

# ***Medeas* from Corinth and Cape-Town: Cross-Cultural Encounters, Theatre, and the Teaching Context**

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Theatre is often viewed as an index of the processes of social and cultural transition, and not surprisingly, post-election South African theatre has come under scrutiny in the media recently. In a piece titled 'Looking Back in Nostalgia', Matthew Krouse rather bleakly refers to the 1994/5 FNB Vita National Theatre Awards as an opportunity to 'pay homage to founding fathers, and stroke their fledglings, encouraging them to follow traditional paths'. At the same time, he sees the trend towards revivals of works like the Junction Avenue Theatre Company's *Sophiatown* (1986) and Fugard/Ntshona/Kani's collaborative work, *The Island* (1973), as performing a necessary function in preserving the memory of Apartheid struggles. Of *The Island* which was judged the Play of the Year, Derek Wilson says, 'It has become like fine wine which, having been laid down, has matured over the years', but Wilson (1995:8) wonders about the inclusion of the 'play within a play', a section of Sophocles' *Antigone*, suggesting that

it could be argued that Fugard and Co [sic] had run out of original thoughts and ideas and had to borrow from outside to argue their point more successfully.

Just how far off the mark Wilson's observation is becomes evident in Nelson Mandela's account of what he took out of reading classic Greek plays while on Robben island, and his one memorable acting role on the island, 'that of Creon, the king of Thebes, in Sophocles' *Antigone*' (*Long Walk to Freedom*, 1994:540).

In the light of Krause and Wilson's comments it might appear incongruous that the award for the Production of a New South African Play went to another re-working of classical myth, *Medea*, directed by Mark Fleishman and Jenny Reznick, with the Jazzart dancers. However, speaking on the future of theatre in South Africa, Jay Pather of Jazzart claims that what is needed now is a radical redistribution of funding, that theatre venues should be accessible to all, and, tellingly, that critics should be gagged 'till they know what they are writing about'. According to Pather (1995:65):

In times of transition we either make a courageous surge forward, shake off the ghosts, loosen up and make space for something to grow, or we take up all the safe options to protect ourselves from falling.

I will argue that far from being a 'safe option', the South African adaptation of the Medea myth serves as an example of a work that 'shake[s] off the ghosts' of the past even in the process of invoking them, and in so doing makes 'space for something to grow'. This production presents not just an innovative re-writing of the Medea myth, but gives physical shape to the performance of cross-cultural exchanges in post-election South Africa. More particularly, I hope to show how works like Fleishman/Jazzart's *Medea* can be useful for discussing issues associated with multilingualism and working in culturally heterogeneous teaching contexts. Here discussion draws on the experience of taking a group of postgraduate students to see the play during its original run in Cape Town. The focus will be on the way the performance unsettles familiar (mainly Western) notions about cultural and gender difference, family, motherhood, and romantic love. This, I suggest, provides the basis for enabling students to theorise their own responses to social transformation, which seems important, given the concern with the resurgence of discourses of racial identity that have featured prominently both in the press and in academia. Also, seeing the performance shortly after the April 1994 election suggested that a work like Fleishman/Jazzart's *Medea* avoids some of the pitfalls associated with multiculturalism in the South African context.

Interestingly, Euripides' play has been receiving renewed attention in Europe and elsewhere recently and interpretations of *Medea* in which the 'barbaric' princess from Colchis kills her two young sons to punish her Greek husband Jason for wanting to send her back into exile have been used to explore the effects of personal betrayal and political exile in a variety of contemporary contexts. (Fleishman's idea for a South African *Medea* with Jazzart dancers as chorus was inspired by seeing an East European production at the Edinburgh Festival.) In her study of the dramatic versions of the Medea myth over the millennia, Betine Van Zyl-Smit points out that

the large number of divergent versions of Euripides' interpretation demonstrate that his *Medea* 'is not easily or unambiguously interpreted'. She mentions that Medea's position as a foreigner and a barbarian is the focus of a number of modern dramatists. In these modern versions, 'the heroine is no longer of a different and inferior culture, but of a different and despised race' (Van Zyl-Smith 1992:72). In her discussion of an earlier South African version of the play, Guy Butler's *Demea* (in which Medea is a Tembu princess and the Jason character a British officer during the nineteenth century Peninsula Wars), she quotes Butler's explanation that,

In writing *Demea*, I have turned [Euripides'] *Medea* into a political allegory of the South African situation as I saw it, at the height of the idealistic Verwoerdian mania (Van Zyl-Smit 1992:75).

