

CHAPTER 4

THERE ARE WOMEN WAITING: THE TRAGEDY OF MEDEA JACKSON

INTRODUCTION

There Are Women Waiting: The Tragedy of Medea Jackson was part of a larger piece titled *Reality Is Just Outside the Window*, a production of the Medea Project, organized by Rhodessa Jones and written by Edris Cooper. Working with women in prison beginning in 1989 at the San Francisco County Jail, Jones and Cooper developed a modern version of the Medea story in which "Medea Jackson" lives in the slums of Oakland, California, and faces the same challenges that the women in prison faced: unfaithful husbands, poverty, drugs, and unstable family lives. The tragedy of Medea is shown to be a very modern one enacted on the streets of America every day.

The Medea Project takes its name from the tragic heroine. Jones, Cooper, and Cultural Odyssey (the producing organization) sought to use Medea as a metaphor for women in prison. These women have been wronged by the men in their lives. Like Medea they are master storytellers and "these women are seen by society as outsiders, barbarians...have committed crimes, and crimes have been committed against

then. They, too, have broken taboos, transgressed laws. They are women who are ruled by their passions, who are self-destructive, and who destroy others."¹ Jones sought to stage *Medea* at the jail and named the project after the play following a meeting with an inmate who had killed her own child.

The text and the original production in 1992 were shaped by the context of the performance and reflected the reality of the lives of women in prison. If all adaptation is local, this version reflects that: It is set in San Francisco and mentions local streets and landmarks such as Haight Street, Darcy City, and so forth. The language of the play is the urban vernacular of the early nineties. Music plays a key role, and in particular the music of Aretha Franklin shapes the play with three of her songs being sung during the performance. This is partly a reflection of the soundtrack of the women's lives and partly the messages of the songs themselves.

Unlike the other plays in this collection, *There Are Women Waiting* was written to be performed by an all-female ensemble, the opposite of ancient Greek practice. The role of Medea is played by a woman (in fact, playwright Edris Cooper played Medea in the original performance), as are the chorus and the male oppressors. Every voice heard in the play is a woman's. This is a form of empowerment: Women tell Medea's story; they tell their own stories. Women are the protagonists; they have agency.

As in *Pecong*, Jason is a person of color. The difference between him and Medea is not ethnic or race but class, although Creon's daughter is "a white girl." The play is less concerned with ethnicity and more with poverty. Medea is trapped in the same cycle as the other women in her neighborhood; Jason sees his relationship with Creon's daughter as a means to improve his own life even though this means abandoning Medea and their children.

Creon is an urban king in his own kingdom: a landlord who controls whether the denizens of the building can stay or must go. He kicks Medea out because he no longer wants her in the building. Jason has hooked up with his daughter and knowing Medea is "crazy," he gives her one day to get out. Medea tells the chorus, "He done fucked with the wrong bitch now." She kills Creon and his daughter by lacing her underwear with "meth, PCP, and heroin," and tells the kids they will "celebrate with some Jim Jones Kool-Aid," a reference that carries particular weight in San Francisco, where the People's Temple (founded by Jim Jones) was located before Jonestown was established in Guyana. A large number of the cult's converts (and subsequent deaths) were lower-income African Americans.

At the end of the play, there is a major deviation from Euripides's original version. Rather than escaping, Medea is surrounded by police and told there is a warrant for her arrest. The implication of the script is that she is either shot by police or jumps off the building, although it remains ambiguous. Regardless, the end clearly states that Medea is dead. Whereas the original ends with Medea riding away in triumph to new life in Athens, no such victory can be found for this Medea developed by women in prison.

There Are Women Waiting: The Tragedy of Medea Jackson was previously published in Rena Fraden's excellent book *Imagining Medea: Rhodessa Jones and Theatre for Incarcerated Women*, which also recounts the history of the company, the project, and the play.

NOTES

1. Rena Fraden, *Imagining Medea: Rhodessa Jones and Theatre for Incarcerated Woman* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 48.

PLAY 4

THERE ARE WOMEN WAITING: THE TRAGEDY OF MEDEA JACKSON

EDRIS COOPER

Music by Carol King and Carolyn Franklin

Part of *Reality is Just Outside the Window*. Conceived and directed by Rhodessa Jones. Presented by San Francisco-based Cultural Odyssey. A site theatrical collaboration of San Francisco's multicultural women's community and women inmates at San Bruno County Jail. Coproduced by Brava! for Women in the Arts and the Jail Arts Program. Premiered at Theatre Artaud, San Francisco, January 8, 1992.

