

‘I can not act / Cause I’m no actor’ - Dood Paard’s postdramatic *medEia*

by Paul Monaghan
University of Melbourne

In this paper I analyse Dood Paard’s *medEia*, a 1998 rewriting for theatre of the Medea story. What motivates this analysis is a desire to find ways to more effectively stage Greek tragedy today. After many disappointing productions of tragedy over the years, I experienced this production as a breath of fresh air. The key features of the production that I focus on in this article are those that I believe most contributed to this effect, namely the striking nature of the script, with its use of a repetitive, overlapping narrative infused with the lyrics of dozens of contemporary pop songs, a non-linear narrative structure, the casual and playful yet carefully modulated delivery of the narrative by the performers, and the quick-fire slide-shows that break up this playful delivery three times during the performance. But perhaps more than any other feature, it is the company’s use of a very open relationship with the audience that distinguishes this production from many others. In all theatre the relationship between performance (including but not limited to the performers) and audience (in time and space) is a defining feature of the medium, but in Dood Paard’s *medEia* this relationship has been made a central feature of the event.

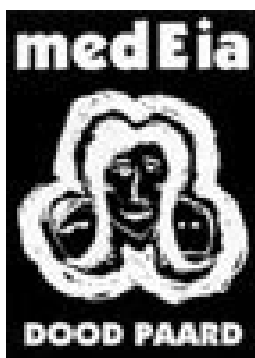


Plate 1 *medEia* graphic.

I do not claim in this article that the various performance strategies used by Dood Paard in *medEia* are unique. After all, very few productions in history could make such a claim. But nor do I discuss any other productions of Medea which may have used similar techniques. The aim of this article is not to cover vast territories, or to catalogue recent productions, but rather to analyse in depth what one production did with Euripides’ play to produce such a positive effect on me. What I do suggest is that the particular combination of such strategies and qualities used in *medEia* was, firstly, thoroughly enjoyable, and secondly, suggestive of the potential for contemporary productions of Greek tragedy of what is now being called ‘postdramatic’ theatre. In *The Postdramatic Theatre* (2006), Hans-Thiess Lehmann argues that the form we call ‘drama’ is historically determined and not inherent to the theatre. The concept and form of ‘drama’, he argues, derives in large part from Hegel’s philosophy of the dialectical process of historical development, and the place that tragedy has within that process. Just as history is made, according to Hegel, from a process of dialectical conflict and resolution in new syntheses, drama, which expresses this process, involves ‘dialogue, conflict, solution; a high degree of abstraction ... [and] exposition of the subject in its state of [dialectical] conflict’ (Lehmann 39). Drama relies on the linear story in which individual ‘characters’ inhabit a closed, fictive universe and in which conflict moves through various stages towards resolution of some kind (Lehmann 31). Dialogue is the primary expression of drama because ‘in dialogue the characters can express themselves and so drive the action forward ... [A]ction is produced by a character as an act of will’ (Shepherd and Wallis 167-8; see Kruger 81). Lehmann argues that *drama* and what he calls *theatre*, a more diverse and open medium than drama (with less reliance on character, dialogue, linear narrative, symbolic space and so on) have drifted apart since the 1970s (Lehmann 30-31) and that in Heiner Müller we see a theatre artist who has left the dramatic form behind altogether; his cast are no longer ‘acting’ in the dramatic sense, but ‘performing’ in a new theatrical form that engages in an ‘active exchange’ with an audience (see Lehmann 98-107).

The very active relationship between the performers and the audience in *medEia* is typical of postdramatic theatre (Lehmann 98-107), and using Lehmann’s thesis on postdramatic theatre as context, I suggest that what generates the impact of this production, in which the story of Medea is so strongly and effectively experienced, is its very lack of ‘dramatic’ form. In *medEia* the actors do not perform the ‘drama’ of Medea, but at the same time the production is delightfully performative in ways that I will elaborate. I

argue that not only is the form used by Dood Paard ‘no longer dramatic’, but that the production offers an important direction for the production and adaptation of Greek tragedy as specifically *postdramatic* theatre into the twenty-first century.

My analysis of the production is based on two live performances of Dood Paard’s *medEia* at the Malthouse Theatre, Melbourne, Australia, on Monday October 15th and Wednesday October 17th, 2007. I have supplemented these performances with the script for the show, written by Oscar van Woensel in co-operation with Manja Topper and Kuno Bakker (who are also the three performers in the production), and a DVD recording of a much earlier performance, on 18 Feb 1999, at the Monty Theatre in Antwerp, Belgium. Although every performance is slightly different, the earlier performance was remarkably similar to the one I saw in Melbourne in 2007.

