

# TRAGIC REPLAY: PERFORMATIVITY, MYTH AND REALITY IN MILO RAU'S *MEDEA'S CHILDREN*<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This article considers the workings of performativity and agonism in Milo Rau's *Medea's Children*, presented at the National Theatre in Prague in November 2024. A provocative work that reimagines the Classical myth of Medea through a contemporary lens, *Medea's Children* raises pointed questions of theatrical affects and effects. The performance mobilises a repertoire of postdramatic and metatheatrical techniques that have come to characterize Rau's dramaturgy. Drawing a line from Jacques Derrida's thinking on absence, iterability and context through to Judith Butler's theory of performativity, the article analyses the use of non-professional child actors who both enact and reflect on the traumatic events of the performance, destabilizing the boundaries between reality and fiction, and presenting the myth as a living, polymorphous structure. *Medea's Children* thus generates a space where audience expectations are both anticipated and manipulated so that the act of performance becomes an agonistic arena. The concept of agonism (with reference to Chantal Mouffe) is used to explore how the play stages a confrontation between diverging viewpoints, highlighting the irreducible nature of societal (and existential) conflicts where differing perspectives on victimhood, justice, and suffering coexist and clash. Ultimately, the article contends that *Medea's Children* serves as a performative act of resistance, questioning the narratives of power and victimhood, and inviting the audience to weigh the complex interplay of personal and political struggles within the mythological and contemporary contexts it interleaves.

**Keywords:** Milo Rau, *Medea's Children*, tragedy, agonism, performativity, global realism

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Theatre must be an act, there must be a difficulty performing it – not a technical difficulty, but a real existential one. Theatre means the creation of a situation of choice.<sup>2</sup>

Milo Rau's *Medea's Children* is a keenly provocative work that reimagines the Classical myth of Medea through a contemporary lens, raising urgent questions about reality, theatrical affect, and the cultural power of collectively recognized stories. This article explores the interplay of performativity and agonism in *Medea's Children*, focusing on performances staged at the Prague Crossroads Festival in November 2024 at the National Theatre.<sup>3</sup> Rau, widely known as a provocateur and politically committed theatre maker, has as Peter M. Boenisch notes, consistently tested "the possibilities and limitations of politically engaged theatre-making on the twenty-first century stage" establishing himself as one of the most significant figures in contemporary European theatre.<sup>4</sup> *Medea's Children* mobilises a repertoire of postdramatic and metatheatrical techniques that have come to exemplify Rau's dramaturgy and is of especial interest for its overt yet ambivalent engagement with the legacy of tragedy and its continued valency. In doing so, it extends Rau's ongoing dialogue with Greek tragedy seen in earlier works such as *Antigone in the Amazon* (2023) and *Orestes in Mosul* (2019). When asked in an interview what we might learn from Greek tragedy, Rau offers a stark contrast between Ancient and modern worldviews:

In the well-known book *The Death of Tragedy*, it is written that since the time of Ibsen, we believe that we can solve our constant societal crisis with for example more social welfare. In the Greek tragedies, there's no such optimism. Our civilisation is one of drama, the Greek one was one of tragedy. In their wars, you either won or lost, meaning all men were killed, women and children were enslaved, and the city was destroyed. The tragic mind means in the best way that you accept and understand death. From there, we might be able to move on.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Milo Rau, *Globaler Realismus / Global Realism* (Berlin: Verbrecher Verlag, 2018), 159.

<sup>3</sup> *Medea's Children*, concept and direction by Milo Rau, dramaturgy by Kaatje De Geest (Prague Crossroads Festival, National Theatre, Prague, 9-10 November 2024). All quotes refer to the performances I attended on these dates.

<sup>4</sup> Peter M. Boenisch, "Milo Rau," in *The Routledge Companion to Contemporary European Theatre and Performance*, ed. Ralf Remshardt and Aneta Mancewicz (London and New York: Routledge, 2023), 603.

<sup>5</sup> Jonas Meyeur, "Being Left by Someone You Love, Is Harder Than a Loved One Dying," interview with Milo Rau, *NTGent*, 9 April 2024, <https://admin.ntgent.be/uploads/files/PRESS-PACKAGES-WEBSITE/Interview-Milo-Rau-ENG.pdf>.

