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What About Medea's Children?
Euripidean Issues and Contemporary Transformations

Edited by Anna Chiara Corradino, Massimo Fusillo, and Marta Lietti

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Contents

What About Medea's Children? Euripidean Issues and Contemporary Transformations

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Miscellany

Special Section and Critical Notes

Daniela Sacco*

Medea's Children: a "Dialogue with the Dead". On Milo Rau's Play

Abstract

The growing tendency among contemporary directors and playwrights to foreground Medea's children reflects a pressing contemporary concern: the emergence of a renewed conception of the tragic, one that confronts the prospect of an unimaginable, catastrophic, and seemingly inevitable future. Milo Rau's *Medea's Children* embodies this renewed tragic sensibility through the form of "new realism", in which the children appear to return to the stage *post mortem* to re-enact their own story, as if seeking to expose, understand, and ultimately reclaim agency over it. In doing so, they testify to the infanticide perpetrated by contemporary society through its denial of any viable future. Their presence and their enchanted gaze reveal a humanity suspended between violence mediated by images and the direct experience of violence. Within this framework, responsibility emerges as the only form of hope that theatre can still offer. As an art of resistance, theatre reconnects reality and imagination, making possible a collective working-through of grief that contemporary society increasingly forecloses.

Keywords: Milo Rau; Medea; children; tragic; future; catastrophe; grief

The growing tendency among contemporary directors and playwrights to focus on Medea's children not only contravenes classical Greek theatrical convention but also interferes significantly with the mythical narrative canonised by Euripides. This raises a fundamental question: is this focus an artistic device intended to offer an alternative reading of a well-known story, or does it respond to a pressing concern of our time?

In examining this phenomenon, observable in a series of plays that have emerged in recent years,[1] this analysis argues that in this context, we are not confronted with a form of virtuosity driven by a desire to test the flexibility of a myth which, although inexhaustible in its capacity to

[1] In addition to Milo Rau's *Medea's Children* (NTGent, 2024), which is the focus of this article, notable productions include *Malacrescita* by Mimmo Borrelli (Piccolo Teatro di Milano, 2012), *Medea*, directed by Simon Stone (Toneelhuis, 2014), *La Médée* by Luigi Cherubini, directed by Damiano Michieletto (Teatro alla Scala di Milano, 2024) and *Medea* by Kate Mulvany and Anne Luise Sark, directed by Daniel Evans (Queensland Theatre, 2025).

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generate new configurations over the centuries, does not call for yet another reinterpretation. Rather, what we face is the emergence of a new dimension of the tragic, a horizon of meaning that must contend with the idea of an unimaginable, catastrophic and inevitable future. In the face of an inability to envisage a future for humanity, the choice of so many artists to focus on the perspectives of children can be understood as a form of resistance, offering an alternative viewpoint from which to confront catastrophe and attempt to address and endure it. Taking inspiration from Milo Rau's *Medea's Children*, this study situates itself at the intersection of theatre studies and philosophy. An in-depth analysis of Rau's play is accompanied by a dialogue with philosophers and artists who have engaged with themes such as tragic, the inevitability of catastrophe, and the possibility of processing grief while imagining a future.

1. The Metatheatrical Mechanism

The strategies employed by directors and dramatists to place children at the centre of their reinterpretations of the story of Medea are highly diverse. Medea's children may drive the dramatic action; they may prompt a radical reconfiguration of space in which inside and outside exchange roles; they may assume the roles of other, adult characters; or their voices, absent from the ancient tragic context, may intrude upon and reshape the theatrical scene itself.

Among the various reinterpretations presented in recent years, *Medea's Children* by Milo Rau, first staged in 2024, is particularly significant. In this production, Medea's children occupy the centre of the action, which is constructed on stage through a Brechtian metatheatrical mechanism characteristic of the Swiss director's work. Rau's theatre can, in fact, be situated within a genealogy of German-language authors which, in addition to Brecht, includes – particularly in relation to the tragedy of Medea – the works of Hans Henny Jahnn (1926) and Heiner Müller (1982).

The play features six child actors, aged between eight and fourteen years old, who present their interpretation of the story of Medea to the audience. At times, the story is narrated; at others, it is enacted, with the performers moving in and out of the roles of the various characters. As is customary in Rau's work, a tragic real-life event is also brought onto the stage to serve as a counterpoint to the mythical narrative. In this instance, the audience is presented with the case of an infanticide that occurred in Belgium in 2007, in which Geneviève Lhermitte – presented in the play under the pseudonym Amandine Moreau – was convicted of killing her five children and later chose, while in prison, to end her life through euthanasia.

