

Oedipus

by **Sophocles**

in a new version by **Frank McGuinness**

The National's production	2
Synopsis of <i>Oedipus</i>	3
Sophocles – The Man and his Work	4
Ancient Greece	6
Theatre	6
The Origins of Greek Theatre	6
Theatre in the Athenian Golden Age	6
Tragedy	7
Comedy	8
Religion	9
The Growth of Democracy	10
History Timeline	11
Map of Ancient Greece	12
Creating <i>Oedipus</i>	13
Interview with Derek Barnes (Musical Director on <i>Oedipus</i> and member of the Chorus) and Christopher Saul (member of the Chorus)	13
Interview with Denni Sayers (Movement Director)	15
Interview with Jonathan Kent	17
Further Exploratory Tasks and Exercises	19
Bibliography and Further Reading	21

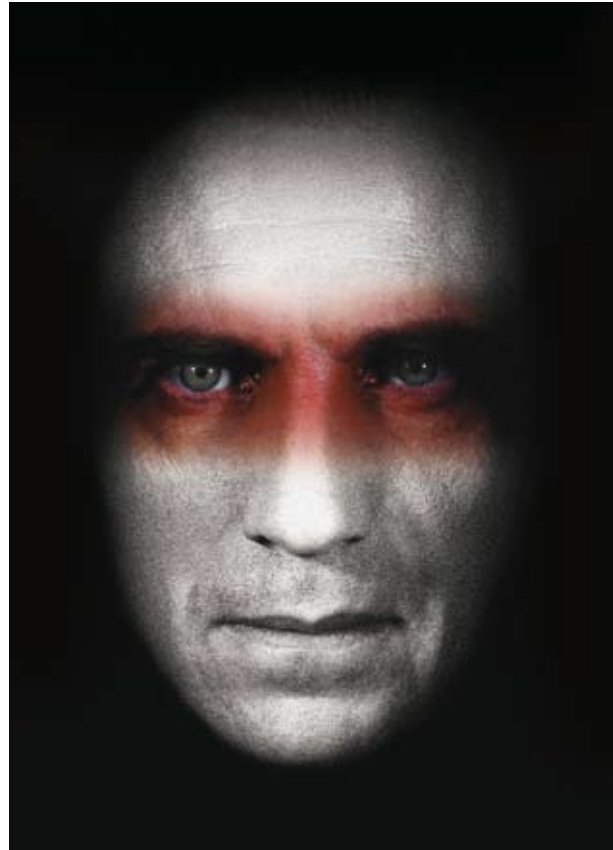


Photo (Ralph Fiennes) by Jillian Edelstein

Further production details:
nationaltheatre.org.uk

This workpack is published by and copyright The Royal National Theatre Board Reg. No. 1247285 Registered Charity No. 224223

Views expressed in this workpack are not necessarily those of the National Theatre

Sources for some of the dates given in this workpack differ. In each case the most likely date has been chosen, given the available evidence

Director
Jonathan Kent

NT Education
National Theatre
South Bank
London SE1 9PX
T 020 7452 3388
F 020 7452 3380
E educationenquiries@nationaltheatre.org.uk

Workpack writer
Elly Green

Editor
Alice Massey

Design
Rosanne Liu
Clare Parker

Photographs
Jillian Edelstein
Catherine Ashmore

The National's production

This production of *Oedipus* had its premiere at the National's Olivier Theatre on 15 October 2008

Characters, in order of speaking

Oedipus **RALPH FIENNES**
Priest **DAVID BURKE**
Creon **JASPER BRITTON**
Teiresias **ALAN HOWARD**
Jocasta **CLARE HIGGINS**
Stranger from Corinth **MALCOLM STORRY**
Shepherd **ALFRED BURKE**
Messenger **GWILYM LEE**
Chorus **DEREK BARNES**
PATRICK BRENNAN
EDWARD CLAYTON
SAM COX
RUSSELL DIXON
DARREN FOX
RICHARD FREEMAN
NEIL McCAUL
PAUL McCLEARY
SEYMOUR MATTHEWS
STANLEY PAGE
STEVEN PAGE
CHRISTOPHER SAUL
DAVID SHAW-PARKER
ROBERT WILLOX
Boy with Teiresias **REECE BEAUMONT**

Children **POLLY DARTFORD, OTTO FARRANT,**
THEO FEWELL & FRANCESCA MARSHALL
or **CHRISTOPHER ASHLEY, GABRIELLE**
DONALDSON, SHANNON-FLEUR
ROUX & FELIX ZADEK-EWING

Understudy to Jocasta **SIONED JONES**

Director **JONATHAN KENT**
Designer **PAUL BROWN**
Lighting Designer **NEIL AUSTIN**
Music **JONATHAN DOVE**
Music Director **DEREK BARNES**
Movement Director **DENNI SAYERS**
Sound Designer **PAUL GROOTHUIS**
Company Voice Work **JEANNETTE NELSON**

Production Manager **DIANE WILLMOTT**
Staff Director **ELLY GREEN**
Stage Manager **DAVID MILLING**
Deputy Stage Manager **ANNA HILL**
Assistant Stage Managers **ALI BIGGS, IAN FARMERY**
Costume Supervisor **RACHEL DICKSON**
Prop Supervisor **ELLIE SMITH**
Assistant Designer **MAURICIO ELORRIAGA**
Assistant to the Lighting Designer **TOM SNELL**
Assistant Production Manager **JONATHAN YEOMAN**
Design Associate **ADAM TAYLOR**
Production Photographer **CATHERINE ASHMORE**
Literal Translation **KIERAN MCGROARTY**



Photo (Ralph Fiennes) by Catherine Ashmore

Synopsis of *Oedipus*

The city of Thebes is suffering from a terrible plague. The people come begging to their king, Oedipus, for help. He has already sent his wife's brother Creon to Delphi to seek an oracle from the gods. Creon returns and reveals that Apollo has demanded that they find the killer of Laius, the former king, and drive him from the city in order to rid themselves of the plague. Years before, Laius had been murdered on his way to Delphi to try and find a way to free Thebes from a bloodthirsty Sphinx who destroyed all those who came to the city. Shortly after this, Oedipus travelled from his home in Corinth and when he arrived in Thebes, killed the Sphinx, by answering its riddle. As a reward he was made king and married Laius' widow, Jocasta.

Now, Oedipus vows to hunt down Laius' killer, and enlists the help of the Chorus. They advise him to consult Teiresias, a blind prophet, who can only tell the truth. But Teiresias upsets Oedipus, speaking in riddles, and accuses him of being the murderer of Laius. Oedipus jumps to the conclusion that Creon and Teiresias have plotted against him, as it was Creon who suggested he send for Teiresias. Creon denies the charges against him, reasoning that he has sufficient power already, and would never seek to be king. Jocasta finds them quarrelling and, with the Chorus' help, persuades Oedipus not to execute or banish Creon, but the two men part on bad terms.

Oedipus explains to Jocasta about the suspected plot, but she dismisses the prophet's words. She tells him about an oracle that was sent to Laius, predicting he would be murdered by his own child. In order to prevent this they abandoned their baby on a mountain to die, and then Laius died at the hands of robbers, so the prophecy did not come true. Oedipus picks up a detail in her story – that Laius died where three roads meet. He questions her further then reveals that he killed a man where three roads meet before he came to Thebes. He fears he is Laius' murderer and has cursed himself. He also reveals that he left Corinth because an oracle at Delphi decreed he would kill his father and sleep with his mother. They decide to send for the Shepherd – the one witness of Laius' murder – to see if he confirms Jocasta's story. If, as she says, a group of foreigners killed the king, Oedipus would be innocent.