The challenge of such an attitude is escalated in *Medea's Children* by the use of child performers who consciously engage with tragedy, cruelty and a sense of a future that is foreclosed. Taking on this tension, my discussion is guided by two concerns: how Rau's concept of "Global Realism" functions in *Medea's Children*, and what role performativity and agonism play in shaping audience engagement and creating a dynamic theatrical space that challenges traditional notions of realism and tragedy. The analysis unfolds in four interconnected sections. I begin with a brief introduction to Rau and his notion of "Global Realism," before going on to outline some relevant theoretical frameworks on performativity and agonism. These provide the foundation for my exploration of the formal features of *Medea's Children*, focusing on its modes of audience interpolation and its reconfiguration of the Medea myth on the basis of the two performances I attended. Finally, I reflect on the agonistic space generated by the performance and the critical conversations it potentially opens. I argue that *Medea's Children* operates as a performative act of resistance, questioning the narratives of power and victimhood, and inviting the audience to weigh the complex interplay of personal and political struggles within the mythological and contemporary contexts it interleaves.

## Rau and Realism

Milo Rau is a Swiss theatre director, writer and activist well known for courting political and ethical controversy. His work has been subject to considerable attention in German language theatre scholarship, and over the last five years, has been increasingly recognised in the Anglosphere as well. Rau came to theatre making indirectly and via activism; he studied sociology, German and Romance studies in Zurich, Berlin and Paris, before working as a reporter. Rau studied under sociologist Pierre Bourdieu in Paris, and Bourdieu's work on habitus, cultural capital and the agonistic structure of the field of cultural production<sup>6</sup> is an important influence on the evolution of Rau's thinking about his role as an artist. It is to this background that he credits his fixation with reality:

I wanted to go where I could see things for myself, describe them face-to-face and fight against them. Thus, I began to travel to Africa, South America,

<sup>6</sup> Key works include *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randall Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) and *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995).

Russia and work on what I now call global realism: On the description of this global network of capital, its nightmares and hopes, its underworld and counterculture.<sup>7</sup>

In the early 2000s, he began working as a director and writer both in Germany and internationally, including at the Maxim Gorki Theater in Berlin, Staatsschauspiel Dresden, HAU Berlin, Theaterhaus Gessnerallee in Zurich, Teatrul Odeon in Bucharest, and Beursschouwburg in Brussels.<sup>8</sup> Then in 2007, Rau formed his own company called the International Institute of Political Murder that has gone on to produce commissioned work for European theatres such as Residenztheater, Munich, the Royal Flemish Theatre, Brussels, and the Schaubühne, Berlin.<sup>9</sup> Between 2018 and 2023 Rau was artistic director NTGent in Ghent, and in 2023 he became artistic director of the Vienna Festival. He has produced numerous books, films, exhibitions, radio plays, over twenty “representational or narrative plays” and five “direct intervention” ‘trials.’<sup>10</sup> In the latter category, works such as *The Last Days of the Ceaușescus* (2009), *Hate Radio* (2011) on the Rwandan genocide, or *The Congo Tribunal* (2015), blend documentary theatre methods with re-enactment to expose and re-evaluate specific traumatic real world events as sites of agonism.<sup>11</sup>

A key term for Rau is realism, more specifically something he calls “Global Realism.”<sup>12</sup> Such realism, he contends, “does not mean something real will be represented, but that the representation is itself real. That a situation arises that carries all the consequences of the real for those involved, which is morally, politically and existentially open.”<sup>13</sup> Global Realism is concerned with the ways global (as opposed to national) systems of power, economy, and history shape our lives. Performance in this expanded and motile scene is hybrid, combining actors

<sup>7</sup> Rau, *Globaler Realismus / Global Realism*, 175.

<sup>8</sup> “Milo Rau,” *Schaeferphilippen*, [https://www.schaeferphilippen.de/kuenstler\\_in/milo-rau/](https://www.schaeferphilippen.de/kuenstler_in/milo-rau/).

