

Fiona Shaw

*interviewed by Clara Armand*

## The Irony of Passionate Chaos: Modernity and Performing Medea

Clara Armand, author of the preceding article on 'Dialogism and the Theatre Event' in relation to Deborah Warner's production of Euripides' *Medea*, talks with Fiona Shaw about her close working relationship with the director in earlier productions, and the process of creating and developing the title role in the play. The interview took place in the Queen's Theatre on 21 February 2001, during the West End run of the production.

**Clara Armand** *Can you tell me a little about the rehearsal process? How did you work with Deborah Warner on Medea and for how long?*

**Fiona Shaw** We have rehearsed the play twice now: once in Dublin, which was perhaps the most significant part of the rehearsals because that's when we 'found' the truth of the play; then again in London in December/January. So we rehearsed twice – each time for six weeks. And the run we have to do now is for three months. I came through the process with two different groups, which means, perhaps, that the second time round we started nearly from scratch.

*So you rehearsed for the run in the West End with a different ensemble? Did you, because of this, have to connect to the part in an entirely different way than for its run at the Abbey Theatre?*

It was different because the actors' group playing the Chorus was completely different. We always rehearsed with the complete cast of the Chorus, and I had to adapt to the new Chorus – to their way of carrying a dialogue with me. However, the second group came through the same course. They were aware from the second rehearsal that they had to find their own changes. But, in the end, the play has its own aesthetic, which corrals people for this particular aesthetic. And the production had been constructed to communicate aspects of that aesthetic. It's the same production, but different actors have to en-

dow it with their own knowledge of life. . . . They must think of their own thing, so they can relate to the play. The two groups must have thought of different things, and the form in which the relationships were expressed was different – I mean, the positioning, some of the movements – but essentially, it is the same play, and the same production.

*Actors are frequently asked the question, 'How much of the part you play is you in the given circumstances of the play, and how much is the dramatic character as it has been created by the playwright?' Was there a particular aspect in the part that you could relate to almost instantaneously, as a person, as an actress? Was there a particular thing that drew you to the play and to Medea?*

I don't know whether there is 'a' Medea. There is just *my* Medea or *your* Medea or somebody's Medea. There is a 'text' . . . you respond to the text. And I don't know which is inherent of me. I know there are things in the play that I begin to think are the metronome to 'who she is'. She is concerned with childbirth because of her repeated references to it. The language of the play indicates that she is, to me, full of irony, because the language is ironic. That's in the translation of Kenneth McLeish and Fredric Raphael. And I have a tendency towards the ironic. But before all, the *tradition* is also ironic. The passionate 'chaos' of the way Medea thinks comes across

to me as ironic. And because of the current translation, the language being chaotic is sometimes very good. The thoughts are *not* very connected – and I am very interested in contradiction. Like a lot of interesting characters, *Medea* is full of contradiction in a moment. So that's one of the things that drew me to the play. I had vaguely wondered whether to do this play or *Hamlet*. And I thought I didn't want to play another 'king'.

*Why?*

I think, maybe, because I felt I had given all my Hamlets in *Richard II*. And the Abbey Theatre was very definite about what they wanted: they wanted a big tragedy or *Hamlet*. So we went with the big tragedy and thought it would be interesting to dive back into the Greek area where we had been. But of course with the proviso that we would not go back in the same style. I mean, ten years ago, in the production of *Electra*, we were in a Greek setting and using Greek costume. So we thought this time we might go beyond costume. But it's difficult to explain in words why you feel drawn. I mean, if you knew what drew you to it, you couldn't play it . . . you'd be self-conscious. You just feel drawn.

*How long was your pre-rehearsal period? I mean, from the moment you felt drawn to Medea up to the day of the first rehearsal? Did your long-standing collaboration with Deborah Warner make that period shorter than it would have been if you had never worked together before?*

Of course. It would have certainly taken me longer if I'd had to adjust to the approach of somebody I had never worked with. I didn't re-read the play again and again. Not at all. I did very little preliminary reading of the play. You sort of know what it is. It's become a myth. Of course, I know what Deborah is. So I know about the manner we'll jump into it. Strangely, the more unknown is the text to you, the better. Deborah wanted Tom Pye to design it. Tom is young, so he is bound to respond to the modern architecture of aesthetic. We were playing with the idea of not having a set at all, but Deborah thought this would be very difficult with a text which the actors

wouldn't normally do without a set. They don't necessarily know what Greek tragedy is. To give the other actors no context at all would be very difficult. So we gave up the idea of not having a set.

