

Clara Armand

Dialogism and the Theatre Event: Deborah Warner and Fiona Shaw's 'Medea', 2001

The long-standing artistic collaboration between director Deborah Warner and actress Fiona Shaw has, argues Clara Armand, raised the powers of performance to a form of genuine authorship. Her article explores the distinctive qualities of their scenic writing as evident in the production of *Medea* which transferred from the Abbey Theatre to London's West End on 30 January 2001, and went on to play at the Queen's Theatre for over ten weeks. She makes comparisons between the production of *Medea* and those of the earlier *Footfalls* and *Richard II*, focusing on Warner's challenging ways of transforming pre-existing playtexts and theatrical spaces so as to enunciate statements about the contemporary world. Shaw's interpretation of *Medea* is explored with an emphasis on the actress's ability to maintain truthful identification with the dramatic character and make it reverberate with her own critical social stance as an artist. The discussion of *Medea* as seen at the Queen's Theatre is developed in the light of Bakhtin's concept of dialogism and related ideas. The article is complemented by the interview with Fiona Shaw which follows. Clara Armand teaches acting and directs at the Stratford Circus Theatre in Stratford East, and is currently a doctoral student at the University of Reading.

MEDEA opened at the Abbey Theatre in May 2000, and on 30 January 2001 moved to the Queen's Theatre on Shaftesbury Avenue. The production made a curious addition to the West End theatre scene in a season when the repertoire abounded in such productions as Pinter's *The Caretaker* at the Comedy Theatre and Yasmina Reza's *Art* at Wyndham's. It also had as near-neighbours comedy dramas and upbeat musicals, among them Linda Marlowe's one-woman performance *Berkoff's Women* at the New Ambassadors Theatre and Andrew Lloyd Webber and Ben Elton's *The Beautiful Game* at the Cambridge – a typical West End repertoire, guided by canonical convention and formulae, whereas Warner and Shaw's body of work has developed a distinctive tendency to challenge tradition and convention.

Even those who had not seen their production of *Footfalls* at the Garrick Theatre would have read about the ban placed on the production by the Beckett Estate following a conflict over the transposition of two lines and the 'vignette' configuration of the acting area. The Beckett Estate had declared that

'the playtext's stage directions had not been followed'.¹ Arguably, a sanction of that sort would have been less likely if performances subverting the proscenium convention were part of the West End's theatrical tradition.

Location, Play, Artistic Platform

'Location', 'play', and 'artistic platform' are three *paradigmatic identities* which determine the fundamental channels of communication through which any theatrical performance reaches its audience. These three identities are mutually referential. Each is made up of a network of expressive materials. There is never a single, strictly straightforward type of direct discourse – whether artistic or ordinary/everyday. The three identities which have been isolated here for the sake of analysis consist of socially formed signs that fluctuate and interact – among themselves, and with the signs that constitute the other two identities – as they address a particular audience. As Maria Shevtsova argues, socio-cultural analysis focuses on the interdependencies between signs and society: 'Signs are

brought about *by someone in relation to someone else*. Society is in the signs because it produces them.² Furthermore, all signs are 'historically, socially, and culturally saturated' and 'communicability depends on how they are made, where, and to whom, for which precise purposes'.³

'Location' is made up of a network of expressive materials organized by various socially rooted codes and subcodes (in relation to its context, audience composition, and their predominant tastes and values; hence commercial factors determine preferences of repertoire and the architectural structure of the theatre building). 'Play' is constructed in relation to its socio-historical context, literary convention, and the predominant values it mediates. The discourse between 'location' and 'play' can be seen as an interaction between *sociocultural contexts*. Plays communicate their meanings through a hiatus determined by the sociocultural distinctiveness of their time-place setting and the time-place zone of their reception.

According to Shevtsova, Bakhtin's idea of the *chronotope*, 'the particular socio-historical time-place that engenders a particular kind of sign-making', is especially useful for performance theory in explaining the ways in which a play mediates meanings across a hiatus.⁴ She also observes that period or historical plays are not the only ones that are socioculturally removed from the context of their reception. A play's chronotope may be temporally analogous to the chronotope of its perception, but a hiatus between them always does exist, whether spatial, cultural, or ideological.

Medea has to communicate its meanings across a span of 2,500 years, reaching us through the screen of translation. Euripides' play cannot be communicated to contemporary audiences by using the forms and means that appealed to the audiences of ancient Greece. 'Artistic platform', the *idea-system* that motivates an individual artist's choices of 'form' throughout a continuous artistic journey, can only be identified in relation to 'play' and 'theatrical location'.

The issues raised thus far foreground the discussion of another interrelated area – the

set of factors which determines an individual artist's aesthetic choices from the artistic production available to him/her. Ideas and values are socially formed, but they are arguably also formed under the influence of deeply personal, innate qualities and sub-conscious affinities, and are mediated by the individual artist's preferred language, genre, style, and aesthetic vocabulary.