The mythical narrative and the real-life case are continually intertwined. Euripides' *Medea* is recognisable not only through the familiar elements of the myth but also through the exotic costumes worn by the actors. By contrast, the story of "Amandine" is signalled by the actors' wearing bourgeois clothing. The child performers alternate between interpreting and observing the two skilfully interwoven narratives. This dramaturgical mechanism is established from the opening scene: for the first twenty minutes, with the curtain closed, the audience witnesses what is presented as a post-performance discussion, after which the tragedy itself begins to unfold. Actor Peter Seynaeve welcomes the audience and introduces himself as a children's coach. One by one, the children then enter and take their places on the chairs arranged on stage, in front of the curtain. They are Vik Neirinck, Anna Matthys, Gabriël El Houari, Emma Van de Casteele, Sanne De Waele and Jade Versluys.[2]

This is not the first time that Rau has placed children at the centre of his work. In 2016, in *Five Easy Pieces*, the director brought a cast of seven children onto the stage to recreate the widely publicised case of Belgian paedophile and serial killer Marc Dutroux. Nicknamed "the Monster of Marcinelle", Dutroux shook the Belgian legal and political system to its core in 1996 with his brutal crimes against young girls. In that play, Rau also employs metatheatrical devices, playing with the dual levels of reality and fiction to explore the nature of tragedy and its representation. At the beginning of the play, the casting of the production's child actors is staged, with Peter Seynaeve portraying the director responsible for the selection process[3].

In the post-performance discussion that counterintuitively precedes the enactment of the story of Medea, the children's coach asks them a series of questions, including how the news story relates to the mythical narrative, how difficult it was to stage the murders and what it was like to perform a kiss on stage. The children sometimes respond in a self-assured, almost pedantic way and are occasionally mildly rebellious towards their coach as they seek to reinterpret key moments of the tragedy contrary to his instructions. The youngest performer, Vik, offers genuine lessons on Greek tragedy and Euripides both here and throughout the performance, and the children collectively articulate what might be described as moments of unexpected insight.

[2] The author attended the play, staged in Venice on 29 June 2024 at the Teatro alle Tese during the Venice Biennale Theatre Festival, and was able to view the recording of the show which premiered at the NTGent on 18 April 2024. The child actors mentioned in the text are those who appear in the video consulted.

[3] For an analysis of the ethical and aesthetic implications of Rau's approach to directing children in *Five Easy Pieces*, see Arteel 2025.

These initial responses reveal some fundamental aspects of Rau's approach. The coach's questions are intended to introduce and prepare the audience, who share this 'safe zone' with the children. While one might expect a sentimental response from the children regarding the difficulty of staging murders, their focus instead lies on technical considerations, with the young performers explaining that the key issue is "how to make it real" and highlighting the importance of showing as much as possible, including close-up views, slit throats and fake blood. Similarly, they state that the kissing scene is simply part of the play and that it does not matter whether the participants are men or women, or even humans or animals.

Following the observation that violence was never explicitly depicted in Greek tragedy, the children suggest that the key question should be, "What should be shown? What should be left to the audience's imagination?". After this discussion, the staging of the story of Medea/Amandine, requested by the children, begins with a melodic rendition of Regina Spektor's "Two Birds", sung by Jade and accompanied by Emma on the player piano. This song, which returns as a refrain throughout the show and acts as a chorus, is, as the girls explain, about separation. In an interview, Rau himself has stated that abandonment is the greatest pain: "Being abandoned by someone you love is harder than a loved one dying" (Rau 2024). The choice of this song to open the play proper provides a key to its interpretation: the tragedy is not, strictly speaking, centred on Medea's infanticide or the question of her guilt. Instead, by shifting the perspective to that of Medea's children, Rau allows them to articulate "'adult' themes like love, separation, death, and the end of the world" (Rau 2024) through their own - we could say - enchanted gaze, thereby giving form to emotions that more directly concern adults. In fact, he states: "what better way to do this than by having children on stage instead of adult actors" (Rau 2024).

When Medea is removed from the central role, many of the interpretations that have shaped the tragedy over time disappear, including those focused on the passionate revenge drama; the magical and demonic nature of the witch; her foreign, barbaric and marginalised identity as a driving force behind her actions; and feminist readings that frame the play as a rebellion against male power (Hall et al. 2000). In Rau's play, while the theme of infanticide remains, the focus shifts from Medea herself to the victims: the children. Once the tragedy has unfolded, the children seem to return, *post mortem*, to the stage in order to re-enact the story—as if to expose it, to show it to us adults, but also to comprehend and, in some sense, to gain symbolic control over it.

Thus, we witness a re-enactment of history that unfolds through the dialogue between the two levels of the ongoing performance: the videos on screen, in which adult actors perform key moments from Medea's/Amandine's story, and the stage, where the children perform the scenes being shown on

the screen. These scenes, in turn, are projected, creating a continuous short circuit between reality and virtuality. The only adult physically present on stage, the children's coach, assumes, as in *Five Easy Pieces*, the dual role of director and video operator. He films the scenes performed by the children and subsequently comments on their success. However, he never becomes an authoritative or authoritarian voice: knowledge remains the children's prerogative, and they retain full control over the action.

