

Medea a bit much for tiny Cotuit stage

Fierce performance unsettling, exhilarating

By Mary Richmond
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First, let me say I love what this group, Theater Under the Stairs is doing at the Cotuit Center for the Arts. They are young, they are bold, and they are creating theater in a way that is fresh, adventurous and new while honoring the tried and true and traditional. They want to share their joy of theater, the history of theater, their fountains of self-expression – and they also want to challenge tradition with new points of view. Founders Holly Erin McCarthy and Chris Compton are brave, talented, ambitious and fun to watch as they develop their voices right alongside and inside their programs.

Now that I've said all that, anyone who is familiar with Euripides' Greek tragedy *Medea* – and that should be all of us who attended high school English classes – knows that *Medea* was one tough broad. She gave new meaning to the old expression, "Don't mess with a woman scorned." Her man left her for another and to say she

was enraged may be the understatement of the ages. She was one angry mama grizzly and even Sarah Palin and her gang armed with rifles better watch out around her. You probably remember that *Medea's* children do not fare so well by the end of the play, literally paying for the sins of their father. This is harsh, vengeful and violent stuff.

The theater company is full of talented actors and they do quite well mixing up the old-school Greek play with Chris Compton's adaptation and new-school mentality. While *Medea* herself wears traditional garb, the men wear modern power suits. The language goes back and forth between the old and new as well and if you're afraid this play is going to be too ancient Greek tragedy for you, think again. It's as up to date a comment on society and the ongoing misunderstandings and abuse between men and women as any modern play. It may be over 2,000 years old, but guess what? Some things just haven't changed that much.

The Theater Under the Stairs is quite literally under the stairs in a creaky old house where the living room is the stage. Some of the action takes place in the rooms above the stage and audience, sometimes quite graphically, which is both inspired and unnerving. The actors use their costumes, minimal sets, a

black background and curtains to wonderful advantage and each character is well developed and an integral part of the whole. A small projector is used throughout to show videos of times past and also to make shadow puppets to depict the children. In the end, trust me, you are glad that you have imagined the children to be mere stick figures.

The acting, direction and staging are all quite good. McCarthy is over the top in a diva performance of the over the top diva *Medea*. P.J. McKey is outstanding as the tutor, Karen McPherson has our full attention as the angst-ridden nurse, Jeanny Wishingstone strikes a compassionate note as the widow, and Rose Webster makes the most of her small part as the orphan. Compton's use of these characters on stage as individuals and also as a mock chorus works quite well.

Dan Groves plays King Creon, a man with an unfortunate mission and message, with just the right note and Anthony J. Teixeira is convincing as the Jason, alternating belligerence with resignation and a glimmer of a weak will. Compton himself plays the agreeable Aegeus and provides a pleasant break in what is otherwise a grim story.

My biggest problem with this presentation of *Medea* isn't the performance but the place in which it is shown. It is way too small and confined a space for the wild and stormy characterization of *Medea* that we are given by the intensely dramatic and energetic Holly Erin McCarthy. When she is



CHRIS COMPTON PHOTO

MEDEA – Say it loud, and there's madness playing at Cotuit Center for the Arts. Holly Erin McCarthy performs as the title character.

crying and yelling she seems to be crying and yelling at you and when she confronts King Creon and her straying husband, Jason, you feel as if you have been caught right in the middle of someone else's very nasty fight. It is actually sort of traumatic and at times almost feels personally abusive. I understand that the intent may be to make this piece more personal and even interactive, but I question the necessity when the play is already so brutal, even from afar.

The day we saw the performance everyone was so overwhelmed at the end that no one seemed to know what to do and there was no applause. It was very uncomfortable. When the actors appeared everyone clapped as loud as they could for this cast did

an amazing, powerful, and unforgettable job performing. But the play itself? It's a tough one. If you don't respond well to people yelling at you, it might be best to avoid this one. If you're up for a feisty performance that will give you something to talk about for days, reserve your tickets in advance for the theater is very small. I for one, can't wait to see what this ambitious group comes up with next, but it's going to take a long time to get *Medea* and some of the images from this play out of my head.

Medea is at the Black Box Theater at the Cotuit Center for the Arts through April 23, with performances Thursday through Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday 2 p.m. For tickets (\$10), call 508-428-0669.