*Did you discuss the idea of the set being a hybrid between 'a place' and 'not-a-place'?*

I don't know if we even discussed it. We knew we should try a modern set. But, you see, you could always change your mind if the modern didn't work, if it really didn't work, if it would rise up and bite you. But it didn't. The more we went with the modern, the more we found that it worked.

*What do you mean by 'modern'? How would you characterize a modern production of a classical playtext?*

'Modern' means 'no-guard'. 'Modern' means you can't have chariots in. But, I mean, the audience is modern. They live in a modern world. They react to Shakespeare as well as to Euripides in a modern way. But both Shakespeare and Euripides do define certain choices. Yet they have left space for choices. And of course you have to face these defined choices, but in a modern way. You may have problems handling these pre-defined choices, but you don't worry about the problems until you hit them, because in the end plays are only linguistic symbols that hint at a structure that you make flesh. That's all they are. So you make that flesh in a group of a shared aesthetic. I knew Tom. Tom had been assisting us for the second time, so we had already agreed a shared aesthetic – but nothing conscious. It's just you know people whom you get on with. We understand each other from half a sentence. Somebody's coming up with a mad idea. . . . For example, Tom came up, a long time ago, with these wonderful ideas of throwing light into the pool that had a photograph of me, with just a wavering shade on the wall, and when the water was still, that wavering shade on the wall attained the features of that photograph. So we played with this *magic* for a long time, and then we decided we did not need the photograph. So, lots of things are thrown out.

*So some of the final decisions were arrived at as you experimented with things to see whether they worked or not?*

Yes. Whether they were needed. Whether we could or couldn't make them work. So, we only kept about one-third of the good ideas. There were some wonderful ideas we didn't do! Sometimes, you let the best idea go. But it *has* to go because, if it stays, it may offend the wholeness of the performance.

*Is it difficult to give up ideas?*

Oh, it is very hard. Sometimes, you go, 'Ah, this is something wonderful, I want this,' and then you let go. So you have to be very brave. And in that way Deborah is marvellous, because she is a priceless editor. She's quite 'basic'. If there is an idea that is in the way of the play, it's kept in store as 'a good idea'.

*How did this process of 'editing' happen in the course of the rehearsals? Did the set designer, for example, attend all the rehearsals? And from what you said, the final decisions in that department were made in the course of the rehearsals?*

Yes. And I think this was very good because, you're right, something of the very first idea has remained in the finalized set and perhaps that is why it is so appealing and poetic – a place and not-a-place. Tom Pye was in a little hut next to the rehearsal room. At lunchtime, we would go over and look at the set. And over lunch with Tom, we would cancel a great deal in the set and change it. As we were rehearsing, we'd go on about the set. Tom, in the meantime, would spend days over the set, thinking, 'This isn't right; this isn't right; this isn't right.' Often, you cancel a thing you want, but that's part of it. Sometimes, you go very far away from the thing you want – except I think, there's always a part of it that stays – you rehearse it and you think, 'A-ha! There's another thing in this moment', and you think, 'it's the wrong play, there's another play here', and so on until you find the play that exists. Only if you could see it at the very beginning, you'd be much freer. But no. That's the last phase. Once you get into the theatre, you start rehearsing the



play you're going to show, but obviously it's nothing like it, it's something amorphous that could go in any direction.

*That's the most pleasant thing, that constant discovery, I guess?*

Yes. Yet it's not 'pleasant' in the sense of comfortable. It's full of anxiety and full of

discomfort. The subject of this 'pleasure' is not 'joy' or 'pure pleasure'. Just wonderful ideas come very early on because people try out ideas. I'd been to see the photographic works of Marina Abramovich in New York, and I came back full of ideas. And I saw an exhibition in Dublin, and it had photographs of me in a shirt, with my stomach cut with glass . . . because there was a connection somehow, this woman had mutilated herself – it was just something that spoke to me, I could feel a connection! I just found that this cutting of the skin – just standing when the audience is coming in – this was performance art! That was a moment which I have remembered and which stayed with me all along while I was rehearsing *Medea*. But in the end, there was none of it.

