

Adept interpretation of Oedipus

by Judith Pratt

Described by Samuel Coleridge as containing one of the three best plots ever written, **Oedipus the King**, under the adept hands of the Young Vic Company, justified that description once again last week at the Rebecca Cohn.

Over two thousand years old, winner of the coveted prize at the Festival Dionysus in ancient Greece Sophocles' play, using W.B. Yeats' translation and adaptation, is emotionally explosive and taut in thematic development. It deals with such universal questions as the role of fate in mankind, wisdom, attainment of truth, the price of conquest, and the height of ambition. Tragedy, representing the purest expression of man's suffering, reaches its pinnacle in Sophocles' play, as evidenced by its reverence throughout the ages, suffering many translations yet still embodying the original essence.

Challenging and exhausting, **Oedipus the King** is a forbidding play for any theatre company to choose because of its intensity and its long history of performances. It has been among the repertoire of most noted theatre companies and has reached a wide audience through the film starring Christopher Plummer. Yet last Wednesday night there was a distinct vitality and exuberance as Oedipus, played by Barrie Rutter, went from a haughty assertion of his god-like royalty to a poor, lowly exile, blinded by his own hands, as a penance for his hideous crimes: that of killing his father and marrying his mother.

Oedipus, saviour of the city, is introduced by a priest, standing on the highest tier, backed by a simple and stark white curtain. The history of the city and the king is outlined in a chanting tone and establishes in the audience's mind the position at the top of the Wheel of Fortune at which Oedipus then stands. The road is paved to understand Oedipus' attitude when he first emerges.

From behind the curtain, the king then emerges and descends to the large acting stage on which the chorus kneels to do homage to their lord. A plague is raging throughout the city and prophets have declared that this is the gods' punishment for the unsolved murder of the king. Despite the people's belief that Oedipus has intimate connections with the gods, he is unable to hide the truth that even he cannot cleanse the city of the plague. Barrie Rutter, in a commanding voice (which his Yorkshire accent

amazingly does not hamper) declares that he will begin investigation into the murder of King Laius and, by producing the culprit, releases the city from the Olympian wrath.

He begins by taking Creon, his brother-in-law, here played by David Henry, into account for not discovering the criminal. The popular story is that a band of thieves had killed the king, but doubt is cast on this with the emergence of the information Creon brings from the oracle of Delphi that the murderer is yet unrevenged in their midst. Tiresias is then brought on stage by members of the chorus, hanging from a rod by his arms. Ian Trigger here plays the blind prophet who warns Oedipus that the truth is too hideous to uncover and that he should drop the investigation. Rutter, taking a majestic stance, declares that he will once again be the saviour of the city. In a whining voice Tiresias begs Oedipus to forget his plan of justice, but this angers the king into prodding the prophet with accusations that he and Creon are attempting to cover the trial of the murderers. In a finely acted scene, where strong commands are parried by whining suggestions that ignorance is safer for all, Oedipus is finally confronted with the accusation that he is the murderer.

The king's face, reflecting fear, doubt, and anger in a series of contortions, finally settles into a smug and haughty mold, and he banishes the prophet with the suggestion that Creon and the shrill blind man are attempting to usurp him. Jocasta, the Queen, emerges and is ineffective in warding off the anger of her husband, who flagrantly accuses Creon of treason. There is a slight pause in the drama as a flowing white sheet is pulled from the top tier to blanket the royal couple, a very smooth and effective operation, creating the image of a vast white bed in which the couple reclines. The lights, so reflective of the moods throughout the play, are here diminished and the Chorus, for the first time in the play, all retire to the top tier, away from the scene of action, but retaining their omniscient position so integral to ancient Greek drama. Oedipus, besieged by doubts, questions Jacasta, played by Judy Wilson, about the appearance of her husband Laius and the place of his death. The truth that he is the murderer emerges frighteningly as Rutter moans and descends from his lofty position as uncontestable saviour.



The sheet is then withdrawn and Oedipus demands to see the only survivor of Laius' party, an elderly herdsman. Again Creon warns him to drop the investigation and is forced to ward off the threatening accusations of Oedipus. But before the herdsman arrives, a messenger from the kingdom where Oedipus grew up comes, bearing the news that Oedipus' father is dead. Oedipus rejoices, for it signifies that the oracle who told him that he would kill his father and marry his mother was wrong, and he scornfully begins to mount to his royal position again. But he is startled by the messenger's report that he could never marry the dying Queen and fulfill the oracle's prediction, since he is not her son. Raging with anger and fright, Oedipus contests this but is assured that he is not their natural son and that a herdsman had given Oedipus as a

then given him to the childless king and queen.

Calling for the herdsman, despite Jocasta's pleas that he drop his search, Oedipus prods him and threatens him until finally the truth emerges, to the evident horror of all on stage, that Oedipus is Laius' son and is therefore married to his mother. Jocasta runs moaning from the stage while Oedipus falls to his knees in horror. Rutter captivates every eye in this scene with the agony expressed both in his voice and face, displayed with a power that quickens the blood and revolts the imagination. He too leaves the stage in complete and utter despair.

The chorus then confronts the audience with the action then taking place off stage. It was a restriction in Greek theatre that all physically violent action occur off stage, and hence we hear from the chorus that Oedipus, stomping about continued on page 16

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