Set at times within an atmosphere reminiscent of childhood fairytales, alternating between intimate interior spaces and outdoor landscapes of desolate moors and beaches, Medea's story unfolds alongside that of Amandine. In this way, the mythical narrative becomes firmly embedded in contemporary reality. Rau thus draws on a contemporary news story to present Medea our contemporary: the story, as in many of his other works, is never framed as exclusively private or personal. On the contrary, Medea's motives are situated within history in the broadest sense, her culpability anchored in historical, political and social conditions, with the result that judgment is directed towards society rather than the individual.

2. Mythical and Historical Intertwining

The story unfolds through a series of chapters, each devoted to a particular character or fragments of the story, corresponding to scene changes. The play proper opens with a chapter entitled "O Bittersweet Love That Nothing Can Resist", which recounts Medea's story as it is known from Euripides. The images projected on screen depict the acquisition of the Golden Fleece, showing Medea killing the dragon and demonstrating her love for Jason, sealed by a prolonged kiss. This kiss is then reproduced on stage by the children. The chapter is followed by a scene change entitled "The Story of Amandine's Mother", in which the life of Amandine Moreau is recounted by her elderly parents, with two adult actors appearing on video and mirrored on stage by two children. The scene narrates the meeting between the couple's daughter and her Moroccan husband, Mounir.

The play then moves back to the story of Medea, introduced by the title "Strange the Land Where You Live", and recounts Jason's betrayal and Creon's order that Medea and her children leave Corinth. This scene is performed entirely on stage by the children, with two of the group playing Creon and Medea, respectively, while the others gather around to watch, comment on and applaud the performance as an audience would. The new scene, entitled "The Story of Dr Glas", returns to the world of Amandine but concerns itself with the story of her husband: we now discover the existence of Dr Glas, played in the video by an actor who, as we learn

from the children, is another children's coach as well as playing the role of Mounir's adoptive parent. The setting is no longer the desolate beach of Colchis but a seaside landscape that evokes Thomas Mann's *Death in Venice*. An adult figure sits in a characteristic beach chair, reading a book and observing Gabriël, whose angelic features and long blonde curls recall the figure of Mann's Tadzio. This allusion, already present in *Five Easy Pieces* (Rovida 2019), further complicates Amandine's story by introducing themes of paedophilia and violence, experiences she suffered indirectly and for which she bears no responsibility. "Why did Glas adopt Mounir?", asks Peter, the children's coach. "Out of compassion?", Anna replies, "Perhaps not. Rather, out of lust". The video scene ends with an intense kiss on the cheek from adult to child, which Vik (playing the adult) and Gabriël (playing the child) reproduce on stage. This is followed by an interview with Vik/Glas that resembles a psychoanalytical session. They discuss Amandine and the belief that her terrible gesture was intended to punish Glas and her husband, Mounir. At the end of the interview, alongside Peter's customary comments on the success of the performance, the children offer reflections on the art of acting. "Acting is easy; we don't understand how it can be considered a job", says Emma from her place at the player piano and the theremin.

This observation is particularly revealing in light of Rau's statement in an interview that working with children means continually relearning what theatre is.[4] This is because, as Rau explains, the rules implicitly assumed by adult actors do not apply to children, who do not draw the same distinction between the real and the unreal as that presupposed by adult consciousness. One might also argue that children possess an innate sense of wonder about the world, which negates the need for the "suspension of disbelief" described by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, that is, the tacit agreement between actor and spectator that enables both to accept improbable events as real, thereby fostering identification and empathy. It is to this innate sense of wonder – characteristic of a child's gaze – that we must attribute the enchantment of the world as a condition capable of giving hope to the possibility of imagining a future.

This childlike perspective is fundamental to Rau's work, which uses tragedy to convey the impossibility of the future through the killing of children. It is, therefore, no coincidence that the disappearance of humanity from the Earth is evoked when the performers' reflections on the art of acting shift to the risk of artificial intelligence's replacing flesh-and-blood actors. "The fate of humanity", says Anna, "is to disappear; it would be better for the planet if they did". This idea is reinforced by the reading of a short

[4] Interview by EASTAP - The European Association for the Study of Theatre and Performance with Milo Rau as an artist associated with EASTAP in 2018–2019: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6WlkAhJrh7I (Accessed 22 June 2026).

passage from Euripides' *Medea*, which introduces the next scene, identified as the "apotheosis". The following chapter, introduced under the title "Now Everything Is Hatred", depicts the transformation of Medea's love into hatred and her announcement to Jason of the completion of her terrible act.

The following chapter focuses on "The Story of Mounir Taïeb", which is presented in a video. An adult actor is interviewed in character, with his new wife by his side, about the tragedy he suffered in his home in Ostend. The scene is replicated by the children within the only large set present on stage: the small Flemish house in which the tragedy will soon unfold.

The next scene is introduced by a title that quotes Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*: "Never to have been born is best". The phrase echoes the answer given by Silenus to King Midas's question about what is best for humanity and was later cited by Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy*. It is, therefore, no coincidence that the German philosopher is paraphrased shortly beforehand in one of Vik's lessons on tragedy and its end.