*How do the images emerge when you start rehearsing? Do they come at random?*

Medea is concerned with childbirth – she makes references to it all the time. When you know the play, you start looking, you start noticing connections. You start seeing pregnant women . . . seeing pregnant women anywhere. I mean, that's all random, but you suddenly notice, you sort of 'put them in a bag'. Tom and I went to a toyshop and got lots of toys, we've also tried lots of toys that we didn't use. . . .

*I wanted to ask you about the toy that you burn on the stage.*

We wanted to burn 'the house', and then we sort of replaced that idea with the burning of the toy. I think it is very useful to keep certain elements, like for example 'water' and 'fire' (even though we can't do much 'fire' in the theatre), because she's a 'sun-girl', there's some connection with 'fire' or 'sun'. And then I made the connection with the 'lighter' – that she harms herself, burns herself. The 'death' self-employs 'death' (or 'burning' as self-renewal – they think if they burn some house and run, life will change). So when I say 'I need this land, I run', I use the lighter. For a long time, we looked into whether we could burn the set or something.

*Can you remember what inspired the idea of burning a toy? You also use other toys as props – the plastic-ship toys, the stethoscope.*

I remember I saw all those in programmes about child-abuse – toys are often used to ask the children what happened. And also children's games are much nearer 'the savage' than adults'. Children's toys are all violent, or attention-mutilating. But again, we tested their power – and they either worked along with the power of the play, or they didn't work. And finally, we left only what worked.

*There was a striking combination of simple form and ambiguity which permeated all elements of the production. For example, the scene of Medea's last speech. As you were moving, there was also a reflection of you, in motion, on the double-glazed wall behind you – obviously an element of the lighting design. Yet it did not distract us, or dissipate the dramatic tension. Were you aware of what we were seeing from the auditorium?*

'Aware' – yes. I knew there were reflections on the back wall. Yet I was not 'conscious of' exactly what was perceived from the auditorium.

*The way your movement interacted with these reflections was not immediately translatable into meaning. But these multiple reflections of you were clearly projected onto the glass, and it looked like many women were doing what you were doing in that moment. And I think it wasn't just me who saw that.*

If you get the elements correct, people's meanings are their own. Especially with this text, I think. It's so simple, it's so remarkably simple, that people fill in their own arguments. For instance, this text, saying, 'I made your reputation' could be replaced in many people's minds by, 'I paid for your education', 'I pay for our mortgage'. I think people translate the conversation in their minds. Euripides' text is quite ordinary, but you have to push it, and you have to fill it with life, and actually the audience fill in theirs. For example, I wear a black dress that *anyone* could wear – a night-black plain dress, but for

every lady. I could've worn a flowered dress, I tried all sorts of dresses, but we decided that I should stay with the most plain. Because actually, people can put *their* own dress on. Or they can put on trousers. I mean, I'd love to do it again where I would wear whatever I wore any day. I think the set is doing that too. It could be *anybody's* house, but it is a house that's nearly been built. I think that's very important: the house isn't finished. Their life is just coming together. And he's gone.

*Did this signal – the unfinished house – work in a different way at the Abbey Theatre?*

The Abbey Theatre is a modern one, with a much wider and shallower stage. So it was designed for that building. Whereas at the Garrick we were trying to get it much deeper. In the Abbey, we were nearer and wore much more of an Islamic costume. Everybody spoke Irish, except me. Most of the Chorus spoke in Gaelic. Here, in London, because people don't speak Irish, I speak Irish. So, it's just a transference of that contradiction between Medea's language and the language everybody else speaks. But again, these are little brace notes. We're not aiming to say that Colchis is Ireland and Corinth is England.

*But people do relate to these shifts in the accents.*

Oh, they do relate. It's useful to show that I'm an outsider, but I'm not that much of an outsider. You can highlight it enormously and put it in different braces, but it doesn't need those things – or rather, you only need them in as much as everyone who feels an outsider *is* an outsider.

