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'The Curse of Oedipus': Theater Review

2:48 AM PDT 6/27/2014 by Myron Meisel

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The Curse of Oedipus

The Bottom Line

Densely compacted presentation lithely rushes through all three Oedipus tragedies with modern storytelling that makes the complicated pathos readily accessible to contemporary perceptions.

Venue

The Antaeus Company, North Hollywood (runs through Aug. 10)

Playwright

Kenneth Cavander

Director

Casey Stangl

All three Oedipus tragedies are given a modern reworking in North Hollywood.

If you feel that the Oedipus myth starts with the riddle and ends with the cathartic revelation, that's just the beginning: here Oedipus (**Ramon de Ocampo**) blinds himself with Jocasta's (**Rhonda Aldrich**) earrings barely an hour into a nearly three-hour evening. It's not even the climax before the intermission, merely the triggering tragedy for generations of accursed fates, an epic night of hubris, blindness and downfall that nevertheless manages to rally, in **Kenneth Cavander's** decidedly reupholstered version, to a hopeful conclusion -- so long as one neglects to remember the succeeding millenia of the masculine destructive pursuit of power. It may not be exactly true to the classical vision, whatever that might have been, but it appropriates those insights to make splendid dramatic sparks in a spellbinding production.

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Presiding over these preordained follies are rivalrous gods Apollo (**Mark Bramhall**), phlegmatic proponent of elegant reason and sublime detachment, and the half-human Dionysius (**John Apicella**), who identifies with mortal pain and advocates the defeat of suffering through losing oneself in pleasure, particularly drink and sex. Their wry bickering provide not only an Olympian perspective on the sanguinary soap opera below, but also serve to organize the arguments that progress throughout the chronicle regarding the corrosive cleansing force of maturing self-awareness.

Indeed, while Oedipus may be the prominent protagonist, arguably here he is not truly the central figure: rather, Jocasta's brother Creon (**Josh Clark**), the rational, patient and calculating leader devoted, he believes, to the best interests of his people, content to counsel the kings but whose own

sagacity and consistency covers up his lust for authority, seems the most recognizably modern man here, and equally tragic in his trajectory. He exploits the fecklessness of Oedipus' reckless sons, Polyneices (**Brian Tichnell**) and Eteocles (**Patrick Wenk-Wolf**) by decreeing that they should share the rule of Thebes in alternate years. It requires the indomitable selfless courage and principle of Oedipus' daughter Antigone (**Joanna Strapp**) to expose the hypocrisy at the heart of Creon's arrogant good intentions.

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Eminent adapter Cavander has not only translated and manfully wrangled the Sophoclean trio of *Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*, but plundered fragments of the myth ranging from **Homer** to remnants of lost **Euripedes**, *Seven Against Thebes* by **Aeschylus**, an even earlier ode by **Pindar**, and who knows what else. Since all the sources vary on key plot points, Cavander has felt free to fashion his own rendition entirely idiomatic to mid-20th century stage practice, reconciling pagan beliefs with humanistic ideals.

Originally written as a copious two-evening presentation, Cavander has extensively condensed the material in collaboration with the Antaeus company through years of readings, rehearsals and a trial workshop at the Getty Villa. Presented with the signature Antaeus custom of double-casting all 22 players, who alternate performances and also mix-and-match with one another in fluid combinations, such nimble flexibility requires a rigorous synchronicity of conception. Virtuoso director **Casey Stangl** deploys a profuse arsenal of highly burnished strategies to keep the action moving at a brisk pace, gaining clarity with speed, given actors who are able to pierce to the core of character and emotion without dawdling embellishment, sacrificing no conviction to economy of narrative.

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Indeed, this viewer was often reminded of the influence of **Orson Welles** with his sustained visual bravura, cut-and-paste texts, radioplay-like primacy of the spoken word, and thoroughgoingly mid-Atlantic progressive sensibility. Echoes, too, of **Laurence Olivier** and **Peter Brook**. The results are unsentimental yet consistently moving, and more importantly, building to a crescendo of thematic power and complexity throughout the length of the piece. No mean feat, let alone to cram so much action, ambition and sheer thespian chops on a stage so small it's a challenge just to block the crowd of bodies. Did I mention an earthquake so emotionally shattering it surpasses the wonders of cinematic Sensurround?

This is not the deepest contemplation of the myth, nor a particularly original take in either scheme or staging. Nearly all its component parts bespeak workmanlike, intelligent craft. Yet the cumulative impact transcends its triumphal professionalism to reach profoundly into our anxieties and sympathies in ways immediate and never obscure. Even the smallest roles of the individual chorus members are indelibly vivid, and the dozen or so major characters are superbly limned.

De Ocampo, who has grown his talent so impressively over many years with the company, astoundingly takes Oedipus far beyond his revelatory realization, and in the aftermath evolves from a blameless victim of prophecy into a chastened pathos that illuminates a movement from utter abasement to anguished anger to a plausible place of peace. Clark has always been an actor with an innate talent for conveying contradictory motivations and a subtle sense of suggesting the tinge of tragedy. (His counterpart, **Tony Amendola**, displays comparable qualities in his own distinctive style.) Bramhall and Apicella make delightful gods, while Aldrich grounds her queen-mother with an accent that conjures up memories of the vigorous New York scene that comprised the wellspring for much of this splendid show's theatrical vocabulary.

Watching this impressively accomplished show, I thought I hadn't seen anything quite this vigorously audacious with classical material since the memorable 1999 Odyssey Theatre six-hour *The Greeks*, which I was amazed to discover on arriving home was written by none other than the apparently ubiquitous Kenneth Cavander.

Cast Reviewed ("The Thebes Cast"): Ramon de Ocampo, Josh Clark, Rhonda Aldrich, Mark Bramhall, John Apicella, Chad Borden, Fran Bennett, Joanna Strapp, Lily Nicksay, Dylan John Seaton, Brian Tichnell, Patrick Wenk-Wolff, Jonathon Lamer, Adam Meyer, Philip Proctor, Drew Doyle, Cameron J. Oro, Harry Fowler, Elizabeth Swain, Kitty Swink, Belen Greene, Anna Quirino-Miranda

Parallel Casting ("The Corinth Cast"): Terrell Tilford, Tony Amendola, Eve Gordon, Barry Creyton, Stoney Westmoreland, Bill Mendieta, Bernard K. Addison, Kwana Martinez, Lindsay LaVanchy, Adam J. Smith, J.B. Waterman, Douglas Dickerman, Lee Jones, Geno Monteiro, Ned Schmidtke, John Achorn, Chris Clowers, Reba Waters Thomas, Susan Boyd Joyce, Desiree Mee Jung, Sylvie Mae

Baldwin/Keri Safran

Director: Casey Stangl

Playwright: Kenneth Cavander, based on the trilogy by Sophocles and other classical Greek sources

Set & lighting designer: François-Pierre Couture

Costume designer: E.B. Brooks

Sound designer: Jeff Gardner

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