Butler's treatment of cultural and racial prejudice was however slated as a 'vastly dated and simplified view of the Great SA Race Problem' (De Kock in Van-Zyl Smit 1992:80)<sup>1</sup>.

Far from being another political allegory of South African racial politics, Fleishman/Jazzart's production moves across space and time drawing on a variety of sources apart from Euripides, including Seneca and Appolonius of Rhodes. The gestural language of the chorus of dancers is used to give mainly non-verbal expression to the representation of Medea as 'other' (female and native), as well as to the emotional sub-text which leads to her horrific child-slaying. Significantly, Fleishman's script also draws on the cast's own linguistic and cultural contexts, and there is frequent code-switching between English, Afrikaans, Xhosa, Tamil, and creolised versions of some of these languages. This code-switching is incorporated into the body languages and hybrid dance styles that undercut conventional expectations in ways that are unsettling, but suggest possibilities for 'new' ways of reading such interactions. According to Fleishman (see Friedman 1996:30), the play is about

two cultures that are incomprehensible to one another, about a woman who takes on the dressings of her lover's world and who, in the process, loses her own history and sense of self.

On the other hand, Jennie Rezneck, referring to the different languages and movement codes of the play says:

<sup>1</sup> Van Zyl-Smit describes the critically hostile reaction to Butler's play which was first performed in 1990, though written thirty years previously. For instance, Guy Willoughby (1992:80) saw it as 'veritable proof of the deadness of a certain brand of starry-eyed liberalism in the "new South Africa"'.

By articulating different languages the production attempts to come to terms with the issues of multi-culturalism and multilingualism .... Yet *Medea* remains an extremely personal story (quoted by Friedman 1996:30).

Relating Rezneck's comments to the teaching context, one notes that the shift from a political dispensation constructed in terms of binary categories has resulted in a concomitant shift from discourses of opposition to an emphasis on 'difference'. The debates around multiculturalism and the increasing interest in cultural studies in curriculum development in many English Departments, are of course also indicative of the challenges posed by the multilingual and culturally heterogeneous teaching context which is increasingly becoming the norm for South African universities. Visual and other media have been introduced as appropriate mediating texts because, as Jenny Williams (1992:25) points out, "'faulty English" may mirror the dynamics of the social context in which it has evolved"<sup>2</sup>. However, in promoting multiculturalism in curriculum development and teaching practice, care should be taken that this does not result in glossing over unequal power relations that might be masked by an emphasis on 'difference', reminiscent of the 'separate but (un)equal' apartheid paradigm.

While it is useful to note some of the critiques of multiculturalism from the radical left situated in metropolitan centres, it is also necessary to consider how we relate to these debates. For instance, in a forum discussion on multiculturalism and literary representation in the North American context, Henry Louis Gates comments on the concerns of cultural critics like E. San Juan and Hazel Carby about the way multiculturalism glosses over unequal power relations between racially inflected dominant and subordinate groups<sup>3</sup>. Gates (1993:6) takes issue with this, claiming that multiculturalism is 'concerned with the representation not of difference, but of cultural identities'. According to Gates (1993:12), there is more to be feared from the 'final solutions' of essentialist and fundamentalist culturalist arguments than from a multiculturalism which

lets us remember that identities are always in dialogue, that they exist only in relation to one another, and they are, like everything else, sites of contest and negotiation, self-fashioning and refashioning.

<sup>2</sup> Williams (1992:25) argues that, because of its popular appeal, film 'might be the most effective form through which literary works could reach a wide public and at the same time act as subversive force against ruling hegemonies'.

