



[Oedipus](#) at the [Liverpool Playhouse](#) □ □

Directed by Steven Berkoff

Reviewed □ by [Denis Joe](#) February 2011

You never quite know what to expect with Berkoff. His interests are so wide and he will 'sometimes' cram as many variables into his work as he thinks he can get away with. This is not the first time that he has tackled Greek classics and it is not the first time he has used the myth of Oedipus. His play Greek, in 1982, borrowed from Sophocles' play that was later made into an opera by Mark-Anthony Turnage.

And watching Berkoff's Oedipus there is a feeling of attending an opera. His attention to the detail of Greek tragedy, which itself, was the template for early operas, which drew on ancient Greek and Roman drama. The first opera was probably Dafne by Jacopo Peri, 1597, most of the music of Dafne is lost, and in particular the role of the chorus as a sort of consciousness that seems to see morals as a collective (Demos?) phenomenon rather than an individual mechanism (think Jiminy Cricket from Disney's Pinocchio) as well as observers of events. There is accompanying music, but this is more ambient than something that is imposed, though it sometimes acts as a prompt for action on stage.

The play centres on how Oedipus comes to realise that he has killed his father and married his mother. The city of Thebes is stricken by drought and Oedipus dispatches his brother-in-law,

Creon to Delphi to ask the Oracle why Thebes is being punished so.

Creon returns to inform Oedipus that the killer of King Laius (Oedipus' real father) is still at large in the city and that is the reason for the gods to inflict a plague on the city. Oedipus, unaware that it was he who slayed his father, vows to find the killer. The play revolves around the unravelling of the story of how the King met his death and how Oedipus, unwittingly, came to take his (actual) mother for his wife.

The action of the play is demonstrated in mime which provides for an exciting spectacle and the cast create a tense feeling without the need to attempt a realistic depiction. The star of the play was, for me, Vincenzo Nicoli as Creon. His overpowering presence gave the play much muscle and created a great counterfoil to the pathetic Oedipus.

Berkoff has the actors in updated (though not modern) dress. The costumes seem to suggest social status with the Ensemble (chorus) decked out in the idealised uniform of open waistcoats, rolled sleeves and the obligatory flat cap, for the working man. Whilst the costumes of Oedipus, Creon and Jocasta (Oedipus' Mother/Wife) infer their bourgeois status.

The script to Berkoff's Oedipus was published by Faber in 2000. The roles of the main protagonists are written in iambic pentameter. On page this works very well and it shows a great deal of skill; that shows Berkoff could create such a work and establish it in the English speaking world using English poetics, rather than take the easier path of open or free verse.

Unfortunately, following a script and reciting poetry are two different things altogether. Much of the time the line endings were overshoot by the actors. There were moments when the poetics of the script was respected, and at those times we were taken to another dimension: what was being heard from the stage sounded like Singspiel, as good, recited, poetry should do. The moments when this worked were pure magic.

However a main weakness of Berkoff's script was the inclusion of a classic and common vernacular. The common vernacular seemed to attempt the comic in parts. But it also appeared that Berkoff could not decide on what was appropriate to the action. And this is a major failure, as classic vernacular rubbed up against a more modern speech rather like new chalk on a blackboard. It is as if Berkoff was confused about whether to use a social-realistic approach or one of mimesis that would have allowed for the more classic approach to speech. I also got the feeling that some of those on stage had forgotten lines and were simply filling in, which showed itself quite noticeably.

Updating a work is a difficult undertaking. The usual excuse for updating is to say that the piece has universal appeal and still speaks to us, true of all great art and should go without saying. It seemed to me that Berkoff was drawing parallels between Oedipus and Tony Blair (particularly over the Iraq war), presenting Oedipus as a "strutter", having to constantly battle against some force or other. In part Simon Merrells plays the role rather like a petulant teenager and when he stands on the table, having realised the truth, he goes through a mime sequence that made me think of Frank T.J. Mackey, played by Tom Cruise, in the film, Magnolia. The problem is that what makes Oedipus' 'crime' so outrageous is the fact that he is a king and not like ordinary men. But Merrells' portrayal undermined that feeling of the mighty falling, and simply portrayed Oedipus as one of us, with all the emotional baggage.

Whilst I think that the experience of Berkoff's Oedipus is exhilarating, I also think that it is a product of the confused times we live in. The chorus, whether in Ancient Greek plays or in

opera, stand apart from the main characters, who act out the drama. And though the roles of Creon and Jocasta certainly appear to be those of strong characters, that stand above society, the role of Oedipus seems to be that of a member of the Ensemble.

This portrayal of the mighty as human like us (the film, *The King's Speech*, is a variation on the same theme) may well work once the mighty have fallen, but Berkoff's Oedipus is portrayed throughout as being just like you and me. There is no explanation, or inference, as to why we should see this man as someone with power (as we do in Sophocles' version). I think that this takes much of the humanity away from the original intention. Maybe this is what social-realism means today.