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# REVIEW: 'Medea' stands test of time at Salem State

The late American poet Robinson Jeffers' taut re-creation of Euripides' "Medea," onstage now in the Callan Studio Theatre on the Salem State campus, makes no attempt to refocus the blinding anger of the original. Director David Allen George has molded the intrepid Student Theatre Ensemble around Je...

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Zoom Kelly McGowan plays the title role of Medea in the spring production of the Student Theatre Ensemble at Salem State University. COURTESY PHOTO / Alex Portenko



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By Keith Powers / Correspondent

Posted Apr 26, 2016 at 1:19 PM Updated Apr 26, 2016 at 5:06 PM

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SALEM

### If you go...

**WHAT:** Salem State Theatre's "Medea," adapted by Robinson Jeffers

**WHERE:** Callan Studio Theatre, 352 Lafayette St., Salem

**WHEN:** through May 1

**TICKETS:** \$15, \$10 students/seniors. Visit [www.salemstatetickets.com](http://www.salemstatetickets.com) or call 978-542-6365.

Updates on the classics usually suffer. Shakespeare set on Wall Street, the Greeks fancied up in some topical current event, a Mozart opera staged as a rave — these attempts at making timeless works relevant again usually collapse under their own enthusiastic intentions.

Mainly because the classics are perpetually relevant. And the late American poet Robinson Jeffers' taut re-creation of Euripides' "Medea," onstage now in the Callan Studio Theatre on the Salem State campus, makes no attempt to

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refocus the blinding anger of the original.

Director David Allen George has molded the intrepid Student Theatre Ensemble around Jeffers' muscular adaptation, which was a Broadway success in the 1940s. Jeffers condensed the action, and revitalized the language, but the central premise never wavers: Medea wants revenge.

Shocking audiences comes hard: the video glut of warfare, abuse and murder have blunted how everyone perceives horror. But the lingering onstage presence of two young boys, who are doomed to be murdered by their mother to

avenge their father's infidelity, re-creates the shock that Greek audiences must have experienced almost 2,500 years ago.

"Medea" challenges players and audiences alike, and George has done admirable work guiding his actors through the near-constant grief and anger that this play demands. Kelly McGowan takes on the title role of the "barbarian" princess brought to Corinth by the glittering hero Jason (Sam Nudler). Medea has betrayed her own family, and aided Jason through countless successes, only to be unjustly rewarded with abandonment once he has come back to glory in Corinth.

Jason's bigamous marriage to King Creon's daughter Creusa sets the wheels in motion: devoted Medea, bereft and soon to be exiled, must get payback. Killing Jason, or herself, would be too easy; her revenge needs to be more complete.

She plots to kill Creusa, kills Creon as well, and then takes the lives of her own two children. And so her vengeance is filled, and Jason's future destroyed.

The play reeks with relevance. Gender politics, class distinctions, superstition clashing with reason, even immigration issues bubble easily to the surface. Jeffers' script makes sure all of this seems real, but never lets us away from the one true focus: Medea's deadly determination.

McGowan lives and breathes the role. It's not easy. Her offstage wailing begins the action, and that tense pain never gets far away. Such unrelenting emotion is almost impossible to maintain, but McGowan, with pliable facial gestures, deliberate body choreography and direct, believable dialogue, makes us live in Medea's world.

The rest of the cast serves her needs. A chorus — cast as the four elements, Earth (Caitlyn Jones), Wind (Anastacia Athas), Fire (Kayla McKinnon) and Water (Becky Jo Roland) — rarely leave the stage, creating symmetries that enhance the visual appeal. Medea's Nurse (Delaney Jenkins) suffers through the vain challenges of having to persuade her mistress toward a different course of action. The bulk of the cast fill brief onstage roles.

The set — ancient columns and a doorway, leading to steps and a courtyard fountain — suited the action perfectly. One great strength of this production was the blocking: soldiers paraded robustly on and off, the chorus moved fluidly and set vivid tableaux vivants, and the principals delivered their lines foursquare to the audience.

Classical costuming seemed unforced. The chorus alternated between speaking as individuals and in unison; the unison passages mostly sounded unnatural, a small distraction.

The children actors — Wyatt Kugel and Bennett McMann — spoke little, but their long onstage presence through the second act, with everyone anticipating their doom, riveted the audience's attention and concern. A startling respite — when the children return to Medea with playful shouts about new toys, just at a moment when the audience assumes the worst — provided temporary relief.

The strength of this "Medea" remains Jeffers' organic script, and George makes sure it stays in the foreground. Sound and lighting effects are helpful, but never become more essential than the words the actors bring alive.

This "Medea" has strong suggestions of violence. Not that much is actually seen onstage, but bringing children to this production should be carefully considered.

The Salem State Student Theatre Ensemble's "Medea" runs in the Callan Studio Theatre through May 1.

Showtimes are April 28-30 at 7:30 p.m. and May 1 at 2 p.m.

For tickets and information, visit [www.salemstatetickets.com](http://www.salemstatetickets.com) or call 978-542-6365.

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Rockport Elementary School						
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Shalin Liu Performance Center						
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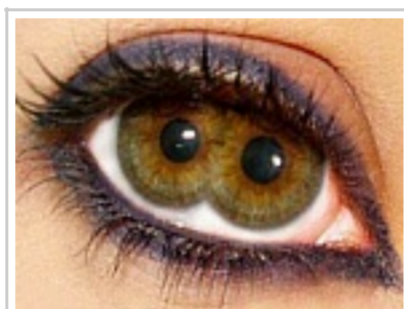
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