A Feminist's Review

'Let Mom — Fly to The Moon' Or: How Male Avant-Garde Theater Still Can't Imagine Liberation for Women

By a close friend

Let me begin with the title, because it tells you everything you need to know about Ilias Katsis's "Let Mom — Fly to The Moon." Not "Mom Flies to the Moon." Not "Mom's Flight to the Moon." But "Let Mom" — as if someone else must grant permission, as if her flight requires approval, as if liberation is something bestowed rather than seized. And that dash? That's the space where the permission never actually comes. MOM spends the entire play hanging upside down by one foot over a sewage well, dunked repeatedly like a carnival attraction, abused by her children, and finally murdered. She never flies anywhere. The moon might as well be on another planet.

This is avant-garde theater in 2024, apparently: a three-hour exercise in maternal torture porn dressed up as classical reimagining. And we're supposed to call it brave.

The Mother as Punching Bag

From the opening moments, MOM is positioned as the play's literal and figurative whipping post. She hangs upside down, "straining up" as the Erinyes—those convenient agents of divine vengeance—snag her hair. Her son Bedlam controls her like a marionette, yanking her up and down from the well while his child (or niece, or both—the incestuous family tree is typically murky) Dorian "yo-yos" her, dunking her head in sewage water. "Break it, girl," Bedlam commands, and break they do.

MOM's only crime, as far as we can tell, is existing. The Chorus accuses her of being Medea, of murdering her brother, of butchering children. But MOM insists she's Cassandra, "the only survivor of my family." The play never clarifies which version is true—or if either is. What's clear is that MOM's identity is entirely defined by accusations, by what others say she did or didn't do, by the violence enacted upon her body. She has no voice, no agency, no interiority beyond suffering.

And when she does speak, she's told to shut up. "Ma—zip it. And pull up your panties," Bedlam commands with casual contempt. The mother's body is both obscene and available for mockery, both punishable and insufficient. This is the eternal double bind of motherhood in patriarchal culture, and Katsis seems to think that staging it with maximum cruelty constitutes some kind of insight.

Medea Through the Male Gaze

The invocation of Medea is particularly telling. Euripides gave us a woman driven to infanticide by her husband's betrayal and her complete powerlessness in a foreign land. The violence is horrific, yes, but it emerges from a specific political and social context: Medea has no rights, no protection, no recourse. She commits the ultimate maternal crime because it's the only form of power left to her—the power to hurt Jason by destroying what he values.

Katsis drains all this away. His Medea—or MOM pretending to be or accused of being Medea—doesn't kill her children. According to Dorian's version, Medea threw her children to

pigs "so she could bar-hop childless." It's a deliberately crude reduction, stripping away any political or emotional complexity in favor of the most misogynistic reading possible: the bad mother who abandons her children for selfish pleasure.

But here's the thing: even this version isn't true within the play's own logic. We learn later that "the sack split. Two babies out"—Bedlam and Jett survived, were raised by a headmistress "for her personal use. Plus the rest." So we have layers of abuse, cycles of violence, but the original maternal crime might never have happened at all. MOM is punished for a murder she may not have committed, for a story that keeps changing, for sins that belong to everyone and no one.

What we're left with is mythology as blame-shifting device. The Greek myths are invoked not to illuminate contemporary violence but to provide classical cover for it. If these patterns are ancient, the play seems to argue, then they're inevitable. If Medea killed her children, then all mothers are potential murderers. If the Erinyes pursue the guilty, then MOM's torture must be deserved. It's determinism masquerading as tragedy.

The Women Who Hurt Women

The play gives us three generations of women: MOM, Jett, and Dorian. And what do they do? They torture each other. Dorian dunks her grandmother. Jett watches, complicit. The Chorus of Erinyes—female vengeance personified—becomes just another tool for Bedlam's sadism. Even when Jett and Dorian have moments of potential connection, they're immediately undercut by violence or betrayal.