Then, a stranger arrives from Corinth, with the news that Polybus, Oedipus' father, is dead and Corinth wants to crown Oedipus king. Oedipus celebrates the news, as it denies one half of the oracle he was given, but he still fears that he will lie with his mother. In order to release him from this fear, the Stranger tells him that he is not, in fact, the son of Polybus, but that he found him on the mountains of Cithaeron as a baby, his ankles bound together. Furthermore, he was given to him by another shepherd from Thebes. Jocasta tries to prevent Oedipus investigating further, but he insists on sending for the Shepherd, who happens to be the same man who witnessed Laius' murder. When the shepherd arrives he reveals that the baby he gave to the Stranger from Corinth was Laius' son. Oedipus realises that he is the son of Laius and Jocasta, that the gods' word was right, and that he is the sole cause of the city's plague.

A messenger relays the events that follow inside the palace. Jocasta, having worked out the truth, hangs herself. Oedipus finds her and uses brooches from her clothing to stab out his eyes. He comes back outside the palace and confronts the people with his self-hatred and self-punishment. He appeals to Creon, now leader in his place, to drive him from the city but Creon tells him that decision is in Apollo's hands. He lets Oedipus be with his children for one last time and Antigone, his daughter, helps to lead him away.



Photo (Ralph Fiennes) by Catherine Ashmore

Sophocles – The Man and his Work

Sophocles (496 – 406 BC)

Sophocles was born in 496 BC in Colonus, a small village community near Athens. The son of a wealthy armour manufacturer, he received the best possible schooling, and became skilled in the arts. He won awards in wrestling and music, and was a dancer and actor. When he was 16, he was selected to lead a chorus of boys in the victory celebrations, for the Greeks' victory over the Persians at Salamis, in 480 BC.

Because his voice was not strong enough, Sophocles later gave up acting, but carried on writing drama. In 468 BC he entered his play, *The Triptolemos*, into the Festival of Dionysus in Athens, and won first prize, beating the leading playwright, Aeschylus. He went on to write approximately 123 plays, but only seven of them survive: *Ajax*, *Antigone*, *Oedipus Tyrannus* (also known as *Oedipus the King* or *Oedipus Rex*), *The Women of Trachis*, *Electra*, *Philoctetes* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. There are fragments of lost work including a satyr play – *The Ichneutae* on which Tony Harrison's *The Trackers of Oxyrhynchus* is based – and we also know that he wrote a critical essay entitled 'On the Chorus'. Sophocles won the contest a total of 24 times, and otherwise came second. He pioneered the tradition for self-contained plays – rather than thematically linked trilogies – as more suited to the examination of the psychology of the individual. He was known as the 'Attic Bee' because of the sweetness, or 'honey quality', of his poetry.

Sophocles actively abstained from politics, but he did hold civil and military roles. From 443–442 BC he held the post of Imperial Treasurer, and he was elected twice to be a general (the highest possible office an Athenian could hold). In 440 BC, he was made one of the ten *stratēgoi* (military commanders) of Athens, and led the battle campaign with Pericles against the Peloponnesian Island of Samos. Later in the war he again served as general with Nicias, assuming a subordinate position to the younger man on account of his experience. He also took on another role as treasurer and served as a foreign ambassador. Whilst it is impossible to conjecture what his opinions were about the growing democracy in Athens, or the imperialism of Pericles' rule, he certainly remained a loyal member of the state, and never put himself in a controversial position (unlike Aeschylus and Euripides did).

Sophocles was also very religious, and was priest for local heroes Alcon and Asclepius (gods of healing and medicine). Some sources attribute him with having written a paean in honour of Asclepius. He achieved the status of cult hero following Asclepius' death, and people believed he had power over the winds. The decline of religion in Athens during his life will have undoubtedly had a great effect upon him and his work.

There is no absolutely firm date for when *Oedipus Rex* was written or performed, but it has been estimated at between 430 and 423 BC, soon after the beginning of the second Peloponnesian wars and the plague in Athens. It is certain that Sophocles was capitalising on the audience's familiarity with this state of emergency. Also, it is interesting to consider to what extent the figure of Pericles, ruler of Athens for over 30 years, and an acquaintance of Sophocles', is a template for the character of Oedipus.

Sophocles refused invitations to princely courts and remained in Athens all his life. He was married to Nicostrata, who bore him children, however sources differ in the number, between two and four. He also had several affairs, with men and women, and at least one other son, Ariston, by a mistress (or second wife), Theoris. The general consensus is that he was much liked, and had the reputation of being a charming and contented man. He lived for 90 years, witnessing the rise and fall of the Athenian Empire, and died in 406 BC. His play *Oedipus at Colonus* was produced posthumously in 401 BC.

Sophocles' work

The following are the approximate dates for when Sophocles' existing plays were first performed:

458-448	<i>Ajax</i>
457-430	<i>The Women of Trachis</i>
442-445	<i>Antigone</i>
430-423	<i>Oedipus the King</i>
420-410	<i>Electra</i>
409	<i>Philoctetes</i>
401	<i>Oedipus at Colonus</i>

(NB: all dates are BC)

Sophocles – The Man and his Work

The Theban Trilogy

Whilst Ancient Greek playwrights did present tragedies in threes, the plays that make up the Theban trilogy were not presented in this way, as they were all written at different times in Sophocles' life. In terms of Theban history, the plays' chronological order would be: *Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*. However, Sophocles wrote *Antigone*, and then went back to write the first part in the story, *Oedipus the King* (or *Oedipus Rex*). Finally, only five years before his death, he wrote, rather fittingly, the most reflective play of the trilogy, *Oedipus at Colonus*, in which the central character dies at Colonus, where Sophocles himself was born. It is worth noting that the plays seem to mirror, in their tone, the different stages in Sophocles' life, both as a man and as a writer.

Oedipus at Colonus

Set many years after the disastrous downfall of the king in *Oedipus Rex*, this is the longest and most lyrical of Sophocles' tragedies. Oedipus, now an old beggar, has been wandering the country with his daughter Antigone ever since his exile. Now they arrive at a sacred grove of the Eumenides, just outside the city of Colonus. Oedipus realises this is his final destination, as the oracle at Delphi told him he would die on the ground of holy goddesses, and bless the citizens of that place. When a passer-by asks him to move on from the sacred ground, he refuses, and sends the man with a message to Theseus, the King of Athens, requesting refuge. Whilst waiting for the king's decision, Oedipus and Antigone speak to a Chorus of elders who try to persuade him to leave and are shocked to find out his identity. They fear that he will curse the city, but Oedipus defends himself explaining that he cannot be held morally responsible for his crimes. Then Ismene, his second daughter, arrives after a long journey to seek her father and sister. Oedipus and Antigone are overjoyed, having not seen her for many years, but she brings sad news that her brothers, Polynices and Eteocles, are at war with each other: Eteocles has taken over command of Thebes, and Polynices – supported by the army of Argos – is challenging him. Creon, she tells them, is on his way to lure Oedipus back to Thebes to die, as the oracle has told them that they can only defeat the Argon attack if his corpse lies in Theban soil. Theseus arrives and welcomes Oedipus but, on understanding the blessing that his burial will bring, questions why he won't grant this upon his homeland in Thebes. But