<sup>9</sup> Boenisch, “Milo Rau,” 602.

<sup>10</sup> Freddy Decreus, “‘Theatre remains traditionalist and Eurocentric.’ About Milo Rau’s ‘Theatre of Crisis,’” in *Staging 21<sup>st</sup>-century Tragedies*, ed. Avra Sidiropoulou (London: Routledge, 2022), 142. Decreus is referring here to an account of Rau’s work offered by Johannes Birgfeld, *Milo Rau: Das Geschichtliche Gefühl. Wege zu einem globalen Realismus* (Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2019), 151, 165.

<sup>11</sup> Martin Hodoň’s article “Milo Rau, and Justice for All,” *Slovenské divadlo (The Slovak Theatre)* 70, no. 3 (2022): 270-81, offers a richly detailed analysis of *The Congo Tribunal* assessing the ways Rau’s work situated between “performing arts and performance art” (274) probes trauma and memory to consider relations between the past and the future (279).

<sup>12</sup> Rau, *Globaler Realismus / Global Realism*, 175.

<sup>13</sup> Rau, *Globaler Realismus / Global Realism*, 177.

and non-actors, documentary techniques and re-enactment with the goal of blurring distinctions between art and reality, and taking risks that have impact. This heightened political sensibility that dismantles dramatic illusion in favour of political awakening might initially seem to align Rau's work with that of Bertolt Brecht. Yet the effect of Rau's artistic practices, as Laurens De Vos notes, usually goes directly "against the grain of Brecht's poetics [...] rather than an alienation effect, we get a heightened reality effect."<sup>14</sup> While the political foundation of Rau's so-called realism is unmistakable, it is notable how divergent it is from historical realisms. It eschews an external, superior and stable perspective in favour of an embodied, relational aesthetic that emerges from dissonance and complicity. In consequence, he insists that there is no governing system of realism, "because essentially realism as an aesthetic method is a deficiency: namely, to accept you don't know how to do it, but you have to keep trying no matter what."<sup>15</sup>

Rau's theatre of Global Realism thus grapples with the antagonisms and impasses of the world in an effort "to define a theatre on the road, which tries to connect worlds, people, ideas, in a social context that unfortunately is filled with separations, conflicts, and rejection and exploitation of others."<sup>16</sup> Intrinsic to this is a tragic sensibility. It is unsurprising then that tragedy as genre, as experience, as imperative has been the interface of several of Rau's major works, posing questions of meaning, existence and justice always accompanied by the realities of human vulnerability and failure. Boenisch deftly describes how Rau's complex dramaturgy fuses and juxtaposes numerous elements:

mythological and universal, the historical and political, and the personal and subjective. [His] idiosyncratic 'realism' thus replaces mimetic representation of play texts with their complex palimpsestic over-writing. This strategy also multiplies potential access points, using the somewhat mythological resonances of the known plots to 'pre-form' the audiences' 'response-ability' to, and their 'situative understanding' of, the traumatic situations and fraught relations addressed [in the work].<sup>17</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Laurens De Vos, "A Tale of Truth: The Use of Brechtian Strategies for Non-Brechtian Artistic Purposes in Milo Rau's Theater of the Real," *Theater* 51, no. 2 (2021): 79.

<sup>15</sup> Rau, *Globaler Realismus / Global Realism*, 176.

<sup>16</sup> Lorenzo Mango, "Form and Politics: An Introduction to the Theatre of Milo Rau," *European Journal of Theatre and Performance* 1 (2019), 25 January 2019, <http://journal.eastap.com/2019/01/25/form-and-politics-an-introduction-to-the-theatre-of-milo-rau/>.

<sup>17</sup> Boenisch, "Milo Rau," 605.