Warner/Shaw's *artistic platform* has a strong critical and social outlook. It suggests a constantly searching and questioning way of thinking, and is guided by the principle of creating new audiences. Warner observes:

*Newness is a difficult thing, isn't it? I would be the last person to do something for the sake of the new but, in fact, we mean something more than that because it's not good to go into a theatre and think, 'Oh God, here we go. I recognize everything.' I don't think the act of creating theatre is about making the audience recognize things, or feel comfortable – or bored. This isn't conducive to what an evening in the theatre ought to be, and, more often than not, my heart sinks when I walk into theatres now. I recognize it. Also, there are so many references from other productions. It's not creating a new audience.*⁵

Dialogic Exchanges

The pre-publicity announcing the transfer of *Medea* to the West End aroused curiosity. It was inconceivable to expect a repetition of the artistic decisions made in *Footfalls*, simply because Warner and Shaw never approach different plays in exactly the same way. And yet spectators could assume, on the basis of their knowledge of the collaborative duo's previous work, that the production would be consistent with Warner/Shaw's searching, take-nothing-for-granted approach. This act of expecting an 'outcome' from the interaction of several informational flows can be seen as *dialogue*, for which Rob Pope's definition is useful:

Dialogue (as a process) involves negotiation between individuals or groups of individuals with different interests, a negotiation between anything and anything else across any conceivable interface; in yet another specialized sense, it is a

negotiation between people in a network of inter-related activities.⁶

Dialogue uses signs in anticipation of particular responses, which implies that the side that actively pursues an objective in the process of 'negotiation' applies an element of intentionality. Dialogue is better explained as *heterologue* (as opposed to the conventional concept of 'binary' exchange), not least because 'etymologically, the word *dialogue* consists of the prefix *dia-* from Greek, which means 'across' (not just 'two', and therefore not binary); while '-logue' comes from the Greek *logos* (meaning both 'word' and 'knowledge')'.⁷ 'Dialogue', then, presupposes the multiple interfaces which are essential for performance.

Bakhtin's theory of the process of communication as a series of dialogic exchanges can also be applied to performance theory. By doing so, we can see that meaning is communicated to the audience by means of 'agencies of sociability': that is, by means of socially rooted signs which are repeatedly mediated and revised dialogically as they interact with the playwright, the performers, and the audience.⁸

Furthermore, Bakhtin indicates, according to Shevtsova, that 'signs specific to users and usage circulate in society at large and become part of the *stock of signs* available to other users'.⁹ This contention can be usefully re-applied to performances which, after challenging pre-existing conventions, establish their own. In other words, performances are both products and progenitors of dialogic exchanges with subsequent performances.

Performances communicate their meaning through the physically present expressive materials – scenery, sounds, actors – that constantly enter different combinations and assume different functions. Once part of the performance, they become its social agencies and are organized in particular structurations that have been programmed during the rehearsals. As Patrice Pavis suggests, the spectator is able to reference these structurations in the performance because they are still perceptible in it – 'like scars from former operations or like the work's perspiration'.¹⁰

In the course of the rehearsals, a particular system of signification is thus put together, prefiguring the spectators' response. During the rehearsals, there comes a moment when the director tends to dissociate from the group within which the actors and collaborators negotiate to start directing from the auditorium: the director becomes a kind of originary spectator, calling forth the theatrical moment, and 'watching both the man who walks and the person who watches', thus endowing the performance with the perspective of the spectator.¹¹ The director has a sense of the division of the work and of its segmentation, a kind of a know-how which facilitates handling the complexity of the source-text as well as the process of putting together the visual, auditory, and kinaesthetic elements of the performance.

Performance Text

Structural semiotics accounts for an analogy with reading, as Tadeusz Kowzan postulates.¹² To a certain extent, such an analogy exists and it may be usefully applied to performance analysis. As occurs when reading a book, the spectator perceives the performance by making a succession of hypotheses, each hypothesis undoing the previous one to bring in new indices or unexplored avenues.

However, the analogy of reading does not exhaust all the means available to theatre in the process of enunciating and communicating meaning. Theatre has languages other than verbal language. A *performance text* may contain spoken text, but it is qualitatively different from a playtext. The playtext is a constituent part of the performance text. It is always present in one way or another, as 'spoken' text or as 'context', or even as a source tale in its raw state. A performance text contains gestures, spoken text, movement, colour, sound, rhythmic patterns – a 'living symphony of steps, gestures, and attitudes linked together'.¹³ It evokes recourse to the imagination and to emotional memory, communicating directly with the spectators through everything that is material on the stage, travelling between fiction and reality by means of various physicalizations.