Oedipus convinces him, arguing that the gods have willed it so, and Theseus generously grants Oedipus asylum. Creon then arrives and kidnaps Ismene and Antigone, then tries, by deceit and by brute force, to take Oedipus back to Thebes. Theseus intervenes and reunites Oedipus with his daughters sending Creon away. Finally Polynices comes to find Oedipus and beg his forgiveness, telling him that his father's curse has become his own. He seeks to rally his father to his side for the attack on Thebes. Oedipus is furious and still bitter from his sons' betrayal when Creon threw him out of Thebes. He curses his sons and predicts that they will kill one another. Polynices rejects Antigone's plea to give up the mission and leaves. Then a thunderstorm erupts signalling Oedipus' time has come. Theseus remains with him until the end, taking him to a secret location in the countryside of Colonus, performing rituals with holy water, and speaking to the gods before he dies. A messenger relates this to his daughters who beg to see their father's tomb, but they are forbidden from seeing this sacred place by Theseus, who tells them that keeping his pledge to Oedipus would keep his country safe from harm forever. With Theseus' blessing, Antigone and Ismene set off for Thebes to try and prevent disaster befalling their brothers.

Antigone

The story of *Antigone* begins shortly after the end of *Oedipus at Colonus*. The two brothers, Polynices and Eteocles, have killed each other, as Oedipus predicted. Creon has, once more, assumed power. Whilst Eteocles had broken the bargain they made to share the rule, it is Polynices Creon condemns, for seeking foreign help to attack his own city. Creon, therefore, decrees that Polynices' corpse shall remain unburied. Antigone, furious with her uncle, resolves to go and bury him, despite the pleas from her sister, Ismene. When Creon learns of her defiance, he condemns her to be buried alive, despite the fact she is promised to marry his son, Haemon. Antigone is remorseless, defending her brother's right to pass into the next world. Ismene and Haemon beg Creon to show her mercy, but he is resolute. Only when Teiresias, the blind prophet, tells Creon that the gods are on Antigone's side, does he falter in his resolve. He goes to try and bury Polynices and pardon Antigone, but is too late: she has hanged herself in her tomb. Haemon has already found her and, enraged, tries to attack his father, and then kills himself. When Eurydice, Creon's wife, hears of the death of her son, she too takes her own life, leaving Creon alone.

Ancient Greece

Theatre

The origins of Greek Theatre

Greek drama sprang directly from a form of religious worship, dating back to 1200 BC. In an area of northern Greece called Thrace, a cult emerged to worship Dionysus (also known as Bacchus), the god of fertility, wine, dance and procreation. Its ritual celebrations involved intoxication, orgies, human and animal sacrifices and ecstatic, cathartic dances. The cult spread across the whole of Greece, gradually becoming more and more mainstream over the next six centuries. One rite that became pivotal was the singing of formalised choric hymns, known as the *dithyramb*. These hymns, or chants, were sung in honour of Dionysus, and were accompanied by gestures and music. In its earliest form the dancers probably dressed as satyrs and danced around an altar. There will have been a leader of the chorus, who may have spoken during the intervals in the song.

This dithyramb is the basis for all Greek drama which became split into two genres: tragedy and comedy. These divisions remain in Western civilisation to this day (see below). As both forms evolved, they gradually removed themselves from solely worshipping Dionysus and began to develop plots and stories from other areas of Greek mythology. The one constant in both tragic and comic forms was the chorus. The word 'chorus' originates from the Greek *Khoros* meaning 'a place of dancing' or 'group of dancers'. Choral performances were also used to mourn the dead, and to celebrate athletic and military victories.

Theatre in the Athenian Golden Age

By the beginning of the fifth century, Athens was the social, political and cultural centre of Greece. In c. 530 BC, the ruler of Athens, Pisistratus, had added drama competitions to the Dionysian festivals, which were held at the end of March. Playwrights travelled from all over Greece to present their work at these festivals, which lasted for five days. Each playwright produced three tragedies and one comedy (or satyr) play. The festivals were supervised entirely by the Athenian government and involved the erection of statues of Dionysus, and processions.

Before each performance, sacrifices in honour of Dionysus were performed. The orphaned children of those killed in battle were brought on stage and paraded in armour before the performances began. Since the Athenians were at war for half of the fifth century, these children will have been a constant reminder of the military campaigns that continued outside their city gates.

In Sophocles' time, the writers would take on the job of directing the play, writing the music and choreographing the movement. The producers, or 'sponsors', were wealthy citizens of Athens, and it was considered a great honour to be selected to provide the funds for the play, as well as a grand feast after the performance. In true Athenian democratic style, the judges were elected by lot on opening night, and then plays were awarded first, second and third prizes.

The plays were presented on the south-eastern slope of the Acropolis, in daylight. The theatres were far larger than today, holding between 15,000 and 18,000 spectators, all male (the Olivier Theatre – the National Theatre's largest space – holds 1,110). There were marble chairs (the only seats with backs) on the front row for the priests and magistrates. To begin with, entrance to the performances was free, but, due to high demand, they instigated an admission fee. This policy was reformed by Pericles, the leader of Athens, from around 461 to 429 BC, who started a system whereby the tickets were free to any citizen who applied for them.

The central dancing space in which the chorus performed was called the orchestra and was a huge circular area with an altar in its centre. They used a façade of a palace or temple, called a skene, as a backdrop, which was about twelve feet above the level of the orchestra. It had three doors for exits and entrances (the central one, for members of a royal family only). On either side of the orchestra, there were two gangways (called *parados*) from which the actors, or chorus, could make entrances and exits.

The actors were all male, and all amateurs (professional actors did not emerge until the fourth century BC). All the actors wore elaborate costumes, padded to increase their size, and raised shoes to make them appear taller. They also wore large, stiff linen masks, which were naturalistic representations of types

Ancient Greece Theatre

(e.g. old priest, soldier, young girl), not caricatures (as in comedies) and had a carved out hole for their mouth to allow them to be heard easily.

Tragedy

"Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions." (Aristotle, *Poetics*)

Tragedy, in terms of Greek theatre, means something very different from the modern term, which stands for something that ends unhappily. When we talk about Greek tragedy, we are talking about half of the majority of all performed drama in Ancient Greece. The word originates from the Greek work *tragoidia* meaning 'goat song'. Theories vary as to why, but possible explanations include that the earliest choruses wore goat costumes to play satyrs, that the goat was the first prize to be awarded in competition, or, that the goats being sacrificed made a 'tragic song'. Early tragedians included Thespis, Phrynichus and Patinus. Then four major tragedians emerged: Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes.

In approximately 625 BC, Arion, of Corinth, is credited with inventing the tragic form because he produced

the formally written dithyramb chorus. Thespis added an actor, called a 'protagonist', who interacted with the chorus thus changing the form from choral song to 'drama'. It was Thespis who produced the first 'tragedy' at the festival of Dionysus in Athens in 534 BC. But the style of tragic performance remained choral until Aeschylus added a second actor and reduced the role of the chorus, taking their number from xx to xx. He also introduced props and scenery.