*Did your previous work on ancient Greek plays influence your work on Medea? For example, your work on Electra?*

We had a terrible time with *Electra*, because we couldn't 'find' *Electra*. We rehearsed it and rehearsed it, and rehearsed it, and we still couldn't find it. It's just . . . hard to find. And people think, 'This doesn't work, this doesn't work, we don't know where it lives any more.' And when we finally found it, we realized that it lives a lot higher – you have

to . . . jump for it! I think the work on *Electra* gave us confidence that we knew where *Medea* probably existed, which is in a very high, energized place. It doesn't exist in a domestic conversation – and yet the story is in a house. Subsequently, it was very useful that we did *Hedda Gabler* in that *Hedda Gabler* existed in a house. But *Medea* was a Greek tragedy in a house. So I think doing *Electra* gave us a confidence not to be frightened and to be brave.

It's very amusing to watch my colleagues – because this translation is so modern, we all rehearsed in a room as if it *was* a room, and there was this terrible fright that what we were doing was not 'big' enough, which you can find if you start rehearsing in a room. But we shouldn't have been so afraid of that, because it's about the *essence* of what they say, not simply about the surface of what they say. Someone walks in casually, lights a cigarette, has a chat, tells you a few things, or you argue calmly – but this doesn't exist in the calm argument, the daily rested argument. It exists at the 'last possible moment' of argument. And for that, you need incredible energy. And people were shocked, all of them, at how much energy they needed to be anywhere – to be even in the play. The Chorus burn up because they have to work on a premise that is almost unplayable.

It's like ballet: in order to be angry, you have to be on your toes. And in order to say, 'Why have you come to this house?', you have to be driven to that house. They have to be *there* (*pointing up*) to be caught. And once caught, they cannot go back. That's the logic, the truth, the 'site' of the situation. And that's of use for me as an actress – that the wedding is today, it is the day of the marriage. And I do know many stories about people who've done terrible things, like committing suicide, on the day their ex-partners were married – which is a fantastic way to ruin the marriage, which can never be celebrated again.

So this situation is very near the 'marrow' of people's souls, underneath the bone. . . . We are all very similar and there's a kind of moment where, if people are hurt or their spirit is so broken, they will do anything and destroy themselves – but it's not the worst

thing they can do! In a way, Medea would happily destroy herself. At the beginning, she says *she* would like to die. But then she gets strength which is worse, because the children were to die. And worse is what she wants to do. The worst thing! Worse! It'd be so much nicer if she decided to commit suicide, but he would recover! And live again! So she got away with the children!

*Is it a characteristic of Greek tragedy and particularly of Euripidean tragedy to begin the play at a moment when the dramatic tension is very high?*

Yes. It begins at a moment of crisis. I mean, in this play, the story of Jason and Medea could be told in a movie just telling the story of Jason and Medea or telling the story of his wedding. But Euripides is not interested in the story of their love. You could have a man storming out of a house, saying, 'I'm off!' But you even go beyond that, to the next bit – some days later when he hasn't come back – to the worst moment! The Greeks seem to waste no time with this – it's marvellous! *Electra* is the same. You don't meet her on the day she's sad at the death of her brother. You meet her on the day she'll die if she doesn't stop grieving. It's pure protein. And it's terribly demanding on everyone. It's poetry!

And the situation is made up of such taut elements that only an explosion can occur. So in that way, it's quite easy to act if you follow it exactly. Medea has been left by her husband, but she thinks there are worse things that could happen to her. Then she's banished, which really is the worst thing that could happen to her. And then Jason will marry on that day when she's done it. These three things. And she can't go any further because she's already given everything to him. He stacks it unrealistically. Most people, when they're leaving each other, have somewhere to go, they have an alternative. But Euripides takes away the alternative. He's a brilliant writer! She has no alternative.