The performance text is the evidence of the performance, as organized by its creators and perceived by spectators, whilst making references out to the larger framework of life. The canonical plays of the past contain the potentiality of many physicalizations with many different meanings. It is up to the creative team to put together a system of signs that will articulate the meaning a given play has for them.

Scenic Writing: *Écriture* and Intervention

The principle of the physicalizing of ideas of pre-existing texts and organizing the physicalizations so they can effect programmed dialogic exchanges with a particular audience can be referred to as *scenic writing*. It can also be viewed as the artistic activity which establishes the authoritative power of performance. The process of scenic writing involves elements of intentionality as it pursues particular objectives in a process of negotiating meaning. Scenic writing takes responsibility for the configuration of signifying systems and relationships between stage materials. Scenic writing is also understood, here, as the flow of signals that engage the spectators' perceptions during the performance.

The term *scenic writer* was introduced by Brecht.¹⁴ It was a new idiom developed by the theatre of the avant-garde in recognition of the legitimate right of the director to intervene in handling pre-existing materials. A significant part of Brecht's legacy for performance theory and practice is his recognition of performance as a combination of dramatic writing and scenic writing; but scenic writing – as he was the first to say – has equal responsibility with dramatic writing. Here is an example of how, from observing Brecht's productions, Roger Planchon developed his notion of scenic writing:

In fact any movement on the stage, the choice of a colour, a set, a costume, etc., involves a total responsibility. The scenic writing has a total responsibility in the same way as writing taken on its own: I mean the writing of a novel or a play.¹⁵

By virtue of its analogy with writing, scenic writing entails a logical connection with

écriture (the French word for 'handwriting'). *Écriture* is not part of the usual terminology in performance analysis, but this essay uses it as a working term of particular relevance. *Écriture*, understood as consistencies in one artist's body of work, facilitates discussion of tendencies which persist in and distinguish an individual artist's works, and suggests a useful working perspective for comparative performance analysis.

The three concepts – 'performance text', 'scenic writing', and '*écriture*' – address the area of performance signification understood as a complex flux of energetic fields, a compound of dialogic exchanges, as distinct from a simple transaction from stage to receiver. The three concepts allow us to look at different aspects of performance. 'Performance text' is the material evidence of the performance as we perceive it, alongside the referentiality of this material evidence to the fictional world of the source-text and the real world of the spectator. 'Scenic writing' is the set of principles applied in structuring the 'performance text'. It brings about dialogic exchange with the spectator. *Écriture* refers to the recurring consistencies and developments in an artist's succession of works. Scenic writing and *écriture* are open to influences from various old or emerging theatre movements.

It is imperative to note that there are no ideal 'texts' outside the process of 'reading' them. As Umberto Eco pointed out: 'Theatrical messages are shaped also by the feedback produced by their destination point.'¹⁶ The epistemological notion that meaning is somehow contained immutably within a text and restricted to it, impervious to the inconsistencies of language and the vicissitudes of culture, is particularly invalid in the theatre.

Every interpretation of a pre-existing text is an act of intervention. As Rob Pope argues: 'The best way to understand how a text works is to change it, to play around with it, to intervene in it in some way (large or small).'¹⁷ In performance practice, changes are made at all levels, from the nuances of punctuation or intonation to radical recasting in terms of genre, time, place, and medium. Different *écritures* develop different

interventional strategies and techniques. They may make use of the essential theme of the source and dispense with its original text (Wilson, Schechner); or produce collages of texts (Brecht, Meyerhold); treat the pre-existing text merely as a scenario and develop spin-offs comprising other texts from other sources (La Mama, Simon McBurney); turn a source-text into a dance (Pina Bausch, Yvonne Rainer, Joan Jonas, Karen Finlay); and use the full original texts but contradict them through scenic writing (Warner, Bogdanov, Hytner).

In the polemics between two conflicting attitudes to object–representation relationship – the cultic attitude of the ‘illusionistic’ theatre to representation as a mirror image of an immutable reality and the avant-garde attitude to the changeable representation of social reality – emerged the *theatre of intervention*. Its main ideologist was Brecht, who placed both the subject and the object within a process of socio-political production and who employed a number of interventionist techniques which set up a critical distance between the represented world and the spectators, thus fostering a critical outlook on social reality.

Warner/Shaw’s *écriture* consistently initiates a series of interventions in the fictional world of the pre-existing play and unveils areas unexplored by previous productions. Some of the main instruments through which their productions of pre-existing texts establish their authorial voices are the *V-effekt* and its consequent defamiliarization, both of which set up a tension between signs and conventions.

