

## “Somehow it’s about all of us”:

### *Black Medea’s White Taboo*

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*Benjamin Miller and Hallie Donkin*

*Black Medea*, Written and Directed by Wesley Enoch, Set by Christina Smith, Performed by: Margaret Harvey, Aaron Pederson, Justine Saunders, Clive Cavanagh and Kyole Dungay. Belvoir St Theatre, Surry Hills April 13 – May 8 2005. Malthouse Theatre, Melbourne May 12 – June 5 2005

The setting is stark – a dining table and three chairs on a floorboard island in a sea of graphite shavings is surrounded on one side by a cave-like, perforated iron wall and on the other three sides by theatre-goers. Over the table hangs a woven fish-trap, traditionally used to catch large fish and let the smaller fish pass through. No such luck in Wesley Enoch’s *Black Medea*;<sup>1</sup> the fish-trap is woven tight at one end – this is a production that lets very little through its net.

To discuss taboo in relation to Enoch’s adaptation, especially considering the domestic/private violence and infanticide of the production, might feel like stating the obvious. However, there is a curious lack of discussion in the critical reaction to the production about the implication of white Australia in the tragedy of *Black Medea*. Whilst other taboos have been voiced, the silent character of whiteness in *Black Medea* has not been discussed. Forgotten, overlooked, or ignored, the role of white Australia in Medea and Jason’s downfall has proven to be a taboo topic.

Enoch’s *Black Medea* is an adaptation of Euripides’ Ancient Greek Classic. The title character of *Medea* is the sorceress and foreign wife of Jason of the Argonauts.<sup>2</sup> Jason, although married to Medea, promises himself to another woman, inviting the wrath of his wife. At Medea’s bidding, her two children deliver a gown and crown to Jason’s new bride-to-be, who dies shortly after wearing them. The spurned wife completes her revenge by murdering her two children and flees, unable to stay or to return to her homeland. Euripides drew on a well-known myth for his drama, and for his contemporaries the differences between the myth and his version was an important point, and the main source of contention for his critics. For example, Euripides was known to give his characters a human element often absent from many other tragedies of the time; this was a potent comment on the relationship between the individual and the divine.

Enoch’s *Black Medea* diverges from Euripides’ *Medea* in many ways and, similarly, the differences are telling. Enoch’s characters, whilst occasionally using

language evocative of mythology, are far more human than Euripides'. Whilst Euripides' version has a cast of over a dozen, the action of Enoch's adaptation feels more claustrophobic, with just four actors. Absent from Enoch's production are the human catalysts for the tragedy. Jason (Aaron Pederson), in *Black Medea*, is not betrothed to another woman (although Medea – Margaret Harvey – asks "who is she?") but is haunted by the Chorus (Justine Saunders), who urges him to abandon his wife so that Medea may return to the land, family and culture she has abandoned in order to marry him. The equation of Enoch's characters' homelands with the separate nations of Euripides' version is a telling commentary that some viewers may overlook: they may not recognise that there are many nations of Aboriginal people within Australia and displacement across just one hundred kilometres may be devastating. Whilst Jason and Medea are both Indigenous Australians, they are from nations as different as Corinth and Colchis, the respective homelands of Jason and Medea in Euripides' original.

In addition, Jason and Medea are continuously torn between a desire to succeed in a modern and western world (Jason works for a mining company) and returning to Medea's country (a call constantly reiterated by the Chorus). To add further to the pressure of succeeding in the modern world, Jason, led by Medea, receives "blood-money bonuses and mining royalties" through the exploitation of Indigenous sacred sites and burial grounds. A jingle of coins perforating Jethro Woodward's powerful and paranoid soundtrack reinforces the capitalist motivation behind Medea's displacement and cultural betrayal. Jason, driven mad and alcoholic by the pressures of his wife and "the wind" (the voice of the Chorus) fights with Medea in dance-like scenes, but continues to be a devoted father to his only son. Infuriated by Jason's refusal to leave the city, and seeing her son becoming like Jason, a fate she cannot bear, Medea murders her child<sup>3</sup>. After Medea's emotional infanticide, the Chorus, a haunting image of both tradition as well as Medea's ancestors and future, informs us that Medea dies walking home to her land; the actor is shown clutching the broken trireme that was her son's favourite toy before it was 'lost', when it was removed by the Chorus and replaced with a bulldozer (a telling present from Jason).