There's a wonderful line – the one where the Chorus says, 'No myth! It's true life. Hear enough: no myth.' And at the moment of her weakness, there comes a tiny hope of help: Aigeus. And at the moment she sees help,

she's not weak any more. But at the beginning of the play, she is finished! And in order to tell the story, the audience need to identify and sympathize with the fact that she's down. It's remarkable! It should be on every play-writing course. Many plays waste time with insignificant things, but what this play does to me is to meet the human psyche. And wherever the human psyche is met, I believe the play!

You can only do this play if it's done quickly. You mustn't allow enough time for the mind to think of an alternative. Otherwise you'd say, 'Yes, but . . .'. You're further in before you can believe how far in you are. And I think that's very near the human psyche – and very far away from Christianity, because Christianity sort of says, 'Sin is perfect knowledge, grievous matter, and full consent.' None of us live like that. We've done the bad deed before we realize we've done it. Nobody plans an affair, they have an affair, and then they realize, 'What have we done?' Medea has no idea – as soon as she realizes, he's already left her! The Chorus say, 'When you made your plans, is this the plan you made?' That is how we experience our lives – there's a mixture of fate and catastrophe in the state that we experience, rather than 'sin' which is 'choice'.

*How do you relate to the Chorus's words? Are they 'your own voice'? Do you hear these words in your mind?*

To a certain extent, yes. I mean, they were much more 'my own voice' in Dublin. But they're such an individual group here! They're fantastic! They feel like real people, and they feel like they're really in dialogue. But, of course, they *are* in a way the dialogue in her mind, the contradiction in her thoughts, the 'chatter' in all our minds. But, no, I couldn't reduce them to my own voice. They genuinely are other voices in the community that are speaking, 'This isn't a good idea. . . .'. And they too get implicated – more than implicated, they help! They give her the courage at the moment she needs courage. And in that way, we learn we help people do good and bad things, even if they don't know that

they've done them. It works on a very small spinning-top. It just keeps repeating that, in a way, it's all been Medea's magic – the worst thing has happened, and you ask, 'How did it happen? It should never have happened.'

*She realizes what she has done is tragic. Yet there was a very special kind of humour that came across. Where did it come from, and how does it co-exist with the tragedy?*

Yes. My Hedda Gabler was also full of humour because, first, the humour was there in the play: 'So many roads lead fast to death! How can one choose?' is not necessarily a humorous line, but from someone who hasn't a hope of getting a bus, let alone killing someone, it speaks of helplessness. 'Humour' is the gap between what is potential and what is real. And just hitting that gap is humorous. The humour is nearly in the impossibility, is actually in the helplessness. Humour in itself is a release of helplessness. What else is 'humour'? 'So, they die!' If she'd said it in an ominous whisper – 'So . . . they . . . die!' – it would be humorous, because if she *could* do it, it would have already been done! If she had any magic power, she would have prevented bad things from happening! But she *couldn't*! So humour is nearly her self-deprecation of somebody in that state. But I don't mind if the audience don't laugh, I don't need them to laugh. I'm not trying to make it humorous. Maybe, sometimes, I like to make it humorous for the Chorus – to entertain the Chorus, so that at least they're entertained enough to stay with her.

*It makes it more human. It strips some of the 'heroic' halo off the characters.*

Yes. And I think, politically, they would be laughed at anyway. However, there *is* something 'heroic' about someone who says, 'What breath of life but any more who came.' I mean, I'm full of admiration for these heroes – but doing the good thing isn't always the 'heroic' thing! And I do think that humans are wonderful, doing sometimes the self-destructive thing. That's the contradiction in us, that's the play, that is the fact of 'us'.

*The realization of this self-destructiveness, making it a subject of theatre – would you consider this part of a modern aesthetic?*

Maybe. We live in a very complex, and a very complicated world, a world full of contradictions. And we don't all fit very easily. And to some people one person's acts may seem terrible, while to others these acts may seem justifiable. There is an ironic side to that, isn't there? To me, the self-destructiveness of the mother who brings up her son who burns himself is a terrible act! But to the Buddhist monk, it is a good act. I think life is more complicated than that. My father thinks all people who commit suicide are mad. They're not necessarily mad! They may be desperate. But not mad. There's a logic to all these things, and what's 'inside' the logic gives us compassion.

