

Cultural Daily

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Tragic and Comic Heroines: Medea, Lily Dare

David Sheward · Wednesday, February 12th, 2020

Euripides' *Medea*, the unforgettable story of a scorned woman whose thirst for revenge drives her to slaughter her own children, has reverberated through the ages, transcending time and culture. Along with Hedda Gabbler, it is the great role actresses long to play. Judith Anderson, Zoe Caldwell, Diana Rigg and Fiona Shaw drenched Broadway in blood, with the first three winning Tony Awards. Maria Callas starred in a film edition. Neil LaBute and Michael-John LaChiusa have created modern versions and just this past summer, Luis Alfaro transported the tale from ancient Greece to modern Queens while addressing immigration issues in *Mojada*.



Rose Byrne and Bobby Cannavale in *Medea*.

Credit: Richard Termine

Playwright-director Simon Stone has joined the many adapters and given the tragedy a decidedly contemporary twist. Unfortunately, his sleek, minimalist production is more like an episode of *Law & Order* than a horrifying glimpse into the depths of humanity. In his retelling, now on view at Brooklyn Academy of Music's Harvey Theater after an international tour, *Medea*, called Anna, is a medical research scientist rather than a sorceress. Her unfaithful husband Jason is now Luke, a fellow doctor who has left Anna for the daughter of the pharmaceutical corporation CEO who employs them both. Stone's taut, 75-minute script picks up after Anna has attempted to poison Luke and she is desperately trying to get him back.

In front of Bob Cousins' stark, all-white set, the tragedy unfolds, with distracting videos playing overhead on a giant screen. The primal rage infusing the Greek original is replaced with petty squabbles and seamy sexual scenes. Simon's idea of drawing parallels between Medea's ancient status as an outsider and today's still-sexist culture is a worthy one, but he fails to find equivalent power in his modern choices. Deborah Warner's 2002 staging with Fiona Shaw fared better by treating the heroine as a victim of celebrity culture.



Gabriel Amoroso, Bobby Cannavale, Rose Byrne, and Emeka Guindo in *Medea*.

Credit: Richard Termine

Rose Byrne's Anna is whiny rather majestic and Bobby Cannavale's Lucas also lacks heft. Each has individual moments of authenticity, such as Byrne's shattered despair when she realizes her marriage is really over and Cannavale's final devastation when his family is destroyed. The pair, who are married off-stage, possess chemistry, but it's not the inferno lit by Euripides. The

supporting cast are convincing as helpless witnesses to an inescapable tragedy. Madeline Weinstein's not-so-innocent young princess subtly hides her manipulative skills while Dylan Baker is appropriately officious and commanding as her no-nonsense executive daddy. Jordan Boatman and Victor Almanzar do as much as they can with bystander roles of social worker and supervisor of Anna's rehabilitation job. At the performance attended, Anna and Lucas's young sons were given personality by Gabriel Amoroso and Emeka Guindo.

Simon's production does exhibit a cool, arresting style, rather like a photo shoot for a fashion magazine. While the doomed lovers approach the climax of their dance of death, a cascade of black ashes floods the stage, foreshadowing their final fate. It's an arresting image, but not enough to capture the original essence of betrayal and horror.



Jennifer Van Dyke, Christopher Borg, and Charles Busch in *The Confession of Lily Dare*.

Credit: Carol Rosegg

At the other end of the theatrical spectrum, Charles Busch's farcical *The Confession of Lily Dare*, presented by Primary Stages at the Cherry Lane Theatre, also features a strong female lead addressing her wrongs with murder. As in his previous satires such as *The Lady in Question* and *Red Scare on Sunset*, she played in drag by the ever-inventive Busch with the aide of Jessica Jahn's dazzling costumes and Katherine Carr's wig design. (Rachel Townsend designed the sumptuous costumes for the rest of the company.) This hilarious spoof is more successful in its aim of lampooning Hollywood's trite attempts at depicting women's tragedies than Simon's serious stab at updating one.



Nancy Anderson and Charles Busch in *The Confession of Lily Dare*.

Credit: Carol Rosegg

The diva is Lily Dare, modeled on the heroines of soapy cinema melodramas as *Madame X*, *Stella Dallas*, *To Each His Own*, and *The Sin of Madelon Claudet*. Each of these guilty pleasures features a fallen woman sacrificing all for the child that doesn't even know her. Busch miraculously channels Audrey Hepburn, Marlene Dietrich, Joan Crawford, and Bette Davis as she journeys from innocent convent girl to sexy cabaret canary to tough-as-nails madame. His Lily is both a pastiche of glamour gal stereotypes and genuine mother. Carl Andress' staging combines the lunacy of the *Carol Burnett Show* movie parodies with ribald adult humor as well as a touch of honest pathos.

Busch is supported by a troupe of versatile clowns including Nancy Anderson's faithful, much-married sidekick, Kendal Sparks's jovial pal, Howard McMillan's oily villain, and Christopher Borg and Jennifer Van Dyck in multiple roles playing an octet of eccentric character parts. There's more talent, laughs, and Hollywood nostalgia in *The Confession of Lily Dare* than a week-long TCM binge.

Medea: Jan. 30—March 8. Harvey Theater at BAM Strong, Brooklyn Academy of Music, 651 Fulton St., Brooklyn, NY. Tue—Fri 7:30pm, Sat 2pm & 7:30pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: one hour and 20 mins. with no intermission. \$45—\$195. (718) 636-4100. www.bam.org.

The Confession of Lily Dare: Jan. 29—March 5. Primary Stages at the Cherry Lane Theater, 38 Commerce St., NYC. Tue—Fri 8pm, Sat 2pm & 8pm, Sun 3pm. Running time: two hours with one intermission. \$82—\$102. (866) 811-4111. www.ovationtix.com

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