Dood Paard and *medEia* performance history

Dood Paard (‘Dead Horse’) was founded in 1993 by Van Woensel, Bakker and Topper, the three cast members of *medEia*, after they left their performing arts training school in Arnhem, Holland. Since then they have taken on a fourth performer and various production crew. The company creates new work as a collective, usually without a director, and uses a very particular process that I return to below. Some productions, including *medEia*, are written in what the company describes as ‘Euro-English’, which the *medEia* press release describes as ‘similar to the kind of English used by people from different countries who are not native English speakers but who have English as the best common language’ (Dood Paard 2007; see MIAF 2007). According to the company website, to date they have created thirty-three theatre productions, several TV films and a TV series. Numerous works each year form a repertoire that tours Holland, Belgium and elsewhere.

Their *medEia* – the Dutch spelling of Medea; I return to the use of the capital ‘E’ below – opened in Spring, 1998 in the Toneelschuur theatre in Haarlem, Holland, and then toured around Holland and Belgium. International tours of *medEia* have included to Ljubljana (Slovenia) in 1999, Bergen (Norway) in 2000, the Dublin Theatre Symposium, Vienna Festival and Belgrade in 2003, the Festival d’Automne in Paris in 2004, Arhus (Denmark) in 2006 (Dood Paard 2007), to various locations in the United States – starting at the Spoleto Festival in Charleston, S.C. in June (Wallace 2007) – and of course to the Melbourne International Festival (Australia) in October 2007, where I saw the production.

A basic description will serve to introduce readers to the nature of the production. At the start of the performance, the three performers stand or sit upstage at roughly equal distances from each other across the width of the space, waiting for the audience to be seated. An aria from Cherubini’s opera, *Medea*, sung by Maria Callas, is playing, a particularly appropriate choice given Callas’ starring role in Pasolini’s *Medea*. Indeed the overall narrative in *medEia* seems to draw heavily on Pasolini’s film. The opera helps the audience to ‘enter into’ the theatre and prepares them to engage with a performance; it also sets up expectations of ‘tragedy’, which are then twisted and played with for the rest of the show.



Plate 2 Scene from *medEia*, reproduced with permission, Dood Paard.

The performance consists of four segments. As audience members enter the space, the three performers sit upstage in front of the bare back wall of the theatre. At the beginning of each segment, including the first, two of the performers raise a backdrop by means of ropes and pulleys, and the performers stand in front of it. At the end of each segment, the backdrop is torn down again, a new one is raised further down stage, the lights dim and a long series of slides is shown in very rapid succession. After the slide show, the performers take their places in front of the new backdrop, and resume the narrative. So with each new segment they move a few metres further downstage until in the fourth and final segment they are quite close to the front row of the audience. During each segment the performers remain stationary and the same distance apart, interacting at times with each other and with the audience. They do not enact the story or become the personae of the narrative; at times they are narrators, at other times they

speak to the audience (or each other) with the words of one character or another, much like an ancient bard might have done with the poems of Homer.

The script

The script of *medEia* as a document on paper consists only of the words spoken in the production, without speaker allocations (except 'Chorus:' at the very start), punctuation (except apostrophes in words like 'didn't' and so on), stage directions, or in fact any indication whatsoever as to staging. The only structuring device on the page is the use of stanzas, and each new line starts with a capital letter, as is the convention with verse. The only speaker of the text is the Chorus, and it is worth mentioning here that 'choral theatre' is one of the manifestations of the postdramatic noted by Lehmann (Lehmann 129-32). On numerous occasions the chorus refer in a self-reflexive way to themselves ('I am the chorus / The chorus all over the world / I am everywhere / All the time'), usually accompanied by a complaint that the chorus can see disaster approaching but do nothing to intervene. An example of this lament, which also gives the reader a good idea of the 'Euro-English' used in the script, is the following (in production, it occurs immediately after the second slide show):

I am the chorus
And I'm going crazy
I want to help
I want to do things
I want to make things better
For her
Medea
For the world
Turn the world into a better place
But I am like paralysed
I can sit next to her
Cry with her
Talk with her
Feel with her
I can tell her story to other people
But I can't do anything
And sometimes
It's just driving me crazy
Driving me mad
It's making me insane
I live and I live
Forever and ever
And I will never die
I'm always the woman
I'll always be there
But never able to intervene
To interfere
To act
Never an actor
Always on the side
Never the subject
Always talking
Just talking
And singing
And weeping
And crying
And hoping
Hoping that times will get better
Hoping for better times
Mistake
Times won't get better
Times will get worse

This arrangement of words, much like the ancient manuscripts of Greek tragedy that similarly had no speaker divisions, punctuation or stage directions, presents as a poetic text whose performance possibilities remain insistently open.