In a gradual video fade-out, we see the adult actress playing the now-desperate Medea in Euripides' play, as portrayed on stage by Sanne. The scene then cuts to Amandine (mirrored by Jade), who is filmed in a supermarket, buying the knife she will use to kill her five children. This chapter, which introduces the infanticide, is entitled "The Story of Amandine Moreau". Meanwhile, Anna recounts the events of 28 February 2008 in great detail, describing precisely how she killed each of her children and the difficulties she encountered in slitting their throats and strangling them. She also describes her attempt to take her own life and her call to the police. We then witness the re-enactment of these events inside the house mentioned above: this is filmed on Peter's camera and projected, enlarged, onto the screen. The music of a cartoon that the children are watching on a television on stage provides the soundtrack to Amandine's brutal actions. With determination and lucidity, she brings her children into the house one by one and kills them. The camera lingers on their faces, their throats, the knife and the blood that gushes from their necks. We hear their breaths, gasps and screams.

In addition to filming, the children's coach helps Amandine move the bodies and prevent one of her daughters' escape. We watch this scene for about fifteen minutes; it leaves little room for imagination and only ends when Amandine, covered in blood and still holding the knife, calls the police in desperation. Peter, as the director, then calls "Cut", ending the performance. In just a few minutes – enough time to clean up the blood and check on the performers' safety – we find ourselves back at the post-performance discussion where the play began. The chairs are arranged in a row, the children are seated, the curtain still open behind them, and the children's coach leads them to discuss their performance and answer any questions from the audience. The theme is not infanticide but the loneliness

of Amandine/Medea and, in parallel, that of Jade, who recounts how she was bullied at school and can therefore identify easily with her character. In fact, she comments, "The most difficult things in life are other people". However, the final word goes to Amandine/Medea: Jade performs the monologue containing Amandine's words before her assisted death. This is preceded by Anna's interpretation of Arno Hintjens's song *Les Yeux de ma Mère* (*My Mother's Eyes*): "Ma mère, elle a quelque chose / quelque chose de dangereuse. / Elle a des yeux qui tuent / Mais j'aime ses mains sur mon corps / Et j'aime l'odeur sous ses bras" (my mother, she has something / something dangerous about her. / She has killer eyes, / But I love her hands on my body, / And I love the smell beneath her arms). In the background, a video plays, titled with the opening line of the monologue: "Humanity is but a dream of a shadow". We see the salient moments of Amandine's/Medea's story, with the characters' actions unfold in reverse, as if we are watching a tape being rewound. After Jade has finished speaking and the curtain has fallen, Anna remains on stage, and her words echo certain passages from Amandine's monologue:

> Let me tell you. All good stories end with horror and death. What does it matter if a play has just been performed, or whether we still have to learn our lines? After love comes separation. After life comes death. We are our own child, our own mother. We grieve as we lie on our own deathbed. Each footstep takes us further into darkness. We drift deeper with each world. As if there were a secret agreement between our ancestors' generation and our own. We are the last generation: we are waiting for nothing. There is nothing yet to come. And yet we are compelled to repeat what our parents did. My grandmother said: Life is like an ice cube thrown into the sea and at the end it turns into the sea itself.

3. The Depiction of Violence

With Rau's proposed shift in perspective, the lens through which myth and history are observed – and ultimately understood as inseparable – is placed in the hands of children. As a result, the theme of infanticide is no longer attributed exclusively to Amandine/Medea, but is instead released from the burden of guilt, which falls not so much upon the individual perpetrator as upon society as a whole. Infanticide thus comes to represent the inescapable destiny of children themselves. What is now at stake is the killing of the future and the very possibility of existence: "We are the last generation: we are waiting for nothing. There is nothing yet to come", as Amandine's monologue goes. These children have no future and thus return, after the inevitable

tragedy has been consummated, to speak to us. As Rau has stated, "Today, more than ever, theatre should question itself, not only in terms of form and aesthetics, but also in terms of finding a language that can recount the decline – and therefore the tragedy – of our society" (Rau 2023).

The stakes concern not only the decline of society but also the language capable of revealing it. For Rau, tragedy is simply the representation of violence (Rau 2023). The genre originated in the fifth century BC as such a representation, and today, our ability to represent and recount violence speaks to us of tragic sentiment. If not the possibility of tragedy itself, which is forever lost, then at least the possibility of theatre's being tragic.

It is for this reason that the theme of violence and its representation is central to Rau's poetics. The concept of "global realism" or "new realism" around which his entire body of work is constructed constitutes his response to this concern. The International Institute of Political Murder, the organisation founded in 2007 to support Rau's activities, aims to explore the "multimedia treatment of historical and socio-political conflicts".[5]

Such exploration reveals how conflicts and the violence they trigger are mediated by the media. Today, in addition to television and newspapers, young people use the web extensively. For Rau, multimedia treatment of conflicts reveals "the monstrous gap that has appeared between what has happened and how we talk about it" (Rau 2018, 178), and his approach to theatre, which he terms "new realism", is an attempt to bridge this gap. From this perspective, representing violence on stage is a duty and a strategy. The interminable scene in *Medea's Children* that dwells on the mother's violence towards her children pursues precisely this goal, and the effect is all the more powerful because it contravenes ancient theatrical convention by revealing an action traditionally hidden from the audience.

