

Medea, in the legendary Greek tragic tale, is best known for her worst deed: killing her children. The vengeful sorceress has been revisited in countless plays since Euripides first presented the work in 431 B.C. This month, Medea appears in a fresh take written by **James Ijames**, the Philly playwright who won a Pulitzer for *Fat Ham*, his reimagining of *Hamlet*.

Media/Medea, one of **Ijames'** first new works since the award in 2022, pairs renowned Philly theater makers with student actors from Community College of Philadelphia, Bryn Mawr College, and Haverford College.

In **Ijames'** version, Medea is part of a wealthy Black celebrity family that implodes when her husband, Jason, decides to leave for the younger white princess, Glauce of Corinth.

Ijames crafted a Medea inspired by *Real Housewives of Atlanta's* Porsha Williams and *Sunset Boulevard's* Norma Desmond. The chorus — here a cacophony of social media commentary — follows the drama closely. Medea plots her revenge on Jason's new family, killing Glauce, Glauce's father, and her own children.

When **Ijames** first read Medea as an undergraduate, the play was scary but undeniably compelling. The final act "was so disturbing to me, it just never left me," he told *The Inquirer*. "I also found the arguments about honor and love and forgiveness, and belonging — which run throughout the play prior to this really awful ending — to be really powerful things to talk about today."

Raelle Myrick-Hodges, founder of Azuka Theatre, directs, and longtime actor Akeem Davis plays Jason. Monet Debose, a recent graduate of Bryn Mawr, stars as the antiheroine in a breakout lead role.

Sixteen students, eight from CCP and eight from Bryn Mawr or Haverford, form the cast.

The collaboration, "Greek Drama/Black Lives," is led by Bryn Mawr professors Catharine Slusar, in theater, and Catherine Conybeare, of the classics department. A grant from the American Council of Learned Societies connects Bryn Mawr, CCP, and E.M. Stanton Elementary School in Philadelphia in this yearlong partnership.

Medea, however, wasn't the first Greek classic they had in mind. When Slusar, Conybeare, and Davis pitched **Ijames** the idea last year of rewriting a classic, they proposed *The Frogs*, a comedy by Aristophanes. **Ijames** said yes to the project but not the text. He suggested a reexamination of Medea with a particular emphasis on how revenge impacts an entire family, especially the children. The team ran with it.

"The next day, he won the Pulitzer for *Fat Ham*," said Conybeare. "It was very good timing."

The collaborators also agreed to make Media/Medea available for other colleges, high schools, or theater groups to produce for free in the future. "I would wager a Pulitzer Prize winner has never done that before [for their] next play. I mean, you're trying to get the money!" Slusar said, laughing.

Over the next several months, **Ijames** put his play to paper. "Particularly, because I knew I was doing it for a university, [I tried] to see the story as much as I could, from the perspective of the young people," he said.

He devised more speaking roles for women, like Medea's aunt, Circe, who becomes the children's caretaker, and Glauce, the Paris Hilton-like princess. The children, Devan and Shel, get a bigger spotlight, too.

Debose was introduced to Medea first through **Ijames'** eyes. "I saw myself in Medea," she said. "I saw other women who have been heartbroken by betrayal in Medea, so she just became relatable." Reading Euripides afterward, she understood how such a powerful being — the daughter of a god — could exact that scale of violence once betrayed.

One acting note from Myrick-Hodges stuck, Debose said: "Medea is not crazy for going ballistic on her family. So don't play her crazy. Why is she doing this?"

Rehearsals began this semester with the cast alternating weekly between CCP and Bryn Mawr campuses.

The director holds nothing back, either. "I do not treat students any differently than I treat professional artists, it doesn't serve them and it doesn't serve the show," said Myrick-Hodges.

In developing the show, Myrick-Hodges thought back to Will Smith slapping Chris Rock and how that led to a chorus of people blaming Jada Pinkett Smith. "She is being vilified, she is being called names online, it is literally what happens in this play for Medea," she said.

That commentary grounds the millennia-old classic in today's world with the careful skill that **Ijames** is known for delivering. Despite stepping into big shoes, the creative team has embraced the adaptation fearlessly. "I look at it as a new work, period, versus an adaptation," said Myrick-Hodges. "And nobody writes like **James**."

"Media/Medea" runs through April 22 at CCP's Black Box Theater in the Bonnell Building, Room BG-21, 1700 Spring Garden St., Phila. P performances are sold out.

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CITATION (MLA STYLE)

(Staff Writer), Rosa Cartagena. "A 'Medea' inspired by 'The Real Housewives' - The James Ijames play is being done in partnership with Community College of Philadelphia, Bryn Mawr College, and Haverford College." *Philadelphia Inquirer, The (PA)*, sec. Life, 21 Apr. 2023, p. B7. *NewsBank: Access World News Research Collection*, https://infoweb-newsbank-com.proxy.brynmawr.edu/apps/news/openurl?ctx_ver=z39.88-2004&rft_id=info%3Aid/infoweb.newsbank.com&svc_dat=AWNB&req_dat=0D0CB4ECF235E68A&rft_val_format=info%3Aofi/ft%3Akev%3Amtx%3Actx&rft_dat=document_id%3Anews/1910A0796B138AC8. Accessed 2 Aug. 2023.