The potential of these re-iterative methods lies in a sense of something shared. As Rau puts it, “The Greeks are like a comic strip. Like with the Bible, you say one word, and you know where you are. The collective mind is already there. [...] One of the attractions of the classics is the opportunity to deal with stories that people already know and to engage in that collective storytelling.”<sup>18</sup> This collective familiarity becomes a powerful entry point – not to reiterate the myth, but to interrogate it. The engagement Rau proposes is one of wresting the familiar into the unfamiliar, using the audience’s shared recognition as a foundation for disruption. Citing Ancient Greek theatre and Euripides in particular, *Medea’s Children* reconfigures the Medea myth to invoke a critical dialogue on the power dynamics *at play* and *of play*, and on the nature of the tragic in the contemporary moment.

### From Speech Acts to Staged Acts

Understanding Rau’s “realism” as performative and agonistic, I want to sketch a trajectory through these terms to draw out some of their resonances before turning to *Medea’s Children* in more detail. J.L. Austin’s seminal book, *How to Do Things with Words*, stands as the origin point for many debates about performativity and language. Austin’s speech act theory maintains that certain utterances are not defined by the transmission of information but, in specific contextual settings, are performative – they *do* something rather than merely say something.<sup>19</sup>

These conditions of performativity become the focus of Jacques Derrida’s 1971 deconstruction of speech act theory, “Signature Event Context,” in which he unravels some of the ambiguities of performatives that Austin’s work attempts to delimit. Derrida challenges the stability of context and argues that communication is always plural and equivocal: it cannot be wholly contained within any one moment of use. Pure context can never be absolutely guaranteed.<sup>20</sup> The two key terms in Derrida’s essay – iterability and absence – redefine how we understand performative utterances. Signs, to be readable, must be repeatable, and must furnish meaning in the absence of the sender/speaker. For Derrida, Austin’s “infelicities,”<sup>21</sup> therefore, are not incongruities, but are rather the very ground of all communication, performative or otherwise. He asks, “is not what Austin

<sup>18</sup> Joseph Pearson, “Killing On-Stage, with Milo Rau: In Conversation with Joseph Pearson about *Medea’s Children*,” 28 March 2025, <https://www.schaubuehne.de/en/blog/find-blog-medea-kinderen.html>.

<sup>19</sup> J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), 5ff.

<sup>20</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Signature Event Context,” in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (1972; Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 310.

<sup>21</sup> Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*, 22-23.

excludes as anomalous, exceptional, 'non-serious,' that is, *citation* (on the stage, in a poem, or in a soliloquy), the determined modification of a general citationality – or rather iterability – without which there would not even be a 'successful' performative?"<sup>22</sup> In this view, citation, theatricality, and even failure are not marginal to language, they are constitutive of it. Derrida's (re)iterative model collapses distinctions between felicitous and infelicitous utterances, between what is performative and what is merely performed. In consequence he proposes "a generalised iterability, a pervasive theatricality common to the stage and world alike."<sup>23</sup>

This expanded concept of performativity finds extension in Judith Butler's work in the 1990s. Butler takes up the term performative as a means of articulating the ways gender "is an identity tenuously constituted in time – an identity instituted through a *stylized repetition of acts*."<sup>24</sup> Using an overt theatre metaphor, she suggests that gender is "an act that has been going on before one arrived on the scene. [...A]n act which has been rehearsed, much as a script survives the particular actors who make use of it, but which requires individual actors in order to be actualised and reproduced as reality once again."<sup>25</sup> Such a cumulative notion of identity as both rehearsed and contextually enacted links back to Rau's dramaturgy. Arguably, Rau's return to tragedy likewise invokes mythic scripts as living, polymorphous and mutable structures, embodied anew, in delimited contexts in which a dissonant "agonistic pluralism"<sup>26</sup> appears.

The concept of agonism is central to the work of political theorist Chantal Mouffe who has argued that a healthy and resilient democratic politics is defined not by consensus, but by agonism, a dynamic of constructive conflict.<sup>27</sup> Agonism, for Mouffe, maintains the intractable nature of conflicting identities and positions within the political field without inciting overt animosity (in other words, antagonism).<sup>28</sup> It is a struggle not aimed at erasure, but at coexistence through dissent, that is continuously performed. Remarkable on the connotations of these

<sup>22</sup> Derrida, "Signature Event Context," 325.

<sup>23</sup> Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Performativity and Performance* (New York: Routledge: 1996), 4.