Critics have noted the major success (or downfall) of this production as being Enoch's confrontation with domestic violence in Indigenous communities. For example, a *Daily Telegraph* reviewer, Krista Wilson, has commented, "Where much theatre has failed, this play successfully illustrates the confusing cycle for the children and the lover involved in a violent relationship".<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, Colin Rose, writing for the *Sun Herald*, gives the performance a rating of five out of ten, stating:

Enoch doesn't need to dress up in Euripides's toga to point the finger at wife bashing and the loss of identity in [I]ndigenous communities. That story is big enough on its own. In translating *Medea* to a contemporary context, he's made a nonsense of the play and blunted his own argument.<sup>5</sup>

It is arguable that Rose has missed the whole point of Enoch's appropriation. Not only is it possible to see *Medea's* murder of her child as a metaphoric death, Enoch's call to end the cycle of domestic violence, but the use of *Medea* to make this call - the deliberate use of a *universal* Classic - suggests the story is applicable to *all*. Enoch justifies his appropriation in the Program Guide when he recites the relationship between the play and the audience: "The Greeks knew the power of catharsis [...] The hero takes us to the depths and we are transported by their heartache and struggle. On our return to the 'real world' we - the audience - are transformed".<sup>6</sup> In short, Rose, at best, discusses the implications of Enoch's story for Indigenous people alone, and Wilson expands the scope of the play by reading the domestic violence as not simply confined to Indigenous communities. We are interested in reading another kind of 'transformation' *Black Medea* evokes for both audiences and critics.

Contemporary Indigenous theatre often addresses political and historical issues to audiences both within Australia and internationally. Quite rightly, Helen Thomson reminds us that Aboriginal theatre contests "white values, even the benign, liberal humanist ones, which have been informed by well-intentioned but damaging ideologies such as assimilation".<sup>7</sup> Seemingly breaking with this convention, *Black Medea* prefers to tell a dramatic and personal story, rather than explicitly blaming white Australia for catalysing this domestic tragedy. To counteract the alienating effect for white audiences of a direct challenge to 'white values', Enoch's *Black Medea* invites the audience to infer this criticism. For example, the Chorus invites this response, telling the audience that they must involve themselves in this play, be "witness, judge and jury" to *Medea's* tragedy. It is suggested quite strongly that the story cannot be outed fully without the interaction of an audience. Unfortunately, however, Enoch's serious challenge to the white audience members remains unidentified in the literature surrounding the play, with most reviewers considering the Indigeneity in the play as a negation of the universality of the story rather than symptomatic of Thomson's contestation of 'white values'. The Chorus goes on to state that *Medea's* story is "like that story that gets whispered in the corner 'cause no-one wants to come out with it". Enoch has come out with it, but still some aspects of his outing remain taboo - unread or overlooked. Much of Enoch's criticism itself threatens becoming a white taboo in *Black Medea*.

Enoch's criticism is employed in his use of the Classics; he is an advocate for the universality of such works. In an interview on the Belvoir St Theatre's website he is quoted as saying "the Classics are Classics because they have Universal stories to tell. These Universal stories are not contained in one culture but inhabit all cultures".<sup>8</sup> This is the impetus behind the Chorus' revelation that, rather than being Jason and Medea's exclusively, or Indigenous people's exclusively, "somehow" this is "a story about all of us". One way of analysing the universality of *Black Medea* is to utilise what Mudrooroo has termed the "polysemic nature of Aboriginal drama".<sup>9</sup> Such an analysis allows many diverse yet related meanings to emerge from within the single piece of theatre. Silent and taboo commentaries, for example, can be mounted within a seemingly simple story. The set's fish-trap can be read as a trap with all its practical connotations, whilst also representing the commoditisation of so-called relics of the past to adorn the dining rooms of the wealthy and museum cabinets. This is a significant commentary, albeit one left to the audience. As Enoch commented in an Introduction to one of his earlier plays, *The 7 Stages of Grieving*:

The greatest misconception held by White Australia and indeed international audiences is that Aboriginal culture is a museum piece, a remnant of a world long gone. This romantic picture pays little justice to our instinct for survival and ability to interact with the contemporary world.<sup>10</sup>

*Black Medea*, literally destroying romance, challenges the comfort that the de-animation of Indigenous cultures affords white audiences. This romanticisation constructs Indigenous culture as a relic, ensuring a detachment that denies cultural exchange. Romanticisation of Indigenous culture, in turn, effectively prevents productive Indigenous/non-Indigenous interaction. Enoch, however, disrupts the voyeuristic detachment of romanticisation and pushes the boundaries of interaction further than the contemporary world, revamping Ancient drama to great effect. This is a serious challenge to Colin Rose's narrow reading of the play and is one aspect of *Black Medea* that calls for a transformation of white theatre-goer's experiences of Indigenous art. Whilst this is a worthy ideal, it is problematic – the call for active spectatorship paradoxically requires an already active engagement by the audience. Transformation on the scale that Enoch demands is complicated by the tendency for white audiences and critics to view this story voyeuristically.<sup>11</sup>

Jason and Medea's story is not only a domestic tale entirely about their private life with the audience as voyeur, but a tale of how white Australians have collaborated in the family's predicament. How Medea, for example, is corrupted by capitalist ambition at her city school and lured away from her family and land

by this ambition. Whilst the Chorus gently sails audiences into the life of Medea, the actor's involvement with the audience is far from gentle. Her entrance involves a direct, challenging stare at the audience "I know you're out there" Medea cries, haunted by the presence of the audience. She calls for a confrontation with the audience, whether they are willing or not. Whilst avoiding a direct address of the fact, her livid expression and screaming tirades invite the audience – at least the whitefellas in the audience – to feel a part of her story, to feel involved.

