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## THE CURSE OF OEDIPUS

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**WOW!**

Spending time with the Ancients has rarely if ever been as exhilarating as it is in Kenneth Cavander's *The Curse Of Oedipus*, an Antaeus Company World Premiere which proves that even the deadly dulllest of theatrical genres, Greek Tragedy, can end up the opposite of boring when given fresh new life by the right creative team.



Though there might be those out there unfamiliar with Oedipus and/or the psychological complex that bears his name, I'll take for granted that anyone sophisticated enough to consider purchasing tickets to Antaeus's latest has heard tell of the mythical Greek king who, despite all efforts to avoid his fate, ended up fulfilling the most dire of prophecies—that he would slay his father and marry his mother.

Still, playwright Cavendish does his darnedest to keep Oedipus blissfully (and willingly?) clueless throughout most of Act One, the better to heighten the moment when the truth wills out, as it always will, to eye-stabbing effect.

But I get ahead of myself.

We first meet our hero mid-legend on his arrival in Thebes, a land terrorized by a powerful Sphinx whose insistence on the frequent sacrifice of local newborns can only be put to a stop upon the solution of a riddle so seemingly insoluble that it has already cost the lives of multiple hapless Greeks with no end in sight.

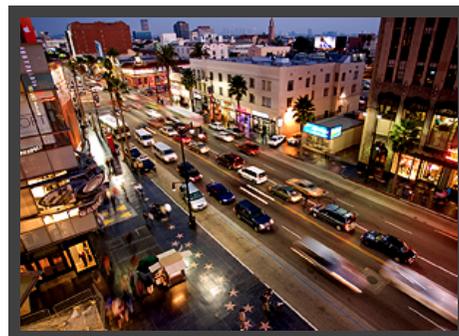


Cocky young man that he is,

Oedipus not only vows to solve the unsolvable, he does just that in no time flat, thereby winning the hand of the widowed Queen Jocasta, sister of the reigning King Creon, and one sexy older gal if there ever was one.

It's only post-wedding that we learn that Jocasta had long ago borne an infant son, whom her husband King Laius, had entrusted to a servant to dispose of in the nearby mountains, the better to avoid having the baby grow up to kill his royal dad as prophesied years before.

Not that any of this would seem to concern our hero Oedipus, whose parents King Polybus and Queen Merope are reassuringly alive and well and reigning in Corinth and



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therefore in no apparent danger of becoming, respectively, their son's murder victim and incestuous wife.

Neither should it concern Oedipus that on his way to Thebes, he just happened to end up killing a man in a road rage-fueled altercation.

Or should it?



Far be it from this reviewer to reveal the havoc wreaked when truth eventually wills out and *The Curse Of Oedipus* flash forwards to Oedipus and Jocasta's four adult children—Eteocles, Polynices, Antigone, and Ismene—whose power-hungry *Game Of Thrones* makes the play's second act an even more thrilling theatrical roller-coaster ride than its first.

Taking as his source material not only Sophocles' *Three Theban Plays* but other renderings of the Oedipus myth as well, playwright Cavander tells his three-generational saga in language both contemporary and classic, and though the play's occasional burlesque-style humor might seem incongruous at first listen, it turns out to be as authentically Ancient Greek as the Chorus of narrator-commentators who guide us on our journey.

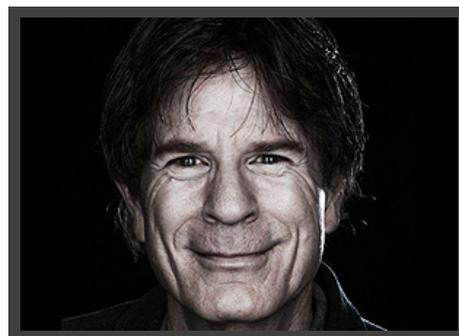
Add to the Choral Octet thirteen lead characters brought to life by a grand total of forty-four actors (since as is their custom, Antaeus has double-cast each role) and *The Curse Of Oedipus* may well be the company's most ambitious work to date.



No wonder then, that directorial duties have been assigned to the masterful Casey Stangl, who managed an even larger cast a few years back in *Peace In Our Time*, and does so again to intricately-staged, gorgeously-acted perfection.