And in that way the play is full of compassion. It's full of compassion even for Jason – men leave women because, as in the play's argument, they want to go on being young! That is part of their strength as well as their weakness. And that is a part of the incompatibility of women, who are rewarded with children, and men who are not. Men want their sons to grow up, so they can inflict their manner on them; women want their children to remain small so they can be mothers. And you cannot see just the tragic in that. So the play, I think, cannot be performed as a pure tragedy.

For example, there is a wonderful line at the end that goes, 'And so ends our sorry story.' Well, the word 'sorry' (I don't know what the word is in Greek), is much less final throughout than 'our tragic story' or 'our ugly story', but 'sorry' is only . . . it's *sad* that they cannot spend a life together! Particularly, when they gave themselves such a fantastically good head start, with passion, with all the things that we admire! They had love, they had passion, they had heroism, they had adventure, they had shared adventure, they had sons. It's more sad that they could not stay together with all of that! . . . And is it his fault? He *believes* that they are not safe without his remarriage, or he needs more children – he needs more. Well, that leads to

tragic consequences, but when you think . . . the opposite way of looking at that situation is also there.

*Does the performance change every evening? What changes and what doesn't?*

I'm in a different state almost every evening. Sometimes it's easier to put 'heroism' off our memory; sometimes it's difficult. Sometimes we're trying to play for a word, a point of focus. Last night, we played towards the word 'home'. So we all give ourselves a sort of group-note. That's very important. So we agree what we're playing for. Everyone's state of mind is very important too. So that everyone's in good form. Saturday nights are very good because we're tired and we're not interfering with the 'play'. The 'play' just happens. If you're in too good form, you have other energy interfering with it, and you resist the story. If you're tired, you can just concentrate on the story. Yes, it could be very different on different nights. But it's the same story. . . . And the same actors, and the same director.

*Does Deborah give you notes on the same night, or on another day?*

On the next day. It is alive, and changes come in, of course. I mean, if something gets better, it is acknowledged, so we keep that in. If something *is* there, it affects everybody else. Everybody affects everybody else. So ideally, it gets better. It grows. But it's very precise in its playing, of course. Its playing time attests to that. It's nearly always the same. It's very, very tight in its playing time.

*Does the production mediate its knowledge only to women, or only to men, or to both?*

To women and to men. There are warnings that such things could happen! Men do leave women, and women do leave men because of other partners. But the warnings are: husbands, beware how you leave your wife! *How* you leave your wife – not *why* you leave your wife, but *how*. And warnings to women: beware of these husbands!

*Did you share with the group during rehearsals what you had seen in your real life that might be associated with your part, like saying for instance, 'I saw that woman, she looked so-and-so and was doing this-and-this, and she reminded me of Medea'?*

Yes. A lot of that. Hours of it. Lots of little rubbishy stories. Lots of looking at the *OK* magazine. Pop shows are full of things we can use as associations. We are using the architecture of 'now'. Just 'now'. If it were of any other epoch, it would have been old-fashioned. I mean, there are famous people 'now' in the same way as there were famous people 'then'. Their heroes were a bit better. I mean, our heroes are sometimes popular, we have people who are famous for beauty or famous for gifts, but we have all the same view of 'fame' as they had. At the moment, to put the issue of 'fame' on display is particularly good, because the media make us think 'fame' is a good thing. It seizes us with vertigo at the most dangerous places and with the most dangerous consequences.

*Did the play create any difficulties in speaking an ancient Greek text, albeit in translation – of striking a balance between Euripides' poetic language and the language of the modern world?*

I believe that in achieving 'modernity' actors have to use the skills that are recognized as fundamental for the profession. Some might think they are old-fashioned skills. You have to be able to speak in a very old-fashioned way, and only then be very modern in your thinking. You must be a master of the techniques, and then be completely modern. The actors in this production are, I think, particularly good speakers. Speech technique is a very old-fashioned craft, but you have to develop it to perfection while not being old-fashioned in your imaginative approach. You must absorb the tradition in what it can offer, which is good speaking in big places – and an excitement about language! But that isn't being taught, and that is a pity. We will lose it, the skill will be gone. It'll be gone in ten years, it's nearly gone now.