Sophocles is widely acknowledged as the dramatist who took the tragic form to its perfection. He increased the number of principal actors from two to three and the number of chorus from 12 to 15. In this way, democracy is deeply rooted in the form of Greek tragedy, presenting us with a debate rather than a single voice.

Tragedies were based on mythical figures contained within ancient Greek epic poems, most notably 'The Iliad', 'The Odyssey', 'The Epic Cycle' and 'The Theban Cycle'. *Oedipus*, and the two other Theban plays, are based on the history of Thebes in the Mycenaean Age. By taking stories from the past, rather than basing them on contemporary issues, Athenian dramatists relied on the authority of the legend to achieve more objective and timelessly meaningful characters and plots, that would not lose their relevance without the immediate political or social context.

Tragedies were composed of both sung verses by the chorus and principals, and dialogue between the principals. Occasionally, the action would be presented first in song, then again in dialogue. The action would also be accompanied by a 'double pipe' (resembling most closely a modern oboe).

Tragedy adhered to a fairly rigid traditional form, consisting of:

- a) the *Prologue* – in iambic verse (spoken by a single actor, sometimes in dialogue with another)
- b) the *Parados* – the entrance of the chorus into the orchestra
- c) the *Episodia* – a series of scenes in dialogue, divided from each other by...



Photo (Ralph Fiennes with members of the Chorus)
by Catherine Ashmore

Ancient Greece Theatre

Tragedy contd...

- d) the *Stasima* – lyrics sung by the chorus
- e) the *Messenger Speech* – relating events offstage
- f) the *Exodus* – everything after the Chorus' last song.

The Greek audience would have been familiar with this form, as much as the content, and would have expected, for example, not to witness the climax, but to have it retold by a messenger. They would also have been familiar with the themes in tragic works, which cover three main areas: the civil state, the family and religion. It is a particularly Athenian trait that all tragedies relate to kings and leaders and concern themselves with the connection between ruler and state, and the dilemmas which affect them and the state as a whole. They also focus on the family, using dynasties from Greek mythology, whose histories would be well-known, and show relationships in extremis. Finally, and most importantly, they explore man's relationship to the gods. The chorus are always our link to the latter, reminding us of their influence – which is fitting, since the choral chants originated from a form of worship.

Aristotle defines tragedy as including specific parts, including (but not exclusively) a reversal, a recognition and suffering. We see this in all Sophocles' work, but nowhere is it more sublimely displayed than in *Oedipus Rex*. The king begins a hunt for a killer at the beginning of the play, placing a curse on that man's head, then realises – the reversal – that he may be the man himself:

I am the one that cursed this curse on myself.

Then, when the shepherd arrives he realises that the oracle has come true – the recognition – that he is his father's killer, and his mother's lover:

I lay with a woman I should not, I struck down a man I should not.

Following his blinding, comes the suffering, not just physical, but mental:

I am the stem, the root of all evil.

(All quotes taken from Frank McGuinness' version)

Comedy

"Comedy, as we have said, is a representation of inferior people, not indeed in the full sense of the word bad, but the laughable is a species of the base or ugly. It consists in some blunder or ugliness that does not cause pain or disaster, an obvious example being the comic mask which is ugly and distorted but not painful." (Aristotle, *Poetics*)

In the Athenian Golden Age, comedy, as a form of theatre, rose in popularity hand in hand with tragedy. Comic plays were based upon imitation, mockery and the light-hearted treatment of immoral subjects. Aristotle (in his *Poetics*) tells us that comedy first appeared in Megaris and Sicyon and that its origins lie in the phallic songs and processions at country festivals. These celebrations were seemingly in worship of the phallus and in honour of Phales, companion to Bacchus, another god of fertility, and possibly adultery. Bands of revellers were apparently called a *komos*, and their song called a *komedía*, from which the word comedy derives.

Like tragedy, they often had a traditional formula: hostility, contest, and reconciliation between chorus and hero. But comedies, in contrast to tragedies, were based upon satirising contemporary issues and figures. Their plots were fantastical, and they freely played around with the passage of time and changes of location. They treated mythology and theology with extreme irreverence and parodied prominent members of society, using grotesque masks and exaggerated costumes.

The only existing comedies from the fifth century BC are those of Aristophanes, who was writing several decades after Sophocles. He wrote around 40 plays, of which 11 survive, including *The Frogs* in which he parodies the style of Euripides, and *Lysistrata*, which is the story of how the women of Greece refused to make love until the men ended the war in their country. From 486 BC there was a competition solely for comedies in Athens called Lenaea, a three-day festival in January. Aristophanes first won first prize in 425 BC with the *Acharnians*.

Ancient Greece

Religion

Twelve gods formed the basis of religion in the aristocratic world, and were worshipped during the period in Thebes' history in which *Oedipus* is set. Popular religion also continued to worship local deities, incarnations of natural forces and the heavenly bodies (the sun and the moon). Originating in Thrace, the cult of Dionysus only came to mainland Greece in approximately the seventh century BC. The result of these various influences is that Greeks worshipped a multitude of gods, rather than a single one. In this way, the form of their religion was poles apart from Western religion today.

The hierarchy of the gods, and their affairs, would have been common knowledge to all Greek citizens as mythology was deeply embedded into their culture. They all knew that the gods lived together on Mount Olympus, created by Zeus, and that each god represented a certain area of command, and was worshipped accordingly. The family of gods was made up of 12 principal ones:

Aphrodite = Goddess of Love and Harmony
Apollo = God of Youth, Dance, Music and Reason
Ares = God of War
Artemis = Goddess of the Hunt
Athena = Goddess of Wisdom
Demeter = Goddess of Grain and Fertility
Hephaestus = God of Fire and Metalwork
Hera = Goddess of the Hearth & Matrimony
Hermes = God of Travellers
Hestia = Goddess of the Hearth
Poseidon = God of the Seas
Zeus = God of Weather, Sky, Light and Divine Creator

Homer was the first writer to give us a clear written account of Greek religion in his chronicle of the Trojan War, 'The Iliad'. However, the Greeks had no written word of god, as we have the Bible and the Koran. Instead, their gods were much more tangible and often became involved in the world of the mortals. Many of the characters in Greek mythology, for example, were 'loved by' Zeus (usually resulting in a beautiful unmarried woman giving birth to a child).

Greek religion was also entirely different in spirit and function to our modern religions, in that it contained no notion of the afterlife, or the punishment or glorification

of the human soul beyond this world. All dead souls went to Hades, ruled by Pluto and Persephone, and whilst there was a favoured part of Hades – the Elysian fields, where heroic figures were allowed – it was certainly not the same as the notion of heaven and hell. Greeks believed that life was for living in the present, and that to be alive and in action was always favourable to death. They did not try to live their lives in order to gain a place in heaven.

Shrines and Oracles

The god's ability to divine the future for humanity was their main point of contact with the mortal world. As the Olympian religion evolved, temples and shrines were erected in multiple city-states for the worship of individual gods. From about 750 BC onwards, Delphi, Delos, Samos and Olympia became the most important sacred shrines in Greece. Delphi was founded, the legend goes, by Apollo who, leading a group of Cretans, killed a great dragon, or python, that lived there. This victory gave the name to the Delphi festival Pythia, held every four years, and the Pythoness, the priestess who was a medium for the oracles.