One of the key features of the script of *medEia* is the use of over 140 quotations of lyrics from American and English pop music (Cook 2007) from around 81 groups or solo artists. The 'Thanks' list at the back of the script includes Nick Cave, The Cure, Elvis Costello, the Beatles, Stevie Wonder, the Doors, Meatloaf, Michael Jackson, Madonna, the Rolling Stones, Lou Read, Aretha Franklin, Elvis Presley, Lionel Richie, Bauhaus and Santana, to name just a few. As the media release for the production states, 'These lyrics are, like Greek mythology, part of our collective memory' (Dood Paard 2007). Audiences at all three of the performances I have experienced clearly recognised and were amused by at least a good deal of those lyrics. The effect of this usage is, I suggest, manifold, but includes a sense that the story of Medea, or at least the elements of love, betrayal and revenge that the co-authors have chosen to highlight in the production, is part of our own experience. And few would argue with that. In addition, as Oscar van Woensel explained, 'Pop songs ... refer to love in a very direct and simple way – the same as in Greek mythology' where stories were told in a 'very pure, very extreme, and very specific' way (Rodat 2007). In a similar way this retelling of 'the life of Medea' draws on many previous versions, 'from Euripides to Pasolini, from Seneca to Müller' (Dood Paard 2007 – *medEia* Press Release). These too are part of our collective memory of the story of Medea, as one version becomes intertwined with others in our minds.

These techniques reference Brecht's 'quotation' acting (Brecht in Huxley & Witts 101, 105-06), as Bakker stated in an interview for the Melbourne season (Cook 2007). They keep us outside of the fictional location of the Medea story and ancient Greece by jolting us back into the artificial construction that is the performance. The humour and recognition thus generated also help to firmly locate the story in the present moment of the performance, and to generate the 'active' exchange between performers and spectators that I return to below. Humour helps to prevent 'tragedy fatigue', especially among those who have been subjected to a plethora of overly emotive productions of tragedy. The writing of the title of the production – *medEia* – with a capital letter 'E', whatever other thoughts it might provoke (some have thought it refers to the importance of the media in our lives), also defamiliarises the well-told tale.

Thematic concerns

The total inability of the Greek chorus to intervene in the action is in fact a common misconception, belied by choruses such as Aeschylus' *Libation Bearers* and *Eumenides*, Euripides' *Bacchae* and often in Aristophanes. But what is important here is the thematic aspect of that supposed passivity for this production. Passivity in the face of disaster is a common enough motif in the media, and in their press release for the production Dood Paard ask, 'Is this impotence, tragic destiny or unwillingness?' (Dood Paard 2007 – *medEia* press release). Members of the cast have suggested this powerless passivity is their own, being 'citizens of Western Europe. We look at the world but there's nothing we can do about it' (Wallace 2007), or 'Westerners witnessing tragedy on television' (Boukabou 2007). The theme certainly seems to have struck a cord, with most newspaper reviews and articles picking up on it. In the theatre the audience also watch passively, especially in 'dramatic' theatre which, especially after Wagner first turned off the lights in the auditorium, tends not to engage the audience as *actively* as does the postdramatic. The importance attached by the company to the active relationship between performers and spectators in all their performances, as I will discuss shortly, suggests that passivity is something they not only want to testify to, but to transform.

The most active theme of the production is Love. Both Van Woensel and Bakker are quoted as saying that what attracted them to the Medea story was the theme of love, 'extreme love and ... what happens with love when it gets so big it becomes destructive' (Boukabou 2007; see also Rodat 2007). The pop song lyrics obviously connect here ('Love is all you need' and so on), and the script makes very frequent reference to the love between Medea and Jason that will last forever ... for a while. 'This love will never end', says the chorus; the irony is heavy throughout, since the course of this love story is rather well known. A particularly effective section of the script dwells on the complexity of love:

Love is the most destructive of all emotions
Love is the most beautiful of all emotions
Love is the most terrible of all emotions
Love is the most unreasonable of all emotions
Love is the most passionate of all emotions
Love is the most horrible of all emotions
Love is the most direct of all emotions
Love is the most emotional of all emotions
Love is the most killing of all emotions
Yes
When there is love

Then there is blood
Love like blood
And when there is love
Then there is flesh
Flesh and blood
And when flesh and blood are there
Then there is murder
There is death
There is murder
No reason anymore
Only love
And passion
And anger and grief
And more love
And more and more
And then there is revenge
Revenge

The ‘otherness’ of Medea is also strongly present in this, as in other, versions of the Medea story. The women in Corinth, for example, tell Medea, ‘Go away / Stranger / You don’t belong here / Get back / Get back to where you came from / Get back to where you once belonged / Get out of our sight / We don’t want you here / You don’t belong here’. As Van Woensel says, ‘*medEia* is a story ... about love, and it’s a story about a stranger in a strange land, about racism, and in America, the story will turn out to be also about terrorism’ (Wallace 2007). The same was undoubtedly true of the Australian season.

