

Oedipus Wrecked

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It would be hard to imagine a more inspiring prelude to the world première of Peter Hall's Oedipal double-header (Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Oedipus at Colonus*) than the journey by car from Athens to the ancient theatre at Epidaurus, where the two plays were performed one Friday night in August 1996. The highway, leaving Athens by the hill of Colonus, crosses the road for Thebes, skirts Mount Cithaeron and turns just north of Corinth, all critical stops along Oedipus' stormy career. Such a pre-theatre trek, along with the majestic setting of old Epidaurus, tended, if anything, to raise one's expectations. The task facing Sir Peter seemed imposingly Heraclean already.

Why then wilfully increase the odds by yoking the two Oedipuses together when to bring over successfully any one ancient Greek play is so rare as to require the intervention of some *ex machina* divinity? Initially the decision to join the two works seemed sheer directorial hubris, or a consumerist gimmick offering two-for-the-price-of-one. For the *Oedipus at Colonus* (401 B.C.), Sophocles' last play, is no necessary sequel to the *Oedipus Tyrannus* (c. 431 B.C.). Yet the free recasting of ancient plays, intentionally eliding differences in tone, date, and even authorship, is nearly the rule today. So what if Hall's plan of putting on the two Oedipus plays in tandem might encourage the common misperception that Sophocles' so-called 'Theban plays' (*OT*, *OC*, *Antigone*) form a real unity, though in fact they are separated by great spans of time and temper and theme? Perhaps Hall's joining of the two Oedipuses would open our eyes to something which had so far gone unseen or under-noticed. Let the man cut and paste, as Orson Welles did with his Falstaffian anthology *Chimes at Midnight*, and deliver up a rich collage of Sophocles' renowned protagonist.

At any rate, grand old Oedipus would, of necessity, be the evening's centre-piece, and he began the entertainment at nine sharp with the sky darkening overhead. Alan Howard, Hall's 'swell-footed' protagonist in both plays, lightly masked and robed in black and scarlet, entered slowly but without a definite limp

on what served as the stage: a raised, narrow ramp, fifteen metres long, carpeted in red and extending from the fir-trees behind the theatre down to the hub of the circular orchestra. There the plague-ridden chorus of Theban elders already lay, parched and catatonic, surrounded by rusted-out half-barrels of oil spewing flames along the rim of the orchestra (this red-handled magnifying glass the good work of the designer Dionysis Fotopoulos). Oedipus, standing aloft in the centre of the orchestra, broke the silence, addressing the chorus in a warbling tenor which underlined, by melismatic peaks and scoops in pitch, the banal rhymes in Ranjit Bolt's over-colloquial rendering. The Theban priest began his plea to Oedipus with these words: 'We can find no sure *defence* against this *pestilence* that rages.' Oedipus replied: 'I have the right response to your request/ If you promise to do what I suggest.' In such near-couplets the bathetic lines ran on in sing-song declamation, the actors affecting a style of pronunciation which drew perhaps on the ancient Greek or modern Chinese pitch accent.

The chorus, masked and dressed in last season's sackcloth, huddled together like the proverbial football squad, timidly shuffling forward and back to punctuate scenes and entrances. Choristers of little song and less dance, their lock-step movement and gestural vocabulary of intermittently clasped hands or raised arms produced a visual poetry on a par with Bolt's verbal patter. They responded only periodically to the lightly percussive music of Judith Weir, which mixed drum, flute and double bass and furtively snaked its way to the audience's hearing. Of the actors, only Greg Hicks deserves special mention as a Tiresias crowned with briars and soaked in mud. Naked but for a loin-cloth and a rope around his mid-section drawn by his child guide, Hicks's interestingly Christ-like prophet of the bog was able to submerge the rhymes and truly hold the audience.

