

## **Medea in Australia: responses to Greek Tragedy in contemporary Australian theatre**

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In this article I briefly examine three productions of *Medea* that reflect some of the dominant responses to Greek tragedy in Australia during the past twenty years. I experienced these productions at first hand in Melbourne between 1984 to 1993 – some were also performed elsewhere. To avoid preconceptions of theatrical forms I call these styles ‘hysterical/realistic’, ‘body theatre’, and ‘opera-theatre’. I have expanded my analysis of these performances more recently through archival research in preparation for a much larger project on the reception of Greek tragedy in Australia from the beginning of European settlement late in the eighteenth century to the present. Of all the extant Greek tragedies, *Medea* appears to have received the most attention here.

As I argue in another paper that focuses on the 2005 Indigenous Australian production (*Black Medea*, in preparation) a number of Australian productions and adaptations of Greek tragedy invite a scathing postcolonial critique. Here I simply analyse some of the trends that the three productions of *Medea* illustrate. Each of them deserves a fuller analysis than is possible here.

During the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century productions of *Medea* involved ‘visitations’ by overseas stars. Avonia Jones, Mary Provost, Judith Anderson, Sibyl Thorndike and Adelaide Ristori all toured here, playing the title role in Euripides’ play, and the adaptations by Legouvre, Brough and Jeffers, with much psychological and emotional investment in a largely realistic style. Charles Mathews, the London comedian, toured in 1870 in the Planché extravaganza, *The Golden Fleece*. In 1932 the Australian theatrical entrepreneur J.C. Williamson brought out Lewis Casson’s English *Medea*, in Gilbert Murray’s translation, to the Theatre Royal in Sydney, with the legendary Sibyl Thorndike in the title role (cf Macintosh 19-20). In 1955 the Australian-born (but American bred) star Judith Anderson toured here as Medea in a remake of the 1948 Broadway production of Jeffers’ ‘free translation’ of Euripides, directed by John Gielgud. These touring productions to Australia were predominantly in a mixture of two moulds: ‘Medea the Abandoned Wife’, where Jason is so ambitious for personal gain that he abandons the woman who loves him for a better deal, and ‘Medea the proto feminist’ who disrupts patriarchal authority (Macintosh 14-6). As Macintosh notes (18), the ‘modern’ Medea formed in productions such as these ‘is no longer simply a victim of circumstance; she is determined to take a stand against both the individual who caused the suffering, as well as the society that allowed it to happen’.

### 1. ‘hysterical/realistic’: Melbourne Theatre Company 1984

The Melbourne Theatre Company (MTC) production of *Medea* in 1984 was a remount of a 1948 American production of Jeffers’ version of Euripides, which in the meantime had toured to Australia in 1955 and was remade again in the US in 1982.

The history of the MTC and its role in the development of professional theatre in Australia throws some light on this programming choice. In 1955 the MTC established itself as the first professional theatre company in Australia. Its inaugural production was Ray Lawler’s *Summer of the Seventeenth Doll*, which many still see as the first truly ‘Australian’ play although it was very much in the English naturalistic mould. In this same year the newly established Australian Elizabethan Theatre Trust (an early national arts funding and touring body), was founded ‘with the aim of establishing national drama, opera and ballet companies employing local artists’ (a brief history of the Trust can be found at the [National Library of Australia](#), accessed 27/10/05). In pursuit of this general aim the Trust sought ‘to “educate” the public via a range of classical revivals and to provide an outlet for domestic talent of the highest order’ (Meyrick 28), and one of the Trust’s first actions was to remount the 1948 American *Medea* and tour it around Australia. Judith Anderson played the lead role – she was an Australian after all – and local actors took the supporting roles. Hugh Hunt, an English director appointed the first executive director of the Trust, and who had worked at the Bristol and London Old Vics, redirected the production. Anderson had influenced Jeffers to write the version in 1947, and in the 1948 production that was enormously popular in the US and Britain (Macintosh 24) she won a Broadway Tony Award for her impassioned, psychological interpretation.

Robert Whitehead produced the 1948 season, and 34 years later in 1982 he redirected the production with Zoe Caldwell, another Australian diva who was also his wife, as Medea and Anderson as Medea’s nurse. Caldwell had played a minor role in the 1955 tour, and performed regularly with the MTC over the years while forging her career in the US. When the MTC were asked in 1983 to inaugurate the new brand new Victorian Arts Centre the following year, it seemed a natural choice to continue the

tradition begun in 1955: they brought the 1982 remount of the 1948 production back to Australia. The enormous and positive response to this production from most critics and much of the audience ensured that this British-American colonial formation of the Australian reception of *Medea* – and Greek tragedy in general – was carried right through into the last decades of the twentieth century.

