

Simon Stone brings a searing reworking of Medea to London's Barbican

Informed but not constrained by contemporary psychology, the story retains a mythical quality here — a haunting sense of despair

It's the children we see first. They don't have much voice in Euripides' original tragedy, but in Simon Stone's superb reworking, they are present from the outset. As the audience take their seats, the two boys (young teenagers in this version) are on stage: one leans against a wall, the other is engrossed in his laptop. Their ordinariness, in the light of what we all know will befall them, is awful. It's one of the things that makes Stone's contemporary retelling of this timeless story so devastating.

Stone was last in London with his searing production of Lorca's *Yerma* starring Billie Piper. His version of *Medea*, staged by Internationaal Theater Amsterdam (formerly Toneelgroep Amsterdam), likewise features a stunning central performance — this time from Dutch actress Marieke Heebink. Again he finds a contemporary context for a classic drama and uses the tension between ancient and modern to express the agonising scale of the emotions that engulf the characters.

His script (delivered in Dutch with English surtitles) draws on both the Greek original and on the true story of Debora Green, an American doctor who killed her children in 1995. Here *Medea* and Jason become Anna (Heebink) and Lucas (Aus Greidanus Jr), two middle-aged pharmaceutical scientists, who married when Lucas was still a lab assistant. In their casual clothes, with their puppyish teenage lads (Faas Jonkers and Poema Kitseroo), they could be the couple next door.

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But when we first meet Anna, she has just returned from psychiatric treatment after trying to poison Lucas for cheating on her with the (much younger) daughter of the company boss. The couple's opening exchanges as they meet are tentatively normal, light-hearted even (one of the surprises of Stone's script is that it is often funny). But behind Heebink's tight smile we see something else: a kind of hunger and desperation. Heebink's body language is brilliantly precise, but Stone also delivers filmed close-ups of her face on a giant screen above the stage, making us even more aware of the disconnect between her desire to return to family life and Lucas's intention of moving on.

Heebink's performance is painfully raw, oscillating between strange calm and scorching fury at a man and a system that have discarded her. Greidanus Jr, meanwhile, brings complexity to Lucas: keen to wriggle away from this complex woman and advance his career, he is also plagued by moments of guilt and doubt.

That sense of vertigo is augmented by Bob Cousins's set: a bare, clinically white box that extends right to the back of the Barbican stage. The emptiness allows scenes to tumble into one another and throws the focus squarely on to the characters. But it also speaks of Anna's state of mind as she sees everything falling away from her. This whole drama could be simply inside her head, and it's that elusive quality that makes this staging. It is informed, but not pinned down, by its contemporary psychological reading. The story retains, in this blazingly acted production, a mythical quality: an extreme and haunting expression of despair.

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