CAST OF CHARACTERS (AND ORIGINAL PERFORMERS)

Singer: Jeanette Tims

Nurse/Jason: h.T. McNair

Medea: Edris Cooper

Creon: Angelle Williams

Aegus: Dorsha Brown

The Home Girls of San Francisco: Belinda Sullivan, Tanya Mayo, and Nikki Byrd

Other roles played by Ensemble

(Dressed in street clothes, the ensemble moves downstage in a line; music plays; Rhodessa Jones, down in front on the floor of the theater calls out "Work it!", "Energy!" She directs this way throughout the show. They strike an attitude; and then break into another.)

SINGER sings "Natural Woman" with backup from ENSEMBLE who also sing

When my soul was in the lost and found... You came along to claim it...
Now I'm no longer doubtful, for what I'm looking for... Baby what you
done to me - - you made me feel so good inside... You made me feel like
a natural woman...

Enter NURSE with two CHILDREN; they stand on the edge of the stage observing the action.

NURSE-- *(eating barbecue, all words in bold spoken by CHORUS as well)*
Chawl, why in the hell did them collegiate ass niggas have to take they
slummin' asses down to Haight Street. Like they don't got enough crack
houses in Daly City. Medea wouldn't have gotten in alla that shit. Killing
up all them people. Gave up going to **school** to be with him, where he
want. Gave up her **time** to work and spend money on him. And gave up
her **kids** because he couldn't stand the **competition** and she even gave
up her **ears** because she couldn't stand to hear the truth. And gave up
the rich black nectar of the goddess to the basest of men, **men**. Now she
down here in the Fillmore and he sleeping with a white girl! After all
she did for him. Now y'all, you know she is pissed. She just sit up in the
house crying. Girlfriend don't wanna go to the club, the movies, chawl,
she wouldn't even go get no cue-bob with me. Something's up, shit, you
know how sistah is when she gets mad. Sheeit!

MEDEA-- (offstage) Motherfucking bastard! (NURSE covers kids' ears.) You Clarence Thomas, David Duke, Wilt Chamberlain, Williams Kennedy Smith...looking ass nigger! Son of a bitch motherfucker, I hope your dick falls off!

NURSE-- There she go again!

CHORUS-- Word! (children giggle.)

NURSE-- All right she gone catch y'all laughing and y'all gone have a knot upside your head. (To audience) See, Medea's mother raised her to be too seditious. See me, myself, I don't expect nothing from nobody, just to leave me the hell alone. Don't expect no shit and you won't get no shit.

CHORUS-- (Circle around NURSE, chanting) Don't like, don't want, don't love.

MEDEA-- (offstage) Awwwww -- shit!

(SISTERS 1, 2, 3 hurry on stage.)

S1-- Girl, is that Medea hollering like that?

NURSE-- Who else?

MEDEA-- (offstage) I hope a bolt of lightning strikes me dead. Or the roof comes crashing on my head.

S3-- Pitiful chile.

MEDEA-- (offstage) Just kill me nigger, go ahead and kill me. Fuck! I hate this world and I hate niggers.

S2-- Girlfriend, please, you gone kill yoself with alla that grieving you doing. I don't know why; 'cause he slept with another bitch? Please!! That nigga ain't done nothing every other nigga done done. Shit, he wouldn't worry me. Get a grip!

MEDEA-- *(offstage)* Some support; y'all are shit. *(Loudly wailing)* Nobody understands. Jason, I'ma get you and that bitch! After all I've done for you.

NURSE-- Girl and she means that shit too, ok?

(The CHORUS and the NURSE all snap together-- A CHORUS that snaps together caps together.)

S1-- Girl, she need to talk to somebody. Bring her out here so we can give her the news, baby. That's what the sisters is for, girl. Laying on hands and all of that. Hurry, girl, for she hurt somebody.

NURSE-- Girl, I'll try, but you know she might cuss me out.

S1-- She ain't gonna cuss you out. Bring her on over to my house. We'll listen to some Anita Baker; that always helps me out. All she needs is to be rubbed the right way.

S2-- Girl, I don't know about you.

(NURSE exits; CHORUS ad lib until NURSE returns with MEDEA.)

CHORUS-- Hi, Medea.

MEDEA-- Look, I know y'all been out here just reading me to the tee. I know you think I am stuck up, but I am just tired, ok. Tired, tired, tired. Of niggas and of life. The man who was everything to me turned out to be the basest of men. Y'all women; you know how it is. Look how we're treated. First of all, we always doing everything for our men and in return, what do we get? Fucked! And most niggas feel that's payment. I did everything I was supposed to do. I cooked dinner, I cooked rocks. I even cooked in bed. But you know it's hard to find a good man with a job that won't beat you, that won't fuck around, and that'll be nice to your kids. If you get a good man all the bitches is backstabbing. And if you get a fucked up man and leave him, everybody talks about you. Shit, better just be dead or turn gay.