<sup>3</sup> Gates (1993:7) quotes Carby's objection that: 'The paradigm of multiculturalism actually excludes the concept of dominant and subordinate cultures—either indigenous or migrant—and fails to recognize that the existence of racism relates to the possession and exercise of politico-economic control and authority and also to forms of resistance to the power of dominant social groups'.

On the other hand, Sara Suleri (1993:17) observes that:

As the identity formation of the nation state becomes problematic, the question of diverse cultural locations self-evidently gains in critical significance.

In South Africa there have indeed been some rather unexpected cultural mutations and appropriations, such as the much publicised transformation of previously vilified Springbok rugby team with its apartheid sports associations, into the popularly embraced 'amabokoboko'. At the same time, however, there has been little change in 'identity formation' for people identified as 'white' and 'black' living in the rural heartlands<sup>4</sup>.

This is demonstrated in an anecdote involving the Hearts and Eyes Theatre Collective who undertook a project called *Journey*, which involved using material based on their experience of a literal 5,000 kilometre journey to the 1995 Grahamstown Festival. According to director Peter Hayes, although the play was never intended as a polemic, 'an emerging theme is that our one-year-old democracy has barely reached the dry outer reaches of South Africa'. One of the actors, Jay Pather, mentions that

in an all-white school in Namaqualand the only coloured pupil was living in a room at the back of the school while the other students were living in a hostel (quoted in Pearce 1995:3).

While mindful of these incongruities, my reading of the re-positionings of identity as performed in culturally syncretic works such as Fleishman/Jazzarts's *Medea*, is informed by the notion that:

Instead of situating literature and other arts as both marginal to, and reifying of, cultural practices, aesthetic forms might be taken as central to the epistemological and ethical possibilities of culture's emergence (Stewart 1993:14).

It is at moments of transition which put pressure on existing political, social, cultural and gendered identities, that cross-cultural exchanges should be foregrounded in our readings of cultural production.

Theatre, as Temple Hauptfleisch (1989) observes, is an ideal medium for representing the polydialectical urban South African experience. The point has been made that as many of our students speak four to five languages, 'It's time to stop talking about students' "language problem" when we mean "problems with English"' (Cornell 1994:37). However, in view of some of the questions raised by multilingualism and multiculturalism,

<sup>4</sup> While the terms 'black' or 'white', as Paul Gready (1994:164) points out, have in the past signified 'ideological identities', the new democracy has not yet managed to obliterate racial coding.

it seems to me that what we need is not a multicultural, but a cross-cultural model, in which students are made aware of factors that cut across the familiar race/class/gender dichotomies, such as geographical location, rural and urban experience, age, and of course language and the cultural values and belief systems that are associated with the variety of languages spoken in the Western Cape.

The use of multilingual texts and performance contexts offers scope for a non-hierarchical learning situation where 'knowledge' is expanded to include oral and vernacular knowledges often not validated in academic discourses. This is achieved via information that students themselves present to the group or class, so undoing the 'top-down' relationship between lecturer and student. Such information is not limited to familiarity with other languages, but also applies to regional dialects, and to place. In other words, students act as 'cultural insiders' at different levels<sup>5</sup>. Another aspect that will be considered is the way the performance context serves to free students to consider alternatives to given or traditional assumptions about, for example, gendered and racial identities, through seeing the way 'roles' are subverted, literally, in performance. In using the multilingual performance text, ideas and concepts are dealt with not only at an intellectual level, but also given a human shape in performance, thereby including an 'affective' or emotional dimension in the response. In addition, the use of 'voices' in dramatic dialogue encourages a reading that takes cognisance of the way information is interpreted and presented discursively by voices that are engaged in conversation or debate. In other words, it encourages argument as a strategy for communicating and organising ideas.