Like every source-text, Euripides’ play is a play of signification shot through with the traces and fragments of other ideas. Out of this play of signifiers, ‘certain meanings are elevated by social ideologies to a privileged position’, or are made the centres around which other meanings revolve.¹⁸ Warner/Shaw’s scenic writing uses defamiliarization through various stylistic techniques such as accentuation, reaccentuation, ostention (of objects/props), and sign-substitution in order to reorganize privilege.

The underlying principle of this form of defamiliarization is deconstruction, a con-

cept which Derrida has explained as an ‘ultimately political practice’, an attempt to dismantle the logic by which a particular system of thought and the political structures and social institutions behind it maintain their force.¹⁹ Warner/Shaw’s entire body of work rests on what has been called a ‘theatre event’, understood as a type of scenic writing that relies on an unexpected way of using an incident and which is an instance within a performance text that establishes connections between the ‘agencies of sociability’ in a unique and unusual way. A ‘theatre event’ often substitutes one sign for another. In many respects, a ‘theatre event’ is the modern transformation of Brecht’s *V-effekt*. As Edward Bond states:

The concept of ‘Theatre Events’, TEs for short, has in my own work replaced the Brechtian alienation effect. There is no need to say what the event is, but to say what you want to use it for.²⁰

Bond’s emphasis on ‘use’ reaffirms a radical redirection in object-representation relationship. The truth lies in the use, which becomes more important than the object. A theatre event uses an incident in a play in an entirely different way from what might be expected. Eventfulness permeates all decisions in a production from decisions of space organization and casting to narrative and rhythmic structure.

Attitudes to Space and Casting

Warner’s search for form is informed by a deep understanding of the interdependencies between the contexts of play and location. Her endeavour to create new audiences motivates the risk-taking decisions that characterize her *écriture*. She said about *Footfalls* that it was

*a great exploration of form: whether you could take a twenty-minute play into the West End and expect people to come and see it, whether they would pay £4 for a ticket. The answer to these questions was ‘Yes’, which was fantastic, but, when it came to the question of whether it would pay for longer than a week, unfortunately the answer was ‘No’.*²¹

One of the decisions that came as a result of the exploration of form in *Footfalls* was the configuration of the 'vignette'. The acting was situated on extended planks between the stalls and the circle, thus creating a suggestive image of somebody caught between the floor and the ceiling. This not only reversed the convention of the proscenium, but also challenged the more recent convention of the black box. The 'vignette' suggested that the conventional architectural structure of the Garrick could be made to look different; but this organization of space was not an arbitrary decision: rather, it resulted from how Warner and Shaw had connected to the playtext:

On the one hand, it was just an actress (Fiona Shaw) in a theatre; on the other, it was as if you were seeing somebody caught inside a brain. We [also] transposed two lines, which was the other count of the conflict with the Beckett estate.²²

Richard II 'in traverse' is another example of the tendency of Warner's *écriture* to create tensions between 'sign' and 'convention'. The 'in traverse' organization of the space enhanced the polemical quality of the play. Warner observes:

The theme of Richard II is intimacy, and that's a very emotional thing. It's about the relationship between Bolingbroke and Richard [in] the in-between state, never with a black-and-white condition. Your focus is not on the rooms on either side of the corridor, but on the corridor itself and the people passing through it. [It's] a state of not knowing. Not knowing who's king is the obvious example. Richard is still called king, but he isn't a king. Bolingbroke is also called king by some people, but he's not a king.²³

The tension between two geometrical shapes, traditionally assumed to be in conflict, was obvious. There was an oval (the 'horseshoe arena' of the theatre) and a rectangle (the traverse). But the fundamental intervention was in the casting, since Richard was the cross-dressed Fiona Shaw.

The casting of a woman in a canonically male part was paradigmatic. There was an

eventful substitution of a sign: 'man', 'king', was substituted for 'woman', 'not-king'. The figures of political power were played by an all-male cast. The concept of femininity was brought into play and the idea of women's inequality and subjection to men in male-dominated repressive societies was made central. Richard's extreme vulnerability and powerlessness were accentuated. By using deconstruction and sign substitution, the scenic writing mediated its ideology.

Warner's casting decision indicates that she is interested in exposing the interactions between two categories which permeate all social and political processes – power versus powerlessness. Warner/Shaw's entire body of work demonstrates consistent attention to the manifestations of tyranny, dehumanization and violence as they impinge on everyday, private life.

Medea: the Invisible Made Visible

From the very opening scene of the production, the interaction between the spoken text and the sound/visual elements involved various interpolations: the radio music offstage suggested contemporary domesticity, but Medea's desperate screams offstage ('Yoh! Weep. Grief. Pain. Yoh, mo-ee, mo-ee. Die. Let me die') suggested a catastrophe on a scale that exceeded a domestic milieu. The costumes and props were contemporary, but the play of light on the ripples in the pool on stage added a metaphoric dimension to the setting. Thus time-specific markers were contrasted with signs emptied of historicity.