The Slide Shows

As noted above, there are three slide shows during the performance, each accompanied by a different piece of recorded music. The slides are changed very rapidly; the DVD reveals that each of the three slide shows last for approximately 200 seconds, with around 100 slides passing the eyes very rapidly during that time. Viewing time for each slide ranges from around one to three seconds (mostly one), and the only way to actually take them in during the live performance, I found, was to keep my eyes wide open and let the slides wash over me like flashes of light with content.

A general function of the slide shows is, I believe, to function like the chorus in a Greek tragedy – a chorus to the chorus as it were, since the conceit of *medEia* is that it is the chorus who present the whole narrative. In the structure and performance of Greek tragedy in antiquity the chorus fulfilled a range of functions; one of them was to vary the mode of performance and engagement with an audience. The choral segments engaged the audience’s emotions and collective mythic memory in a more sensuous way through song, movement/dance, and music (by the *aulos player*). In the same way the slide shows in *medEia* break up the narrative into ‘episodes’, allowing more precise rhythmic and informational control. While the slides engage us in a more affective/sensual way, especially because the slides were changed so rapidly, the narrative episodes engaged us *primarily* in an intellectual, cognitive/computational way (for these terms, see Epstein 128-29). Neither mode, of course, fully excludes the other, and the effect of the narrative technique was certainly emotional at times.

Choral lyrics in ancient tragedy commonly evoked and brought to the spectator’s attention *particular* aspects of a much broader body of mythical stories, because those details were relevant to that particular performance, at that time, for that audience. The *medEia* slide shows operated somewhat in reverse, by expanding the audience’s focus from the particular aspects of the Medea story out towards a broader horizon of relevance. The slides acted as a visual analogue to the poetic text of the show infused with pop songs. Slide shows in Western culture are often a way of remembering experiences and destinations in one’s immediate or more distant past, especially relating to children growing up and travel; both are relevant to the story of Medea. The idea of travel also recalls the words of the Chorus near the start of the performance (‘Let me take you for a trip’) and subsequently the whole narrative structure that leads, in the final scene, to the killing of the children. And just as the viewing of slides after a trip invites a more passive than active viewing – there is nothing one can do then to change what the camera snapped – so our viewing of the slides in *medEia* was also passive, especially since the only way to be open to the parade of images was to open one’s eyes wide and let the images wash over you. Thus the oft-lamented ‘passivity’ of the chorus connected with our experience of watching the slides.

The content of the slides in general evoked an experience of tourism, both geographic and cultural (both synchronic and diachronic). In the live performance, I am not sure how much anyone is able to consciously distinguish between each bank of slides, though I suspect that on a subliminal level the differentiation has its effect. Studying the DVD allows me access to the

strategies being employed by the company, and what emerges is that, while the content of each bank of slides overlaps, there are particular emphases in each. The first show sets up the slide show as an event in the production, as well as generating a sense of 'Let me take you on a trip'. It consists mainly in what I would call 'external', tourist shots, the view of a tourist from the outside (both in the sense of being actually outside – there are no shots of the inside of buildings as far as I can tell – as well as in the sense of not having an insider's view of a place). There are slides relating to travel, relaxation destinations, some ancient Greek artefacts, and many shots of city buildings, sky-scrapers, churches and so on. An African/Islamic motif emerges towards the end of the first show. Most shots are of daytime, and there are splashes of colour. The music accompanying this bank of slides is an 'easy-listening' French pop tune that demands little while seeming to be totally appropriate to the 'travel' motif that dominates this first bank of slides.

The second bank of slides includes some similar travel shots and a few ancient artefacts and sites, but seems to generate more of a sense of being *in* a place and seeing its ongoing life, as opposed to passing through. We see shots *inside* the city and *inside* buildings. The African/Islamic presence in the slides is stronger, presumably reinforcing the theme of Medea's alienation and otherness, and there are shots of children that evoke those born to Medea and Jason. There is a strong sense of night time, of black, white, greys, off-white and some slides are rather hard to identify. The music for this slide show is more heartfelt (though still in a popular style), and somewhat melancholic. It is also cut off during the run of slides, and for the last minute or so we hear the sound of the projector shifting the slide-carousel around. The total effect of these slides, in my experience of them, is to create a sense that something is happening, that we are being taken somewhere, and the silence at the end of the music increases this sense. The third bank of slides is accompanied by a harsh, dissonant piece of music consisting of a stringed instrument and single voice. The slightly urgent tone has certainly moved on from that of the first two songs. It also finishes before the slides do, leaving the sound of the projector. The slides now seem to be a mixture of the contents of the first two shows, but I perceived a sense of emptiness and desolation in them, and the music adds to this sense. The last shot is of a roll of camera film, perhaps to remind us of how all these images came to be.