The play's treatment of Jett is particularly instructive. She's described as a "leading interpreter of Ancient Drama," suggesting intellectual accomplishment and professional status. But what do we actually see her do? She strips. She vomits into the well. She "lifts her leg crudely and passes gas." She's eventually murdered by her Nazi-sympathizing lover while her daughter watches and takes notes. Her final moments are spent trying to kiss Dorian, who "pulls back," denying even this small gesture of maternal connection.

And Dorian—the young "hermaphrodite," the gender-nonconforming protagonist who might offer some alternative to the binary violence of patriarchy—what does she do with her theoretical freedom? She participates in her grandmother's torture. She watches her mother die. She smears blood on her face and announces, "Same blood. Same irises," as if recognizing kinship excuses complicity. She writes it all down, documenting the horror while refusing to stop it.

The play seems to suggest that this is somehow liberating—that Dorian's ability to witness and record her family's violence constitutes a kind of agency. But witnessing isn't the same as resisting. Writing down atrocities doesn't undo them. Dorian's final line—"The bird never spoke. The rest was us"—sounds profound until you realize it's just another way of saying everyone is equally guilty, which means no one is responsible.

The Nazi in the Room

We need to talk about Vlad. He's not just any character—he's explicitly identified as a "National Socialist student of Classical Philology." A Nazi. Dorian's lover. And the one who ultimately murders Jett with a bayonet in a scene staged as ritual sacrifice. The play wants us to see this as complex, provocative, challenging. I see it as lazy.

Including a Nazi character in your experimental play doesn't automatically make it political. It certainly doesn't make it feminist. What does Katsis want us to understand by making Vlad both a Nazi and the instrument of maternal murder? That fascism and misogyny are connected? Congratulations, feminists have been saying this for decades. That loving a fascist is dangerous? See above. That studying the classics can coexist with genocidal ideology? We've known this since Heidegger.

What bothers me most is the play's apparent fascination with Vlad's violence. The stage directions lovingly detail his "dragging ceremonial step," the way he "raises the bayonet in both hands" before plunging it into Jett's back "at the heart." He then smears her blood on Dorian's face in a grotesque parody of both military ritual and sexual initiation. It's violence as aesthetics, politics as performance, murder as art.

And where are the women in all this? Jett dies. Dorian watches. MOM is already dead. The men—Bedlam and Vlad—survive to fight each other, to struggle over meaning and money and power. The Nazi murders the mother and the daughter doesn't intervene because she's too busy taking notes for her creative writing project. This is what passes for gender transgression in 2024?

The Imperial Eagle Watches

The play's most consistent presence is the taxidermied imperial eagle perched on Bedlam's desk. Characters address it. It never answers. In the climactic moment, Bedlam begs it to speak and receives only silence. The eagle represents power, empire, the violent structures that enable all the horror we witness. And it's dead, stuffed, silent.

This is meant to be profound: power doesn't explain itself, doesn't justify itself, just watches impassively while humans destroy each other. But notice what this framing does—it externalizes power, makes it seem like something outside human agency. The eagle isn't responsible. The institutions aren't responsible. The structures aren't responsible. We're all just acting out roles written by dead empires and ancient myths.

It's a deeply conservative vision dressed in radical aesthetics. Nothing can change because these patterns are eternal. Women will always be sacrificed. Mothers will always be punished. Men will always compete for dominance while women's bodies become the terrain of their battles. The eagle doesn't speak because power doesn't need language—it just needs our complicity.

The Sponsorship Question

Bill, the "major sponsor from the Homeland," is the play's most nakedly allegorical figure. He represents American money, Western capital, the economic forces that fund experimental theater. His presence raises an important question: who pays for this? Who benefits from staging maternal torture and calling it art?