Medea used a conventional proscenium stage, did not involve an unexpected casting choice, and employed Euripides' complete playtext. The intervention of the scenic writing was not so obvious as in *Footfalls* or *Richard II*. In *Medea*, the intervention was in the shift of emphasis from the theme concerning the supremacy of the gods over humans to the idea of how mortals in power hold sway over the powerless Medea. In Euripides' text, Zeus is mentioned in nearly every speech of the Chorus, which attempts to stop Medea from carrying out her plan. The idea of the gods' supremacy was tenden-

tiously weakened in this performance text in favour of putting forward the cause of a Barbarian woman against a Greek man who had wronged her to the point of turning her into an outcast.

The 'divine epiphany', which is an integral part of Greek tragedy, was absent in this production. There was no *deus ex machina* in the closing scene. Nothing in this production was made more beautiful than it should be. Tom Pye's set was a brutalist concrete bunker, suggesting a half-finished house with a glass-doored back wall, complete with a paddling pool filled with water and plastic toy ships. Signs were non-historical, which allowed the spectators to endow them with their own interpretative inventions. It was a place and not-a-place.

However, the sound and costumes indicated contemporary 'domesticity'. The women of the Chorus wore cardigans, headscarfs, and anoraks, and carried gifts of Tupperware and cake; the tinny radio music offstage played 'I Gave My Wedding Dress Away'. The costumes were reminiscent of Irish folk garments, but several of their features can be found in the developing world, where women hide their faces behind yashmaks and veils.

The Moral Dilemma

Fiona Shaw's Medea was different from the traditional image of the murderous, half-supernatural, half-mortal woman. She looked like a harried housewife in a little black dress, high heels, and a bright orange cardigan. She strode in claspng a huge knife and humming 'My Old Man's a Dustman', suddenly stopped by the pool, and stood still, which allowed the spectators to take in every detail of her appearance. The colour of the cardigan stood out in stark contrast to the rest of the colours on the stage. Medea's otherness was signalled from the outset, and was accentuated through the rhythmic structure of the scene.

The actress's tension-saturated movement was set against a conventionally calm 'Prologue': a vigorous entrance, an abrupt stop, a brief pause. Then Shaw briskly removed the

orange cardigan, put on a white garment, and poured paraffin over her head as she stood in the pool of water in the centre of the stage. This intense fragment of movement was a *rhythmic montage*. She then spoke with a strong, rich voice which conveyed anguish and determination:

MEDEA Ladies, Corinthians, I'm here.
Don't think ill of me. Call others proud.
In public, in private, it's hard to get it right.
Tread as carefully as you will,
'She's proud,' they'll say, 'she won't join in.'²⁴

Medea's otherness assumed a particular significance in the theatre ambience and context of the West End as Shaw unveiled the character's claim of female equality in a competitive social system, where financial status and possessions were valued as the instruments of power over others.

Shaw's acting excluded any melodramatic manifestations of 'suffering', thus emphasizing the character's moral dilemma and tragic circumstances. The succession of oppressive acts she was subjected to was horrid: betrayal by her husband, isolation, exile, realization that she could not go back to her native land because she had killed her brothers to help her husband to capture the Golden Fleece. Shaw filled the stage with physical activity, which made visible Medea's desperate attempts to overcome the hopelessness of her situation. As she spoke Euripides' text, Shaw physicalized the character's inner turmoil by a range of actions such as putting on a white garment, claspng a knife, striding through the paddling pool, playing with a ship-toy, injecting imaginary poison with a spoofo-needle, burning a toy. This was stage business, which was both attention-grabbing because it had never been seen in previous productions of the play, and justified by the character's circumstances.

The flow of physical actions revealed the character's inner world – her trepidation, anger, hidden desires. Moments of stillness interrupted Medea's physical activity when she realized that alternatives were being taken away from her. The emphasis was on 'causality' as Shaw guided her character to decide outrageous strategies of revenge, con-

template their effects, and justify them to herself and to the chorus.

The crime Medea committed was the effect of a corrupt and depraved social system. Shaw unveiled the psychology of a human being under the severe deforming pressures of social circumstances, showing how this human being can become a menace to the same society which oppresses her. Shaw gradually revealed the conflict in her character between motherhood and revenge against a male-dominated establishment, in which a rightful mother and wife can be turned into an outcast because her husband has traded her in for a king's daughter.

Shaw brought together the principle of truthful identification with the dramatic character and, at the same time, maintained an almost imperceptible distance from the latter, sometimes even directly forcing the character to reverberate with her own 'truth' as an artist. The empathic and ironic dimension were intertwined in rhythmic configurations which provided a test case for issues of social determinism. This was not a traditional Medea who rejected the male ethos, but a Medea who set herself against domination in all its forms.