Anderson's 1948 interpretation was in the 'legendary' mould, and Caldwell followed suit. The MTC media release for the show said Medea's revenge on Jason's betrayal was 'awe-inspiring in its elemental savagery'. Hailed as 'maybe the greatest dramatic actress this country has produced' (*The Sun*, 25/10/83), Caldwell explicitly drew on her own experience as a mother of two boys 'to gain the size and the agony' of Medea (*Herald Sun*, 20/10/83). She claimed that it took her a year to both prepare for and recover from the role (*The Age*, 21/10/83) because she had 'never had to go so deep into my psyche ... To keep it going I have to use all of my energy, every nuance of my emotions and every bit of my intelligence' (*The National Times*, 13-9/10/83). She had clearly made a decision to manifest her psychological interpretation through an exaggerated physicality. Reviewers noted how Caldwell stalked the stage 'like a cat on hot bricks' (*The Herald*, 9/5/84), or 'like a panther, rolling her eyes, tearing agitatedly at her gown, wailing with grief and howling with anger' (*The Age*, 10/5/84). The reviewer from *The Australian* (10/5/84) mentioned her 'heart rending moans, wheedling pleas, angry denunciations and anguished cries ... her writhing body, her clutching fingers, even her agitated feet'. The judgement passed by the overwhelming majority of reviewers was that this was 'ancient Greek theatre at its best' (*The Advocate Magazine*, 14/6/84), 'an unforgettable experience ... dramatization of a quality that ... is incomparable with anything I have seen' (*The Sun*, 10/5/84) and 'an astonishingly original creation' (*The Australian*, 10/5/84). The last reviewer seems not to been aware that this supposedly original portrayal was, on the contrary, very much in the mould of Provost, Jones, Ristori, Thorndike and Anderson.

This imported 1948/1984 production exemplifies what I call the 'hysterical/realistic' response to Greek tragedy in Australian performances, a conception of tragedy underpinned by the assumption that a realistic, psychological interpretation of both character and consequently performance is entirely and perhaps *solely* appropriate for the performance of Greek – or at least Euripidean – tragedy in the modern world. In this style emotionally charged actors feel they must actually experience the emotions they assume their 'characters' (a dubious term at best when referring to even Euripidean tragedy) are experiencing. In the 'hysterical/realistic' style, it is the job of the leading actor – in the case of *Medea*, a diva – to fill the hearts of the spectators with their own excessive emotion; the spectator will feel moved by the realistically portrayed fate of the hero or heroine, portrayed as a real-word character, and go home having experienced some kind of catharsis (that vaguely articulated Aristotelian notion of dubious value for understanding fifth century BC tragedy). By attempting to generate the experience of tragedy through 'Medea as Romantic tragic heroine', as performed by a fundamentally naturalistic actor with little or no support from either a deep physical awareness or from other production elements (set, lighting, music – especially music), this style of performance has enormous problems dealing with the chorus. The chorus of the MTC *Medea* was a dismal affair, consisting, as one otherwise approving reviewer put it, of 'three female players who can't decide if they are "I" or "we"' (*The Age*, 10/5/84). The three hapless women were largely confined to one upstage area of the space, speaking individualised lines in 'tragic' tones, with no sense of *choreia* whatsoever, and in complete contrast to Caldwell's overly gesticulated 'passion'. The 'hysterical/realistic' style seems not to acknowledge its own modernity, in the sense that its concept of 'drama' as 'the representation of human characters and passions in conflict' (Kruger 81) derives not from the Greeks but from Hegel. Nor does the style seem aware of how heavily nineteenth century naturalism and realism have determined its assumptions. Overburdened with inappropriate psychology and individualism, the 'hysterical/realistic' performance style does not even have the tools to satisfactorily execute its own misconceived notions of how to translate Greek tragic text into a living reality on the contemporary stage. The effect in my view is similar to an actor wearing a mask but retaining his/her naturalistic body in performance, causing a disjunction between mimetic and poetic, concrete and abstract representation.

Unfortunately, this misconceived style of performing *Medea*, of performing Greek tragedy, and of theatre making in general, has been pursued by many in Australia both before and since this 1984 remount of a 1948 production. Thankfully, a new generation of theatre makers from the early 1990s has been inspired by radically different traditions and ideas. The irony, as the next case study will show, is that it took a new wave of influence from overseas – in this case, from the European physical avant-garde – to help dislodge the almost total dominance in professional productions of tragedy of the 'hysterical/realistic' style.