When Bill tells the family, "You're broke. You're insane. You're surrounded by ghosts and garbage. You need me," he's stating the obvious truth about avant-garde theater's dependence on institutional support. But the play seems to think that acknowledging this dependence is the same as critiquing it. Including the sponsor character doesn't disrupt the sponsor's power—it just makes the transaction visible while changing nothing.

And notice who gets killed in this play: MOM and Jett, both women, both mothers. Who survives? Bedlam, the abusive son/brother. Vlad, the Nazi murderer (hunted now, but alive). Bill, the money man. Dorian, the writer, documenting it all for posterity. The economic and patriarchal structures remain intact. The women are eliminated. And we're supposed to see this as transgressive?

The Incest Question Nobody Wants to Ask

Let's address the elephant in the abandoned ceramic workshop: the play's incestuous undercurrents. Jett is Bedlam's sister and Dorian's mother, but Dorian is also described as being part of Bedlam's experimental investigation into "Princess DORIAN of Corinth." The relationships are deliberately murky—who is whose parent, whose child, whose lover?

This murkiness isn't accidental. It's central to how the play conceives of family as inherently contaminated, as a site where all boundaries collapse into violence and abuse. When Dorian declares that Bedlam "tied my feet when I was small. To keep me close," we're meant to understand that childhood itself was a form of imprisonment, that family bonds are chains.

But here's what troubles me: the play uses this incestuous structure to suggest that abuse is universal, that everyone is both victim and perpetrator, that the cycles of violence transcend individual responsibility. This is the same move as the mythological framing—it makes abuse seem inevitable, natural, written into the DNA of family itself. And once again, the burden of this falls most heavily on the women's bodies.

Johnna's Absence (Or: The Native Woman Who Isn't Here)

In the list of characters, there's a reference to "AGENT FIGURES" described as "shadow presences." The cast includes six vampires plus a chorus of Erinyes. But notably absent is anyone like Johnna from "August: Osage County"—the Native American housekeeper who served as silent witness to white family dysfunction.

This absence is telling. Katsis's play is set in Berlin, not Oklahoma, and focuses on Greek mythology, not American Gothic. But the absence of any outsider perspective, any character not implicated in the family's violence, means we have no alternative viewpoint. Everyone is complicit. Everyone is contaminated. There's no possibility of escape or redemption.

In a way, this is more honest than Letts's use of Johnna as noble savage receptacle for white suffering. But it's also more hopeless. If everyone is a vampire, if everyone feeds on everyone else, if violence is the only language we speak—what's the point? Where's the possibility of change?

The Question of Catharsis

Late in the play, Bedlam announces, "The Catharsis is SEALED." It's meant to be ironic—there's no catharsis here, no purging of emotion, no resolution. Just more violence, more death, more silence. But the announcement itself is revealing. Katsis knows he's not providing catharsis. He knows he's not offering healing or insight or even understanding. He's offering an ordeal.

And ordeals can be valuable. Theater doesn't have to comfort. Art doesn't have to please. But it does have to mean something beyond its own existence. It has to offer some perspective, some way of seeing differently, some challenge to how things are. What does "Let Mom — Fly to The Moon" offer beyond the staging of maternal punishment?

The play's final moments circle back to the corpse. MOM's body becomes an object of fascination, horror, and finally competition. The family fights over it, bleeds on it, uses it as prop in their ongoing battles. The tape recorder explodes with laughter. The Furies drop from the ceiling. The eagle gleams. And Dorian observes that "The bird never spoke. The rest was us."

Yes, the violence was human. Yes, we create our own hells. Yes, power operates through our complicity. But these observations don't constitute insight—they're the starting point for analysis, not its conclusion. The question isn't whether we're responsible for the violence we enact. The question is: what systems make that violence possible? Who benefits from it? How do we stop?

The Politics of Transgression

"Let Mom — Fly to The Moon" wants desperately to be transgressive. It deploys every tool of theatrical shock: violence, nudity, incest, Nazis, murder, desecration of the maternal body. It stages atrocity in elaborate detail, provides safety protocols for the vomiting and the stabbing and the blood. It creates a space where audiences can witness extremity and call it art.

