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Review, 'Medea': Powerful expression of sorceress' torment

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Jason (Khary Moyer, right) is soon to abandon Medea (Leontyne Mbele-Mbong). Photo: Lance Huntley

Medea: Tragedy. By Euripides. Directed by Dawn Monique Williams. Through March 30. African-American Shakespeare Company, African American Art and Culture Complex, 762 Fulton St., San Francisco. 85 minutes. \$12.50-\$37.50. (800) 838-3006. www.african-americanshakes.org.

Leontyne Mbele-Mbong is a fearfully potent Medea, her tormented presence made all the more formidable by the reactions and remonstrances of a deeply committed Cathleen Riddley as her distraught, loyal old Nurse. That's the best news about director Dawn Monique Williams' modern-dress African-American Shakespeare Company version of Euripides' immortal tragedy, which opened Saturday.

It isn't quite enough to deliver the cataclysm of grief, horror and awe of Euripides' drama of a woman - a sorceress, no less - so wronged that she kills her children to punish their father when he deserts her for a younger princess (whom she also gruesomely dispatches). But Mbele-Mbong and Riddley contribute enough art and passion to carry this "Medea" a pretty long way.

Their relationship is essential to getting the action under way. Riddley's Nurse has to hold the stage and fill us in on the situation as she serves as a terrified intermediary between us and the anguished offstage wails (and ineptly staged shadow play) of her mistress. She also eloquently anchors the three-woman Chorus when Mbele-Mbong's regal Medea makes her dramatic entrance, visibly struggling between heartbreak, extreme rage and a deep-seated need to keep up appearances.

That need has an extra modern resonance in Williams' production, with Courtney Flores' "Real Housewives of Atlanta"-influenced Chorus costumes and Bert van Aalsburg's contemporary neocolonial home facade. But though it plays well off Kenneth McLeish and Frederic Raphael's colloquial translation, the modern setting creates some problems.

Medea's tragedy is timeless, but her immediate plight is caught up in the politics of petty kingdoms. The passionate pleas to Zeus, Hecate and other gods take on an air of unreality, and our belief in Medea's powers of sorcery is compromised, altering the impact of the play's ending.

None of that would be much of a problem if the rest of Williams' cast were working on Riddley and Mbele-Mbong's level. Khary Moyer delivers the firm, manly self-confidence and entitlement of a Jason who sees deserting Medea for the local king's daughter as a good career move, and reflects some erotic tension in his scenes with Medea. But he plays his emotional cards so close to his chest that their climactic showdowns don't achieve their usual impact.

Danielle Doyle and Shani Harris-Bagwell fill out the Chorus fairly well, but without the sense of awe that could amplify Medea's potency. Dwight Dean Mahabir contributes some of that as the autocratic, frightened King Kreon. The charming Gabriel Reader and Caden Cotton-Blake convey the fact that real children's lives are at stake. A stoic Elizabeth Strong undersells the usually harrowing description of Medea's revenge.

Mbele-Mbong's vital Medea embodies the core of Euripides' tragedy with quicksilver shifts between unreasoning rage, practicality, grief, erotic subterfuge, maternal qualms and an unsettling aura of otherworldly powers. But she's a Medea in search of a full "Medea."

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