## 2. Body-theatre: IRAA Theatre, 1991

In 1991, Renato Cuocolo, founder and director of IRAA Theatre, an Australian reformulation of Cuocolo's earlier internationally renowned Italian group Teatro dell'IRAA, devised and directed *Medea: a Vision of the Void*. This production was Part One of the *Vision of the Void* trilogy that included *The Trojan Women* (1992) and *Agamemnon* (1993). In 1992-3 he also directed the *Bacchae*. The *Vision of the void* trilogy opened up new ways of responding to Greek tragedy in Australia by seriously challenging

the dominant conception of tragedy as ‘hysterical/realistic’, and by providing audiences – in Melbourne at least – with exactly what that approach to tragic performance was lacking: a theatre based in the expressive power of the body.

Cuocolo radically reworked the tragedies by paring down the Greek texts to a bare minimum, by the inclusion of contemporary texts, and by the strong focus on the actor’s body as the key expressive medium. His *Medea*, with text from Euripides, Pasolini and Heiner Müller, was driven by the idea of ‘the clash between two cultures’, described as ‘sacred and profane, the West and the Other, integration and rejection’ (*Medea* program). This is the theme, in fact, of much of Cuocolo’s work. On many occasions he has spoken of this clash of cultures, the domination of the West, the disappearance of minorities and the resulting homogenisation of world culture. In *Medea*, Jason’s ‘victory’ over Medea comes at a terrible price: ‘If in fact the West wins on one side, it loses on the other. While imposing its domination on the globe, it crushed within itself the possibility of another vision of the world’ (*Medea* program). *Medea*, played by a male Chinese-Malaysian actor – a dramaturgical decision that disrupted easy characterisation and identification – was the foreigner, the Other, who is abused, destroyed and abandoned. Medea’s murder of her children was not emphasised. The production was also strongly informed by the notion of displacement, dislocation or exile from ‘the centre’, the centre being defined variously as ‘home’ (or *Heimat*), the sacred, and the stable meaning of text (SBS Television). Being ‘far from the country of one’s birth’, said Cuocolo, was an issue he felt personally connected with, and was also the situation of many people in the world today, especially in Australia. The ‘Vision of the Void’ trilogy was based around the ‘void’ that is left once ‘the sacred’ or centre has disappeared, leaving only memories.

As in all his work, Cuocolo’s *Medea* was based in theatre as an autonomous, Dionysian art form. In a brochure for the *Vision of the Void* trilogy, produced in 1993, Cuocolo specifically refers to Nietzsche’s Dionysian principle as underlying his work on Greek tragedy. ‘The central question is’, he writes, ‘that we need to give a *body* back to these classics, and we need to replace the beautiful literary images of these texts with theatrical equivalents’. Indeed from its beginnings in Rome in 1978, under the direct influence of Jerzy Grotowski and Eugenio Barba, and the indirect influence of Antonin Artaud, Pina Bausch, Peter Brook and Tadeuz Kantor, Cuocolo’s work has always been based in a rigorous physical training of the body. Derived initially from Grotowski and Barba, but extended through the Italian group’s own research into the ‘body knowledge’ of a number of non-Western countries and traditions including Zen Buddhism and Sufism, the training develops the psycho-physical balance and awareness of the actor for theatre in a Western context. So when he asks himself how the ‘past tense’ of the classical text ‘should be transformed into the present tense of the representation’, his answer is, ‘*There is only one way of thinking in theatre: poetically*’ (original emphasis, *Vision of the Void* brochure, 1993). The organic components of theatre are space, time, performer and audience, and the main aim of the group, following Barba’s notions of ‘theatre anthropology’, has always been to explore these components to ‘find a new theatrical language with which to speak to the deepest levels of people’s sensibility regardless of cultural differences’ (*Medea* program). In an interview for *The Trojan Women* the following year, Cuocolo said, ‘I want people to be transformed, both the people doing it and the people looking’ (*The Age*, 12/6/92). He tries to achieve this through a theatre of rich images and synaesthesia based in the immediacy and energy of the actor’s body.

