

## Really Desperate Housewife: "Medea," at Lincoln Park through July 15

Written by Mike Schulz

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Euripides' *Medea*, the title character of the Greek drama currently being produced in Rock Island's Lincoln Park, is a vengeful sorceress who - after discovering the unfaithfulness of her lover, Jason - kills Jason's wife, the king of Corinth, and, in her most monstrous act, her two young sons. And while I'm not sure what it says about *me*, I may have had more sheer *fun* at this Genesisius Guild endeavor than at any other I've seen over the past two years. With superior direction by Peggy Hanske, this

*Medea*

is a vibrantly dramatic, unexpectedly funny, and completely accessible version of the classic tale, and it's the most consistently well-acted Genesisius Guild production I've yet seen.

The *Medea* program doesn't reveal who wrote the adaptation, but audiences who dread the thought of a stiff, stoic evening of Greek tragedy should know that this presentation has all the nasty vitality of a prime-time soap opera; the leading figures may wear Greek masks of the period, but their fervent readings have a modern-day immediacy. (The characters' dialogue appears to have been subtly modernized, too, as I doubt "What? You don't *trust me*

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?" and "Forget I said anything" are *literal* translations.)

Hanske keeps this 90-minute one-act moving swiftly and with escalating force, and she often peppers her scenes with subtly comedic curlicues; after Jason (James J. Loula) makes a disparaging remark about how the world would be better off without women, *Medea's* all-female Chorus figures take a moment to look appalled, then huffily turn their backs on him. Yet the director is just as inspired with the play's moments of high drama - the off-stage execution of Medea's children (Kylie Jansen and Josie Kirkbride), with their tortured shrieks piercing the night air, made for a thrillingly disturbing sequence.

Not including the evening's opening processional, which shows off both Ellen Dixon's sensationally effective costumes and the leading performers' *faces*, our introduction to Medea herself also comes from off-stage. "O

*God*

!" she wails in agony and grief. "What shall I

*do*

?!" The heartache of the reading is chilling, but I'd be lying if I didn't admit to a huge grin upon hearing it, as the line's timbre, and the emotional commitment behind it, could only come from Patti Flaherty.



What an exhilarating performance! Even those of us who are routinely in thrall to this actress' talents may not be prepared for how multifaceted her work is here. Medea's sorrow and anger are more than palpable - "Hell hath no fury" *indeed* - and Flaherty's divine, almost playful wickedness makes you laugh *while* you shudder; the way she reflexively kicks up her heels upon news of her rival's death, and the heartless manner in which she responds to Jason's disintegration ("Go home. Your wife needs

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to be buried."), show a performer in full, glorious acceptance of her character's hatefulness. One after another, Flaherty's scenes deliver a giddy theatrical charge.

*Medea's* other cast members provide expert support. Loula makes for a wonderfully egocentric Jason - his delivery of "I'm sure my wife values me above any gift" is alpha-male perfection - and his performance becomes legitimately shattering; the actor's final, anguished scene is the best work I've ever seen from him. Patti Flaherty's equally gifted husband, Pat, provides a spectacularly fiery cameo as Creon, and Dee Canfield's Nurse registers a world of sorrow in her pained, elegant readings.

Bob Hanske's lamentations as the Messenger are marvelously vigorous - was it my imagination on Saturday night, or were his thunderous speeches, at one point, accompanied by actual, faraway *thunder*? - while Doug Adkins and Neil Friberg, as Aegeus and Medea's tutor, are as touchingly understated as their co-stars are impassioned.

And the 14 women who constitute the Chorus, led by the very fine Rae Mary, are really noteworthy. The actresses' connection to the material is evidenced though their focused expressions and lovely, grounded physicality - they truly appear to be *feeling* the words they're hearing - and several read their lines stunningly well; a good half-dozen already seem promising enough to play Medea themselves one day. And I say let 'em - this *Medea* is so good that I'd be content for Genesis Guild to make it an *annual* presentation.

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