S1-- Word! (*Snap, approaches Medea.*)

MEDEA-- Shit, it's not fair. A man get upset and he can go out and kick it with the fellas. But a woman-- shit you ain't got nobody, you can't trust no bitch.

S2-- Girl, please, you been reading too much Shaharazad Ali. You shoulda been looking out for you.

MEDEA-- If only you coulda seen; we were really good together. We was making money, cleaning up. We could have got out of the coke business, and retired, and travelled.

CHORUS-- On the slow boat to hell.

MEDEA-- Like Bonnie and Clyde, or Donald and Ivana.

S2 -- Girl, please, they white. You are trippin'. You shoulda asked somebody and got a clue. There ain't never been shit here. People round here just like all the rest of us -- all out of work.

MEDEA-- And thank you for the news this morning, Miss Thing. Well shit, alla y'all know each other. I'm not from around here and y'all ain't really been all that charitable.

S3-- And you have?

MEDEA-- Wait, I'm sorry for that, but we got to stick together. Men always talking about how hard they got it, how hard they work. Shit, let me see one of them have a baby. Then they'll appreciate us.

CHORUS-- Ok? (*snap*)

MEDEA-- Look, y'all gotta hang with me. Just one thing I ask. If I figure out how to get this bastard, you will keep the tee for me?

CHORUS-- Girlfriend, won't no tips pass from these lips.

MEDEA-- Cools...fuck with me, shee--it. I'll show that nigga. I'll slap his ass so hard he'll wake up and his clothes will be out of style.

(MEDEA opens her mouth to start loudtalking when S1 stops her.)

S1-- Girl, chill, here comes Creon.

(CREON enters.)

CHORUS-- Hi, Creon.

CREON-- Look at you, woman, lips all poked out like you a madwoman. I think you are. And before you mess around and do something foolish, I'm kicking you outta my house. You and them damn kids.

MEDEA-- Oh great, Creon, where the hell am I supposed to go?

CREON-- Woman, that's not my problem.

MEDEA-- Why, Creon, why are you putting me out?

CREON-- Cause you crazy, woman, and quite frankly I am afraid of you. Look how you fucked up Pelias, not to mention your own brother. Now you do that to your own, what the hell's keepin' you from doing that to me? I heard you threatening me, and Jason, and my daughter.

MEDEA-- Everybody holds these deaths against me without hearing my side. If I hadn't fucked up Pelias, Jason wouldn't even be around for your daughter to enjoy. With all that shit he talked, Pelias was gonna kill his stupid ass. Here I am helping his ass and I'm the bitch. Look, Creon, I'm not crazy. I only did that shit because I love Jason. I don't have nothin' against you or your daughter. Hey, she got eyes just like me. I'm not stupid. I have nowhere to go and I have such a nice home here. It'll kill me but I'll be cool, count my blessings and keep to myself.

CREON-- You talk a good line, Medea, but I gotta watch my back. You're outta here.

MEDEA-- Creon, please. I'm on my knees.

CREON-- Well, you can just get up.

MEDEA-- Where will I go?

CREON-- Woman, that's not my problem.

MEDEA-- God don't like ugly.

CREON-- He ain't too fond of pretty neither.

MEDEA-- Creon, please, I got problems...

CREON-- You ain't never lied.

MEDEA-- Then, Creon, have a heart...(CREON *laughs*) You a cold motherfucker, Creon. Well, all right then, but let me ask one favor before I go. Please.

CREON--Oh lord, what now?

MEDEA-- Please, just give me a day to get my things together. I gotta get the kids together. You know Jason ain't gonna help. If not for me, think about the kids. You gone turn them out, naked and with nothing?

CREON-- I am too kindhearted, I tell you. Ok, woman, I'm gonna give you one day to get your kids and shit together, but I'm here to tell you so you'll know. If the sun rise on you and them damn kids, you'll wish it hadn't, cause I'ma play your evil game, ok?

MEDEA-- I get it.

CREON-- (*walking*) Don't try me, woman.

CHORUS-- Girlfriend, where you gonna go? You up the creek.

MEDEA-- Please, who do I look like, Sally or her sister Suzy? Girl, I ain't got time to be bumping gums with that bastard for nothing. I'ma get that crackhead bitch and that basest of baseheads Jason. That jackass gone let me stay one too many days. I'ma fuck they asses up. I just don't know whether to burn them butts up as is fitting or if I should cut off Jason's nuts, or slice a hole in her titties and stuff 'em. I got to be cool, though, cause they got lots of fire power. I ain't goin' out like that. Fuck it! He done fucked with the wrong bitch now.