For the Greeks, the notion of a medium had no suspicious or crooked undertones: the oracle was the word of Apollo. They would consult the oracle on every affair: starting wars, making peace, and building cities. Also, as we see in *Oedipus*, rulers would consult the oracle as to the affairs of their person, and their family. In one version of the story, Laius goes to Delphi to ask why his wife, Jocasta, is barren, and that is when he's told that his child will murder him.

When the pilgrims went to Delphi, they observed many rituals. Firstly, they would need to bring offerings for the god. Then they would wash in a spring and sprinkle themselves in holy water. Next came the sacrifice of a goat, sheep or, ox. If it struggled on the way to the altar, that was a sign the oracle would be bad news, however, if it nodded or shook its head, that was a good sign. The animal would be stunned, then its throat slit, and the blood poured on the altar. Then the pilgrims would make their way down into the cave. There the Pythoness would enter into a frenzy (some sources say induced by inhaling laurel fumes) and deliver the gods' prophecy in a series of ravings. These would then be interpreted into a coherent message by priests of Apollo.

Ancient Greece

The Growth of Democracy

"Each individual is interested not only in his own affairs, but in the affairs of our city as well." (Extract from Thucydides' *The Peloponnesian War*, quoting Pericles)

The first big step towards establishing democracy in Athens was taken by Solon, who made several reforms when elected ruler in 594 BC. Firstly, he cancelled all debts. The state celebrated at a festival called the "Casting off of Burdens". Secondly, he reduced the power of the nobles, and granted political rights to all citizens, including the poor. Finally, he revoked the laws set down by Draco (a previous ruler) who had decreed the death penalty for almost every offence.

"I gave to the mass of the people such rank as befitted their need, / I took not away their honour, and I granted nought to their greed." (Poem of Solon, from Aristotle's *The Athenian Constitution*)

During the Classical Period (500-323 BC) in which Sophocles lived, Greece became the most advanced economy in the world. Four dominant cities emerged: Athens, Sparta, Corinth and Thebes. At the beginning of the fifth century BC the Greeks defeated the Persian invaders in two major battles: Marathon (490 BC) and Salamis (480 BC). This was a turning point for the Greeks as they were finally free from Persian threat. They set up the Delian League (c. 478 BC), strengthening their alliances with other states.

The first Peloponnesian War between Athens and Sparta (c. 460-446 BC) led to the supremacy of Athens, which became a very powerful city, controlling the empire. In approximately 460 BC Pericles was elected leader of Athens and proved himself a great orator. He continued to work, not without resistance, towards a democracy for the people, granting the lower classes access to the political system. Ordinary citizens were instrumental in the management and daily running of the state. Every man over the age of 20 in Athens was eligible to vote on state decisions (rather than democratically electing a leader or body to make those decisions).

The Age of Pericles was soon to end though. In 430 BC a plague struck the city and killed 30,000 inhabitants, including Pericles, in c. 428 BC. The downfall of the city and the character of Pericles

were, we believe, great influences on the context for and character of *Oedipus Rex*. Then from approximately 431-405 BC there were further wars between Sparta and Athens. Sophocles survived almost to the end of these 27-year wars. He was spared the brutal finale in which Athens was besieged and forced to surrender to the Spartans. This defeat, followed soon after by the rule of the 'Thirty Tyrants', marks the end of the Athenian Golden Age, and of the progress of democracy in Ancient Greece.

Ancient Greece

History Timeline

850 – 700 BC	Development of the Greek alphabet - no primary texts survive	458 BC	Aeschylus' <i>Oresteia</i>
776 BC	The first Olympic Games	456-455 BC	Aeschylus dies
750-500 BC	THE ARCHAIC PERIOD	455 BC	Euripides competes for the first time at the Festival of Dionysus
750-700 BC	Homer writes 'The Iliad' and 'The Odyssey'	447 BC	Aristophanes born
c.740-640 BC	Messenian Wars	445-442 BC	<i>Sophocles' Antigone</i>
625 BC	Arion at Corinth produces named dithyrambic choruses	458-448 BC	<i>Sophocles' Ajax</i>
c. 600 BC	Coin currency introduced	431 BC	Euripides' <i>Medea</i>
594 BC	Solon elected as 'lawgiver' in Athens, and makes several reforms including cancelling debts and giving political rights to the poor	c. 431-405 BC	Second of the Peloponnesian Wars between Sparta and Athens
c. 530 BC	Pisistratus, tyrant of Athens, founds the festival of the Greater Dionysia and Thespis puts on a tragedy at the festival	430 BC	Plague in Athens
526-525 BC	Aeschylus born	c. 430-423 BC	<i>Sophocles' Oedipus the King – only wins second prize</i>
507 BC	Cleisthenes founds democracy in Athens	425 BC	Aristophanes' <i>Archanians</i>
500-323 BC	THE CLASSICAL PERIOD	423 BC	Aristophanes' <i>Clouds</i>
496 BC	<i>Sophocles born</i>	422-417 BC	Euripides' <i>Electra</i>
490-480 BC	The Greek/Persian Wars led by Xerxes	415 BC	Euripides' <i>Trojan Women</i>
485-484 BC	Euripides born	409 BC	<i>Sophocles' Philoctetes</i>
478 BC	Creation of the Delian league	406 BC	<i>Death of Sophocles ; death of Euripides</i>
472 BC	Aeschylus' <i>Persians</i> (based upon his experience at the battle of Salamis)	405 BC	Euripides' <i>Bacchae</i> produced posthumously
468 BC	<i>Sophocles competes for the first time at the Festival of Dionysus and wins first prize, defeating Aeschylus, with the play Triptolemos</i>	405 BC	Aristophanes' <i>Frogs</i>
c. 460-446 BC	The First Peloponnesian War between Sparta and Athens	401 BC	<i>Sophocles' Oedipus at Colonus is produced by his son</i>
c. 460 BC	Pericles takes up political leadership of Athens, ostracizing his main opponent, Cimon.	399 BC	Socrates is tried and executed for his opposition to 'The Thirty Tyrants'
455 BC	Euripides first competes at the Festival of Dionysia	387 BC	Corinthian War ends inconclusively
447-432 BC	Construction of the Parthenon on the Acropolis in Athens	388 BC	Aristophanes dies
440 BC	<i>Sophocles elected as one of the ten strategoi (military commanders) of Athens</i>	386 BC	Plato, student of Socrates, founds the Academy
		384 BC	Aristotle, student of Plato, is born
		356 BC	Alexander the Great, son of Philip II, is born
		323-31 BC	THE HELLENISTIC PERIOD

* pro-Spartan oligarchy installed after the Peloponnesian War

NB: all dates are approximate and play dates indicate when they were first performed

Map of Ancient Greece



Creating *Oedipus*

Interview with Derek Barnes and Christopher Saul

Elly Green interviews Derek Barnes [Musical Director on *Oedipus* and member of the Chorus] and Christopher Saul [member of the Chorus]

EG: Can you tell us a little of your background prior to this and whether you've worked in Greek tragedy before?

DB: I've been interested in Greek and Roman history since I was a teenager, but have never been involved directly in the dramas of these cultures before. I taught myself Ancient Greek at school because I was so interested in the background. I can't remember a word of it now, but it got me really into the mythology of the gods, the goddesses etc. I think it's fantastic that we're using music in the way we are on this production, and that it's playing such a supportive role, as it would have done in the past.

