

# "The raw dream of Oedipus"

## Seneca's Oedipus, directed by Barrie Kosky, Sydney Theatre Company

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Barrie Kosky's recent Sydney Theatre Company production of Seneca's *Oedipus*, the Greek legend of the tormented King of Thebes who, unknowingly, kills his father and weds his mother, completes a cycle of four plays by the director (*Tartuffe*, *Mourning Becomes Electra* and *King Lear*) dealing with the issues of destiny, fate and the family.

The story of Oedipus begins north of ancient Athens, in the kingdom of Thebes where King Laius and his wife, Jocasta, had a son. Legend has it that, before a name was given to the baby boy, Apollo's oracle prophesied that the child was destined to kill his father and become his own mother's husband. In an attempt to thwart this prediction, Laius and Jocasta decided that their child must not live. Unable to bear the guilt of killing him, they gave their son to a servant—a shepherd—ordering him to abandon the child on a mountain-side. The child's feet were to be pierced with an iron pin so that he could not crawl to safety.

But the word of Apollo and human compassion prevailed. The shepherd did not have the heart to allow the child to perish and so gave him to a fellow-labourer, a Corinthian, whom he begged to go beyond the borders of Thebes and rear the baby boy as his own. The Corinthian, a servant of Polybus, King of Corinth, brought the child to his master, who, being childless, took the infant as his own, naming him Oedipus (swollen-foot).

Oedipus grew to manhood, the honoured Prince of Corinth, not knowing that he was the adopted son of Polybus. By chance he heard, again from the mouth of Apollo's oracles, the terrible prediction of his future. Believing that this referred to his Corinthian parents, Oedipus fled Corinth resolving never to see his supposed father and mother again as long as they lived. By chance, his wandering led him to Thebes, where a terrible crisis had gripped the city. An unknown traveler on a lonely road had killed King Laius (the traveller was Oedipus); the city was in the grip of a deadly monster—the Sphinx, which pitted her ferocity against the wits of man, destroying all who failed to answer her riddle. Oedipus, however, answered the riddle, thereby destroying her power, and was received joyfully into Thebes as the city's new King.

Thebes experienced 15 years of prosperity under Oedipus, who had married Laius' widow, Jocasta. She gave birth to several sons and daughters. But the monarch ruling over the apparently peaceful Thebes had married his blood mother and killed his own father. The play begins as a terrible plague descends on the city and the King, desperately anxious for the fate of his kingdom, sends his brother-in-law Creon to the oracle to find out what sin has brought this ruin upon Thebes. It ends with the discovery of the awful truth. Jocasta kills herself and Oedipus tears out his own eyes because he cannot bear to see what he has done.

Oedipus is a rich and complex tragedy, which has lent itself to countless theatrical interpretations over the last 2,000 years. And this legend, a story from the childhood of civilised man's social development, still continues to attract directors, actors and audiences today. While it provides audiences with the opportunity to contemplate the mystery of life,

Oedipus also presents, in artistic form, the great philosophical debate between determinism and free will. On one level Oedipus seems to demonstrate that man cannot escape his destiny. On another, it can signify that man must take full responsibility for his actions and that the source of his downfall is lack of consciousness.

The intensely dramatic script with which Barrie Kosky has chosen to work was adapted from the Roman dramatist Seneca by Ted Hughes, one of the most well-known English language poets of the 20th century, and first performed in 1968 at the Old Vic Theatre under the direction of Peter Brooks. John Gielgud, who played Oedipus in that production, described Hughes' first reading of the script to the cast as an "electrifying experience, and we huddled together spellbound by the power of the play itself and especially by the poet's brilliant handling of the material."

The choice of Seneca's, and not Sophocles', version of *Oedipus*, written some four hundred years earlier, is worth consideration. Seneca is an interesting historical figure. A Roman philosopher, dramatist and statesman, he lived in Cordoba between 4BC and 65AD. In 49AD, he was made a praetor and appointed tutor to Nero, the adopted son of the Emperor Claudius. Seneca was a leading member of the *Stoics*, a philosophical school originating in the Hellenistic culture of the 4th century BC, which claimed that fate preordained everything in life and that a wise man was one who could live in harmony with the universe.