The Ironic Dimension

The character's deterioration into an anti-social human being was accentuated at those moments when Shaw imbued the physical actions with elements of irony. As the theatre critic Carole Woddis noted, there had seldom been a Medea 'so tension-filled, so blanched in irony, or one which makes Medea's misreading of the situation so bloodily, grossly immediate'.²⁵

The elements of irony cut through the entire performance text, but they became particularly obvious in the scene when Shaw/Medea was persuading the childless Aigeus that she could cure his infertility should he assist her to flee Corinth, for which she donned a conical hat, a toy stethoscope, and joke spectacles. This *gestus*-like ceremony not only highlighted the ironic dimension of the dramatic situation (a man had decided to ask Medea to use her craft as a sorceress to

cure him of childlessness exactly when she was planning to destroy her own children), but also argued a political point: it distinguished Medea's behaviour in relation to how she had been unjustly labelled by society.

The moment when Shaw mimed injecting poison with a spoof-needle as she tried to justify to the Chorus her plan to kill her husband's fiancée whilst poking fun at her own reputation as a sorceress could also be described as a *gestus*-like ironic aside. The stage action indicated that the actress retained her own historical subject position separate from the character, and used gesture to enforce our awareness of how women are labelled (in Medea's case as a 'sorceress'). But examining this moment purely in Brechtian terms would limit the analysis to a single technical aspect. Shaw's performance diverged from the traditional Brechtian techniques of *gestus* in that she maintained identification with the character. She used *gestus* as a sign that came 'from within' rather than 'without': it became an aspect of the character.

Medea's relationship with Jason was also played in an ironic way. Simmering with sex appeal, Jonathan Cake's Jason continued to treat Medea as 'his' and she 'could not stop her body from melting into his whenever he touch[ed] her'.²⁶ The rich aesthetic register of the production made use of the principle of identification, whilst at the same time defining the authorial voices of the performance's creators as they penetrated the playwright's authorial voice. Through combining the principles of identification and critical distancing, the performance forged eventful connections with the audience. The ironic dimension made the spectators' experience of the tragedy a contradictory reality that would otherwise not be captured in it.

This raises two questions of interest for the argument: what are the essential effects of accompanying tragic treatment of texts with parodic and ironic accents; and in which earlier traditions can such an approach be identified? As Bakhtin says in relation to the language of the satyr play,

It is our conviction that there never was a strictly straightforward genre . . . that did not have its

Fiona Shaw with Jonathan Cake:
a Medea and Jason seemingly
destined to be linked for ever.
Photo: Joan Marcus.

own parodying and travesty-
ing double, its comic-ironic *contre-
partie*.²⁷

The aesthetic language in which the performance communicated meanings to the audience thus contained elements that defined a *contre-partie* to the conventional language of ancient Greek tragedy. It also transformed aspects of the play's content: this was no mythical world where flying chariots could rescue heroes. From the perspective of this *contre-partie*, Medea's situation seemed more desperate than if it was revealed through the language of tragedy alone. There was something inexorably poignant in seeing how the only thing Medea could do was to accept being labelled as a witch and to start behaving accordingly.

Thus the ironic perspective provided a corrective to the view that people can be categorized and so assigned social functions. The signs which provided the ironic overtones (the conical hat, spoof-needle, and the way they were handled) established connections with the spectators through suggestiveness and correspondence – the domain of poetic theatre. The language of the production interanimated the languages of tragedy, satire, and poetic theatre.

The moment when Shaw/Medea set fire to a fluffy teddy bear as she spoke the text about her decision to kill her children was another instance of this interanimated language. The actress's gesture liberated the object from its material function and endowed it with signals which evoked a metaphoric connection. By means of ostending a



stage prop against the other props, the burning of the toy stood for a whole category: destruction. The spectators saw a toy, a woman holding a lighter, and the action of setting the toy alight: materials, action, and spoken text interacted to evoke the perception of the material and the immaterial (the ideological) dimensions of the performance.

Interanimation of Rhythms

The balance between identification and metaphor permeated all elements of signification in the production. Medea's inner turmoil was conveyed through the use of contrasting rhythms. Decisions relating to rhythmic structure may have been based on subconscious

rather than rational choices, but they signalled a particular world view and elicited a particular kind of perception connected to the psyche instead of to eyes and ears alone. Immediately recognizable signification (the sound of crashing pots and pans, transistor music) was constantly undercut by sounds and movement rhythmically organized so as to evoke metaphoric connections with the world to which Medea did not belong; and Warner/Shaw's scenic writing evoked images of the lost world she had shared with Jason through the splashes of the water in the pool, which recalled the sound of the sea. Time-bound sounds interacted with sounds free of the limitations of time. This accentuated the residual gap between 'what is' and 'what might be' in her world.