*Medea* was performed in an old church hall in a suburb of Melbourne where the company continued to work for many years. The spectators climbed up to a three-sided rampart supported by walls made of heavy logs to watch the performance. We stood around all three sides of the rampart looking down from three metres above it into a pit of roughly six by six metres. Our elevated position somehow made us feel implicated and impotent; some of us felt, as one reviewer put it, ‘like spectators at a bull fight or perhaps like the gods of Olympus who allow all this blood and hysteria to take its course’ (*The Australian*, 13/8/91). The rampart walls surrounded the earthen floor of the pit on three sides, with the back wall of the hall as the fourth side. Once the performers entered this bear pit via a small ‘animal door’ inserted into the double doors in the back wall, they were trapped inside for the duration of the performance. From the rafters of the hall hung a very large block of ice, which melted slowly through the performance, and the context of the production suggested that one of the significations of this was the slow but certain disappearance of minority cultures, of solidity, of centre. The melting ice caused the earth to become muddy, and the actors ended up smeared with the mud they crawled through. Throughout the performance intense physical images accompanied by text and music (from Purcell’s *Dido and Aeneas* and Edith Piaf’s *La Vie en rose*) powerfully and experientially communicated the clash of cultures and the loss of centre. At one point the male/female Medea was physically abused by all the rest of the cast in a way that, by avoiding realism, was seared into our imaginations. At the end of the performance, Medea was left hanging upside down in midair and the ice had melted to nothing. A woman crawled through the mud beneath, calling repeatedly to her/him to ‘speak to me, speak to me’. But it was too late, the voice of the ‘Other’ had been destroyed. Implicated yet unable to intervene, all we could do at the end was to hurry out so the actor could be let down again out of our gaze.

The critical response focused predominantly on the intensity of the images and their visceral effect on the spectator’s physical being. One reviewer mentioned the production’s ‘elaborate physicality that recreates rituals and redefines performance idioms ... The vividness of the production’s imagery confronts and challenges the senses. Some sequences are simply stunning’ (*The Age*, 13/8/91). *The Australian* reviewer (13/8/91) asserted that the work ‘is visually arresting and constantly exploratory in a way that

puts most experimentalism to shame ... Cuocolo brings to Australian performance two things that we haven't seen before: he gives to acting the precision of dance and he shows an extraordinary capacity to visualise'. *The Melbourne Report* (August 1991) mentions the production's 'sheer dramatic impact. Renato Cuocolo's directorial vision allows the audience to experience some of the most exciting theatre seen for some time ... The final scene remains in the mind for days after the performance. See it and live'.

In many ways, the 'body theatre' style of IRAA Theatre's *Medea* was everything that the 'hysterical/realistic' style of MTC's *Medea* was not. The next case study, just two years later, offered new possibilities and challenges by drawing on Seneca and choosing to express the myth through opera.

### 3. 'opera-theatre': Chamber Made Opera, 1993

Chamber Made Opera's *Medea*, composed by Gordon Kerry (a Melbourne-based composer whose work is also well known in England, the US and elsewhere) with libretto by Justin MacDonnell 'after Seneca', was first performed in Melbourne at the Athenaeum Theatre II from April 29, 1993. Later seasons took place in Sydney, Canberra and Washington, and the Berliner Kammeroper produced the adaptation in Berlin, Beeskow and Düsseldorf. Chamber Made Opera is a small Melbourne performance company devoted to what I call 'opera-theatre', the third style of response to Greek tragedy in Australian contemporary performance. Founded in 1988 by Artistic Director Douglas Horton, and with a prodigious 25 new works under its belt, the company promotes itself as 'Australia's only full-time company exclusively devoted to the commissioning and presentation of music-theatre works by living artists' ([Chamber Made Company](#), accessed 4/11/05). A 1993 'company brief' accompanying their production of *Medea* (*Medea* promotional package) states that the company's work in contemporary music-theatre had increasingly led it towards 'cross generic performance modes'.