<sup>24</sup> Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," *The Twentieth Century Performance Reader*, eds. Michael Huxley and Noel Witts, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (London: Routledge 2002), 120.

<sup>25</sup> Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution," 127.

<sup>26</sup> Chantal Mouffe, "Deliberative Democracy or Agonistic Pluralism?" *Social Research* 66, no. 3 (1999): 755.

<sup>27</sup> Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013).

<sup>28</sup> Matthias Thaler, "The Illusion of Purity: Chantal Mouffe's Realist Critique of Cosmopolitanism," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 36, no. 7 (2010): 789.

terms and their implications in performance, Tony Fisher notes how “*agonia* (meaning ‘contest’ or competition) and *agōn* (connoting various forms of ‘struggle’)” are

linked etymologically to the English word ‘agony’, indicating the affective dimension of struggle; that politics, for instance, is not reducible to the tinder-dry stuff of reasoned deliberation but involves complex emotional and affective forms of identification, of passions and desires that animate political commitments. Wherever the *agōn* expresses itself, it is invariably accompanied by *agonia*.<sup>29</sup>

In this light, Rau’s tragic realism can be understood as one that stages not only the repeatability of identity and meaning (as per Butler and Derrida) but also the embodied intensity of political and emotional struggle – a theatricality that is always already performative, always already agonistic.

### Agonia’s Offspring

The multiple affordances of *agonia* are directly of relevance to the experiential outcomes of *Medea’s Children*. “In Greek tragedies,” Rau notes, “the children are always condemned to silence. Even though the concept of family is pinnacle to these stories. In *Medea’s Children*, I decided to undo this wrongdoing [...] in a radical way. The play voices the opinions of children on ‘adult’ themes like love, separation, death and the end of the world.”<sup>30</sup> The performance involves a cast of six non-professional child actors ranging from eight to thirteen years old (two boys and four girls),<sup>31</sup> alongside a professional adult actor, Peter Seynaeve. Seynaeve is also an acting coach and has worked with Rau before, most notably on *Five Easy Pieces* (2016) where he also was assistant director. The show is segmented into three blocks: it opens and closes with a performed post-show discussion that bookends a palimpsest of scenes from Euripides’s *Medea* and a contemporary domestic tragedy. The cast works through the borrowed segments from Euripides and documentary details from a real-world case of familicide interlaced with

<sup>29</sup> Tony Fisher, “Introduction: Performance and the Tragic Politics of the *Agōn*,” in *Performing Antagonism: Theatre, Performance & Radical Democracy*, ed. Tony Fisher and Eve Katsouraki (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 9.

<sup>30</sup> Mayeur, “Being Left by Someone You Love.”

<sup>31</sup> There are two casts of children; the cast in the Prague performances were Juliette Debackere, Ella Brennan, Bernice Van Walleghem, Aiko Benaouisse, Helena Van de Castele and Elias Maes.

portions of workshopped and improvised dialogue. The performance of these stories is multiplied using projections of filmed scenes that accompany acted exchanges and is further complicated by the onstage performance of filming the action of the juxtaposed tragedies. Technologies of representation and mediation raise questions of presence and absence, the pre-recorded and the live, attentive absorption and distraction, manipulation and agency. Combined, these elements – the casting, dramatic structure, citational intertexts, varying modes of dialogue and the presence of technology on stage – form a densely self-reflexive mesh that is at once deliberately overstimulating and ambivalently provocative.

In 2018 when he began as artistic director of NTGent, Rau created a list of production rules that could work as guidelines for making theatre for a present dominated by globalization. These rules were then published under the title “The Ghent Manifesto.” Some are readily identifiable in *Medea’s Children* – primarily, a commitment to multilingualism on stage, the mixing of professional and amateur actors, the embargo on “literal adaptation of classics,” collective creation and touring. While Rau states that these rules are not aesthetic, it is evident that they have aesthetic dimensions.<sup>32</sup> The postdramatic and metatheatrical techniques of *Medea’s Children* repeatedly draw attention to the practices of theatre making, storytelling, citing and art/life dichotomies.