The question we would like to conclude this article with is: why do mainstream reviewers, who have often stated that *Black Medea* is confronting, seldom search for the source of their feelings of confrontation?<sup>12</sup> We would like to suggest that this silence, or taboo, is directly related to the reluctance to implicate white Australia in Medea's tragedy. For the mistress who has stolen Jason, caused Medea's anger, and begun the cycle of violence, despair and grief is white Australia. Whiteness is a silence in the play, but it is ever-present – even the catalyst for the tragedy. It is the source of Medea's capitalist ambition, Jason's gradual and painful assimilation and the family's dispossession at the hands of the mining company. In finding the play confronting and rendering the reasons for this discomfort taboo, critics and audiences distance themselves from the power of *Black Medea* and the potency of Enoch's arguments. Enoch is calling, we believe, for married grief between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people – universal mourning for mistakes of the past and present. One of the most poignant lines in the play comes as Medea explains her recent infanticide to her husband: "Whatever my hell, I will sleep pleased in the knowledge that I have married my grief to your torment". Is it possible, or probable, that white theatre-goers and critics will grieve for a family we helped destroy? Perhaps it is desirable for white audiences to feel a torment that matches Medea's grief.

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<sup>1</sup> *Black Medea*, Written and Directed by Wesley Enoch, Set by Christina Smith, Performed by: Margaret Harvey, Aaron Pederson, Justine Saunders, Clive Cavanagh and Kyole Dungay. Belvoir St Theatre, Surry Hills April 13 – May 8. There is no script available, so all references to character's speech is to this performance.

<sup>2</sup> Euripides, *Medea*, Denys Page, ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1938).

<sup>3</sup> The role was shared in the Belvoir St production between Clive Cavanagh and Kyole Dungay, two impressive young actors from Sydney.

<sup>4</sup> Krista Wilson, "Dreaming of a Greek Myth", *The Daily Telegraph* (15 April 2005): 63.

<sup>5</sup> Colin Rose, "Home's No Place For a Sorceress", *The Sun Herald* (17 April 2005): 26.

<sup>6</sup> Wesley Enoch, "Hell Hath No Fury: Director's Notes," in *Black Medea Program Guide* (Malthouse Theatre, 2005), 3.

<sup>7</sup> Helen Thomson, "Drama Since 1965," in *The Oxford Literary History of Australia*, Bruce Bennett and Jennifer Strauss, eds. (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1998), 301. Whilst Thomson's comments can be read as a crude generalisation, that all Indigenous theatre contests white values, we are interested in applying her observation specifically to *Black Medea*.

<sup>8</sup> Belvoir St Theatre, "Interview with Wesley Enoch" [accessed 29 April 2005]. Available from [http://www.belvoir.com.au/341\\_prod\\_detail\\_general.php?production\\_id=56](http://www.belvoir.com.au/341_prod_detail_general.php?production_id=56)

<sup>9</sup> Mudrooroo, "Black Reality" in *Barungin*, Jack Davis, ed. (Sydney: Currency Press, 1989), ix.

<sup>10</sup> Wesley Enoch, "Why Do We Applaud?," in *The 7 Stages of Grieving*, Wesley Enoch and Deborah Mailman (Brisbane: Playlab Press, 1996), 13.

<sup>11</sup> We do not wish to claim here that all audiences are or can be presumed to be white, but as two white audience members we are reviewing the performance from this position. In fact, in a debriefing session conducted by the Belvoir St Theatre in Wednesday the 27th of April, where Enoch and the cast fielded questions from the general public, Enoch stated that there had been quite a few Indigenous people spotted in the audience. Not wishing (or able) to speak on behalf of Indigenous people, however, we are interested in the reactions white people have had to this performance.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, reviews which have regarded *Black Medea* as confronting; Stephen Dunne, "Harsh Realities Flood Through Broken Tradition," *The Sydney Morning Herald* (16 April 2005): 27; Krista Wilson, "Dreaming of a Greek Myth," *The Daily Telegraph* (15 April 2005): 63; John McCallum, "Mum Could Kill For Some Peace," *The Australian* (15 April 2005): 14; and Alexa Moses, "Beyond the Wounds of a Classic Taboo," *The Sydney Morning Herald* (12 April 2005): 12 – which does not actually mention the "taboo" in the body of the article. On the other hand, a review quoted earlier in this article simply ignores the tragedy's ability to confront current political issues or operate on a universal level. We are referring to Colin Rose who, instead, views *Medea* as "a batty housewife in need of Prozac" and the drama as being restricted to "a domestic drama [...] told around a kitchen table"; see Rose, 26.