The performance text used a distinctly theatrical language, which was neither solely the language of the spoken text nor only the language of non-verbal signification, but a perpetual shift between one and the other. Traditionally, the Chorus does not belong to the world of ordinary experience, where people are real and act and make apposite remarks, but to a higher plane where 'metaphor, as we call it, is the very stuff of life'.²⁸ In some plays, it enunciates the supernatural (as in the *Eumenides* of Aeschylus) or half supernatural (as in the *Bacchae* of Euripides). The Chorus does not further the action of the play. Its business is considerably more important. It may reflect upon the emotions caused by a character's death or upon the meaning of this death in history. Or it may evoke the image of an ideal world to heal the wounds of the real one.

Warner/Shaw's scenic writing reversed the role of Euripides' Chorus. The 'higher plane' usually ascribed to the Chorus was conveyed by a Gaelic overlay, sung from the auditorium. This voice from the audience's side of the proscenium gave rise to the feeling that some of the performance was taking place amongst us. A woman's voice sang in the style of Shanuk.²⁹ This had the effect of a sign which resisted immediate translation into words/meaning, and triggered personal responses from the spectator. For some, it was recognizably part of the Irish folklore,

and so carried a feeling of nostalgia at those moments when Medea was arguing with herself, trying to figure out her best course of action after Kreon's pre-emptive banishment. Yet Shaw's Medea was anything but nostalgic. Her acting at this moment suggested that Medea was fighting sentiment, not giving in to it. The voice from the auditorium was in a lyrical counterpoint to Medea's preoccupation with working out a scheme of action.

This intervention of the scenic writing challenged both the proscenium convention and traditional representations of ancient Greek tragedy. The text in the *recitative* was part of the text given by Euripides to the Chorus. It was a montage of evaluations, which brought to the fore the social injustices to which Medea was subjected. This Celtic overlay occurred only four times during the performance, in repetitive patterns developing an internal theme. It functioned in a way similar to the voice-over in film, which by convention contradicts or confirms the text spoken by the actors; and it accentuated, through juxtaposition, the aspects which Warner and Shaw had seen as central to Medea's moral dilemma, particularly her exclusion from citizenship and her grief for the lost 'paradise' of marriage.

The Manipulation of the Narrative

The structure and position of this intervention in the scenic writing are strikingly similar to the structure and authorial position that Bakhtin discusses in relation to the carnivalesque and its roots in the pageants, marketplace shows, curses and oaths of folk culture:

Carnival does not know footlights, in the sense that it does not acknowledge any distinction between [performance] and spectators. Footlights would destroy a carnival as the absence of footlights would destroy a performance. Carnival is not a spectacle seen by people; they live in it, and everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people.³⁰

Euripides' pre-existing narrative (and its mythical sources) were subverted, deconstructed, and replaced by a new narrative. This kind of subversion and substitution is, according to Derrida, 'a manipulation of



The act of the killing, set against the bloodstained wall. Photo: Joan Marcus.

narratives' and here it argued a political point from a feminist perspective.³¹

Mell Mercier's array of sounds highlighted a dominant narrative within the soundscape, from the offstage sound of breaking pans and pots in the first scene to the crashing electronic effects in the scene of the killing. Sounds of 'breaking', 'crashing', 'blowing to pieces', 'demolition', enhanced the constant rise of tension.

These sounds were noises more than music, but they assumed rhythmic quality by being introduced at those moments when everything else on the stage was still. Even at the climactic moment of the infanticide, the sound preceded the fury of the movement. Medea took the boys off, the chorus remaining quietly onstage. Then, under a crash of electronic screeches, blood splashed onto the inside of the glass door; and one of the boys ran terrified into view. This was the first time that the rhythms of the sound and movement were made to work synchronously. Medea chased the boy down and carried him back into the wings. The noise abated.

This soundscape synopsis illustrates a moment of stylization: through the 'form' of sound, we 'saw' the act of the killing. Furthermore, it demonstrates how the scenic writing challenged the ancient Greek convention of offstage killings. By introducing the ear-piercing mixture of sounds, it actually manipulated our imagination to 'see' the killing itself. Through the combination of sound and blood-splash, we could not help but experience a sensation of 'pain'.

