

Lebanese history by way of Greek tragedy

Adapted from Euripides' *Medea*, Jad al-Hage's play *Bint Asl* fails to deliver on its initial promise

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Special to The Daily Star

There's nothing subtle about *Bint Asl* (Girl from a good family) currently playing at the Monnot Theater. For fifty-odd minutes Darina al-Jundy trembles, cries, stomps, crawls and barks orders as memory after memory consumes her on stage. When it's all over, and every morbid detail exposed, the spot light shines not on Jundy's crouched figure, but on the bomb she has wrapped as a wedding present for her ex-husband.

The message, then, is painfully obvious: the violence will continue.

It's a message that Jad al-Hage, the author of *Bint Asl*, repeats often. "The problem with us, we Lebanese, is that we tend to forget very quickly," he said following Saturday's performance. "We've perfected survival in its worst form."

When he returned to Lebanon in 1997 he was amazed at how quickly society had returned to normality, "No one ever asks 'Why did this all happen?' No one wants to know ... And all this time," he continued, "the seeds (of disaster) are blooming again in darkness."

Inspired by Euripides' classic tragedy *Medea*, *Bint Asl* is an emotional re-telling of a woman's betrayal and revenge, set during and after Lebanon's civil war.

In Euripides' version, *Medea* falls in love with Jason of the Argonauts, and saves him from disaster. She betrays her family and sails off with him. In the course of *Medea's* escape, her father gives chase. She then kills her brother and throws his limbs over-board one by one to hinder his pursuit. Many years and two children later, despite her victories and her sacrifices, Jason decides to marry a young princess. Enraged, *Medea* sends him a fatal wedding gift, and then kills their children.

"The first version I wrote," said Hage, "was very hard. It was more of an exorcism than a play. But I couldn't find anyone willing to direct it." Lebanese society won't accept this, he was told, "but I said that it (would); metaphorically, we all killed our children."

Five years on, and countless



Jundy and Huna try to make sense of Lebanon's past in *Bint Asl*

drafts later, it's a somewhat softer *Bint Asl* who strides on stage and demands a cigarette. While not as macabre as *Medea's*, her story is just as dramatic.

The tone is set by her first memory: "There used to be white flowers here," she says, pointing. "Here, and over there, as well. Why aren't they here anymore?" she demands of the waiter (played by Boutrous Huna). This question,

like almost every question she spits out in the course of the play, goes unanswered.

Speaking in colloquial Lebanese Arabic, she begins leaping through her recollections. It's an impressive performance, and Jundy manages to hold the audience's attention as she stares into space and quivers.

She tells of her brother, Faris, and their childhood games. She recounts falling in love with a

militia member and marrying him against her family's wishes. When at her wedding, surrounded by members of her husband's militia, she fires a gun into the air and accidentally kills a militiaman she is told, "don't worry, fire again" by her husband.

Early on in the play she tells how her husband, in trouble with his militia, begs her to sleep with the militia's leader. "I was stupid; like a donkey I

agreed," she says, and then tells of the morning after, how upon returning home her husband says only: "Take a shower; tomorrow you'll forget."

She tells how he made her sleep with countless members of the militia. She tells about how she unknowingly carried a concealed time-bomb to a party at the request of her husband, one which killed her beloved brother.

In one of the waiter's rare moments of speaking – most of his role consists of lighting Jundy's cigarettes and occasionally holding her hand – the waiter tells her that his brother was killed by the same militia.

The play continues in this vein, with Jundy's arbitrary memories pulling her and the audience along, occasionally interrupted by video clips of social gatherings or herself as a child.

She tells about how her husband tortured people in their home. She tells about how their daughter was permanently wounded by a bomb and how her husband told her to hide their daughter outside the country, he didn't want anyone to know that he had a lame child.

When the war ends her husband divorces her, using as evidence the accounts of the men he made her sleep with. "How

could you divorce me?" Jundy asks. "I gave you everything you wanted without even asking why."

In short, Jundy's character, the daughter of a good family, tells how the war – epitomized by her husband – has ruined her life.

As the play closes she appeals yet again to the waiter, "don't leave, you are like my brother ..." but it is too late for creating such relationships.

"The waiter's a coat-hanger," Hage explains. "He's everyone and nothing. He symbolizes all of us."

Unfortunately, it's during moments of such heavy-handed symbolism that the play is at its weakest.

Despite Jundy's excellent performance – under the sure hand of director Gabriel Yammine – the play falls short of its promise in the end.

Childhood tales of playing at marriage are boring. A woman forced to prostitute herself at her husband's command, while horrible, is neither new nor shocking. The silent, suffering masses deserve to be portrayed differently.

The tale of *Medea* is gripping precisely because it's so horrific. It's just as unthinkable now as when it was written that a woman could kill her children to take such ultimate revenge on her husband. By removing the horror of infanticide from *Bint Asl's* character, the audience is essentially left listening to the tales of a victim. While her tales are tragic, they're regrettably familiar as atrocities of war. And victims, unfortunately, don't make very interesting characters.

Although the play is gripping, it closes without that final punch, a proper denouement that would leave the audience gasping. Hage writes that he is part of the minority which wants to "tell the complete truth about the violence (of the war)," arguing that it is only through such a telling that further atrocities can be avoided in the future. He's right, but his play owes its audience the full telling of the horror of *Medea* – of the civil war – a horror not diluted by symbolism.

Bint Asl plays at Monnot Theater at 8.30pm through Jan. 7. For more information call: 01/202422