Much has been written and many theories advanced regarding the practice of concealing violent acts on the ancient stage, with various justifications proposed, including religious, practical, technical, aesthetic, artistic and habitual considerations (Sommerstein 2010, 30-46). One particularly pertinent argument situates the invention of theatre within the new order of the *polis*, which demanded such concealment: the order of the city was the order of *logos*, which opposed and overcame the archaic law of *genos* (Beltrametti 2004, 5-45).

The birth of tragedy thus represents a struggle against the violence on which *genos*-based law was founded, with *logos* replacing gesture and violent action, which are instead recounted and described through messengers' speeches, songs of mourning and lamentation. In this development, we witness

[5] See the organisation's website: https://international-institute.de/en/about-iipm-2/ (Accessed 22 June 2026).

the implementation of dynamics of mitigation and mechanisms of control over force. As Aeschylus's masterful vista in the *Oresteia* demonstrates, *logos* establishes the justice of the democratic court in opposition to indiscriminate personal revenge. Significantly, Anna Beltrametti identifies this dynamic in Euripides' *Medea* and she focuses on Jason's first invective against Medea for failing to embrace the concept of *sōphrosynē*, central to the Greek *polis*. Medea is accused of "being unaware of the subtle power of words, translation, dissimulation, and the unnecessary or indirect correspondence between words and reality" and "failing to embrace or understand symbolic devices" (Beltrametti 2004, 30). These are not just words used in political strategies and lies; they also indicate a space for reflection and thought, as expressed by the term *Denkraum*, coined by Aby Warburg to describe "the conscious creation of a distance between the self and the outside world" (Warburg 2017, 144), a detachment from identification and fusion with a mythically perceived reality as the basis for civilisation, as he wrote in the *Introduction* to the *Mnemosyne Atlas* (1929). This is a space of thought that generates the symbolic, situated in the interval between the individual and the world. Warburg recognises this space as precarious, continually requiring conquest and always susceptible to reversal. The "monstrous gap" that Rau denounces is an extreme and entirely contemporary consequence of this process of distancing, which has developed into a sense of remoteness that goes well beyond the intermediate symbolic space capable of fostering *sōphrosynē*. As a consequence of media depictions of violence detached from its source, a fracture has emerged between the real and the virtual, and this fracture has become so pronounced that the latter has come to replace the former in everyday experience.

Today, there is no reason to depict violence on stage other than for dramatic effect, namely, to create the "pregnant moment" described by Lessing in *Laocoön* (1767) with reference to a fresco of Medea in Pompeii. There, the figure of Medea is portrayed in a suspended posture, revealing her hesitation over whether to proceed with the violent act against her children, who play unsuspectingly beside her. Lessing argues that the artist should depict not an action at its climax but the moment immediately before or after it. From this perspective, Medea's pose in the Pompeian fresco is the most artistically fruitful precisely because it activates the observer's imagination as they await the potential fulfilment of what seems inevitable (Lessing 2020, 30-1). A particularly fitting example of this dramatic effect can be found in Romeo Castellucci's *Purgatorio* (2008), in which the act of a father who rapes his son is not shown but is left to be imagined as occurring in an internal, offstage space. This strategy has a profoundly violent impact on the viewer's perception[6].

[6] For a study of the effect of concealing violence in Castellucci's play *Purgatorio*, see Semenowicz 2015.

4. Reenactment, New Realism and the Processing of Grief

The significance of concealing violence in ancient theatre, however, has been lost as a result of the contemporary media landscape's denial of direct experience. We are immersed in decontextualised images of destruction and violence, which desensitise us to these phenomena. According to Rau, this violence, reproduced and mediated by screens, has today replaced direct experience; the videos through which he conveys images of violence on stage thus effectively assume the role once held by the messenger in ancient theatre. For this reason, the new realism to which he appeals, formulated in the first rule of the *Ghent Manifesto*, is not "to depict the real, but to make the representation itself real" (Rau 2018, 281). The mechanism of re-enactment that Rau employs on stage seeks precisely to make representation real (Ferraresi 2019). *Medea's Children* unfolds through scenes that constantly mirror one another, blending video projections with live action on stage. The live performance reenacts the projected images, creating a continuous interplay in which the virtual and the real constantly reflect and refract one another. The effect is akin to a short circuit, producing a sense of estrangement as well as a simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from what unfolds on stage.