The speed of the slides passing before our eyes, as well as their vast content, are defamiliarising techniques that prevent easy, concrete or stable interpretation, and thus keep interpretation open. What they achieved surreptitiously or even subliminally, with the help of the music that accompanied them, was to shift us *experientially* along the structure of the narrative towards the dark heart of the Medea myth/story and its inevitable conclusion.

'Let me take you for a trip' - Narrative Structure

After a short prologue of sorts at the beginning of the performance, in which the chorus presents itself as female and powerless, they say, 'Let me take you for a trip'. The narrative structure of *medEia* that develops from this statement unfolds and turns back on itself in unpredictable ways, with heavy use of repetition and leaps in time. Myth typically involves coherent *patterns* of events and behaviours (Herington 66), the kind of interconnected series of events that Aristotle refers to as *praxis*. Greek tragedies are commonly structured along the lines of Prologue (if there is one), Choral entry, Episode, Choral song, Episode, Choral song and so on. In the structure of *medEia* that I set out below (based on my analysis of the performances rather than the script, which contains no scene or act divisions of any kind), the reader should keep in mind my discussion in the previous section of the slide shows as choral songs, and the momentum they provide into the dark heart of the Medea story. The structure as written here also assumes the reader will have some knowledge of the Medea story, but to assist the reader to understand the non-linear form of Dood Paard's narrative structure I will use the following segmentation of the Greek myth: (a) Jason arrives at Colchis, and with Medea he steals the Golden Fleece; (b) Jason and Medea marry, and Jason presents the Fleece to Pelias in Iolcus; (c) Jason and Medea arrive in Corinth; (d) Jason courts the King's daughter and the King banishes Medea; (e) Medea kills the King's daughter and the King; (f) Medea kills their children in revenge and escapes on a chariot; (g) the Chorus reflect on the whole story.

Prologue (g)

Episode 1: Colchis; the arrival of Jason; Medea's flight from Colchis (a); Jason reflecting after the death of his children (f); Jason's presentation of the Golden Fleece to Pelias (b).

Slide Show 1: 'view from the outside'

Episode 2: Medea and Jason in Corinth (c); marriage of Jason and Medea (b); Medea's lament at Jason's neglect of her (d); news that Creon will accept Jason and Medea in Corinth (c); Creon exiles Medea from Corinth (d); the birth of their two sons (b); Medea's lament at Jason's neglect of her (d).

Slide Show 2: 'view from the inside'

Episode 3: the chorus' frustration (g) and Medea's sadness (d); Jason and Creon's daughter are to marry (d); Jason and Medea argue; She curses him (d); Medea's trick with the bridal present; She thinks about killing the children (e).

Slide Show 3: 'emptiness'

Episode 4: Jason pleads with Medea to bury his children (f); the death of Creon and his daughter (e); reflection on Medea's grief; Medea thinks about killing her children (e); she kills them, and escapes in a chariot (f).

The effect of Dood Paard's narrative structure is to juxtapose and thereby clarify related strands in the myth, to make them dramatically active in the production. Underlying this structure is an assumption that we already know the main thrust of the story. A typical example of this strategy occurs in what I am calling 'Episode 1'. The narrative starts in Colchis with the arrival of Jason and the Argonauts (as it does in Pasolini's *Medea*), dwells on Medea's conflicted longing for Jason and rapidly moves past her murder of her own brother. The narrative then leaps forward to Medea's murder of the children, with Jason reflecting on the connection between the two murders. As the structure above shows, this strategy is employed in each of the Episodes, but Episode Three is focused more strongly on the transition from (d) the events surrounding Jason's betrayal and (e) Medea's murder of the King and his daughter.

One can also see how the narrative structure of *medEia* progresses towards Medea's murder of her children, despite the slippages backwards and forwards. The beginnings and endings of each Episode add momentum to this ineluctable direction:

Prologue: the chorus, from the end-point of the narrative: 'I am so sad / So many tears I wept today / And all the tears that I will weep today / I'll weep again tomorrow' **Start of Episode 1:** 'Let me take you for a trip' (the trip leads to the end of the narrative, and back to the beginning)

End of Episode 1: Jason warns Pelias that his daughters will cook him alive; 'And he is gone ...'