As the audience takes their seats in the auditorium, Peter Seynaeve is casually arranging seven folding chairs downstage, before the lowered curtain. He greets us in an informal, friendly way. Some soft jokes are aimed at latecomers and theatre critics, then we are welcomed to the post-show discussion. We are reminded that such talks are rare due to child labour laws. There are some titters of laughter from the auditorium when he asks us what we thought of the show. Some shout out – “we haven’t seen it yet.” Already, we have implicitly adapted to our role as a co-operative audience in a theatrical scenario in which the fourth wall is, it seems, dismantled.

The first two children (the youngest members of the cast) come out through the divide mid-curtain and take their seats. They chat about where the others are – they are getting showered and changed after a “bloody evening.” The post-performance talk meanders: Peter asks them their thoughts about acting, tragedy, being cast in the show. It is all a bit wooden and somewhat patronising. The children do not deliver many insights, but there are apparently tangential and trivial points that foreshadow critical aspects of the show to come. Elias is keen to share tracts of memorised information about Euripides and Ancient Greek theatre,

<sup>32</sup> See Milo Rau, “The Ghent Manifesto,” *European Journal of Theatre and Performance* 1 (2019), 25 January 2019, <https://journal.eastap.com/2019/01/25/the-ghent-manifesto/>.

and to hyperbolically perform his monologue again. He tells us that he always reads the last page of a book first, to avoid surprises. Juliette gives a succinct overview of classical versus contemporary theatre with reference to Samuel Beckett, reminding us (perhaps naively) that in Greek tragedy all the terrible action happens offstage. She would prefer it to be all onstage, with “lots of close ups, lots of blood.” Via these exchanges the audience is implicitly invited to participate in a low-stakes game of recognition and recirculation of tokens of theatrical cultural capital that might be taken for granted.<sup>33</sup>

As the other performers arrive the slightly invasive and manipulative tone persists, as Peter asks Aiko what it was like to kiss a girl onstage, or Bernice what it felt like to perform violence. There is some tension between Peter and Aiko (the older boy in the cast) who does not disguise his boredom and surreptitiously checks his mobile phone during the discussion. Peter impatiently corrects him several times on his behaviour. Once again, we are immersed in a recognition of an all-too-familiar conflict between children and adults, while at the same time the adult-child hierarchy discreetly surfaces. When he is asked about the experience of acting in the show, Aiko’s answer – “I thought it would be more theatrical” – underscores a pertinent mismatch between expectations and the work Rau has engaged them in, as well as an embedded critique of the outcome.

The discussion drifts from Medea to the story of Amandine Moreau – the story is a fiction closely modelled on a real-life Belgian family annihilation: Geneviève Lhermitte killed her five children aged 3 to 14 (one boy and four girls) on 28 February 2007. She was voluntarily euthanised in prison in March 2023, after 16 years in jail. Towards the end of the block, Bernice delicately sings Regina Spektor’s “Two Birds on a Wire,” a song of love, its ending an unwillingness to let go. The sweet tone of the song clashes with the cruelty of the Amandine narrative. Responding to connection suggested by the juxtaposition, the children go on to anticipate and debate the relevance of the themes of love, abandonment and betrayal in relation to both Medea and Amandine.

The matter of expectations is moot, not merely among the cast. As already noted, the citational features of the play invite recognition along the lines prefigured so literally in the pre-emptive ‘after talk.’ One cannot attend a performance titled *Medea’s Children*, framed with age restrictions and trigger warnings and produced

<sup>33</sup> The idea of cultural capital, and its role in social stratification and reproduction, can be traced back to Rau’s mentor, Pierre Bourdieu, beginning with “Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction,” in *Knowledge, Education and Cultural Change: Papers in the Sociology of Education*, ed. Richard Brown (London: Tavistock, 1973), 71-112, and reiterated and developed within many subsequent publications.

by one of Europe's most provocative directors, without some preconceptions. The use of non-professional child actors presents a level of challenge and discomfort for spectators, especially since the effacement of dramatic character with the use of real names, semi-improvised dialogue and direct address, promotes a sense of reality and immediacy that jostles the Greek theatrical reference point. Repeatedly the dramaturgy of the piece brings factual realities, established knowledges and pre-determined scripts into its aesthetic formulas of representational excess, linguistic plurality, temporal jaggedness and emotive unevenness. In line with Boenisch's comments on the 'pre-formation' of audience response cited above,<sup>34</sup> *Medea's Children* generates a space where audience expectations are both anticipated and manipulated, so that the act of performance becomes an agonistic arena of disjunctive sensations anchored in unresolved thematic tensions between victimhood, justice, and suffering.

