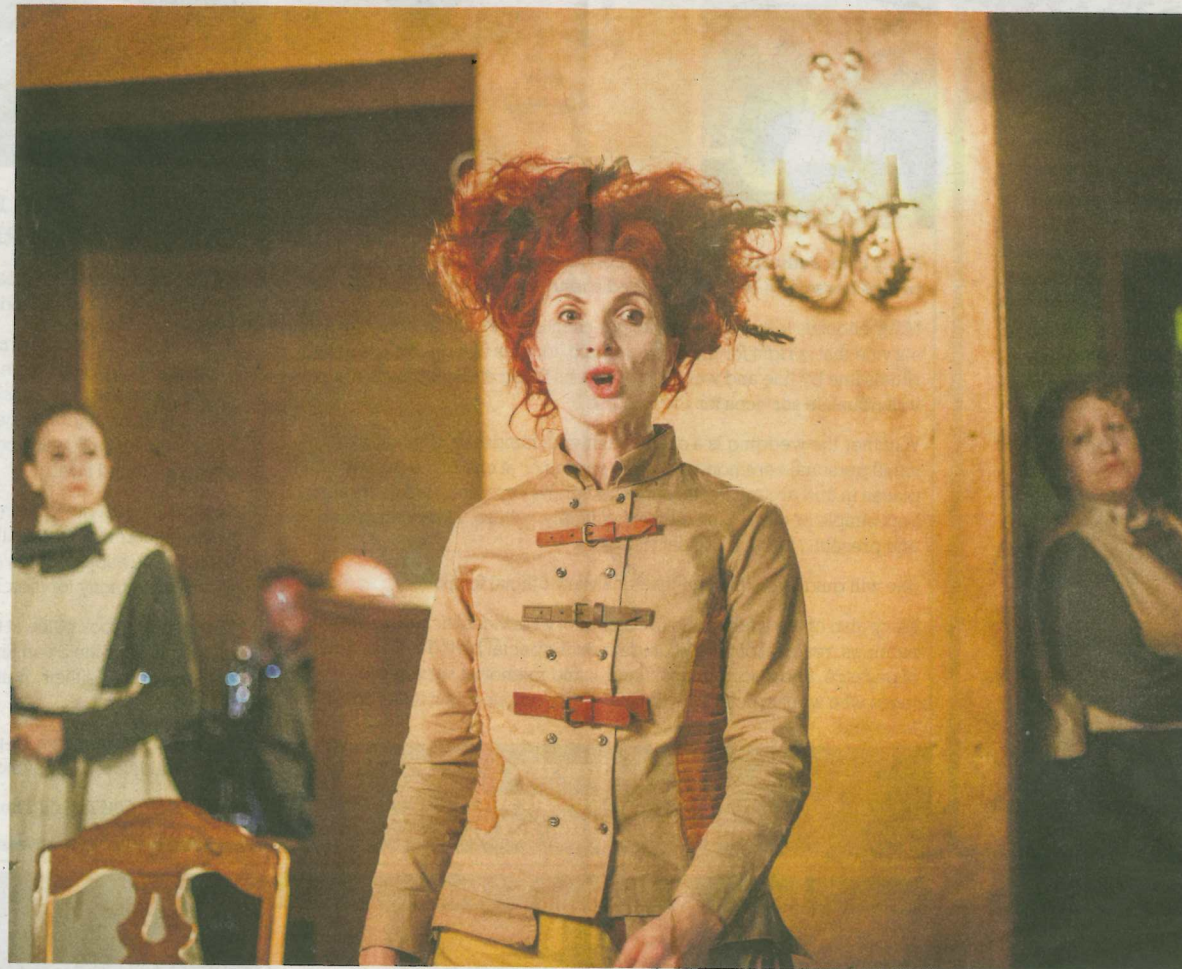


Nothing is as formidable as the anger of a woman scorned." The chorus singers sang the famous line sympathetically before dunking the fuming Medee under water until she calmed down.

Darius Milhaud's 1938 opera *Medee* was given a gripping Australian premiere by Lost and Found Opera at the Fremantle Arts Centre on Wednesday night.

This is the fourth production by the company which specialises in presenting unfamiliar operas in unusual settings. *Medee*, based on Euripides' tragedy *Medea*, was staged in rooms once used as mental asylum cells for women, giving deeper resonance to the conflicted state of the heroine. The princess *Medee* is betrayed by her husband Jason's marriage to Creuse, the daughter of the ruler Creon, and undertakes revenge.

In the hands of director Thomas de Mallet Burgess, the patriarchal Greek society was in disarray and *Medee* was a powerful and subversive foreigner. Matthew McVeigh's set reflected the dysfunction: a chandelier dangled sideways; a golden curtain was dropped to



Compelling: Fiona McAndrew gave a deeply inflected performance as *Medee*. Picture: Jessica Wylde.

reveal graffiti painted walls; Jason and his bride arrived drunk from their wedding ceremony and the maids emerged from under the table to wait on them.

In an adjoining room Chris van Tuinen (piano) Katie McKay (violin) and Ashley

Smith (clarinet) performed a reduced but dramatic version of Milhaud's score. The composer's distinctive polytonal music suited the conflicted nature of *Medee*; the clash of key signatures mirrored the multiple strands of thought in her mind.

The performance area was not much bigger than a lounge room. But with an impressive cast singing in French with surtitles projected on the back wall, the horror unfolded around audience with greater impact than the most elaborate home-entertainment system.

Jason was sung by Richard Symons, whose striking vocal range create a tortured, youthful figure. Creuse was given flighty innocence by Katja Webb singing with velvet sweetness. Creon was a stern Simon Meadows and Ileana Rinaldi was a sympathetic nurse.

The chorus ensemble, for which Milhaud reserved some of his most pleasant harmonies, was immaculately sung by Kris Bowtell, Bonnie de la Hunty and Amy Yarham. Iseult and Beatrice de Mallet Burgess wore bird masks as they chillingly enacted the non-singing role of *Medee*'s daughters.

Fiona McAndrew gave a deeply-inflected performance of *Medee*, depicting queenly poise and deranged witch with a hint of Celtic priestess in her tangled curls and flowing skirts.

Yes, it was sickening watching a woman being pinned down and dunked and to hear her resolve to murder her children, "the last remnant of our love". But in McAndrew's hands *Medee*'s struggle between love and hate was also compelling.

And perhaps familiar too, because this Greek tragedy plays out persuasively the power battle that marriages have been experiencing for centuries. This production shouldn't be missed.

■ *Medee* runs until May 24.