SENTINEL BLACKPOOL
11.1.92

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Tragedy relevant today

APPOINTING Clare Venables as artistic director of Monstrous Regiment might not be as drastic as, say, making near namesake Terry chief choreographer of the London City Ballet but it still prompted raised eyebrows.

Her lengthy stints with Manchester Library and Forum Theatres, as well as Sheffield's Crucible, were innovative but far removed from the Regiment's approach of highlighting women's experience via dynamic theatre. But her version of Euripedes' evocative tragedy has both her and the company's trademarks stamped right through it.

At first glance Greek tragedies might appear to have little to do with today.

But Euripides was well aware of the sexual inequalities inherant even in a society as forward thinking as pre-Christian Greece.

As we are striving toward John Major's classless society, so what better time to make Medea's plight accessible to all.

REVIEW

Ishia Bennison gives a bravura performance in the title role as a woman already at odds with her conscience for deeds done when brought from her native counry by Jason (he of the Argonauts and Golden Fleece fame).

Jason has now abandoned his older wife for a younger and politically more acceptable bride — leaving Medea exiled, outcast and penniless.

Tim Reed's shambolically domestic set and Venables' no-frills text provides the tragic heroine with an Everywoman appeal.

Her furious arguments with Martin Gower's upwardly mobile Jason have kitchen sink power and the emotional speech about motherhood contain a timeless potency.

Sue Holland is the modern slimlined Chorus with Richard Owens and a rather shakey Kathleen Michael completing the cast in a story of such disturbingly contemporary issues it is hard to imagine it is more than 2,500 years old.

ROBIN DUKE

SENTINEL STOKE

17.1.92.

REVIEW

Frankly, Medea, he don't give a damn. . .

IT'S A tragedy played out for aeons on a million matrimonial stages...

Man leaves wife for younger woman, wife gets mad, wife gets even.

Except the depths of despair and rage suffered by Medea drives her beyond getting even to the ultimate crime of passion; the murder of her own flesh and blood.

Two and a half thousand years on, Euripedes' sex-war classic survives surprisingly intact and pertinent.

Women's theatre company Monstrous Regiment have set the Greek myth in the present

By Martin Bell

day at the New Vic Theatre's Stephen Joseph Room.

Ishia Bennison, perhaps best known as Guizin in 'EastEnders', takes the title role in a performance of harrowing, impassioned depth. A woman who has already forsaken, betrayed and killed her own kind for the love of Jason, she suddenly finds herself cast aside by him. Wracked by pain, anger and hate, she exacts her terrible revenge on all he holds dear.

Martin Gower is Jason, whose fatal attraction for a younger woman triggers the collapse of his family. "By doing this, we can all be safe, prosper and want for nothing," he glibly explains.

Director Clare Venables' new version of the play is set in an abstract junk-room of a set, possibly a once-proud family home on the verge of collapse, lives scattered about and piled in haphazard disarray. Or, as the adults scrawl feverishly on the walls, it could be a grown-up playroom, where the most dangerous game of all ends in tears...

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THEATRE

Medea

Lilian Baylis

BOTH *Oedipus* and *Electra* are straightforward plays: they deal in gods and oracles and family curses, but accept that background and the rest persuasively follows. Electra is deranged, but the vengeance she demands fits the crime.

But what of Medea, the foreign princess and witch? When Jason shoves her aside to make a better marriage, she uses her magic art to kill the bride and her father. Reasonable enough, but in order to make Jason really suffer, she then kills the children she has borne him. Yes, this causes her pain, she admits as much, but what is this pain compared with the joy of revenge on the man who betrayed her?

Medea does the deed herself (Electra could only urge a man to do it), which gives her an heroic stature rare among classical heroines, and a special appeal to directors concerned for women's place in the theatre.

The last two productions of the Medea legend, at the Tricycle and the Royal Exchange, Manchester, were both directed by women; and this latest version is directed by Clare Venables, recently appointed artistic director of Monstrous Regiment.

But while it is possible to find, in this early Euripides tragedy, his familiar theme that in human nature violence co-exists with the desire for order, the fact is that here the violence comes from a woman, and a foreigner. General conclusions cannot be drawn, though it is always useful to be shown that all they that take the sorcerer shall perish with the sorcerer.

What is really impossible to take is the argument in the programme that "this powerful story . . . could have been written today". Venables sets the play in a white-walled modern room where plates and books and standard-lamps are stacked in readiness for the journey into exile. Sue Holland's depressed Chorus has no place in this environment, doing nothing but pick at cracks in the wallpaper as she listens to threats of infanticide.

The contemporary speech Venables gives her new text contains some telling phrases. Recalling her mistress's unwise marriage, the Nurse feels she should "never have swallowed herself in him". And though expressions of despair are less happy, Medea's irony is neatly revealed. "My husband I do hate, yes," she concedes, with a joky smile to Creon.

Within the confines of the modern setting, and the limitations of the play, Ishia Bennison's firecracker Medea convinces as a furious wife. There is a gypsyish quality to her, and something of a hot-headed, plate-throwing Italian mamma; she even dances a triumphant jig, like Rumpelstiltskin.