Marianne McDonald argues in "Medea è mobile: the Many Faces of Medea in Opera" (Hall et al 101) that 'Medea in opera is a barometer of sexual politics'. When women's rights are taken seriously, Medea 'is a tragic and powerful heroine who achieves a successful vengeance and escapes with impunity'. At other times she is portrayed as 'weak and submissive and commits no crime, or is punished for her violent acts'. Chamber Made Opera's *Medea*, informed by a mixture of sexual and postcolonial politics, followed the first of these models. Set in Edwardian England, which Horton described as a 'historic point of reference that offers an audience immediate associations with strict decorum, morality, social hierarchy and acute xenophobia' (*Medea* promotional package), the production explored 'what happens when two very different cultures come into contact, and how alternate realities may (and may not) be reconciled'. This approach was designed to resonate 'in the post-colonial and post cold-war period of political re-alignments and inter-racial tensions now being experienced throughout the world'. Explicit in the production concept was a critique of the 'Days of Empire where so many European nations were involved with the colonisation and exploitation of "third world" countries, often with little regard for their effect upon indigenous peoples'. Medea's 'Otherness' was expressed in a number of ways in performance: the costumes and Edwardian drawing room set with fireplace, upright chair, pram and white wedding dress on a headless mannequin, were uniformly grey and joyless, while Medea and her belongings were highly coloured and individualised; her musical motifs were infused with 'string-harmonic and bell textures' (composer's note, promotional package) suggesting her magical powers, and the props she produced from her suitcases (already suggestive of not belonging) were marked by their dynamic pyrotechnics in contrast to the drab chair and static old fashioned pram in which her (very young) children were housed upstage. The power of this woman in a man's world was heightened by all these production elements, by the virtuosity of Merlyn Quaife's 70-minute non-stop performance as Medea, and by the force, tonality and structure of the music.

As an operatic performance response to Greek tragedy (via Seneca), the performance style of this *Medea* was dominated, naturally, by its instrumental and vocal music, and by the *verismo* style of the production. Director Douglas Horton described the music as having an 'extraordinarily abundant and sophisticated relation to the classical repertoire, creating a work that advanced neo-classicism/post-modernism without ever degenerating into pastiche' (Artistic Report). In the Composer's Note for *Medea* (*Medea* promotional package) Gordon Kerry described his composition as having 'a classic operatic shape'. Medea's vocal range was coloratura soprano, Jason was tenor, Creon baritone and the Nurse alto. Medea used a variety of delivery modes including *Sprechstimme* and 'long, sinuous melodic lines', highlighting her isolated status in contrast to the chorus' 'harmonically very simple and archaic' song with religious connotations (sometimes in Latin and evoking medieval church chant). Creon was 'restricted to foursquare melodic phrases and rhythms' and Jason was 'trapped in a texture of twelve-note serial convolutions, suggesting the moral bind in which he finds himself'. At times the disrupted harmonies and twisting percussive sounds that signify Medea's otherness embodied and communicated the disorder that Medea unleashed on Jason's 'civilised' and passionless world. At other times one could hear deeper bell sounds that evoked London's Big Ben.

When I saw the performance, and more recently watched a video recording of it, I was struck by the similarity of its style, despite the operatic form, to a standard naturalistic/realist interpretation. Performers were for the most part standing or sitting in a realistically composed English drawing room (as opposed to an expressionistic or symbolic one), ‘talking’ – in song form – to others, expressing their passion or lack of it in typical naturalistic mode. The music itself, according to Horton, was an expression of ‘the ferocious activity that lies within Medea’s mind and heart’ (Artistic Report), revealing a concern for the psychological verisimilitude that is a hallmark of realist theatre (despite, again, the expression of that aim in a non-realist medium). I have no doubt that this was a deliberate strategy to achieve a *verismo* performance style.

On the one hand the *verismo* style of performance helped to focus our attention on the ‘strict decorum, morality, social hierarchy and acute xenophobia’ that had informed the production concept, but on the other I was thereby made more aware of the precarious line the production trod in relation to the supposedly ‘orientalising’ colonial authority it purported to critique. Within the Western naturalistic setting of the production, Medea was constructed as the non-Western ‘Other’ with mystical powers. Librettist Justin MacDonnell chose to work with Seneca’s version rather than Euripides’, writes Horton (Artistic Report), because he preferred ‘Seneca’s emphasis on the supernatural, the mythological, as well as the psychological elements that inform Medea’s plight’. Director Douglas Horton wrote in the Report that in response to MacDonnell’s script and Kerry’s score, he had consciously drawn on Western stereotypes of the ‘oriental’ in order to critique them. Seneca’s focus on witchcraft, embodied in this production by the use of pyrotechnics, together with Medea’s isolation by means of musical differentiation, costume and of course plot, highlighted the colouring of Medea as ‘Asiatic’: ‘for the ancient Romans and Greeks, the term “Asiatic” referred to anyone who was not Roman or Greek’ (*Medea* Promotional package). It seems, then, that the production team were trying to stage a stereotype with sufficient defamiliarisation for the spectator to recognise it as critique. But in my view the portrayal of Medea as ‘oriental’, with dangerous mystical powers, did not achieve this; on the contrary it fell victim to exactly the orientalism it was designed to critique. An overstated contrast between a drab and repressive Edwardian England on one side and a multicoloured Medea with sparkling adornments and metallic headpiece on the other simply reinscribed the cartoon-like quality of the stereotype. I had the impression, moreover, that the choice to express Medea’s ‘dangerous’ powers by means of pyrotechnics was driven by this orientalising contrast, and the result, in my view, was ultimately dis-empowering. The pyrotechnics were impressive, but theatre tricks are theatre tricks even when associated with an ancient mythological witch. The force of Quaife’s celebrated performance was unable, in this context, to overcome the dramaturgical problems.