CHORUS-- Jason will be back tomorrow sayin' he sorry. (*snap*)

(JASON enters.)

JASON-- See, Medea, a hard head makes a soft ass. You just had to show you ass, now you outta here like last year. You could've had everything, Medea, if you just hada acted right. I was taking good care of you. I'll give you \$150 on your way out. I still care for you and the kids.

MEDEA-- \$150! Just keep that shit. I don't want it. Nigga please, you never gave a flying fuck about me or the kids. Throwing me a couple dollars pretending to be somethin'. You ain't giving me nothin' I cain't get at 170 Otis. Fuck you. I saved your life, I showed you the game. You wouldn't have nothing if it wasn't for me. Shit, I was love sick for coming here with you. And you ain't got no shame for how you treated me. Answer me this. Where in the hell am I supposed to go? I ain't got no friends left, thanks to you. You are an asshole, Jason, and you need to step off the curb with that shit. You low life bastard.

JASON-- Woman, who asked you to give it all for me? I can't help it, lady, if I got it like that, hey? And you need to clean up your motherfucking mouth. You used to be a lady. (*Exits*)

MEDEA-- (*yelling at his back*) I am a lady, bitch, I still got plenty a pussy, don't I?

(*Enter AEGUS in drag.*)

AEGUS-- Shake it but don't break it, wrap it up and I'll take it.

MEDEA-- Aegus, girlfriend, what's up?

AEGUS-- What's up with you announcing your goods up and shit? Gimme some.

MEDEA-- I know you can do better with it than I did.

AEGUS-- Girlfriend, tip to the tee.

MEDEA-- You know he's goin' with that other bitch.

AEGUS-- So what?

MEDEA-- She's in my bed.

AEGUS-- Oh hell no.

MEDEA-- Ok.

AEGUS-- Girl cut the nigga loose, that's all. Shit, dicks a dome a dozen.

MEDEA-- But I can't go out like a ducker sucker motherfucker.

AEGUS-- Well, then don't. I got it, girlfriend. I got a sister I know would be glad to hole up if you know what I mean.

CHORUS-- Ok! (*snap*)

MEDEA-- Thanks, baby, but I got a plan, ok?

AEGUS-- Word, girl, get him. Be slick, ok. (*Exits*)

S1-- Ok! (*snap*) Girlfriend, that queen is your friend. Now he's gonna hook you up with a lady friend. Taste the life, baby, and you'll wake up if you know what I mean.

MEDEA-- Girl, I ask you again, who do I look like, Sally or...

S1-- Ok, ok, impart the poop. Come on and listen, y'all.

(*Lights dim as the CHILDREN exit*)

MEDEA-- Now I'ma lay it out and I'm tellin you, don't sleep on this cause I am serious. I'ma get them bastards and good. Word, I'ma send for Jason and play up to him real sweet. I'll plead the case for the kids for him to let them stay.

CHORUS-- Witcha so far.

MEDEA-- Girl, please, do you really think I'm gonna leave my kids over here in this mess? For them to be treated like dirt, mistreated, and abused

by her? NO! I got a wiley plan. Check this shit out. *(She pulls a vial from her pocket.)*

CHORUS-- Girl, what's that?

MEDEA-- Crystal, baby, pure and sweet as it was in '66. This will make that bitch turn her face inside out. I will send the children bearing gifts to offer to get on her good side to let them stay. A beautiful teddy and a sexy G-string, soaked in crystal.

(The CHORUS stands there looking at her with their mouths hanging open.)

CHORUS-- What??? Crystal???

MEDEA-- That's right, baby. And PCP and MDA and heroin and some new shit they got in 1992 most folks don't even know about yet. When they get back from delivering the deadly gifts, we are going to celebrate with some Jim Jones Kool-Aid.

(The women stop laughing and stare in horror at MEDEA.)

MEDEA-- They should never have fucked with me. Look, look how they treat me, a black woman doesn't have anything and no representation. Look how I'm treated, much less my kids. This world isn't for them. Maybe in another life. I know what I have to do. Nobody shall despise me or think me weak or passive. I am a good friend, but a dangerous enemy. For that is the type that the world delights to honor.

(Silence.)

S3-- Eloquently put, my sister, but you cannot kill your children.

MEDEA-- You don't see the injustice that I see. It's the only way.

S3-- Medea, this may not be much of a life, but they deserve a chance for survival.

