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MEDEA STILL SHOCKS

PHIL BROWN
ARTS EDITOR

SHE'S known for approaching her roles with gusto but Brisbane actor Christen O'Leary confesses that her latest role as the tragic Medea is stretching her. O'Leary (pictured) is one of our most talented thespians, a pocket dynamo who bedazzles and has a commanding stage presence.

If you were looking to cast a strong woman in a role, she's the go-to girl and she's playing the lead in *Medea* for La Boite Theatre Company, with previews from Saturday.

This production is directed by La Boite's artistic director, Todd MacDonald, and is his directorial debut in his new role. Playwright Suzie Miller's adaptation of this Ancient Greek classic is a new look at a canonical work by Euripides, first performed in 431BC.

According to O'Leary, in the 2500 years since then, the piece has lost none of its power and none of its shock value.

"That's why it's one of the greats," O'Leary says.

"It's mind-boggling when you look at the original text. The writing was so good. There are plenty of nods to Euripides in this production and that's important. Suzie has tipped her hat to him because he was a master."

O'Leary, who has been on a roll for some years now, has been scintillating in recent appearances.

Who can forget her as Judy Garland in Queensland Theatre Company's *End of The Rainbow* or in her moving performance in *Florida*, another QTC production.

Her one-woman show *Bombshells* was also a triumph and she toured that one nationally to great acclaim.

We also saw her in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* at La Boite earlier this year and now she's back at the Roundhouse Theatre in a role that is, well, intense would be an understatement.

Medea is based on the myth

of Jason and Medea and the plot centres on Jason's betrayal of his wife when he leaves her for a Greek princess of Corinth. Medea takes revenge by killing Jason's new wife as well as her children with him, after which she escapes to Athens to start a new life.

And that's one of the surprising things in this tragedy, as O'Leary points out.

"At the end after all the tragedy, she's still standing," she says. "And I am exhausted. It's a very demanding role because Medea starts at a pitch and she doesn't back off and that requires a lot, psychologically. Normally there is a slow burn but she begins at fever pitch. And she's unusual because she gets away with it."

The playwright says she wanted to "prize open the character of the ultimate female politician, explore her strength, her power, her capacity for terror and need for justice."

"Rather than being limited to merely a monster or a crazy jilted lover, I wanted to look

beneath her skin, allow her to tell her story and find the complex woman and mother within," Miller says.

MacDonald says the adaptation doesn't contemporise the play.

"We are not in Greece in 450BC but we are also not in Australia in the 1950s," the director says.

"We are in this immersive, atmospheric world where gods and goddesses still exist and it's this world Medea draws her power from."

An added device in this production is a kind of Greek chorus supplied by singers from The Australian Voices choir, who will be on stage throughout the rather historic proceedings.

Medea, May 30 - June 20, Roundhouse Theatre, La Boite, Kelvin Grove, \$25-\$53; aboite.com.au



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