As the curtain lifts, the dismantling, reassembling and proliferating of tragic scripts intensifies. The stage is characterised by simultaneous representational spaces that constantly split the audience focus. Upstage is dominated by a massive screen, downstage left is a replica of a small two-story Flemish house, downstage right is a covered beach chair and a film camera. On screen, the scene is of the coast at Ostend where Euripides's *Medea* is in progress. A recorded version of part of the story of Jason, Medea and her father Aeëtes of Colchis with adult actors in costumes (one of whom is Rau himself) is projected. Jason wields a big wooden sword; he is unsuccessfully trying to kill a dragon (presented by an actor in a pantomime dragon costume with an enormous dragon head). Medea steps in and kills the dragon with frenzied viciousness – numerous stabbing blows – as Jason looks on. Beneath onstage the child cast in identical costumes are simultaneously enacting the same scene with Peter. The plot of *Medea* begins to unfold in acted blocks, each filmed by Peter.

The flow of the performance is interrupted by caesura moments when the scene stops. Peter thanks the performers and confirms that the re-enactment of each part is good before continuing. The *Medea* story progressively segues into that of Amandine Moreau, with the re-enactment, in the style of a television documentary, of conversations with Amandine, her parents, her husband and so on, performed by the children, filmed and screened with surtitles. The effect is to reinforce a strong sense of scripted vocabularies, words taking over or flowing through various bodies. A similar interrupted flow continues as each scene is filmed, then checked before they proceed to the next.

<sup>34</sup> Boenisch, "Milo Rau," 605.

Despite the distancing potential of these interruptions and the multiple layers of the performance, the action contracts around the emotional and physical atrocity of the crime. The non-linear arrangement of scenes means that reverberations of violence and trauma reach us well before the replaying of the event; the police report of the children's injuries and deaths is narrated, an interview with the children's father, Mounir, grief-numbed long after the events, is enacted and projected. A film tracks Amadine in a supermarket buying a large knife. All the information, in other words, is explicitly present, everything is prefigured from the beginning and systematically constructed throughout. Tension mounts as the theatrical inexorability of this sequence is palpable. A television with (violent) cartoons is playing stage right watched by the children. Bernice, as Amandine, crosses the stage and with calm determination takes each of the 'children' singly into the house where she brutally stabs them to death. We have already been told exactly how, now it is 'done' on stage both seen and unseen. Peter follows them each time into the house with the camera and films the action. Our view of one child actor killing another is obscured since they are inside the house structure on stage. Events are, however, projected on the enormous screen. The filming is graphically close up. There are loud screams, grim struggles, plenty of blood, full immersive sound effects and visceral images of throat slitting. After each killing, Peter carefully sets down the camera, and he and Amandine/Bernice drag the bloodied body out of the house to the upstage main playing area. They take a brief break, have some water, wipe their hands, catch their breath; then they start again, moving on to the next child. With the older children, there is more physical resistance and effort to escape which heightens the strenuousness of both the killing and the watching.

The pitiless durational intensity of this whole block is heightened by the metatheatrical stopping and starting of the action. Amandine's story thoroughly displaces *Medea*, throwing it into sharp relief. Euripides's *Medea* seems rather verbose and archaic, yet there is no doubt of the analogy with the contemporary narrative. The re-enactment is a riveting and tortuous ordeal. At the end, all Amandine's children, whose bodies have been so laboriously dumped on stage, get up, blood spattered. One of the older girls breaks down in tears in an apparent panic attack. She is comforted tenderly by Peter. It feels as if another reality has broken through, one in which real children are affected by the re-enactment of violence and are exposed to real emotional distress. The uncomfortable insinuation of exploitation of child performers hangs heavy in the air. What is the point of re-enacting such devastating events? And what is our role in relation to them?