MEDEA-- Look, this talk is tired. Now go and get Jason please and I will expect some solidarity, sisters!

(CHORUS sings Franklin song:)

CHORUS-- Medea, think. Think, Medea. Think about it, Medea. You gotta think, think about what you trying to do to me...Freedom...Think."

(JASON enters.)

JASON-- Watchu want, Medea.

(CHORUS hums "Natural Woman" under MEDEA's speech.)

MEDEA-- Jason, you know, I've been thinking about how I've been acting and about how I could always count on you to put up with me when I acted like a bitch. I just get jealous, you know. It's hard for me to face that I fucked up a good thing. You have been really good to me, letting me stay here and all and I should really thank you and your wife. But you know I am what I am. I didn't know what I had. Today, no worse a woman.

JASON-- Yeah, well you a bitch, Medea, but you got some sense. It's only natural for you to miss this dick. I forgive you but you still got to go.

MEDEA-- But Jason, what about the kids? I don't feel comfortable you know, they're boys and they need a man around. You see, I'm discovering some things about myself, you know...

JASON-- Medea, I knew you was a dyke! That's why you can appreciate no man. That's ok, Medea. It's all right, Medea, it's all right. I will ask Creon if the boys can stay. No need for them to suffer and be confused.

MEDEA-- I hope it's OK with your wife. But she is a woman and she should understand. I'll send them over with a peace offering for your wife tonight. You can pick them up in the morning. I'll be gone.

JASON-- I can persuade her. (Grabs his dick.)

MEDEA-- Just let the kids bring the gifts over. They are beautiful and expensive. She'll love them.

JASON-- Don't spend too much, Medea, you gone need the money.

MEDEA-- They say that gifts persuade even the gods, and gold is worth more than ten thousand words. And to save my children is worth it.

(JASON exits with the CHILDREN bearing the gifts. CHORUS sings "Do right...all day woman.")

CHORUS-- Go on, girl, eloquently put. But you are in serious trouble.

(CHILDREN return.)

MEDEA-- Did she like the gifts?

(They just stare at her. Sounds of hell start softly and swell throughout.

MEDEA takes the CHILDREN and begins to walk up some stairs with them.)

VOICE-- (repeats as MEDEA walks up ramp) At the bottom of our news tonight there has been a new animal aimed in the direction of falling off the face of the earth. Yes, young black teenagers are reported to be the oldest and newest creature to be added to the endangered species list, to the endangered species list...

(The CHILDREN are represented by puppets now. The real CHILDREN observe. When she reaches the top she bellows over the noise.)

MEDEA-- No, by the unforgetting dead in hell, it cannot be! I shall not leave my children for enemies to insult and die if they must, I shall slay them. Who gave them birth? Happiness be yours but not in this life. Your father has stolen this world from you. I can delay no longer or my children will fall into the murderous hands of those that love them less than I do.

(She drops the puppets. A scream [the sound of glass breaking]. MEDEA is lifted up[or given wings], and throws herself into the women's arms. She is bathed in an eerie spotlight.)

VOICE-- Medea Jackson. We have a warrant for your arrest.

CHORUS-- Oh well! (*snap*)

WOMEN-- Oh well, Medea's dead.

ALL-- How'd she die?

WOMAN-- She died like this.

ALL-- She died like this.

(Exchange repeated four times, each time a different freeze is assumed after the last line. Blackout).

SEAN-- I work for the social work department, jail medical services. That means I work with the women inmates. Actually, this is my ID card right here. Look like I'm one of the inmates my damn self. I gotta get somebody to do something about this. I remember my first referral. It was from a woman who said she wasn't having too many problems. She just needed to talk with somebody. So I went in the day room and I found her and the thing I immediately noticed about her was that she was older than most of the inmates. I could tell by the gray hair on her head, just by the way it was set, that she was not about to take any gump from anybody. So I called her out of the day room and we went into the little interview room and sat down. I asked her, rather she told me, that she didn't have any problems, she just wanted to get out of the damn day room. Noise, clanging doors, keys rattling, youngsters, cigarette smoke. I could understand that. So I said, Miss, if you could just tell me what you're here for." And she said, "Oh, honey, it wasn't hardly nothing. I just accidentally stabbed my husband...eight times."

WOMAN--Oh well, Medea's dead.

ALL-- How'd she die?

WOMAN-- She died like this.

ALL-- She died like this.

(Exchange repeated four times, each time a different freeze is assumed after the last line.)

ALL -- *(Whisper)* Medea's dead. Medea's dead. Medea's dead. *(Cover eyes, ears, mouth, cross arms in front of chest and brush arms away. Exit.)*

End of play