

# Medea

MIKE DIXON reports on Gianluca Schiavoni's premiere for the Estonian National Ballet

Stories from Greek mythology have beguiled schoolchildren and adults for millennia. The exciting, and occasionally illogical, narratives often seem to have true meanings that lie tantalisingly out of reach. The story of Oedipus, for instance, was curiously opaque until Sigmund Freud deconstructed it as part of his research into the workings of the human psyche and exposed its true symbolic meaning. The story of Medea, likewise, has often seemed impenetrable: a woman who aids Jason and his Argonauts – all foreigners – to quell the dragon that guards the Golden Fleece; who commits fratricide and scatters the body parts of her brother in the course of her escape with the Greek raiding party; and subsequently slays her children to punish Jason, their father, for contracting a marriage with Princess Glauce, daughter of King Creon of Corinth. For choreographer Gianluca Schiavoni, the story of Medea speaks to the present age, with countless stories in the news of women killing their own children. He is on record as saying that he finds it shocking that a woman can suppress her maternal instinct and destroy her own children. “It seems unbelievable that betrayal, abandonment, separation and loneliness can instigate a reaction so devastating in the heart of a human being.” Medea abandons her country and her family for love of Jason, so his sexual betrayal is all the more painful. Medea does not go mad: the murder of her rival and her own children is a calculated act

of revenge, so this story seems curiously apposite for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

In his treatment of the story for the Estonian National Ballet, Schiavoni concentrates on the ritual aspects of the myth in his *Medea*. Often the narrative seems disconnected, and, as in classical Greek drama, some of the more violent events take place off-stage. The overriding aesthetic is more Martha Graham than ballet, and Schiavoni is well served by his set designers, Maria Rossi Franchi and Andrea Tocchio, and costume designer Simona Morresi. In the opening scenes in Colchis a wall of red flowers is dominated by two white, intertwined snakes; red cords hang from the ceiling like streaks of prophetic

blood; celestial bodies and large wall panels are streaked with red, black and grey. The costumes feature a similar palette of red, black and silver against bare flesh, almost like fetish wear, with horizontal bands of black against exposed skin.

As Medea, Luana Georg is an anguished presence, brooding, impassioned and imperious, with a physical expressiveness that is always pitch perfect. She appears in the opening moments to plunge a dagger into the entwined serpents; then appears playful when Jason and the Argonauts invade and a mating game is played out, as in a garden of Courtly Love, between her female followers and his men, which features an ironically comic dance for two warriors played by Enoko Amorós and Jonatan Davidsson. The music is a curious mixture of Stravinsky, Schnittke and Dead Can Dance, but with fragments of well-known scores appearing and disappearing. The opening of Stravinsky's *Scènes de Ballet* blares out, only to disappear after a few bars. Vello Pahn, the conductor, does well to maintain a sense of control and continuity with the orchestra as he co-ordinates this patchwork.

Jason is danced by Sergei Upkin, a lithe physical presence who partners Georg attentively in their erotic pas de deux, which ends the first half. The two children of their union are suddenly seen playing innocently at the front of the stage as the curtain descends. The next act is set in Corinth with Aleksandr Prigorovski, a muscular and powerful Creon, and a sinuous Abigail Sheppard as his daughter Glauce in a silver gown and pharaonic crown. Sheppard and Upkin engage in a short, tightly constructed duet, which is observed by the jealous Medea, and Glauce dies, poisoned in her bath. Priests, Evil Spirits, Amazons and Black Souls appear in pleasing architectural configurations, and the ritual ending of the ballet features smoke and lights and an altar on which the children have been sacrificed. The final image is of Medea smearing the blood of their children onto Jason's face to the sound of quiet tintinnabulation, rather than a loud orchestral climax.

Schiavoni has created an unconventional and powerful piece of theatre remote from the usual aesthetic of a ballet company, and the dancers of the Estonian National Ballet give fully committed and exciting performances as an ensemble. The choice of Schiavoni was proof, if proof were needed, that Thomas Edur has an unerring instinct when it comes to selecting innovative and stimulating works to build the repertoire of his national company. It has been noticeable that with each season the audience in Tallinn becomes more enthusiastic and appreciative of its dance company. Edur does something that few artistic directors ever achieve. He educates his audience as he entertains them. One hopes it will not be too many years before we see this interesting company in London or Paris.



Estonian National Ballet in *Medea*.  
Photo: Estonian National Ballet