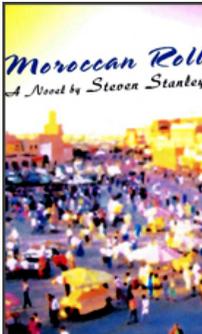
Over the course of a four-year development process, playwright Cavander and the Antaeus team have compacted *The Curse Of Oedipus* from a two-night marathon to a more manageable one-nighter that moves lickety-split from dramatic start to thrilling finish, sparked by all-around superb performances and as sensational a production design as you'll find in any 99-Seat-Plan theater.

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As editor of StageSceneLA.com, Steven Stanley is one of Los Angeles' most prolific theater reviewers. He is also the author of *Moroccan Roll*, and an ESL instructor in the English Language Program at California State University, Los Angeles since 1979. [\(read more\)](#)

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Ramon de Ocampo's tour-de-force performance as Oedipus\* may well be his finest to date, taking us from brash young man to passionate lover to shattered husband/son to bruised-but-not-broken old man and back again, and making us believe in his character's every emotion, no matter how mythic Oedipus's life may be.

Josh Clark's powerful Creon and Rhonda Aldrich's passionate Jocasta represent some of the Antaeus staples' best work, with splendid supporting turns rendered by Chad Borden as King Laius' loyal manservant and Fran Bennett the prophetic Teiresias, and by quip-exchanging commentators Mark Bramhall and John Apicella as Apollo and Dionysus, god and demigod with decidedly distinct points of view.



The younger generation is represented by as impressive a quintet of up-and-comers as you'll find on any L.A. stage: Lily Nicksay (Ismene), Dylan John Seaton (Haimon), Joanna Strapp (Antigone), Brian Tichnell (Polyneices), and Patrick Wenk-Wolff (Eteocles), with sexy Aussie Lee Jones stepping into the role of Theseus for first time (and terrifically so) with a single "put-in" rehearsal the evening before. (A prerecorded Reba Waters Thomas voices The Sphinx.)



Perhaps most remarkable of all are Chorus members Drew Doyle, Harry Fowler, Desirée Mee Jung, Cameron J. Oro, Philip Proctor, Anna Quirino-Miranda, Elizabeth Swain, and Kitty Swink, whose razor-sharp work both as a precisely in-sync ensemble and in multiple finely-rendered cameo roles is quite simply awe-inspiring.

Integral to the performances of all twenty-one "Thebes" (the alternate cast is called the "Corinths") are the dramatic percussive beats of drummer Adam Meyer, underscoring and punctuating dialog and action.



Scenic designer Pierre-François Couture's set ingeniously integrates Greek pillars with a spider's web of ropes and his own dramatic lighting to make for a stunning whole that manages to give an extra-large cast ample room to maneuver, one particularly cataclysmic sequence combining the talents of Couture, ace sound designer Jeff Gardner, Meyer, and the theater's made-for-Deaf-West sound system to earth-shaking effect.

E.B. Brooks' costumes blend classic silhouettes and modern lines, while Meyer's props earn high marks as well, including the swords used in Tony Clarno's rip-roaring fight choreography.

Additional production credits go to stage managers Lara E. Nall and Kristin Weber, assistant director Rachel Barney Needleman, production manager Meyer, technical director R. Scott Thompson, and many more.

Though it's hard to imagine a tougher act to follow than Antaeus's season-opening *Top Girls*, North Hollywood's classical theater masters have pulled it off again with Kenneth Cavander's *The Curse Of Oedipus*, a god(s)send to L.A. playgoers in search of theatrical excitement this summer of 2014.

\*Performances reviewed are those of the "Thebes" cast,

The Antaeus Company, 5112 Lankershim Blvd., North Hollywood. Through August 10. Thursdays and Fridays at 8:00. Saturdays at 2:00 and 8:00. Sundays at 2:00. All roles are double cast. See website for casts and schedules. Reservations: 818 506-1983

[www.Antaeus.org](http://www.Antaeus.org)

—Steven Stanley

July 3, 2014

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