Slide Show 1

Start of Episode 2: 'And Medea's gone with him ...'

End of Episode 2: 'And this is where the story ends / No / No I wish I could say yes / But no / This story goes on / For a while'

Slide Show 2

Start of Episode 3: The chorus's frustration that they cannot stop the events

End of Episode 3: Again, the chorus's frustration that they cannot stop the events; all they can do is 'sit and wait and hope / Hope for times to change'

Slide Show 3

Start of Episode 4: 'But times don't change / Most of the time / Times stay the same / They don't like changes / They like it to stay the same'

End of Episode 4: Medea kills her children and escapes on a chariot.

The rhythm of the segments advances the narrative towards the end point as ineluctably as it does in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. Along the way there are repeated warnings that 'Something is coming / Something sometime', 'Something is coming / Something horrible', and the performance concludes with a strong focus on that 'something', the act of Medea killing her children. Overall, the rhythmic control exerted by the slides and music, the script and the performance as a whole, has taken us on a trip, as if through a funnel, and we have emerged in a place that is very different from where we started.

'I can not act / Cause I'm no actor'

At several points during the production, the performers – as chorus – make statements like, 'I couldn't act / Still no actor / A chorus / To tell / To talk with / But not capable to act / No actor / No person', or 'I can not act / Cause I'm no actor'. Of course on one level they are referring to their role as chorus, and the inability of the chorus to intervene in the action, as discussed above.

But I suggest there is more to such statements, whether intended or not, and that it can be interpreted as referring to the ‘not acting but performing’ aspect of *medEia* that forms the focus of the remainder of this paper. It is the highly performative yet ‘no longer dramatic’ style of presentation in this production that is the most striking of all, generating the energetic and active exchange between performers and spectators, and setting up *medEia* as a postdramatic model for the staging of Greek tragedy today.



Plate 3 Scene from *medEia*, reproduced with permission, Dood Paard.

One of the distinctive features of Dood Paard’s work is the way they have reconstituted ‘the unities of time, place and action’ – that spurious notion erroneously attributed to Aristotle by French neo-classicist tragedians in the Seventeenth Century, and that subsequently had a very substantial shelf-life – into the actual time and place of the live performance. The result, according to the company, is that ‘a strong feeling of “live” prevails during the performances, in which there is consciously room left for new choices, new interpretations and new stage settings’ (Dood Paard 2006-07). In an interview for the Melbourne season, Bakker noted that:

With *medEia* people say “You don’t act”, but the way we tell it we do a lot of work with our eyes, with our voices, with our bodies – slight things become a lot ... Everything the text does for you, you don’t have to do (Cook 2007).

The production relies for its impact on particularly subtle modulations of gaze, head positioning, pace and intonation by the performers as they deliver a finely balanced textual collage with an appearance of semi-improvisation. The performers shift from chorus/narrators to the voices of Jason, Medea and other personae of the narrative, all the while *explicitly* remaining themselves. Though they are always performing, they are not ‘acting’ in the sense of ‘being a character in a drama’. There is only occasionally dialogue in the conventional sense, and even then it is both temporary and infused with a sense of ‘game playing’. For example in the section in Episode One where Medea leaves Colchis with Jason, the ‘voice’ of the narrative shifts subtly from Chorus/narrator, to Medea inducing her brother to join them, to chorus/narrator relating the death of the brother, to Jason berating Medea for murdering their children, then back to the chorus/narrator expressing frustration that they could not intervene. The shifts are achieved by changing the direction of their speech (from being directed to the audience to another performer, then back to the audience), by using the direct speech of the personae of the story as if quoting them, and by *almost* enacting the scene – without ever actually doing so.

The same techniques are used throughout. The speech of each persona can be delivered by any one of three performers, often against gender (either of the two men might speak as if he is Medea, and Manja Topper as if she is Jason). Sometimes the performers interact with each other with a sense of ‘look, I am pretending to be Medea for a moment, and she will be Jason’, and at several key moments this make-believe extends to an emotional engagement that momentarily allows us to leave in the background the constructed nature of the performance. But there is no merging of actor and role, and the degree to which they ‘enter into’ the enactment does not ever extend to physically enacting the scene in any way; they remain standing in the same locations during each Episode, spread out across the width of the stage. Moreover the use of two males to ‘enact’ the Jason and Medea ‘dialogue’ in Episode One defamiliarises the scene and prevents it from becoming conventionally ‘dramatic’. What shapes each Episode is emotional rhythm, a rising and falling of intensity in the events narrated and the *means* of narrating them, including pace, the use of ‘direct speech’, emotional detachment and engagement, humour and so on. The moments when the performers engage emotionally with the narrative (rather than simply telling us what happened), such as the scene quoted above, and those with a more humorous tone (e.g. ‘Before the death of the children / Women gathered together / In the streets of Corinth / *Again*’, Episode 4; the emphasis here indicates the way the last word was emphasised in performance) are carefully planned.