This criticism is not to deny the size of Quaife’s accomplishment in performing difficult music with a strength and richness of vocal and acting ability that many opera companies would die for. The reviews for the original Melbourne and Sydney seasons were unanimous in their admiration for Quaife. The *Herald Sun* reviewer (3/5/93), inadvertently adding weight to my critique, described Quaife as ‘magnificent. She glows with malevolent energy, exotic eyes seductive one second, flashing hatred the next ... the personification of *eroticism*, calculation and *beauty*’ (my emphasis). This reviewer was clearly a man. *The Bulletin* (8/5/93) said the ‘bland, grey ... drawing room’ was ‘the perfect counterpoint to the flashy, colourful, matricidal Medea’. *The Sydney Morning Herald* (19/5/93) said Quaife’s ‘vocal and dramatic stamina throughout the piece was the mainstay of the work and a tour de force’, an opinion repeated by *The Australian* (7/5/93), and later (22/11/93) that the use of colour in the production was ‘a stroke of genius’.

The importance of Chamber Made Opera’s ‘opera-theatre’ was that it challenged, and continues to challenge, Australian productions of Greek tragedy to confront the importance of an embedded musicality.

### Conclusion

The three productions of *Medea* that I have briefly examined in this article illustrate three very different responses to Greek tragedy in Australian contemporary performance. As I mentioned in the opening paragraph, there is much more to say about each of them, and there are certainly many more productions to examine. As in Europe and America, the number of performances of Greek tragedy in Australia over the past 30 years has increased dramatically, and even at this early stage of my research into the reception of tragedy in Australia since European settlement my database is swelling daily.

Historically speaking, the ‘hysterical/realistic’ response to Greek tragedy in Australia carries with it the burden of the end of the nineteenth century. The MTC production of *Medea* in 1984 asked of us that we accept and approve of Australia’s colonial and theatrical heritage. Without wishing to buy into the ex-smoker (or ex-Catholic) syndrome of some postcolonial critique (they must be misconceived because we used to be them), this style in my view has well passed its use-by date. As the one negative review noted in relation to the MTC *Medea*, ‘though the shortcomings are numerous, they stem from one root; a debased and out of date idea of what constitutes dramatic art’ (*The National Times* 24/5/84). IRAA Theatre’s ‘body theatre’ introduced into Australia the physicalised strand of the European avant-garde (Meyerhold, Artaud, Grotowski, Barba and others). Cuocolo’s theatre, with his focus on the loss of centre in contemporary society, a phenomenon that paradoxically homogenises global

culture, is much more than Modernist nostalgia for a lost centre. It examines this loss with insight and penetration, and with its focus on the psycho-physical ‘reality’ and immediacy of the body in performance, finds its life in the fluidity and potential that is inherent in post modernity. Cuocolo’s *Medea* not only responded to the ancient performance style based in *choreia*, but drew in a far more considered way from the contemporary world. Chamber Made Opera’s ‘opera-theatre’ is post-Wagner, but not necessarily post-Nietzsche. In fact Horton wrote of *Medea* that it was ‘a Wagnerian achievement produced with Monteverdian economy’ (Artistic Report). Although a potent force in contemporary Australian performance, Chamber Made Opera’s response to tragedy ultimately failed to free itself of some of the assumptions that undermine the ‘hysterical/realistic’ style.

Aesthetically the three styles might be seen as responses to the interweaving of text, song and dance in Greek tragedy. While the ‘hysterical/realistic’ style seeks to translate literary text into an emotionally charged and heightened realism (with Romantic inclinations), ‘opera-theatre’ in the *verismo* style takes up the challenge of music but is in turn challenged by a lack of physicality and the need to simplify the text in order for complex vocal lines to be understood. IRAA Theatre’s ‘body theatre’ translates textual complexity into intensely physical imagery, with text acting as one layer in a rich performance fabric. Of the three, Cuocolo’s response to the challenge of staging Greek tragedy in the late twentieth and early twenty first century is the most fully theorised, and the superb grasp he has of his chosen medium produces enormously stimulating results.

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## Performances

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