



## Seana's View: How do you solve a problem like Medea?

I first did Euripedes' play "Medea", freely adapted by the American poet, Robinson Jeffers, at the Manitoba Theatre Centre (MTC) in 1992. I played the role again at Stratford's Tom Patterson Theatre in 2000. Now, I have returned to Winnipeg to mount a new production, which travels to Toronto's Canon Theatre in January, for MTC and Mirvish Productions. It seems I feel the need to brush up on my Medea every eight years.

Why? And will it be the same production?

Fortunately, we still have the same talented director, Miles Potter, who is also my husband. The extraordinary designer Peter Hartwell is on board again, as is the original composer, Michael Becker. From the Stratford production, we have stage manager Brian Scott and the wonderful Scott Wentworth reprising Jason. But the rest of the cast and crew are new. So although certain elements will be similar, this cannot possibly be the "same" production.

At the first read-through, it was so exciting to hear all the imagined voices finally come together. Actors with new interpretations and different energies. Some actors are friends, some I have never worked with before. I have been waiting 20 years to work with one actress again, the amazing Patricia Conolly. It is a gifted cast, giving fresh and valued input. After our first week of rehearsal, I already sensed that there will be no such thing as a "repeat" performance.

Also, the two previous productions were in small 200-to-500-seat theatres: the Canon seats 2,273. The previous sets were in a "thrust" configuration, with the audience on three sides. Both MTC's John Hirsch Theatre and the Canon are proscenium houses, with all the audience out front. Consequently, the set has been re-designed and built anew.

A different set requires different staging, and a proscenium theatre requires slightly different acting. You must share "out front," be aware of sight lines, and not block or upstage the important action.

That being said, it is astonishing how old movements re-assert themselves. I will find that as I am saying a line, my body is already in motion, without my knowing why. The sense memory is so deep, even after eight years. Acknowledging, and even following old patterns is fine, as long as I am listening afresh and rediscovering why I made those original choices. Sometimes I will think, why on earth did I do that? But more often I will think, "Ah yes, that feels right."

What else is different?

The first time I played Medea, I did not have a son. People have asked if being a mom radically changed my performance. Although motherhood gave me new personal experiences to draw upon, I don't think it changed my interpretation. The most recognizable difference for me was that I was much more comfortable in the company of children, especially little ones. The second performance was deeper, more detailed, but then, eight years more experience, in life and onstage, will do that.

Any time I have played a role again, I have enjoyed it tremendously. Having survived once, I found myself less tentative, less afraid of making a "wrong" choice. I felt emboldened to "push the envelope", to risk more, to trust my instincts, to "play" more. And you never exhaust the great roles; there is always something more to discover.

Medea is one of the great roles. In the past 18 years, people want to talk to me about this role more than any other. I recently met a young actress in New York who was astounded to realize I was the Medea she had seen as an 11-year-old ballet student in Winnipeg: she said she remembered the play as if it were yesterday, it had had such an effect on her.

Of course, plays and characters speak to us differently at different times in our lives. As a young girl,

I identified totally with Romeo and Juliet. Now I empathize with their parents. As an older Medea, my desperation and sense of betrayal may be heightened. Many of us know women who supported their husbands through medical or law school, or while their husbands built up a business, and after years of struggling and raising families, find themselves forsaken for a younger woman just when the rewards start coming in. Sometimes the first-marriage children are neglected in favour of the new, younger family. It is a common story, it is not new. It is an ancient story.

And Euripedes, and Jeffers, tell it in such a way that it is shockingly contemporary: the language is accessible, the passions are primal. The world of the Greek plays is not interested in repressed emotions. Grief, love, jealousy, hatred - must be confronted head on. Audience members must face their worst fears, their unruly passions, in the safe sanctuary of the theatre, witnessing the horrors of war, incest, or infanticide, and leave, hopefully purged of those feelings and ready to reenter the world.

Perhaps the most frightening thing about Medea is not that she is an alien monster, but that she is a human being we understand. A foreigner, a woman, helpless in the face of a male-dominated society, she behaves as a male Greek hero would have: she avenges her enemies. She destroys what is most dear to her, and in doing so, annihilates her self. This ancient tale is told in today's newspapers.

Medea is mythological, yes, but psychologically real. The worst nightmares are the ones that seem so real, we're not quite sure we were dreaming.

Medea - perhaps a recurring nightmare, but for me, a dream to play.

*Seana McKenna stars in Medea at the Canon Theatre in Toronto from Jan. 7 to Feb. 8.*

I am about to play Medea for the third time.

For those of you unfamiliar with this sorceress from Greek mythology, Medea was a Black Sea princess who helped Jason and the Argonauts obtain the Golden Fleece, betraying her father and sacrificing her brother in the process. She and Jason fled to his home in Corinth, where they married and had two sons. Jason then left Medea for Creusa, the beautiful young daughter of Creon, King of Corinth. Wary of Medea's consequent grief and rage, Creon banishes Medea and her sons from Corinth. Before leaving, Medea concocts a painful death for Creusa and her father, and to punish Jason further, commits the unthinkable.