The University of the Western Cape, like most of South Africa's historically black universities, does not have a drama department. Nevertheless, as suggested earlier, the move towards cultural studies in many English departments has resulted in attempts to engage with recent cultural production at a variety of levels. This 'case study' concerns the experience of a group of postgraduate students, for some of whom attending a performance at a venue like the Nico Arena theatre in Cape Town was itself a new experience. As Fleishman and Jenny Reznick use the theatrical effects associated with physical theatre in their production, students were encouraged to comment on the function of the 'affect' in their responses to the work. Physical theatre aims to confront and often shock spectators at a deeply emotional level, and this was achieved in this production by loud and sudden drum beats, abrupt scene changes, and, above all, the physicality of the performance. The close proximity of the actors to the spectators resulted

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<sup>5</sup> The author wishes to convey her thanks to 1994 Honours and Masters students for their contributions in these seminars.

in expressions of discomfort like, 'It's all a bit much!' or alternatively, 'Absolutely stunning/exhilarating!'. Some might consider this out of keeping with the formality of the academic discourse of literary studies; such strategies of avant-garde theatre are after all designed to effect what Christopher Innes (1994) calls 'spiritual', not intellectual, transformation in their spectators. Nevertheless, it can be argued that, particularly at post-graduate level, such 'discomfort' can become a catalyst that enables students to engage in new ways with texts that are produced during a period of social and political transition.

Significantly, one of the features of the 'new' South African theatre has been an emphasis on dance drama which employs a syncretism of African and Western aesthetics, and by focusing on gestural codes, loosens the grip of the realist tradition that has dominated much of the cultural production of the last two decades. Moreover, also noticeable is an emphasis on the body itself as site of contending identities<sup>6</sup>. Commenting on the important educational function of groups like The First Physical Theatre Company, Gary Gordon argues that the focus on the body is politically significant because traditionally, particularly in Western society, the body has been ignored in education: 'it has been denied recognition alongside the intellectual and the scientific as worthwhile pursuit' (quoted in Handley 1995:55). This somewhat unorthodox, and to some no doubt dangerously 'unintellectual' approach, provides challenges for the lecturer who finds herself placed in the same situation as the students: she has read Euripides' *Medea*, but she is as unfamiliar with this particular interpretation and performance as the students are at the moment of reception. At a recent conference on African literature in South Africa, Mbulelo Mzamane (1995) argued that the post-election period calls not for an 'exclusive' new canon of African texts, but rather for a comparative (inclusive) study of differently situated texts; this becomes an important aspect in reading local South African and African literatures. On the other hand, Temple Hauptfleisch (1992) has suggested that African theatre has more in common with ancient Greek theatre than with European theatre, and this comment provides a useful point of departure for discussion of the *Medea* performance. Similarly, Michael Picardie (1991) describes South African theatre as predominantly Afro-Western theatre, with an inevitably hybrid tradition.

Getting students to identify the syncretism of languages and theatrical

<sup>6</sup> An important role in performing some of these cultural transformations has been played by, for instance, Jay Pather and Alfred Hinkel of Jazzart, Peter Hayes of Hearts and Eyes Theatre Collective and Prof Gary Gordon of The First Physical Theatre Company.

styles obviously works best within a culturally heterogeneous teaching context. In other words, the perceived language 'problem' is translated into the facilitating teaching context. As suggested earlier, the different knowledges available result in a shared exchange of information: someone will recognise that Medea's father is speaking Tamil, not gibberish as others might have thought, and someone else will note that a traditional Xhosa *isibongo* or praisesong is sung to Aetes, Medea's father, on Jason's arrival. In other words, the piece uses different language and cultural contexts in a way that refuses 'fixing' in a particular colonial context. Cellular phones and divorce settlements (for the scenes in Corinth) co-exist with the rituals of ancient cultures (suggestive of the Khoisan or Incas) in the scenes on the island of Colchis. Jason's spectacular arrival by parachute, wearing a suit, is made all the more startling by the actor, Kurt Wurtzman's amazingly tall physical presence, whereas Aetes is played and danced 'exotically' by Jay Pather, himself of Indian descent.

