



Cotuit Center presents an imaginative 'Medea'

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COTUIT — It is chilling enough to watch the cold fury and touch of insanity that grip the vengeful Medea at her husband's betrayal, and to watch the anguish of unfaithful Jason when he realizes just how far she will go to cause him emotional pain.

Then there are the noises.

The action, arguments and hand-wringing are both powerful and disturbing in this update of the Greek tragedy "Medea" that Theater Under the Stairs presents on the small living room stage at the Botello Black Box theater. In such an intimate space, you feel like you're a forgotten guest as a domestic battle rages — perhaps an unwitting Nick or Honey from "Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?"

But director Chris Compton uses much more of the small-house location to great advantage as he sets key offstage action on the second floor. When servants talk about their inconsolable mistress, you hear the screams and banging upstairs as the ceiling shakes. And when a determined yet reluctant Medea (Holly Erin McCarthy in a full-throttle, multilayered performance) leaves to commit the unthinkable on her young boys, you hear her slowly climbing the stairs, then silence as you know she's hesitating, then the thump of a falling body over your head.

This 75-minute adaptation of "Medea" by Compton (who also plays a winning Aegeus) is gripping theater. The strong performances range from king (Dan Groves as the authoritative yet manipulatable Creon) to servants and friends (the increasingly horrified Karen McPherson, Jeanny Wishingstone and Rose Webster). As Tutor, PJ McKey has some funny moments, but also the most harrowing speech of the piece as she almost gleefully describes the gruesome offstage murders of princess and father.

McCarthy fills the stage with her seething anger and sorrow, and while Medea clearly goes too far, McCarthy's performance and Compton's adaptation and setting make her somewhat sympathetic: She could be a wife of any era whose husband cheats on her and deserts his family, leaving them little recourse for where to go and what to live on. Anthony J. Teixeira creates a weak-willed, ambitious Jason who tries to justify his actions as best for the family and minimize what his wife has brought to this union, and densely fails to really understand what he's done wrong.

In these characters' gazes in least-guarded moments, there are glimpses of the love that once existed — and the partnership when clever, strong Medea was saving Jason during his Argonaut adventures. A happy past is also emphasized through videos, including the couple's wedding, screened on a blank wall. The device is effective at again broadening the story beyond the small stage, but the room's size becomes a problem when characters are obviously flipping the projector switch, taking viewers out of the story in "this is just a play" moments.

What works better is even simpler: Stick-figure puppets held before the projector's light become shadows of the children on another blank wall. They aren't real, but the images add a surprising amount of poignancy to Medea's dilemma and her final cruel act.

This is an ancient story that goes too far in its revenge, but the performances and Compton's contemporary touches push home its relevance to the anger and pain in any broken family. And this young company has learned quickly how to make this unusual and challenging theater space greatly enhance a production rather than limiting it.