CS: Yes I have. Obviously the first time was at school, and then drama school when we studied the origins of drama. After that it took years: in 1991 I got involved in *The Thebans* at the RSC, which was *Oedipus*, *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone* for Adrian Noble in the Swan Theatre. That was my first major encounter with it. So coming to it again – in such a different way – is brilliant.

Derek, could you describe briefly for us your role in this process?

DB: My role, in this particular production, is slightly unusual. My normal function is to rehearse and prepare a score musically, whether devised, or written by a composer, and then go out front and conduct the piece. So this is extremely unusual, in that, one, I'm in the middle of it, and two, I'm not allowed to conduct. So, the preparation has been to try and feel the rhythm of the ensemble together, be involved in it, but not to control it. It's a tricky discipline for me, actually.

It's very unusual for the musical director to be onstage – who made that decision?

DB: I think that was made by Jonathan Kent and Jonathan Dove. I'd worked for the National before on *Coram Boy* and *Royal Hunt of the Sun*, and because one of my specialities is voice, Matthew Scott (Head of Music) phoned me up and asked if I would like to do it. The brief was that I would be onstage and my function would be similar to that of Ward Swingle of the Swingle Singers* ie: one of the group, keeping control of everything, and keeping it going – but it developed beyond that. I've done a

lot more acting than I expected, which is quite daunting, considering the skills of the people I'm working with. Consequently, I've had to try and blend in, and sharpen up my acting during the rehearsal process.

Chris, how does it affect you and your fellow members of the Chorus to have Derek there with you?

CS: 'Safety net' are the words that come to mind. It's such a back-up, a strength, someone to lean on, all those sort of clichéd things. When Steven [Page, a fellow baritone and chorus member] hasn't been there, the feeling of nakedness is for me, well, frightening. But good practice, of course, because one night Steven might not be there!

How has the fact that the Chorus are not all professional singers affected your process of teaching them musically?

DB: As Chris has mentioned, Steven and Darren [Fox], our two professional singers, very much stiffen the ensemble, give a lead, and hopefully give confidence to the rest of the group. Initially the teaching process involved Jonathan Dove improvising the score with the Chorus. This was completely without music, so people were having to use memory. This was very interesting, because there are members of the chorus who can read music and can sing, people who can read music who are not primarily singers, and people who can't read music and aren't singers either, so it's a very mixed group. The people who read music found that the



Photo (Clare Higgins and Ralph Fiennes with members of the Chorus) by Catherine Ashmore

Creating *Oedipus*

Interview with Derek Barnes and Christopher Saul

memorising process of putting the score together was extremely difficult, but the people who didn't find that advantageous. When Jonathan had decided what he wanted to do and the music was set on paper – half of the chorus were extremely happy because they could read it off the page, and the other half were puzzled because it didn't mean anything and they went back to their scripts. It's a mixture of the two strengths: the memorising and the reading, and those eventually come together.

And what was your experience of that Chris?

CS: Somewhere in the middle. I'd recognise the dots, the notes going up and down, and I'd get to understand the rhythm.

DB: I'd call that reading music – knowing the geography of where the thing's going.

CS: I certainly found it helpful.

So, in a way, you've learnt to read to music? To a basic level?

CS: Yes, to a very basic level. But, it's the repetition – it's all been down to the period of time we've had to absorb this. In the last run I felt confident, could do the moves, and actually sing the song. It's taken many weeks to get to that stage.

How do you think the music, and the process of learning it, has affected the nature – the character – of this chorus?

DB: I think it's a remarkably coherent group of people, and everyone gets on tremendously well. Sometimes in a production there are personality problems, but I haven't come across a single instance. Everyone is contributing, and highly skilled, and that means everyone is there to look out for everyone else. One hopes that this would be the norm, but it isn't always. So the learning has also been a bonding process, and there's a tremendous mutual respect among the group – everyone has something to offer.

Chris, how do you think singing these songs together, and having to launch from text into song, has affected your character, as a chorus?

CS: It's hard because I see the text and the music almost as one. The new process for me, I suppose, is learning to build on the emotion, through the text, which leads into the song. We've worked very hard on that. In a musical, you talk and suddenly break into a song, but I don't feel that's the case with this. It's rather like when

you're having a row – something sparks, you start to get really angry, and the voice rises. In this case, it just happens in song.

DB: I think that Jonathan's score is a perfect match for the text. The brief was for everybody to move seamlessly from text into song, and this has been achieved both in the writing, and in the way that the actors on stage have taken this on board, and tried to blend and communicate the music and words. The music is there as an amplification of the text. We didn't know, on day one, what the spoken and sung bits were going to be. It was discovered quite early on, but it wasn't in the script.

What are you both looking forward to most about taking this into the Olivier Theatre?

DB: Having worked in the Olivier before, what first struck me was the fantastic feeling of the most wonderful space. I've worked in 14 countries around the world, in different theatres and, not only is the National the best environment I've ever worked in, the Olivier is also the best space, and I've worked in some fairly modern houses. Overall it's a tremendous experience, and there's a real professionalism in the back-up from everyone, in all departments. You feel totally supported.

CS: I've never been on this stage, but our hope is to achieve the epic status of the piece, which to a certain extent, is limited in a rehearsal room. Now it can truly reach those heights.

DB: The extraordinary thing is to recreate this ancient drama from such a long way back, bring it forward, and make it live today. I find that immensely awe-inspiring.

*Ward Swingle is an American vocalist and Jazz singer who is best known for applying scat singing to the works of Bach. He later went on to found the Swingle Singers. He pioneered new choral techniques.

Creating *Oedipus*

Interview with movement director, Denni Sayers

Elly Green (staff director) interviews Denni Sayers:

How did you get involved in this production, and what attracted you to the project?

I was invited on board by Jonathan Kent, the director, and over a year ago we did a one week workshop together, exploring what the physical vocabulary and the physical identity of the chorus would be. I was very attracted to the idea of working with a group of older actors, what one could get from their very specific physicality, and then sculpt and shape from that – and I've always loved Greek tragedy.

You've worked on Greek tragedy before – how is this similar or different to your other experiences?

I've only worked on Greek tragedy before in the operatic world. I did *Medea*, and *The Bassarids*, which is a modern re-working of Euripides's *The Bacchae*. There we had an operatic chorus, which was huge – about 60 to 80 people – so working on this is very different, in that we are working in a very focused and condensed way. In *Medea* we were working in a much more modern idiom, and in *The Bassarides* we were recreating the Bacchaean rituals that you see on ancient Greek vases. With *Oedipus*, the physical vocabulary that I'm working with is the everyday – Jonathan Kent said that he always wanted the choreography to grow out of the quotidian gestures of everyday movement.

How would you describe the overall concept or style of the movement in this production?



Photo (Alan Howard and Ralph Fiennes)
by Catherine Ashmore

I think the overriding style is of everyday gestures, expanded and sculpted and shaped. I tend to think of myself as a non-movement director, because a lot of it is about *not* moving. Working in this way means that a movement can have so much more power. If a group of 15 chorus members moves naturalistically, it can result in a very confused image, and if 15 people turn away, or 15 people lean forward, it is a particularly big statement. However, if everybody's rooted and still, and just a few people move, it can be very powerful in a more subtle way, allowing individuality to emerge from within the group dynamic.

We've deliberately cast actors from an older generation than *Oedipus*. How does working with an older generation of actors affect your process?