The set interacted with the soundscape on a similar kinaesthetic level. The offstage sound of breaking pots and pans worked in conjunction with the glass doors of the set. 'Glass' as a material suggests breakability, and so does the sound of breaking pots and pans which, towards the end, increasingly indicated the pain of the killing. The cacophony of breaking sounds built up intensity, then everything came to a dead stop, and only the splashes of the quiet water in the pool were heard; the nostalgic Gaelic song undercut Medea's rage. The interaction between action-seen and action-sound gener-

ated a third type of action, action-imagined, which to a very large extent gradually became more important than the action-seen and the action-heard taken separately. Meaning remained open to personal responses. Spectators saw Medea mastering her murderous plan on the stage and heard the Gaelic song from the auditorium. However, they could endow the interactive montage between the two with their own associations. Partly due to a shared context in which injustices are seen as wrong, modern spectators are alike 'missing' an ideal world. The scenic writing hinted at the image of this ideal world by means of various lyrical incursions: a light melody, a sound, a pause, or accent achieved through the lighting.

The closing scene was open-ended, encouraging the spectators to imagine how gruesome Medea and Jason's existence would be if they had to continue living together after everything that had happened. Instead of flying away on a rescuing chariot, Medea and Jason remained at the pool, splashing water at each other helplessly, like pitiable beasts in a quasi-Beckettian vision where she and Jason, the closest of enemies, were stuck together for ever. This was an image of infinite poignancy, showing a man and a woman in the silence of their half-built house. This ending created a metaphoric connection with the contemporary condition of men and women, equally victimized and unable to learn from each other.

The collaboration between Warner and Shaw began in 1989. Since then, they have worked together on *Hedda Gabler*, *Electra*, *The Waste Land*, *Richard II*, *Medea*, and *The Power Book*. They feed off each other's vision, nurture each other's ideas, and contribute to the scenic writing of their productions in equal measure. Their individual contributions to the collaborative work they have engaged in over a long period of time are harmonized in a unique *écriture*, which inspires new ways of thinking about the theatre.

Notes and References

1. Geraldin Cousin, interview with Deborah Warner, 'Exploring Space at Play: the Making of the Theatrical

Event', *New Theatre Quarterly*, No. 47 (August 1996), p. 229–36.

2. Maria Shevtsova, 'The Sociology of the Theatre, Part Three: Performance', *New Theatre Quarterly*, No. 19 (August 1989), p. 287.

3. *Ibid.*, p. 289.

4. Maria Shevtsova, 'Sociocultural Analysis: National and Cross-Cultural Performance', *Theatre Research International*, XX, No. 1, p. 6.

5. Geraldin Cousin, interview with Deborah Warner, p. 231.

6. Rob Pope, *Textual Intervention: Critical and Creative Strategies for Literary Studies* (London: Routledge, 1995), p. 120–82.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 120.

8. Maria Shevtsova, 'Sociocultural Analysis: National and Cross-Cultural Performance', p. 6.

9. Maria Shevtsova, 'The Sociology of the Theatre: Part Three: Performance', p. 282–99.

10. Patrice Pavis, 'Which Theories for Which Mise-en-Scènes?' in *Contours of the Theatrical Avant Garde: Performance and Textuality*, ed. James M. Harding (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2000).

11. Peter Brook, *The Empty Space* (London: McGibbon and Kee, 1968).

12. Tadeusz Kowzan, *Literature et Spectacle* (Hague: Mouton, 1975).

13. Emile Jaque-Dalcroze, *Le Rhythme, la Musique, et l'Éducation* (Lausanne: Foetisch Frères, 1919), p. 140.

14. Bertolt Brecht, 'How Ought the Classics to be Performed Nowadays?' [1926], *Gesammelte Werke* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1967), p. 60–1, 42.

15. Quoted in David Bradby and David Williams, *Directors' Theatre* (London: Macmillan, 1988), p. 55.

16. Umberto Eco, 'Semiotics of Theatrical Performance', *The Drama Review*, 21, p. 117.

17. Rob Pope, 'Dialogue, Discourse, and Dramatic Intervention', in *Textual Intervention: Critical and Creative Strategies for Literary Studies* (London: Routledge, 1995).

18. Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1983), p. 61–71.

19. Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference* (London: Routledge, 1978).

20. Edward Bond, interviewed by Ulrich Koppen, 'Modern and Postmodern Theatres', *New Theatre Quarterly*, No. 50 (May 1997), p. 101.

21. Geraldin Cousin, interview with Deborah Warner, p. 231.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*

24. Euripides, *Medea*, trans. Frederic Raphael and Kenneth McLeish, Drama Classics (London: Nick Hern Books, 2001), p. 48–9.

25. Carole Woddis, review of Warner's production of *Medea* in *The Herald*, 7 February 2001.

26. Linda Winer, review of the one-week run of *Medea* at the Brook Atkinson Theatre, New York, *New York Times*, 11 December 2002.

27. Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 53.

28. F. M. Cornford, *Thucydides Mythistoricus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1965), p. 144.

29. Part of Irish folk culture which is half-sung, half-recitative.

30. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1984), p. 7.

31. Jacques Derrida, *L'Écriture et la Différence*.