"We are compelled to repeat what our parents did", reads a passage from Amandine's monologue. The re-enactments present in each sequence of the narrative of Medea's/Amandine's story function as repetition not in the sense of reproducing the identical but of opening a space for the emergence of new meanings and allowing opportunities for future to emerge. In the contemporary scene, the mechanism of re-enactment appears to serve this function (Sacco 2022). This is particularly evident in the work of Rau, who believes that evoking images from the past influences how the future will remember that past. As Rau himself has said:

> I believe that a reenactment does exactly this: In a completely open agreement that everything is only a play, a picture, a reproduction, a repetition that carries the REALITY itself, i.e., dragging those two, old historical philosophical antagonists onto the stage – the objective sense and subjective suffering, the sense "We know that this is an image" and "It happened this way, really". A functional reenactment and any functional artwork reactivates the historicity of the spectator's emotion, his corporal, his mimetic urge to witness the absolute worst and the spectator's desire for certainty, to understand it and even make sense of it. (2018, 173)

According to Rau, then, who draws on Søren Kierkegaard's concept of repetition, the act of re-enactment can "reactivate" the past as the memory

of a forgotten event. The event may have been forgotten because it was traumatic, the individual repressed it or it was rendered insignificant by practices of memory politics. At the same time, the memory is reactivated "as a premonition of what is coming, a not-yet-realised reality, a quasi-pre-memory of something that must still be done, that is yet to happen" (Rau 2018, 209).

In *Medea's Children*, Rau allows the children to speak, creating a short circuit that brings together a returning past and a future whose hope seems to have vanished with their deaths. The theme raised by the mechanism he employs, particularly in this performance, is that of catharsis. Rau himself appears reluctant to use the term, perhaps because of the connotations it has acquired since Aristotle, or perhaps because catharsis implies liberation and relief, which are not the ultimate goals of his work. Nevertheless, he emphasises the importance of both unmasking and identification, seeking to compel the viewer to assume responsibility for the social problem at the core of his work. He asserts, therefore, that "the formula is this: no unmasking without overwhelming" (Rau 2018, 170). To assume responsibility for the social problem means taking action for the good of society. Therefore, Lindsay Parkhowell reflects on postdramatic catharsis in Milo Rau's theatre, a kind of catharsis without a "purging", the release of pity and fear induced by tragedy. In the sense that the director evokes the potential existence of a global polity outside of the bounds of the theatre, with a catharsis which occurs away from its theatrical representation and towards the real-world struggles they depict (Parkhowell 2025).

The possibility of catharsis when the future appears blocked by the prospect of catastrophe is a theme explored by Judith Butler (2023), who reflects, in particular, on the possibility of our processing grief while fully immersed in a tragedy whose outcome we cannot foresee. The present climate catastrophe provides a compelling example of such a condition, as it appears inevitable, especially for future generations – "the last generation" –, who will become the first victims of actions for which their predecessors bear responsibility. These generations will be confronted with what seems the end of the world, an end that will unfold without witnesses to its fulfilment. Reflecting on a reality haunted by the Covid-19 pandemic, Butler questions the potential of art when the time of mourning coincides with the time of loss. When loss extends into the present and the future, how can grief be processed? When tragedy remains incomplete, and its end is not yet in sight, can narratives, representations and artistic creations render the intolerable tolerable? From a theatrical perspective, can tragedy be articulated in relation to an event that has not yet been completed?

Butler observes that loss and mourning increasingly overlap. Confronted with the question of how ongoing losses – losses that may never fully end – can be processed, they conclude that it is impossible to develop a traditional artistic response: instead, they argue that art can only shock by exposing and documenting the normalisation of the destruction within which humanity lives. It must, therefore, be capable of unmasking the stratagems through which ruin masquerades as progress or, worse still, normality.

According to Butler's interpretation of Freud's *Mourning and Melancholia* (1917), the processing of grief becomes possible when one gradually accepts the reality of a situation rather than escaping from it (which characterises melancholia). Although Butler's reflections do not explicitly address theatre, Rau's theatrical effort to make representation real through re-enactment appears to resonate with the idea of demonstrating and documenting the normalisation of destruction. In *Medea's Children*, the audience is directly confronted with the violence that permeates our everyday life through the media, a form of violence that remains detached from the reality from which it originates. In our society, it is the younger generations who are likely to become the primary victims of the pervasive virtual reality imposed by the media —precisely those whom Rau places at the centre of his project.

If psychoanalysis points towards the recovery of the reality principle, theatre indicates a different path: that of making the virtual real while holding together the registers of the imaginary and the real. As James Hillman (1998) noted in his critique of the univocal trajectory opened up by Sigmund Freud, the reality principle alone is insufficient; without its connection to the metaphorical, it risks collapsing into literalism. According to the American philosopher, Freud's Oedipal method—which prioritises the reality principle in the treatment of the psyche—tends to obscure the significance of mythical language. Psychoanalysis nonetheless had the great merit of restoring myth to a central position in twentieth-century thought and of recognising its fundamental epistemological value. Ultimately, however, Freud's work does not fully realise this potential revolution. As a result, the imaginal and metaphorical dimension through which reality is continually constituted is progressively diminished by the dominance of the reality principle. Here, the term drain refers to the process by which the conscious mind seeks to annex the unconscious. This process is famously likened to the draining of the Zuiderzee: "where the Id was, the Ego shall be" (Freud, 1933).