Bennison's voice also dances, savouring the words as though Firbank, of all people, had written them. The style is a way of distancing her humanity from the approaching deed, and works up to a point. That point, of course, is where the infanticide takes over, and the ensuing row with Martin Gower's dull Jason is poor stuff.

Richard Owens turns in some neat characterisation of the other men, but torn from its archaic world of Ancient Greece, or somewhere comparably exotic, the drama's heart does not beat.

JEREMY KINGSTON

Mother and son: Ishia Bennison (Medea) and Nick Walker

THE TIMES 28TH JANUARY 1992

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SALLY ANN LYCETT ASSOCIATES

MEDEA
Lilian Baylis

MEDEA is one of those Greek tragedies which theatre programmes describe as relevant to the modern day.

Well, they say truth is stranger than fiction and cases of mothers killing their children are, sadly, a not-uncommon feature of contemporary life.

Monstrous Regiment's production forces us to look at the Euripides play in the cruel light of the late 20th Century.

A squalid set, Medea's home, is reminiscent of a run-down bedsits rather than the house of a upper-crust hero and his foreign bride.

The text is far from a purist's translation of ancient Greek. The scenes of domestic crisis are contemporary North London. The chorus, a feature of Greek drama, is whittled down to one supportive friend.

Jason (he of the Argonauts) confesses that he has decided to make a political match with Creon's daughter rather than stay with his outcast bride. I was reminded of TV drama, when middle-aged wives from the provinces are told by their MP husbands that the marriage is over and he intends to set up home with his secretary, a highly connected Sloane.

Very different from last year's production of Medea by Manchester's Royal Exchange Theatre Company. There the audience was kept at a distance and exposed to a stately, classical production where a group of lamenting women played the chorus.

Medea, and all the women's parts, were played by black actresses, a non-too subtle reminder that the white, middle-class male has always reigned supreme, unthinkingly destroyed other lives and has been blinkered to all but his own ends.

The blackguard Jason was suprisingly similar in the two productions. Both Ray Dewers in Manchester and Martin Gower in Islington played urbane, confident Jasons, supremely unaware of their own insensitivity.

The relationship between Gower's Jason and Medea, played by Ishia Bennison, was the more convincing. They hugged and kissed like real married people. Clare Benedict's Medea had all the human warmth of an iceburg.

For this reason Medea's horrific murder of her children was more convincing in the London version. Bennison's unstable, almost manic, Medea was recognisable. It was a shame the social workers did not get the kids on the "at risk" register months before.

Francesca Nelson

HAMPSTEAD & HIGHGATE EXPRESS 31.1.92.

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The Independent 29.1.92.

THEATRE / **Louise Kingsley**
Medea
Lilian Baylis Theatre

The searing anguish of Medea, ousted from the marital bed by a trophy bride with youth and royal connections, is as relevant today as when Euripides wrote the account. Clare Venables's adaptation, which she also directs for Monstrous Regiment, plays down the past barbarities of the spurned wife. Murder was in her repertoire long before Jason's betrayal – and Ishia Bennison's Medea takes an almost kittenish glee in her nefarious plotting – but his woolly and hypocritical justification of his actions pulls the production down to the level of soap opera. Venables turns the Chorus into an out-of-place stage-hand who makes Nescafé when Aegeus comes to call. Medea scurries around in leggings, defacing the white-walled wreckage of her home with scrawled graffiti and hurling mementoes at her husband's head. The tragedy is still there, but, reduced to the domestic, it is robbed of nobility, and neglects the wider social context which, as much as her unwanted passion, fuelled Medea's revenge.
□ *To 15 Feb (071-837 4104).*

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LYCETT
ATES

Ishia Bennison as MEDEA

Out of sink

MEDEA
Lilian Baylis

Monstrous Regiment, now fifteen years down the road, is a company renowned for the feminist slant (some might argue slander) it gives to all its productions. History's female protagonists, regardless of worth or moral scruple, are often hoist to heroine status. And given the way of the still largely macho male orientated world, that's no bad thing. But Medea, the legendary Greek sorceress, is a rather prickly candidate for propaganda canonization. It would take the wiliest Queen's Counsel up before a lady judge to get her off the hook for murdering four people, two of them her children, and for my money, even with the plea of Clare Venables' lucid if biased version, Medea remains highly suspect and hardly role model material for a liberal democratic society.

Part of the problem is, of course, whose Medea we're dealing with and which part of her life. Euripides' version focuses on her break-up with husband Jason and the consequent emotional maelstrom – it's what the art world calls 'detail' – and misses a murky past and dubious later life. Certainly it's the easier one to defend and the one Ms Venables choses to vindicate.

Placed within a modern, white-walled domestic setting (harbouring in one corner, inexplicably, a copse of shadeless lampstands), we see Ishia Bennison's Medea pacing the room, dishevelled without and distraught within, insane with jealousy. She's about to explode. (The Greeks may have extolled the virtues of civilisation, but lives of quiet desperation were a subtlety added later and still a long way off). Jason, we learn, has run off with another, younger woman, inadvertently starting a trend which is running still and classified as 'only human nature after all'. She punishes him by murdering the other woman and her father, a princess and a king no less, and her own two sons. "Passion", as she rightly recognises in a moment of pulverising understatement, "destroys happiness."