Traditionally, the opening of the play sets the scene for Medea's bitter emotional turmoil as she discovers Jason's betrayal of her love. Here one of the issues that engaged students was the use of 'Kaaps', a Cape version of Afrikaans, by the nurse who accompanies Medea into exile. Students who as cultural insiders felt closest to this language were initially concerned that Kaaps was once again being used as a language of ridicule, in keeping with the often comic caricature of 'the Cape coloured' in the popular imagination—even though the context here was a serious one. In fact, the nurse's first words to Medea who lies weeping on the sand are in Kaaps. Her words, 'Staan op, meisie, jy's a Colchian' caused a *frisson* in the audience, as Medea had just been speaking Standard English (the equivalent of Greek) to Jason and Creon, and this address in Kaaps suggests her identification with a dispossessed people, whose language is a South African creole. Concrete expression was given to this when the actress playing Medea (Bo Petersen) removed her (Westernised) straighthaired wig, to show her shorn (indigenous/Khoi/Colchian) head beneath. In keeping with Jazzart's concern with the 'play' of identity, Bo Petersen, in terms of previous racial classification laws, is 'white', while Dawn Landsberg who plays the nurse has the high cheekbones associated with the original Khoi inhabitants. In the crucial scene where the nurse announces the horrifying death (by Medea's magical poison) of her rival, the language switches between colloquial English and Afrikaans. This mixing of languages occasioned heated debate, with some students feeling that it undermined the seriousness of the incident described here. However, in the original Greek play, it was a convention that horrifying events were not presented on stage, but reported by an ordinary person, such as a messenger or shepherd, whose words would have an added poignancy by their colloquial vernacular quality. It could be argued that this 'mixture'



of languages was used not as a comic dialect, but to give Kaaps the status of a language in its own right; after all, Kaaps is widely in use on the Cape Flats where the University of the Western Cape (UWC) is located.

These debates around language highlighted the students' own preconceptions about dominant and standard languages in relation to vernacular usages. This lead to discussion of what languages are appropriate to particular contexts—but without falling back into the binary trap of standard and non-standard, dominant and subordinate languages. At the same time, one should not see this as a retreat into relativism or an 'anything goes' mode; on the contrary, such discussions emphasise the use of appropriate language registers. Interestingly, Medea's ambivalent status is suggested in her ability to speak Greek/English. Acting as go-between in a scene that suggests the unequal barter between the colonised (Aetes and the Colchians) and the coloniser (Jason), she betrays her father and brother by helping Jason to steal the golden fleece because of her passionate infatuation with him.

Students were asked to explore the way gender and race categories are destabilised in performance and how this is linked to the multilingual context. For instance, the non-gender-specific clothes worn by the dancers ranged from sinisterly uniform trenchcoats with fashionable Doc Martens boots for the scenes on Corinth, to loin cloths or exotic costumes for the scenes in Colchis. These stark contrasts were, however, subverted by the thick layer of sea sand covering the stage area throughout, and, as some students suggested, Medea's awkward gait over this surface in her contemporary highheeled shoes suggested her uncomfortable status in the Greek/Western setting. On Colchis, however, she moves with speed and grace in the 'natural' environment of the beach. Significantly, Jason's rejection of her is represented in terms of familiar racial stereotyping concerning her appearance, smell, and hair. A comic touch (and there are several) is the way she frequently checks her make-up in a little pocket mirror while in Corinth; yet at the end these 'dressings of her lover's world' are discarded as she reverts to her regal Colchian dress when she prepares for her revenge. At the same time, her ambivalent identity in Corinth is suggested by the fact that her one son is 'white' and the other is 'black'. A further incongruous touch is the way the boys are clad in the ubiquitous grey flannel shorts and white shirts of the typical South African schoolboy, until finally she dresses them in loincloths in preparation for what appears to be a sacrifice.