This dynamic between the metaphorical and reality is evident in Rau's theatre, where history and myth, the real and the imaginary, are placed in constant dialogue with one another. As Rau stated in his speech at the opening of the twenty-first annual Hannah Arendt Tage conference

in 2018[7], theatre is an "art of resistance" in its capacity to stimulate the imagination (*Vorstellungskraft*), which he defines as "identification, empathy and compassion – in other words, a kind of concrete, scenic fantasy". This imagination is absent in those who perpetrate the banality of evil, as Hannah Arendt observed in her analysis of Adolf Eichmann's behaviour, a notion to which Rau explicitly appeals when reflecting on the meaning of his art. Eichmann, by Arendt's reckoning, was incapable of imagining what was happening to his victims or grasping the implications of his own actions; he was radically detached from them. In this sense, Rau denounces action divorced from any sense of responsibility and underscores how the lack of imagination manifests itself in our irreversible path to global destruction:

> Perhaps more than previous generations, we lack the opportunity to experience the consequences of our actions and understand why we are working towards the destruction of this planet. We also lack the opportunity to understand how we can work together to prevent it.

The imperative of art should be to cultivate an imagination for action in the present, as well as a prospective and utopian imagination oriented towards the possibility of alternative forms of action. What is thus at stake is the capacity to imagine and construct a future. In this sense, Rau speaks of the need to "reclaim the future"[8] by challenging the global neoliberal capitalist perspective according to which everything is predetermined by profit. This logic of predetermination extends not only to the past but also to the future:

> On the other hand, our activities are entirely oriented towards the future or to put it another way: the present, the glory of our days, everyday life and ultimately the meaning of life for billions of people and quadrillions of other creatures is now merely a transitional zone in the age of financial capitalism, a zone in which the future has to realise itself. For the future is sold before it has taken place – it is our task, that of civil society, to recapture it.[9]

[7] For the German text of the conference, see: *Die Kunst des Widerstands* - Hannover.de; to listen to the audio: https://www.entdeckertag.de/Media/01-DATA-Neu/Galerie/HANNAH-ARENDT-TAGE/2018-Milo-Rau (Accessed 22 June 2026). The quotations are translated from German by the author.

[8] This expression gives rise also to the title *Re-claiming the Future: An Essay*, published in German as *Die Rückeroberung der Zukunft: Ein Essay* in 2023 by Rowohlt Verlag in Hamburg.

[9] The keynote speech *Recapturing the future* to the 'Dialectics of Liberation' symposium, delivered in Vienna on 24 November 2017: https://www.eurozine.com/recapturing-the-future/ (Accessed 22 June 2026).

In this keynote speech to the 'Dialectics of Liberation' symposium in Vienna (2017), Rau reflects on the responsibilities of this system, particularly in relation to the disastrous situation he experienced first-hand while working on his film *The Congo Tribunal* (2017) in the Democratic Republic of Congo. This work exposes the crimes and massacres that have afflicted that country in the name of economic interests, including not only those of its own government but also those of international actors such as the United Nations, the World Bank and major multinational mining corporations. And the same line of investigation will take Rau further into the Amazon, with, for example, the play *Antigone in the Amazon* (2023). He recognises that making theatre in today's world requires us to leave the fortress Europe has built for itself in order to confront its responsibility for distant disasters. These catastrophes are not remote accidents, but the direct consequences of decisions made at the very heart of a civilisation that continues to regard itself as superior.

Rau frequently deploys images of an impending apocalypse, depicting the Earth as if on the verge of being struck by a meteorite or presenting humanity as passengers aboard the Titanic. Yet the apocalyptic imagery that floods our screens on a daily basis does not incite us to action; rather, it produces paralysis, preventing us from recognising evil and encouraging us to mistake it for normality. As Butler argues, we can only counter this normalisation by identifying the ways in which it operates. Destruction cannot be countered, moreover, by equally destructive actions but only by practices and modes of relation that embody the bonds we seek to preserve, both with others and with the Earth. Indeed, Butler identifies relationality, the possibility of coming together, as the path by which resistance to destructive forces can emerge, allowing us to confront the apparent collapse of any idea of the future and begin processing grief. For Butler, too, therefore, we can speak of catharsis in the sense of taking responsibility and empowerment capable of leading to action in the world.

Rau (2018), for his part, turns to theatre as "the most concrete of all the arts", an art grounded in the body, in encounter and in presence. It is impossible, he insists, to make theatre "without these fundamental conditions of human existence". At the Hannah Arendt Tage conference in 2018, he concluded his speech by quoting Jean-Louis Gilissen, one of the founders of the International Court of Justice in The Hague and president of the Congo Tribunal; significantly, in his words, the weight of the younger generations' judgment will leave no escape for those who came before them:

> History will judge us, but not history in Hegel's sense. No, it will be our children who will ask us: how could you live like that? It is not Hegel's idea of history that will judge us. It will be our children who ask us, "How could you

live like that? Why didn't you do anything to prevent it?" There is a danger that their judgement will be very harsh. In short, even if we try with all our hearts, it is possible that they will not be able to forgive us.