But here's the problem with this kind of avant-garde extremity: it almost always punishes women's bodies more than men's. MOM is tortured throughout. Jett is murdered. Dorian survives but only by becoming a witness rather than an actor, by documenting rather than intervening. The men fight, bleed, struggle—but they also survive, maintain agency, continue to compete for power.

There's nothing transgressive about staging maternal torture. That's one of the oldest stories we have. From Medea to Lady Macbeth to every horror movie mother, Western culture has been punishing maternal figures for centuries. Adding blood and sewage and Nazi lovers doesn't make it new—it just makes it louder.

What would actually be transgressive? A play that imagines mothers escaping. A play that shows women's violence as politically necessary rather than personally pathological. A play that doesn't make femininity synonymous with victimhood or feminism synonymous with complicity. A play where MOM actually flies to the moon—or burns the whole goddamn theater down on her way out.

The Question of Craft

To be fair, Katsis can write. The language is dense, allusive, switching registers with impressive control. The structural ambition is real—three acts building to multiple murders, multiple revelations, multiple collapses. The stage directions constitute their own kind of prose poetry, detailed and evocative and occasionally beautiful. This is not the work of a hack.

But craft in service of what? Technical skill deployed toward what end? The play is undeniably well-made—which makes its politics all the more troubling. A badly written play about maternal torture would be merely offensive. A well-written one asks us to mistake aesthetic accomplishment for ethical substance.

And there are moments—rare, fleeting—where something else breaks through. When Dorian taps the "small bloody drum" in rhythm with Vlad's "mute howls," there's a strange beauty in

the image. When Jett vomits into the well and then crudely passes gas, there's a grotesque comedy that feels almost honest. When MOM insists she's Cassandra, not Medea—"the only survivor of my family"—there's a pathos that transcends the mythology.

But these moments are overwhelmed by the play's relentless darkness, its determination to show us the worst of human behavior and call it truth. By the time we reach the blackout, after three hours of escalating horror, we're exhausted but not enlightened. We've witnessed atrocity, but we haven't understood it. We've seen mothers punished, but we don't know why—or how to stop it.

Let Mom Stay on the Ground

The title promises flight, transcendence, escape. "Let Mom — Fly to The Moon." But that dash—that long pause, that gap between permission and action—tells the truth. MOM never flies. She hangs upside down, is dunked in sewage, and dies. The moon remains impossibly distant. The play's title is a broken promise, a mockery of liberation.

And maybe that's the point. Maybe Katsis is showing us that under current conditions, maternal flight is impossible. That women are always already trapped by family, myth, economics, violence. That the best we can do is document the horror and hope someone learns something.

But I reject this vision. I reject the idea that staging maternal torture constitutes insight. I reject the notion that Greek mythology provides cover for contemporary misogyny. I reject the avant-garde posturing that mistakes shock for substance, blood for truth, victimhood for destiny.

If we're going to have plays about mothers, let them be about mothers who fight back, who escape, who burn it all down. If we're going to reimagine Medea, let her kill not her children but her oppressors. If we're going to hang women upside down and dunk them in sewage for three hours, at least let them survive to tell their own stories.

"Let Mom — Fly to The Moon" is a technically accomplished, intellectually ambitious, and deeply troubling play that uses avant-garde aesthetics to stage the same old story: women suffer, mothers are punished, and men survive to write the ending. It's not brave. It's not transgressive. It's just sad. And the saddest part is that audiences will call it important, critics will call it challenging, and somewhere, another playwright will think that maternal torture is the path to theatrical legitimacy.

Let Mom stay on the ground, the play finally says. She never really had a chance at the moon anyway.

"Let Mom — Fly to The Moon" by Ilias Katsis. Three acts, three hours of maternal punishment masked as classical reimagining.