It is claimed that the moderation of Nero's first five years of rule were a result of Seneca's guidance. By 62AD, however, Seneca had lost all influence over the emperor and three years later was forced to commit suicide by imperial order. Seneca's plays, which are generally believed to have been composed later in his life, include nine dramas on traditional Greek themes: *Hercules Gurens*, *Medea*, *Troades*, *Phaedra*, *Agamemnon*, *Oedipus*, *Hercules Oetaeus*, *Phoenissae*, *Thyestes*.

Seneca is mainly remembered for his influence on future dramatists, rather than for his own works. He would take a drama and exaggerate its emotional qualities, interspersing long speeches with short sharp passages of dialogue. In fact this approach, called *stichomythia*, played a part in the creation of the Elizabethan tragic style. All of Seneca's dramas are written in five-formal acts along with a prologue—a dramatic style that endured up until the 19th century. There is no concrete evidence that these were written for performance. Rather, they consist of large slabs of text to be read in rhetorical fashion.

Ted Hughes described Seneca's version of Oedipus as a "raw dream" of Sophocles' original, and the basis for releasing the inner power of the story in its plainest, bluntest form. "The Greek world saturates Sophocles' Oedipus too thoroughly," Hughes said. "The evolution of his play seems complete, fully explored and in spite of its blood-roots, fully civilized."

It is true that Sophocles' *Oedipus* is very different to Seneca's. When Sophocles was born in Colonus in about 495BC, the struggle with Persia was at its fiercest. By the time he turned 15, however, Athens had secured

independence and was rising to its greatest glory. While Sophocles worked in relatively peaceful times, he was no sentimentalist. The Greek world that permeated his thoughts was as full of the dark and terrible as it was the wondrous.

Sophocles was deeply interested in the relationship between man and the universe and essential to his play is the conception that some spiritual peace is won out of Oedipus' suffering. By contrast, Seneca's *Oedipus* emerged from Nero's nightmare Rome and the decline of the Roman Empire. It is more emotional, less concerned with logic; dark, gloomy and fateful, with a sense of impending doom.

Perhaps the Hughes' and Brooks' adaptation expresses similar sentiments. Their experiment, to explore the inner story, is a study of the psychological aspect of Oedipus within the context of modern man. Hughes' script is overwhelmed with fear, as demonstrated in the play's opening speech.

...but the fear came with me  
my shadow  
into this kingdom to this throne  
and it grew  
till now it surrounds me  
fear  
I stand in it  
like a blind man in darkness  
even now  
what is fate preparing for me  
surely I see that  
how could I be mistaken  
this plague slaughtering everything that lives no matter what  
men  
trees  
flies  
no matter  
it spares me  
why  
what final disaster is it saving me for  
the whole nation guttering  
the last dregs of its life  
no order left  
ugly horrible deaths in every doorway every path wherever you look  
funeral after funeral  
endless terror and sobbing and in the middle of it all I stand here  
untouched  
the man marked down by the god  
for the worst fate of all  
a man hated and accused by the god  
still unsentenced

It is an extraordinarily powerful moment. Hughes' image of the psychic journey Oedipus must undertake, groping his way toward the final and horrible truth of his own actions, is heavily laden with guilt. Having once fled to avoid his fate, he is now forced to meet it, whatever the cost.

In Hughes' script, Jocasta is an archetypal matriarch, with some understanding of what has happened:

when I carried my sons  
I carried them for death  
I carried them for the throne  
I carried them for final disaster

The Chorus is maintained, as in the original Seneca, but its role is different from that of Greek theatre. It has become a means of internal dialogue for Oedipus, like a mysterious voice that confronts him with the horrible reality of his own deeds:

night is finished  
but day is reluctant

the sun drags itself up out of that filthy cloud  
it stares down at our sick earth  
it brings a gloom not light

It is impossible to read Hughes' play without sensing his concerns about the future of humanity. At the centre of the Oedipus tragedy is man's struggle to understand the forces of nature that determine the course of events in the world in which he lives.