5. Voices from a Denied Future

This is why Rau allows Medea's children to speak: to give voice to a future that appears impossible. Ultimately, this gesture constitutes both an act of hope and an act of resistance. Such a horizon is entirely absent from the scenario imagined by Heiner Müller, whose Medea, unsurprisingly, is situated within a post-apocalyptic landscape. In all three texts that make up his Medea triptych, particularly the first, *Despoiled Shore* (1982), the catastrophe has already occurred. The landscape is strewn with polluting waste, with the piles of rubbish cluttering the degraded beach near Strausberg – cookie boxes, cigarette wrappers, condoms, torn sanitary towels, blood and faeces – constituting the sordid debris of a large modern city: the consequences of civilisation, the lethal by-products of progress, capitalist growth and exploitation. Children, and Medea's children in particular, are strikingly absent from this Müllerian landscape, being only alluded to. The image of "wastepipes excreting children in batches against the advance of worms" (Müller 1984, 185) is especially gruesome. As Lillian Corti observes, the image conveys the idea that modernity possesses the power to transform life itself into refuse, as though the installation of indoor plumbing were intended to facilitate the disposal and concealment of small corpses, the product of human folly at every stage of history (Corti 1998, 218).

Indeed, the third part of the triptych after *Medeamaterial*, *Landscape with Argonauts* (1981), develops the implications of the reference by extending it into an image that compares the medium of television to a particular form of indoor plumbing: "The picture screen vomits world into the living room" (Müller 1984, 192). This image evokes what Müller calls "the ancient blight of deferred infanticide", according to which "today's young people are the ghosts of those who will die in tomorrow's war" (193; Corti 1998, 219). For Müller, the story of Jason represents the myth of colonisation par excellence, while Medea – the foreigner, the migrant, the woman, the mother – gives voice to the cry of the colonised within a West that is patriarchal, white, capitalist and oriented towards exploitation. This West, in Müller's formulation, finds itself in a "waiting room of history" (Müller 1983).

According to Müller, if colonisation marks the beginning of European history as we know it, then the fact that the very mechanisms of colonisation ultimately lead to the death of the coloniser suggests that the end of that history is imminent. This is the threat of an ending we now confront: "the

end of growth" (Müller 1983, 196). It is the end of Western growth, realised alongside the death of its children. Confronted with this apocalyptic horizon, Müller observes, "Everyone is alone with the question of how to explain this situation to their child. And perhaps this loneliness is a hope" (Müller 1994, 170).

Like Rau, Müller conceives of theatre as a means of confronting catastrophe: "The theatre's only contribution to preventing catastrophes can be their representation" (Müller 1984, 126). At the same time, he condemns voyeurism, which he identifies as a defining feature of West German society: the ability "to look down from the prosperity we have achieved onto the misery of the world" and "to pay for a good seat from which one can observe as many disasters as possible without disturbance" (Müller 1983, 200). While Müller locates this tendency within West Germany, however, Rau would argue that it now characterises the Western world as a whole. Voyeurism feeds on images that circulate indiscriminately across screens, severed from the lives they depict and the contexts in which they were produced. Rendered virtual and abstract, such images become anaesthetising. In this sense, they are complicit in the condition Hans Blumenberg describes as a "Shipwreck with Spectators" (1979).

If Rau conceives of theatre as an "interstice" between reality and its staging and understands it – in a Marxist sense – as a physical and conceptual space in which modes of exchange or relations can be tested and redefined on grounds that diverge from prevailing logics, then that notion of the interstice must also be understood as an intermediate space in which imagination and literalism are held in continuous dialectical tension. Theatre offers the ultimate embodiment of the symbolic and the metaphorical while simultaneously seeking to anchor virtual images in the reality of bodies through re-enactment. "The real tragedy", Emma remarks before Jade begins Amandine's final monologue, "is that we know how it will end, and yet we do not lose hope".

In *Medea's Children*, Rau appears to respond to Müller's question of how one might explain the oncoming apocalypse to one's child by reversing the roles: here, it is the children who are made to explain the catastrophe to their fathers. Ghosts of the dead materialise on stage, reliving their murders and bringing the reality of infanticide into the collective awareness. Speaking from a shared, transgenerational perspective, they open up cosmic and universal scenarios. This reversal of perspective may contain the seed of a hope that does not die – the seed from which the possibility of reimagining the future emerges – because the children's gaze is at once enchanted and concrete, a form theatre is apt to transmit. Theatre, indeed, is a "dialogue with the dead" (Rau 2023, 22), a declaration of intent that Rau has repeatedly invoked in describing his work.

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