The performance of the after-show discussion resumes. Structurally there are echoes of the first version of the post-show talk – there is a song and a monologue

from Euripides's *Medea*. The children take their chairs again, the open stage now visible behind them. This time they have not changed their clothes, they remain smeared in blood. Notes of wry humour, troubling congruity and mournful expansiveness here sound in quick succession. Juliette asks Peter if their performance was OK and "not over the top?"; she clamours to sing 'her' song, "Les yeux de ma mère," a ballad by Belgian singer Arno. It is the soundtrack from the start of the show. Adjacent to the *Medea* stories we have just witnessed, the dark ominousness of this intense ode to a volatile, potentially violent, maternal figure is unavoidable. Hovering over the final moments is an immense sense of desolation; "we are the last" clinging on to "hope even though we know the end," says Juliette. The agonistic tension between the ghostly presence of the children of *Medea/Amandine* and the expansive sense of tragic foreclosure faced by the young generation in our globalized reality may be experienced as raw futility, or a clear-eyed challenge to do better regardless.

### **The Ends of Tragedy?**

The use of non-professional child actors who both enact and reflect on traumatic events patently works to blur the lines between theatrical performance and lived experience, reality and fiction, appropriate and inappropriate, to produce considerable affective discomfort (or *agonia*) for spectators.<sup>35</sup> The first Prague Crossroads performance was also followed by a (real) post-show discussion in the foyer with Peter but no children, that added a final layer to the evening. In contrast to the intra-performance post-show talks, here the audience could participate. Threaded through the questions and comments raised was a certain amount of consternation about the ethics of the performance, and the extent to which the children were protected from the violent images they had co-produced. To what extent did they, or their parents, consent to the final outcome? Notably, it was revealed that not only do the children's parents accompany them and watch the performances, but that scenes of murder (all pre-filmed) and the panic attack (also scripted) are the parts the children enjoy playing most and they are energised by the audience's reactions. This unmasking of the craftedness of all parts of the show, which may come as no surprise to those acquainted with Rau's work, reintroduces the dilemmas of realism as artistic artifice and method, and resonates with the pre-ordained form of tragedy that is turned back upon the audience. The emotional impact of the performance and the ambivalent sense of complicity it

<sup>35</sup> It is not the first time Rau has used child performers in ambivalent situations – *Five Easy Pieces* (2015) and *Lam Gods* (2018) mobilise some similar unease.

created are not erased but are rather exacerbated by these revelations. And this is perhaps what Rau means when he says that “the representation is itself real. That a situation arises that carries all the consequences of the real for those involved, which is morally, politically and existentially open.”<sup>36</sup> If we take him at his word then logically, and uncomfortably, these consequences are not just confined to the adults in the auditorium.

As philosopher Simon Critchley notes: “tragedy is thinking *in* action, thinking *upon* action, *for the sake of* action[;]”

But this thinking takes the form of radical questioning: how do I act? What shall I do? If tragedy is *mimesis praxeos* then it is action that is called into question through tragedy. What the experience of tragedy invites is neither the blind impulsiveness of action, nor some retreat into a solitary life of contemplation, but the *difficulty* and *uncertainty* of action in a world defined by ambiguity where right always seems to be on both sides.<sup>37</sup>

*Medea's Children* performs tragic agonism, which is, as Martin Hodoň so aptly puts it, both “self-referential and constitutive,”<sup>38</sup> a space where a plurality of perspectives is vigorously sustained, and where resolution is deliberately withheld. In doing so, the performance invites not closure, but critical engagement with the very uncertainties that define ethical action.

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<sup>36</sup> Rau, *Globaler Realismus / Global Realism*, 177.

<sup>37</sup> Simon Critchley, “Tragedy’s Philosophy,” in *Performing Antagonism*, ed. Fisher and Katsouraki, 27.

<sup>38</sup> Hodoň, “Milo Rau, and Justice for All,” 274.

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