What is its significance today? Humanity once again confronts a Theban nightmare. Millions are sacrificed at the altars of profit and the market—the gods of our time. Can we change the world, or are we destined to destroy ourselves? Do we, like Oedipus, feel helpless in the face of disaster?

While Barrie Kosky's *Oedipus* attempts to grapple with some of these basic questions, his production fails to adequately explore the rich psychological power of the text. At times it is simply too alienating to allow us to empathise with Oedipus and his dilemma.

Kosky's production conforms, to some degree, to Brooks' original—limited movements of the actors; heightened, almost depersonalised speech; intensity of mood; music as the impetus for action—a treatment for which Hughes' text was designed. While attempting to create a visually striking performance, Kosky tends to exaggerate these elements, giving it a rather histrionic quality. The simplicity and bluntness of the script is often overshadowed by the actors' distorted bodies and a one-sidedly black mood.

That is not to say that there is nothing of worth in Kosky's production. Oedipus' opening speech, delivered by Robert Menzies, is mesmerising and Wendy Hughes is able, at times, to touch our souls as Jocasta, the distraught wife and mother of Oedipus.

However, Menzies becomes more and more physically contorted as the play progresses. By the end one finds it difficult to look at him, let alone empathise with his suffering. Those moments when the tragedy reaches its heights—when Oedipus discovers the truth; when Jocasta kills herself; or the ritual blinding, when Oedipus tears out his own eyes—should be full of pathos and compassion. Kosky, who seems unable to explore the emotional qualities of this drama in any real depth, treats them superficially.

The chorus, which is played by one actor (Louise Fox), is approached in an equally shallow manner. She looks somewhat catatonic in her first appearance on stage, with an extraordinarily sharp-pitched voice shouting out the text. In her next appearance she wears a bright green and white suit, rather like an overweight version of Shirley Temple. This mockery of the chorus makes it difficult to appreciate its role.

When Tiresias, the blind prophet, explains the real meaning of the oracle's prediction to Oedipus, a frightful vision unfolds on the stage as ghoulish heads and writhing arms appear through the floor, evoking all the madness and ugliness of humanity. This is a strong visual image, but the overwhelmingly bleak and heartless atmosphere created by Kosky seems to argue that humanity is irretrievably doomed.

Over recent years, Kosky has come under considerable criticism for his style of theatre. Born in Melbourne in 1967, he began acting and directing in 1985 at Melbourne University and in 1991 formed the Gigul theatre. In that year he directed *The Marriage of Figaro* and *The Barber of Seville* for the Victorian State Opera. Reportedly, shocked country audiences walked out of his *Barber of Seville* when the chorus entered wearing pig's heads.

Equally controversial were his productions of *Nabucco* and *The Flying Dutchman* for Opera Australia. For the first time in the company's history *Nabucco* was booed on opening night. Kosky's response to this criticism was: "I think the booing thing is fantastic. It shows audiences are awake. In Australia it's usually hard to know that."

In 1998 he came under even more intense criticism with his production of *King Lear*, featuring a pregnant Cordelia and a rabble of errant knights with large rubber penises. Some critics claimed his production was "anti-human" and preoccupied with cheap theatrical tricks and embellishments.

It is certainly true that there is an element of the gratuitous in his work. Behind this, though, lies a real frustration with the predicament that many artists confront. Kosky has recently commented: "At the moment the arts is an entertainment option for the bourgeoisie: a way to fill in two hours of an evening. There is no difference between [the arts], a new restaurant or a film. They're just there to stop the inevitable onslaught of boredom."

This is no doubt the case within a certain social milieu. One senses, however, that Kosky lacks confidence in the artistic power of the material with which he works and feels that the way to overcome contemporary problems is through some sort of radical shock treatment. This characterises his approach to Seneca's *Oedipus*, a production that would be more challenging if it allowed the audience to digest some of Hughes' remarkable poetry and reflect on the play's compelling ideas and internal dynamics.



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