Moments of near-enactment soon shift back into narration, smiling to each other with a sense of ‘ok, your turn to speak now’, and so on. Subtle shifts in vocal quality and where the performers look as they speak are crucial. A subtle bowing of the head is used as a way of ‘passing the baton’ to a fellow performer, of going out of focus; it is the equivalent of a lighting change (fade down ‘a’, fade up ‘b’), or exiting the stage. A look sideways to a fellow performer might indicate ‘we are performing together’, or ‘your turn to take up the narrative’, or ‘the events in this narrative are terrible, aren’t they’, and so on.

What the actors are performing is in effect the *act of performing*. Looking to another performer is often accompanied by frequent turning back to the audience, as if to say, ‘I am being Jason in order to tell you this story, but I am performing *for* you and *with* you’. The performance space is always the here-and-now; it does not at any time become a symbolic or fictional location. At the beginning there is no set as such, just the back wall of the theatre, some audio speakers and some chairs, but one can see the four backdrops that span almost the width of the stage lying on the floor and waiting, presumably, to be raised by the rudimentary system of ropes and pulleys. Once raised they have the appearance of some kind of paper-based material covered in paper tape as if to stick it together; they evoke the sails of the Argonauts’ ship and, by extension, of anyone seeking haven in a new country. The only other scenographic items, apart from the performers of course, are the lighting, which mostly illuminates the actors and reduces for the slide shows (although during Episode 4 they almost create a silhouette effect), the slide shows, and four pieces of music (one at the beginning and one for each of the three slide shows).



Plate 4 Scene from *medEia*, reproduced with permission, Dood Paard.

The way that Dood Paard develops new work is relevant here, because it very much informs the kind of result that I have described in *medEia*. As Bakker noted in the Program Notes for the Melbourne season, the company works collectively and without a director, and both the development of the concept for a new work as well as its rehearsal and production are largely worked out sitting around a table. Van Woensel wrote the script of *medEia* in Sicily in 1998 after working with Bakker and Topper at the table. Opening night, says Bakker, is the first time the performers move away from the table and onto the floor (Cook 2007), an outlandish process for any group unless you are Dood Paard. It is only seeing the performers in operation that can explain how this approach works for them.

Postdramatic Tragedy

When the Chorus of Dood Paard’s *medEia* say ‘I can not act / Cause I’m no actor’, they may or may not be making a deliberate statement about the postdramatic theatre. But as Bert O. States argues, ‘there is no law of the actor, or of the dramatic text, or of their symbiotic relationship, that is not constantly amended by the fashions and enthusiasms of culture’ (States 129-30). There is something about the contemporary world that has generated a new form of theatrical performance called the ‘postdramatic’ in which what we know as ‘drama’ has been left behind. However the ‘post’ of postdramatic does not indicate a total rejection of drama; rather, as Lehmann writes, ‘The adjective ‘postdramatic’ denotes a theatre that feels bound to operate beyond drama, at a time ‘after’ the authority of the dramatic paradigm in theatre’ (Lehmann 27). Having experienced so many disappointing productions of Greek tragedy as ‘drama’, I suggest it is in the ‘dramatic’ reception of tragedy that the lost ‘authority’ of drama is most keenly felt. Elsewhere I have described and analysed the jarring effect of the style I have called ‘hysterical realism’, a particularly virulent form of theatrical mis-translation (Monaghan 2007).

This is not the place to write in detail on the development of the postdramatic, but my analysis of Dood Paard’s *medEia* in this paper, motivated by a desire to find and recognise more effective ways to stage Greek tragedy in today’s world, has suggested that the postdramatic may present an effective alternative to the dramatic models that dominated reception during the twentieth century. There is something about the apparent unruliness and potentially catastrophic violence of the contemporary world that

seems not to fit into the dramatic form. As Karen Jürs-Munby writes in the Introduction to Lehmann, the postdramatic is ‘a theatre that does not make the world ‘manageable’ for us – fundamentally because the world we live in, globalized and multiply mediatized as it is, is less “surveyable” and manageable than ever’ (Lehmann 11). Paradoxically, certain aspects of *medEia* – the open nature of the poetic script, as discussed above, the drawing on collective memory (pop songs as mythic expression), the use of the slide shows as choral songs and so on – bypass the whole dramatic edifice and return to what might be called the ‘pre-dramatic’ theatre of the fifth century B.C. (see Lehmann 26). More than anything else, what reminds us of the ancient theatre in this production is the minimisation of ‘enactment’. Bakker noted in an interview for the Melbourne season that ‘Everything the text does for you, you don’t have to do. You often do too much as an actor, but the moment you trust your text you can do less and less’ (Cook 2007). There may well be surprising connections between the worldview that has generated the postdramatic and the worldview that generated Greek tragedy in the fifth century B.C.

