

Murray Bramwell's Reviews

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Despoiled Shore
Medeamaterial
Landscape with Argonauts

The Border Project
Queen's Theatre

The Border Project is a new company committed, you might say, to pushing the boundaries. And with their first venture, based on the texts of German writer Heiner Muller, they have taken on the themes of exile, persecution and betrayal. Muller uses the story of Medea, the sorceress who betrays her father and slaughters her brother in order to help her lover Jason steal the Golden Fleece. The part of the narrative he focuses on most, though, is the episode Euripides uses for his disturbing tragedy where, after settling in Corinth, Jason abandons Medea to marry the daughter of the King Creon and, in revenge, Medea murders their two young sons and escapes to Athens.

Director Sam Haren, recently returned from a stint with the Wooster Group in New York, and the seven members of the ensemble present us with three fragmented sections. *Despoiled Shore*, a bleak prologue partly presented through three video monitors to the sounds of a heavily distorted electric guitar, features the performers in black, with singlets numbered like a sports team, moving in gridlike formations in the large stage space of the Queen's Theatre. At the back of the performance space a young woman intones, cursing into a microphone.

Medeamaterial provides something more specific to fasten to. We know about Medea and her pride and her outrage at being jilted by the imprudently blithe Jason. I was your milkcow, scowls Medea, now I am your footstool. The guitar and synth dissolve into white noise as Medea prepares the fabled poisoned cloak that will defoliate her rival Glauke. Katherine Fyffe, Ksenja Logos and Amber McMahon all speak the Medea lines in turn, using video close ups for emphasis while at the back of the stage Jason (Paul Reichstein) and his argonauts (David Heinrich, Cameron Goodall and Alirio Zavarce) are jiving around with a basketball. The polarities are made clear enough- Medea the refugee with no allies, Jason the opportunist, for the moment at least, the winner.

The third section, *Landscape with Argonauts* introduces additional elements to Muller's text - namely a thematic link with the Lindy Chamberlain case. It is an interesting, if somewhat specious, parallel - but it verges on farce when the case is told from the point of view of the dingo. A microphone is placed next to the taxidermised snout of the native dog as it confesses to the crime. I took the jumpsuit, he mutters like a stage villain. I ate the baby - as the growl morphs into the sub-bass sonics of the Beast.

The Border Project is a talented group who want, as their mission statement announces, to chart and map the future language of live performance. Unfortunately this despoiled shore has been visited many times before. Muller's enterprise is back there in the angst of the Eighties, alongside the disintegrating structures of Blixa Bargeld's *Einsturzende Neubauten*. The teutonic rhetoric does not sit easily with this group and while Sam Haren has staged the work with care and precision, the twirling microphones and megaloccephalic video screens are such familiar tropes of electronic performance they have now toppled into cliché. The anti-media diatribe is asserted but unsustainable and the use of basketball to denote globalisation presumes too much of the semiotic - is Michael Jordan only the slave of Nike or is he the late-century Ali ?

I want very much to applaud the work of a new company willing to visit new territory. Not since Benedict Andrews' ventures with Koltes and the *Ur Faust* or, more recently, Brink's excellent *Quartet* has anyone taken on the vocabulary of experimental European theatre. But maybe these days there are other styles than over-wrought declamation. Something closer to the wit and comedy that is energetically ubiquitous in popular culture. A bit less grand guignol, might find, not just an audience for the Border Project, but something closer to their own centres of gravity.