The process of working with older actors isn't really that different. You have to work from the premise of: who are the people you've got in front of you, and what they can bring? The movement has to grow out of these people's bodies, so the process is different on every single project. I think what's very special about this one is that we've done a very rigorous, intellectual analysis of the text, and any movement that happens has come as a product of that; every movement has to earn its place and tell the right story.

How do you begin working with a chorus, and creating an ensemble so that everyone works together?

The first weeks of rehearsal, we started every day with a physical warm up. This was partly to help people focus, get into the rehearsal room and forget about life outside, but also to bring everybody in at the same level at the start of the day. We did a lot of work on everyday gestures, how you listen, how you listen in different ways; how wanting to hear, not wanting to hear, and agreeing or disagreeing with what you're listening to, affects your body. We also did a lot of work on group dynamics, spatial awareness, and being sensitive to each other, so that the chorus could become a self-governing group, doing things instinctively together, rather than because they'd been told to do something.

With this production the movement is linked very closely to the music. How specifically do you think Jonathan Dove's composition has influenced your process?

Creating *Oedipus*

Interview with movement director, Denni Sayers

Jonathan Dove's compositions are very multi-layered, which is very challenging for the actors – and they are actors, not singers – so part of what I've tried to do with the movement is not overburden them with yet another discipline. I have tried to make sure that any movement they have to do is keyed in to what they're singing, and that they are able to hear somebody else singing the same voice part as them. I have also tried to echo the richness of the multi-layering that Jonathan has created in the movement, so that it isn't simplistic, but it too is multi-layered.

In terms of classical Greek tragedy, are there any movement patterns that you've taken from the traditional form that have influenced your choreography?

We haven't directly quoted any classical Greek forms, although the chorus would traditionally speak or sing in *strophe* and *anti-strophe*. In the strophe, they would circle clockwise and in the anti-strophe anti-clockwise. Greek choruses would have been performing in a circular arena as we will be. But we believe they would have done much more stylised, and very exaggerated, body postures. You can see these on the vases at the British Museum – and I've looked at a lot of those – but for this particular production, I would say that most of my influences have really come from watching people in railway stations, cafés, and on the street.

Obviously, in many ways the Olivier space is ideal for this production, but what are the challenges in terms of choreographing for this space, and how has the design affected your work?

When we are in the real space we'll not only have to deal with a revolve, but also how that can upset people's balance. The revolve is raked and domed, so people are always slightly out of kilter physically – this will be something to deal with when we get on stage. In the rehearsal space, the circle defines the dynamic of what we're doing. When you're in a circular space, with a doorway that is not in the centre, there is no obvious strong position, other than the centre of the circle. What's interesting for this – and the reason that this space and these factors work so brilliantly – is that the characters in the play are constantly having all certainty pulled away from beneath their feet throughout the play; it is very difficult to be in a physically strong place in this space, so the dynamic is supporting the dramatic situation.

In terms of your role in the room, how does the relationship work between you and Jonathan Kent, between the movement director and the director?

I think, for me, it's very important that people who come to see the play don't say 'that was the movement director' and 'this is the stage director'. The work should be completely dovetailed, and Jonathan is incredibly open about sharing the creative process, and enabling everybody to take part in it. I think that has made it very easy for our work to be closely connected, and that's terribly important.

Creating *Oedipus*

Interview with director, Jonathan Kent

Elly Green (staff director) interviews Jonathan Kent:

You've directed Greek tragedy before. What made you want to tackle *Oedipus*?

I've done Euripides before but never Sophocles. Euripides is obviously a great Greek dramatist but he's an iconoclast. In some ways he's more modern than Sophocles, but Sophocles is 'ground zero' – the basis of it all – and *Oedipus* is obviously his greatest play. There was no point in doing it unless you knew who was going to play Oedipus, and it was really done with Ralph [Fiennes] in mind.

How did the collaboration with Frank McGuinness come about, and what makes this translation different from others?

Frank did *Hecuba*, which is the last Greek tragedy that I directed at The Donmar Warehouse. While being completely true to the spirit of the original, Frank gives it a contemporary tang and ring without being at all anachronistic. His translation honours the poetry and the elevated sense of the play, but at the same time, gives it an immediacy that emphasises the vivid nature of the piece.

It has an incredibly sophisticated plot structure. In terms of storytelling, what have been the most interesting discoveries in the rehearsal process?

Well, at first sight, you think it's quite a simple story which unfolds and leads us. It's been described as the first 'whodunnit' but actually it's much more sophisticated than that, and as you work on it, and peel back the layers, you discover subtleties within it which are fascinating and stop it being crude in any way. The play is extraordinarily subtle, and astonishing considering it was written 2500 years ago. What has been fascinating to work on is the nuance, the gradations, and the terror of it. I've directed *Hamlet* and other Shakespeare, but this is probably the most profound play that I've ever worked on. It goes to the very heart, not just of our culture, but of what we are, and that's what makes it such a dangerous play.

You've decided to stage it in modern dress – what's the thinking behind this?

I wanted it to be an emotional journey and echo the immediacy of Frank's translation. It's not aggressively modern – I mean, there aren't telephones – but we wanted to create an immediate world where these things can happen and we can relate to them.



Photo (Ralph Fiennes and Clare Higgins)
by Catherine Ashmore

What are the challenges of taking the play from the page to the stage? What are the principal elements of the design?

Paul [Brown] and I were very keen to emphasise the epic nature of it. I think it's a wonderful space. I love the Olivier. Where it really works is when the energy of 1,110 people is focused down on a figure's dilemma. It was very important to us to create an austere space where the audience really gets into the minds of these people. There are only two elements: a copper domed floor covered in verdigris, and a large table which is where the chorus – who are like a sort of town council or a cabinet – are based. Then there are huge doors which move round once during the course of the evening. The purpose of it is to focus on these figures, but in a shifting world which is unsteady beneath their feet.

What was your overall vision for the chorus, and has this changed at all during rehearsals?

Dealing with the chorus was the most difficult – indeed the most difficult thing in Greek drama. When I did *Hecuba* I had a chorus of one, and when I did *Medea* I used three, but with this I was determined to use a chorus of the size it would have been at the time, which is 15. These are all men of a certain age. Jonathan Dove, the composer, and I were very keen to explore something that we started in *Medea*, which is to move into song from speech and then back again. You are driven to song when emotion is so heightened that it becomes the only mode of expression. Jonathan has devised the music with this chorus during rehearsal and has composed specifically for these 15 men. In

Creating *Oedipus*

Interview with Director, Jonathan Kent

this play the chorus is involved in the action – unlike some Greek drama, where they are simply appalled bystanders – and they try to change the course of it occasionally (although unsuccessfully), so they are absolutely integral. It's very difficult for actors because, in the main, not all of them are singers – even though the sound they make is wonderful. It's also difficult because they are used to bringing their own individual take to a part, so to submerge themselves within a whole is a difficult equation. The important thing is to retain individuality while being part of a group, and I think thus far, it has been gratifyingly successful.

How did you rehearse with the chorus? Did you use certain techniques?