That Dood Paard’s *medEia* has been well received would be an understatement. As one reviewer put it, the production was ‘like a deus ex machina intervening in my own exhausted psychology ... [the production presented] complexity, recognition, barely speakable anguish – elegantly laid across a performing space with an honesty and grace that elude most public exchange, not least in our theatres’ (Rogoff 93). Another praised it as ‘one of the smartest, most disarming theatre pieces I’ve seen in recent years’ (Sellar 2007). There is an important lesson here for contemporary productions of the text-rich tragedies; it is both the intellect and the senses that need stimulation in order for our imaginations to fire. Dood Paard’s *medEia* shows how one can trust the text of Greek tragedy without resorting to either melodramatic emotional indulgence or theatrical boredom.

References

- Boukabou, R., 2007. “Dood Paard.” *Beat*, no.1086 (17 October 2007): December 21.
<http://www.beat.com.au/article.php?id=1024>
- Brecht, B., 1996. “Short Description Of A New Technique Of Acting Which Produces An Alienation Effect.” in Huxley, M & Witts, N. *The Twentieth Century Performance Reader*. London: Routledge, 99 – 111.
- Cook, R., 2007. “We don’t like to obey the rules: an interview with Kuno Bakker.” Melbourne International Arts Festival. Program Notes for Dood Paard’s *medEia* & Titus (October 2007): December 21.
http://www.melbournefestival.com.au/program_notes
- Dood, P., *medEia* Program 2006-07 (provided by the company).
- Dood, P., 2007. Company Website: December 21. <http://www.doodpaard.nl>
- Epstein, D., 1995. “A curious moment in Schumann’s Fourth Symphony: structure as the fusion of affect and intuition.” in Rink, J (ed). *The Practice of Performance – Studies in Musical Interpretation*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ Press.
- Loren, K., 1985. “Making Sense of Sensation.” in Knowles, R, Tompkins, J & Worthen, W.B. *Modern Drama: defining the field*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003: 80-101.
- Herington, J., 1985. *Poetry Into Drama: early tragedy and the Greek poetic tradition*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Lehmann, H., 2006. *The Postdramatic Theatre*. London & New York: Routledge, 2006.
- Melbourne International Arts Festival (MIAF), 2007. Program Notes for Dood Paard’s *medEia* & Titus (October 2007): December 21, 2007. http://www.melbournefestival.com.au/program_notes
- Monaghan, P., 2007. “Greek Tragedy in Australia: 1984 – 2005”. In Sipova, P & Sarkissian, A (eds). *The Staging of Classical Drama Around 2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Press.
- Rodat, J., 2007. “Dutch Treatment.” *Chronogram Magazine*, Issue 8: November 13.
<http://www.chronogram.com/issue/2007/8/Arts+%26+Culture/Dutch-Treatment>
- Rogoff, G., 2003. “Deadly Theater Meets Dead Horse.” *Theater*, 33.3 (Autumn): 86-95.

Sellar, T., 2007. "Farewell, Dionysus!" The Village Voice (October 9): November 11.
<http://www.villagevoice.com/theater/0741,sellar,78022,11.html>

Shepherd, S. & Wallis, M., 2004. Drama/theatre/performance. London & New York: Routledge.

States, B.O., 1985. Great Reckonings in Little Rooms. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985.

Wallace, H., 2007. "Amsterdam's Dood Paard performs West Coast Premiere of 'medEia' at UCLA Live's International Theatre Festival Sept. 19-23." UCLA Newsroom (August 27, 2007): November 13.
http://www.newsroom.ucla.edu/portal/ucla/Amsterdam_s_Dood_Paard_Performs_8106.aspx

Van Woensel, O., 2003. *medEia*. 1998 (provided by Dood Paard). Also published in Theater, 33.3 (Autumn): 57-85.

Performances

Dood, P., 2007. *medEia*. The Malthouse Theatre, Melbourne, Australia, for the Melbourne International Arts Festival, October 15, 17 2007.

Dood, P., 1999. *medEia*. The Monty Theatre, Antwerp, Belgium, February 18, 1999 (viewed on the dvd made available by Dood Paard).