

# INTERVIEW

**"BEING LEFT BY SOMEONE YOU LOVE, IS  
HARDER THAN A LOVED ONE DYING"**



In his brand new theatre play 'Medea's Children', provocative Swiss director Milo Rau tackles the darkest origin story of western culture, the Greek tragedy 'Medeia' by Euripides in which a mother kills her two children. Rau opted for an adaptation with children on stage, killing and being killed. "Mirroring emotions into a radical act creates a deeper understanding."

**In 'Medea's Children' a cast of six non-professional actors between the age of 8 and 14, play both the roles of the children and the adults. Why did you decide to bring children on stage again, eight years after 'Five Easy Pieces', your play about the Belgian paedophile Marc Dutroux?**

Milo Rau: "In Greek tragedies the children are always condemned to silence. Even though the concept of family is pinnacle to these stories. In *Medea's Children*, I decided to undo this wrongdoing, as always in a radical way. The play voices the opinions of children on 'adult' themes like love, separation, death and the end of the world. And what better way to do this, than by having children on stage instead of adult actors."

**Is Medea a criminal in your play or a victim?**

"Neither. I refuse to judge the story or the characters in it. In *Medea's Children*, we combine *Medeia* with a real criminal case from recent Belgian history. My challenge is to combine the two stories in such a way that you gain more insight into the unknown. Mirroring emotions everyone knows into a radical story can create a deeper understanding."

"We portray Medea with a lot of compassion, even though she did the most horrible thing a mother can do. But being left by someone you love, is harder than a loved one dying. What Medea is experiencing, is more than death. And killing herself and her children feels like an escape and a revenge at the same time."

"On top of that, we create an extra layer of meaning because children are executing the violence. They know child love, but they have never felt this deep pain of being left by a loved one. We talked with them extensively and their take is very clear: a mother would never kill her children."

**The killing of her children by Medea is shown explicitly in 'Medea's Children'. Staging extreme violence is one of your trades. What is the importance of this?**

"It's not about portraying the violence itself, it's about the deeper meaning of it. We live in a very violent society. Our reality is far more radical and violent than what I show on stage. In creating *Family*, a crucial question appeared perhaps for the first time in my career: When you believe you are at the verge of what seems to be a pointless, senseless society, when you feel like a cartoon figure floating over an abyss, knowing you will fall but without knowing exactly when, why would you want the next generation to go on?"

"When we discussed this with the children in *Medea's Children*, they understood this very well, they understood for example that it would be better for the survival of the planet if humanity would end. Only, they said, they would prefer it to happen after they are dead."

"The children have very grim thoughts about the future, but at the same time they are convinced that their own generation will escape. That they will barely still make it. This is how we think about the future: we know the world is going to end, but not yet, we foolishly hope."

**'Medea's Children' is a prologue to the ALL GREEKS FESTIVAL in which all 32 remaining Greek tragedies are performed in the morning all over the city of Ghent. How excited are you about this festival?**

"It is a childhood dream of me. The funny thing is that, apparently, I had to leave NTGent as an artistic leader for this dream to be fulfilled (laughs)."

"The first play I can remember I saw, *Les Femmes Savantes* by Molière, was outside. In the evening. The sun set during the play. Around us, the city was full of life. Outside is where theatre was born. Later, I was walking in a park in Paris in the morning when Shakespeare was performed. For the first time, I understood every word."

"I've been trying to turn things upside down for a long time. We should start the day with art instead of work. Art has to be more than a form of leisure in the evening after a long day of work. To some it might feel childish to perform theatre outside in the morning, but to me it makes sense in so many ways. After I wake up, I have more clarity of mind than later in the day."

"Perhaps only five nerds, five theatre students and five people from the neighbourhood might show up to these early morning performances, but even then, it will be something very pure. We are still very Christian in our understanding of what a ritual means. We associate it with a passing, but the Greek ritual is not meant to do anything besides connecting people. That's it. There's no extra bourgeois, mystical layer."

**What is it about these ancient texts that still makes them important to tell?**

"Of course, the conception of what western civilisation is, started with the Greek culture, for example the realisation that politics means antagonisms. Man versus nature, female versus male, conscious versus unconscious, the group versus the individual, power versus knowledge... all the antagonisms of our current day democracy were born as rhetoric in ancient Athens."

"On the one hand, it is obvious that these ancient stories are the basis of how we think, of what we think even. On the other hand, of the 32 Greek tragedies remaining, many are not relevant anymore. Only five to ten are still staged frequently, the others are merely used as a toolbox because they are filled to the brim with outdated views."

"Many plays or parts of them are unusable. The way king Kreon is talking to Medea for example in *Medeia* by Euripides... his views on women and migrants are very archaic and simplistic. We had to leave it out of the play, it's simply not interesting."

## What makes some tragedies stand out then?

"The development in style from Aeschylus to Euripides is amazing when you realise it took place in a period of merely 50 years. The Greek tragedies evolved from very poetic, epic texts - in line with the political purpose at their origin - to dramas delving into the individual psychology of the characters. In the beginning, they are like Racine, in the end like Ibsen."

"The closer you get to the oeuvre of Euripides, the more the Greek tragedies pay attention to individual psychology. Medea kills her children but not because she is evil or cursed - but because she has been betrayed by her husband and seeks a way out of the suffocating and rotten household she lives in."

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## Is there something we can learn from the Greek tragedies on how to overcome what seems to be our fate: the end of the world?

"In the well-known book *The Death of Tragedy*, it is written that since the time of Ibsen, we believe that we can solve our constant societal crisis with for example more social welfare. In the Greek tragedies, there's no such optimism. Our civilisation is one of drama, the Greek one was one of tragedy. In their wars, you either won or lost, meaning all men were killed, women and children were enslaved, and the city was destroyed."

"The tragic mind means in the best way that you accept and understand death. From there, we might be able to move on. We still have an Ibsen kind of view on the climate crisis. We still believe that we will somehow manage it without the necessary shift of mind."

"When I worked with the militants of the MST, one of the biggest social organisations in the world, for the creation of *Antigone in the Amazon*, a quote struck me deeply. We re-enacted a bloody massacre in which militants were brutally killed by the Brazilian state police. It's a shame our friends died before having a piece of land, survivors said. The collective, or a collective goal, can save the individual. Exactly like the ancient Greeks believed in something bigger than themselves: the polis for example."

"There's a nuance though. Collective resistance and powerful protest is based on the insight that society doesn't exist as a given. The good has to be executed to exist. Power is not born out of knowledge but out of experience when individuals join forces and stand up together. If we do, things can change much faster than we are made to believe. As long as we are prepared to realise that our arbitrary consumption and survival benefits are not a democratic right in the general frenzy in which our world finds itself."

--- interview by Jonas Mayeur / photos by Michiel Devijver