It evolved naturally. We did exercises to begin with but actually, funnily enough, music brought them together. It is a great unifying force, and that has bonded them into a whole. What I was also interested in was not choreography but movement, and the movement of the quotidian, so that running your fingers through your hair, or shaking a fist, becomes a choreographic gesture. Denni Sayers, who's been working with me on the movement, has done a great job with that, again, with men who are not dancers. But that was the point of it. These are men who are the elders of Thebes, caught in this terrible situation – like the Bradford City Council after a nuclear attack for example. They feel responsible for a city, but helpless in the face of what has happened.

What relevance do you think *Oedipus* has for a modern audience? And do the audience have a role in this production?

As we all know, this is *the* Greek text of the 20th century. Freud, I think, rather audaciously expropriated it, so that people who have never actually seen *Oedipus* know about the Oedipus complex. I think that's a very narrow view of what the play is. *Oedipus* is a tragedy because it's about a man who risks everything to find out who and what he is, and the tragic pursuit of meaning in life. That's something that we're all engaged with and there has never been a play which expresses this more clearly – that's why I'm interested in doing it. To begin with, the audience in the Olivier are the people of Thebes – so it's a direct address to them – and they bear witness to the events of the play.

Further Exploratory Tasks and Exercises

DEBATE:

1. Oedipus and Freud

"His destiny moves us only because it might have been ours – because the oracle laid the same curse upon us before birth as upon him. It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father." (Sigmund Freud on Oedipus in his *Interpretation of Dreams*)

Discussion points:

- Do you agree with Freud that this is the reason why we, even today, identify with the character of Oedipus?
- In groups, discuss why you think *Oedipus* has managed to survive over 2,000 years since it was written? What do you think are the main reasons it has been termed 'a classic'?

2. Oedipus the man

"An Athenian is always an innovator, quick to form a decision and quick to carry it out...Athenian daring will outrun its own resources; they will take risks against their better judgement and still in the midst of danger remain confident ... Of them alone it may be said that they possess a thing almost as soon as they have begun to desire it, so quickly with them does action follow on decision ... In a word, they are incapable of living a quiet life themselves or allowing anyone else to do so."

Theucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War*, Book 1 (translation by Rex Warner)

Discussion points:

- Do you think this description applies to the character of Oedipus? Why?
- Discuss in groups why Oedipus might be accused of bringing about his own downfall? Do you think it might have been avoided? If so, how?

3. Tragedy Now and Then

In groups, pick a tragedy that the class is familiar with, eg: Shakespeare's *Macbeth* or *Hamlet*?

- Looking back at the tragedy section of this workpack, discuss how does *Oedipus the King* differ from this more 'contemporary' tragedy?
- Make a list of the differences and then the similarities?

- Sioned's script page (p. 13) mentions the fact that this is not an 'English play'. In what ways do you think *Oedipus* is particularly 'Greek'? Consider this question in terms of the language used, staging, subject matter, plot, and main themes within the play.
- You may also want to consider the political situation in which the plays were written, and how this affects its themes.

4. 'Beware the Grip of God' (trans. Frank McGuinness)

Referring back to the section on religion in this workpack, look at how the Greeks' attitude to religion and the gods is conveyed in *Oedipus*.

- Consider certain sections of *Oedipus* in this light, by picking up references to god within the text.
- Consider each character's separate relationship and attitude to god. Pick out certain speeches within the text to illustrate your point of view.

5. The Chorus

- What function do you think the chorus plays in *Oedipus*? and in Greek tragedy in general?
- How might you think about staging it were you to put on your own production?
- Think about other examples of how the chorus has been staged, and compare and contrast with this production. What has worked, in your view, and why?

6. More than a 'whodunnit'

In his interview, Jonathan Kent talks about *Oedipus* being so much more than a 'whodunnit'.

- In what way would you say this is true?
- What are the main things that we discover as we peel back the layers of *Oedipus*?

7. The quest for the self

- What do you think Sophocles was trying to say about 'quest for the self'?
- Why do you think the myth came to be so entrenched in Freud's teachings and philosophies?

Further Exploratory Tasks and Exercises

PRACTICE:

1. In groups, and considering all the evidence that is provided in the play, create a timeline of the events that occurred throughout Oedipus' life, from birth to death.

2. Select one of the following scenes from *Oedipus*.

- i) Oedipus' meeting with Teiresias.
- ii) Oedipus' confrontation with Creon after he has been delivered the news by Teiresias.
- iii) Oedipus' first scene with Jocasta.

Split up into groups, and decide who will play which part.

a) Using Sioned's script page as a reference – looking carefully at the language – mark out any stresses in the language on paper. Read the main speeches out loud. Consider the rhythms and the alliteration. Look at each speech carefully, line by line, and discuss the meaning of each word with the rest of the group, and then the class.

b) Write down what you think might be the internal monologue for each of the characters in the scene. (See Sioned's script page, p.15, for examples of this)

c) Write out detailed notes of what each character knows and doesn't in the scene.

d) Consider how you might 'block' these scenes. Draw a diagram of the stage, and decide beforehand where each actor is going to be at every stage of the scene.

e) Think of ideas and ways that you think you might stage the chorus in these scenes. Could the chorus be less than 15? Would they sing? Would they be on stage throughout the performance? How would they be dressed? Would they dance?

f) Perform each scene of your choosing to the rest of the class.

3. Also in groups, invent your own version of a tragedy or tragic story, referring to the 'Greek Tragedy' section of the workpack. It should be about 10 mins long.

a) Think about all the elements of the previous question as you do this.

b) Remember it should follow the sequence: reversal, recognition and then suffering.

Once you're happy with this, perform these sequences to the rest of the class.

4. Pick a particular speech in *Oedipus* and compare and contrast Frank McGuinness' translation to another of your choosing.

- a) What are the main differences or similarities?
- b) If there are differences, how do these affect your understanding of the play and/or the character?
- c) What would you say characterises each translation and why?
- d) Try reading both speeches out loud. Differences are likely to spring out even more.

5. Consider Aeschylus' trilogy of plays, *The Oresteia*. Compare and contrast these with Sophocles' trilogy.



Photo (Ralph Fiennes) by Catherine Ashmore

Bibliography and Further Reading

The Reader's Encyclopedia of World Drama
(ed. Gassner & Quinn, Methuen, 1970)

Robert Fagles, *The Three Theban Plays: Antigone, Oedipus the King, Oedipus and Colonus*
(Penguin Classics, 1984)

Graves, Robert, *The Greek Myths*
(Penguin, 1960)

Six Greek Tragedies, Introduced by Marianne McDonald and J. Michael Walton
(Methuen Drama, 2002)

Euripides, Medea and other Plays, trans. John Davie
(Penguin, 1996)

Aristotle: Poetics, trans. Malcolm Heath
(Penguin 1996)

Burgess, John, *The Faber Pocket Guide to Greek and Roman Drama*
(Faber & Faber, 2003)

Bernard Knox, *Oedipus at Thebes: Sophocles' Tragic Hero and His Time*
(Yale University Press, 1998)

Hermann Kinder and Werner Hilgemann,
The Penguin Atlas of World History, Volume 1
(Penguin, 2003)

Taplin, Oliver, *Greek Tragedy in Action*
(Routledge, 1985)

Marjorie and C.H.B. Quennell, *Everyday Things in Classical Greece*
(Darien Press, 1932)

Weblinks:

<http://www.ancientgreece.com/>
<http://www.watson.org/>
www.historyworld.net/
<http://www.thucydides.co.uk/>
<http://www.britannica.com>