Otherwise the dancing, costumes and blocking were all traditionally unremarkable, the strongest and most damning criticism one has being of the Anglicized colloquialism of the translation. Here, for instance, is Jocasta: 'Tell me Oedipus, I need to know/ What it is that has incensed you so.' And again: 'I am as sure as sure can be/ No man has the gift of prophecy.' The vocal hitch or grace-note on the rhyming words created a resonance which was purely nasal, never poetic. Turning to the grandeur of Sophocles' choral verse, you meet with this inspired comment on the divine powers: 'They are immortal and sublime,/ Until the end of time.' The intricate rhythms and sonorities of Greek choral poetry, always the greatest challenge for the translator, have been flattened into the monotony of pop-lyric. But what of the crucial words in which Oedipus claims

responsibility for his self-blinding at the very climax of the play? 'It was Apollo brought this about,/ But my hand, none else, dashed my eyes out.' This is not Pope; it is not even good pop; and it is a laughably flaccid example of rap, the genre to which it most nearly approximates.

In the intermission before the second play I believe I came to understand Hesiod's proverb about half a loaf being more than the whole. But time for such reflections was short. The only change in scene was the red carpet, now stripped off the narrow aluminium stage, whose forward section was swung down to form a ramp ascending from the centre of the orchestra out toward the lighted fir-trees. The chorus of old yeoman-citizens from Colonus entered draped curiously in purest white. Their entrance was accompanied by an eerily celestial vocalise which seemed to over-prepare the atmosphere for the final mystery: Oedipus' burial and chthonic redemption. Nevertheless, the droning rhymes and the pervasive clichés of the translation dragged even this inexplicably angelic chorus of rustic elders down to earth. As for the narrative, Oedipus, as Bolt has it, was 'cast out from house and home', reaching Colonus where he will die and dying 'stand them in good stead'. Unless, of course, 'something untoward happens', like old Creon intervening – in which case Theseus, king of Athens, will 'take steps to stop it'. The recipe for Bolt's banal couplets seemed to consist of a pound of plainspeak, a dash of interrogative particles ('When . . . Where') for filler, and a sprinkling of antiphonal phrase-greasers ('Then . . . There'). Let it sit for three and a half hours, and the result: a batch of dead and deadening verse.

'Wretched' was a keynote to this Colonus. Oedipus laments his daughter Antigone: 'I never thought that she would ever have to live so wretchedly.' Kingly Theseus evinces good political self-interest at Creon's kidnapping of the wretched Antigone and Ismene: 'If he gets those girls away,/ This fellow has the right to say,/ He got the better of me.' The chorus react to the same calamity with concerned foresight: 'This much I know,/ These girls who suffered so,/ Their trails will soon end.' But not, alas, the play, which as Oedipus is made to say of himself, is 'tainted through and through' with bathos and cliché. Finally, Oedipus, unmoved by his son Polynices' prosaic supplication to help in his fight against Eteocles, is grandly negative: 'You will lose the war, and furthermore . . .' But by then we cannot take any more. I cry out, with Bolt's Theseus, 'Call me a fool', but I do not see the point of such work. Surely this is no worthy solution to the question of how to render ancient Greek drama in modern verse.

The translation aside, there are other problems. The *OT* and *OC* are the noon

and sunset of Sophocles' career. The merciless tragic vision of the former fuses awkwardly with the ritual melodrama of the latter, the deep peace at the conclusion of the one at odds with the troubling *pietà* that ends the other. Perhaps that is why the redemption that Oedipus found in the second play here seemed disconcertingly quick and easy, coming so soon after the trials of the first. The director, in an interview with the Athens Sunday paper, *To Vima* (24 August 1996), declared that 'Sophocles (and Shakespeare and Mozart) is my religion'. If this is so and Sir Peter is actively 'Making an Exhibition' of himself, as the title of his autobiography has it, then it is interesting to speculate on how this project might have taken shape. With a better translation, Hall's redemptive vision of the *OC* might actually have been realized, as it surely was in the Baptist choruses of *The Gospel at Colonus* by Brewer and Telson. But unfortunately, this evening's worth of Oedipus, at Thebes, Colonus, and Epidauros was damned from the first by an all too this-worldly rendering.