In a classical context shorn of modern sensibilities we can understand the kind of rage which, prompted by betrayal, erupts into horrendous violence, gnashing of teeth, tearing of hair and general fist waving at the gods. It's not so easy in a world where the chorus comes across like a home-help, the children are chubby school-uniformed pubescents and Medea herself is the kind of suburban mum who you feel puts on a pink track suit to do the dishes. In this world it might have been more prudent to put the marriage on hold, go for a trial separation and let Jason take the kids every other weekend.

The actors do what they can with the given material, keeping our interest up through the emotional block-buster story which can have only one end, but the essential gravitas is lost in this particular translation which, rather like a malfunction aboard the Starship Enterprise, has Euripides materialise in an alien soap opera world where the polarized sexes slug out a low key despair in designer comfort. Beam me up, Scotty. (See Fringe).

GRAHAM HASSELL

What's On 29.1.92.

328 9521 / 071-624 2417

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Ishia Bennison as Medea . . . there is a skittish naturalism that feels inappropriate to the horror of the piece

PHOTOGRAPH: KENNETH SAUNDERS

In the lap of the moods

Rosalind Carne

HOW DO you evoke sympathy for a woman who has committed two self-serving murders before the play that takes her name begins and finally enacts revenge on her false husband by killing her own children? Director Clare Venables responds by glossing over Medea's past, concentrating on the stormy domestic present and in Ishia Bennison's spirited performance, transforming this monster enchantress into an everyday neurotic. As the bloody end approaches and Medea's mood lifts, neurosis appears closer to psychosis, and what sympathy we feel begins to evaporate. Ms Bennison lurches from pain to the hysterical dissembling that may well precede an atrocious act. But there is a skittish naturalism that feels inappropriate to the horror of the piece. And here lies the central dilemma: the sympathetic approach is doomed to failure. For we surely ought to feel terror at this woman whose obsession with a man could lead to acts of such foul malignancy.

In modern dress and setting, Monstrous Regiment's production, designed by Tim Reed, is at pains to stress the play's contemporary relevance. Old standard lamps, suitcases, clothes and books litter the floor, the debris of a life on the move. On empty white walls, Medea scrawls her own words as if trying to ground herself as the emotional temperature rises, rather as one makes lists in moments of crisis. This is a nice touch, and there is moving support from Sue Holland as the desolate Chorus. Yet if she is to make an impact, Medea must be more than an ordinary jilted woman gone berserk. Without the divine intervention of the original text, her final exit avoids any of the broader philosophical considerations of the cruel forces that Euripides sought to address. Having seen various attempts to milk this play for feminist and racial scenes, I have come to believe that you cannot tackle Medea without tackling the gods.

● *At the Lilian Baylis Theatre*

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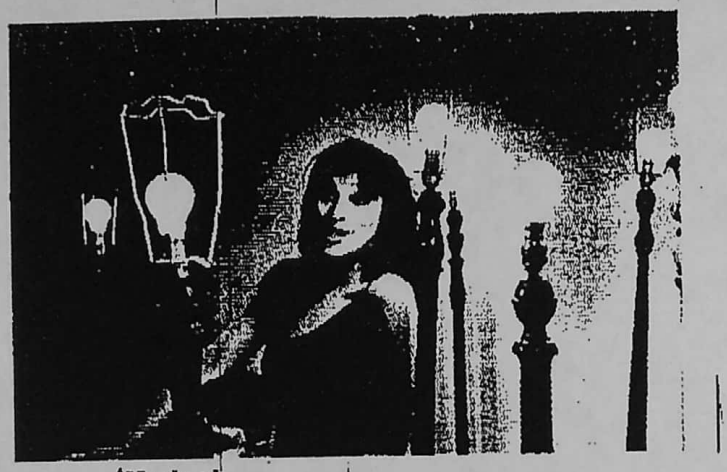

'Medea'

LILIAN BAYLIS

Clare Venables' first production as artistic director of Monstrous Regiment is her own modern version of Euripides' enduring tragedy of betrayal and vengeance. In both the version and production, Venables appears to have sought to domesticate the action of the play, mixing the sweeping drama of the original with something altogether more prosaically contemporary. If this is an attempt to make Medea's reaction, pain and loss a more accessible metaphor for women's experience everywhere, then the very act of trying to make it universal belittles rather than opens out the original and one is left with a piece of drama which falls between two styles.

Lacking the potent passion of Greek tragedy, it also fails to be truly contemporary. The result is stylishly histrionic rather than powerfully historic. Ishia Vennison's Medea is a bouncy, manic woman given to expressing herself through flourishes of red graffiti on white walls, a woman who decides on her children's bloody fate with a jaunty hop and skip and who seems little torn by the pain and horror of her own destiny — she does not propel the action forward with the force of her own anguish. The production has its clever, and even witty, moments but overall it fails to draw from the deep wellspring of emotion which drives Medea to her horrific act of revenge.

Helen Rose

TIME OUT 28.1.92

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