

Medea and the Barista: Exploring the Effect of a Chorus Member's Age

This paper examines the 2013 production of Brendan Kennelly's *Medea* by Mamai Theatre Company. Kennelly, an Irish poet, translated Euripides' *Medea*, adapting the original text to express the rage of women against their male abusers which he heard while resident at St. Patrick's Psychiatric Hospital in Dublin during the summer of 1986 (Kennelly 2006, 70-72). For its US premiere in June 2013 the director Bernadette Clemens created five characters out of Kennelly's singular chorus: a female newscaster, a female attorney for Medea, a female neighbor, a male attorney for Jason, and a female barista. In so doing Clemens created unique scenes within Kennelly's two-act structure that fundamentally altered the relationship between Medea and the chorus of Corinthian women to the point that neither Medea nor the audience can assume that the chorus is capable of being a sympathetic witness. Moreover the different ages of these five choral characters becomes a significant factor in how Medea reacts to their words.

In particular the decision to create the barista has profound implications for the text. The barista delivers the response to Medea's request that the chorus remains silent while she takes her revenge on Jason, a mere four lines in Euripides (*Med.* 267-270) which Kennelly (2006, 91) expands to fourteen. In this response the chorus consents to comply with Medea's request, sympathizing with her unjust suffering, and then announces the entrance of Creon.

In Mamai's production the decision to cast the barista as a traditional college-aged woman, at least half the age of Medea, undercuts her ability to be taken seriously by Medea. Medea's body postures in her chair communicate to the audience her disinterest in the barista's words, and the barista's overly-enthusiastic delivery of her lines paint her as incredibly naïve, presuming as she does that she can identify with the sufferings of a woman old enough to be her mother who has not asked for the approval of her young coffee-maker. Medea has not asked for

the barista's approval because the barista's words are not a response in Mamai's production. The barista's lines open a second scene set at the local Starbucks where Medea will run into Creon. In creating this scene Clemens divorces Medea's address to the Corinthian women from their response. Scene one ends with Medea talking on her mobile telephone as she walks to Starbucks. Her addressee is unknown. But the audience overhears Medea's part of the conversation and effectively assumes the role of chorus, Medea's fellow "sisters" as Kennelly's heroine so often addresses them. In effect it is the audience who are being asked to be silent, to be complicit in Medea's plan for vengeance, and by doing so to become by the play's end accomplices to four murders.

Bibliography

Kennelly, Brendan. *When Then is Now: Three Greek Tragedies*. Northumberland: Bloodaxe Books, 2006. Print.