In the play different cultural identities are represented by means of the dancers' individual physiques, in contrast to the homogeneity of body shape associated with conventional dance companies. This lead to discussions around the concept of 'the body' which were not limited to a Foucauldian

analysis of power and the socially constructed body, but focused also on living, performing bodies. Referring to the body as receptor of cultural signs and symbols, Liane Loots (1995:51) says that given the power dynamics operating in South African society,

this concept of the body as receptor has important implications for how women (and men) construct the use of their bodies; not only within day to day living but in the art that they generate.

For instance, in this production bodies move interchangeably: women lift men and other women, men lift men and women—yet, when the performers' bodies are not hidden underneath trenchcoats, their physical differences are emphasised.

Jazzart has been described as a controversial company in search of a 'democratic dance' which uses dance as an educational and self-help tool in a variety of communities (Sichel 1994:50). The particular relevance of this to us at UWC is the emphasis on destabilising (en)gendered cultural identities during the current period of reconstruction. Here the interaction of bodies with different physical features become 'signifiers' in this process. Significantly, the theory behind Jazzart's performance techniques has parallels with the claims made by Gordon on the political significance of the body, namely, that social stresses and strains and tensions are manifested in the body of the individual. If, however, this body is freed through movement,

that is, if this body is made to realize what it can do, this automatically goes to the mind. Once people are confident about moving their bodies, they will also be confident about other aspects of their lives and take control over their lives (Quoted by Schechner 1991:14)<sup>7</sup>.

The small group situation where one can engage in intense debate following upon a joint excursion to a performance (which then becomes the cultural text under discussion) provides a useful forum for generating discussion around some of the issues raised by the cross-cultural encounters

<sup>7</sup> Richard Schechner is quoting a Community Arts Project document on Jazzart policy formulated by Jay Pather and Alfred Hinkel. At that time Jazzart received no government funding; however, in 1992 it joined forces with Capab. The company is again under threat in the light of the recent funding cuts which have resulted in Capab disbanding its drama department. Nevertheless, Jazzart has embarked on extensive tours of the townships and schools. *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, an educational dance drama on sexual harassment and rape, was presented at UWC during 1994. Obviously, watching *Medea* at the Nico Arena theatre was a different experience from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which was presented, appropriately, in a lecture venue during lunchtime, with interruptions by incoming students, technical hitches, etc. Also, in keeping with its educational thrust, this show was introduced by members of the Gender Equity Unit and Nicro.

both as performed in the play, and in the teaching context. Moreover, the affective response elicited by aspects of physical theatre functions as a vehicle for defamiliarisation, enabling students to discuss the controversial issue of racism not just at an academic, structural level, but also at a deeply personal level. This, suggests South African cultural theorist, Neville Alexander, is a vital aspect of working towards a non-racial society<sup>8</sup>. At the same time, as cultural insiders with access to different types of knowledge, students can contribute to the material that is being discussed in lectures. In the process students become active participants, rather than imbibing knowledge passively. The lecturing context becomes a space where 'other' voices are heard and noted, but also examined critically within an academic framework. Cross-cultural texts like Fleishman/Jazzart's *Medea* thus offer scope for reaching/teaching across a variety of cultural backgrounds in order to challenge given assumptions about knowledge, power, (en)gendered identity and culture. More importantly, this should enable students to theorise their own readings of texts, as informed by an integrated response to a variety of aesthetic forms, and not limited to 'prescribed works' to be studied in the classroom.

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<sup>8</sup> This was a comment made during a radio programme on racism (SAFM AM Live October 5, 1995). More recently, at a forum on racism and the debates around what has been termed perceived 'Colourism' at the University of the Western Cape, Alexander suggested that one cannot deal with racism only at a structural or administrative level. Each individual needs to confront socially constructed racial prejudice at a psychic level as well. In a response titled, 'We are never only South Africans' ( *The Cape Times* 4 April 1996), Zimitri Erasmus takes issue with Alexander's concern with ethnic identity, and that 'calling oneself coloured is inherently racist'. Says Erasmus, we should acknowledge 'that coloured identities are historically specific social constructions which have real effects in everyday life' (see also articles by Wilmot James in *The Cape Times* 26 March and 4 April 1996).

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