Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

Oedipus Machina-tions

Sylvie · Wednesday, July 1st, 2015

It may be an ancient story, but it is still one of the best, and Ron Sossi's reimagined staging of Ellen McLaughlin's adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King,* staged with many members of his well-named KOAN Company, is a current and strong entry at The Odyssey.

Its reinvented title — *Oedipus Machina* — is set in a deliberately indeterminate time and place, with suggestions of extraterrestrial interference, yet close enough to the original Greek period to allow for the existence of shepherds and soothsayers, primitive weapons and costumes that blow in the wind. The *Machina* in the title no doubt refers to the spinning geodesic dome, a central tented piece of Keith Mitchell's set, that serves several purposes, including providing a structure for many entrances and exits.

As significant as these may be to Sossi's concept, they don't distort the tale of the king who inadvertently killed his father and married his mother. And the acting and choreography of the piece, strung together by a chorus of six, hold our attention without flagging.

l-r, Martin Rayner as Creon clashes with Joshua Wolf Coleman as Oedipus in *Oedipus Machina.*

The direction is inventive and the acting, led by an arresting Joshua Wolf Coleman as Oedipus, is compelling. All the major players in this tale are astutely cast, with Martin Rayner delivering a persuasively fuming Creon when he's falsely accused by Oedipus of having plotted against him — and Brent Christensen providing an agitated and deeply conflicted figure as the shepherd who rescued the infant Oedipus from certain death by taking the child from the messenger charged to abandon him on the mountain.

As that messenger, Terry Woodberry puts in a brief but extremely vivid appearance as one of two actors in the production that are impossible to ignore. The other one is Dey Young as Jocasta, beautiful, driven to near-madness and to suicide when she realizes how the fates have tricked her — and her son — into doing the very things that their lives had been reprogrammed to avoid.

l-r, Joshua Wolf Coleman and Brent Christensen in *Oedipus Machina* at The Odyssey.

Aside from her natural grace and elegance, Young delivers a well-spoken and moving performance as the tormented wife/mother that anchors the production in powerfully emotional ways.

One reason we do not tire of this Oedipal story is the extraordinary case it makes for the force of

destiny. There is something so tantalizing and dangerous in the knowledge that we, arrogant mortals, cannot outwit it no matter how hard we try. We may think that we control our lives and our world only to be undone at every turn. The fates are watching and this tale demonstrates the foolishness and hubris of thinking otherwise. (John O'Hara also toyed with the same idea in his *Appointment in Samarra*.)

The technical aspects of Sossi's staging are simple, clear and effective, including Philip W. Powers' shadowy lighting and, one is happy to report, Chris Moscatiello's sound design. Credit also goes to vocal advisor Barbara Rottman and choreography advisor Debbie McMahon for their fine work in their respective departments. (I cannot remember when I last saw a vocal advisor listed for a stage production, making it no accident that the voices in the play come across as clearly as they do, and that attention was paid to sound in equally careful measure.)

Joshua Wolf Coleman as Oedipus holding the dead Jocasta in his arms in *Oedipus Machina* at The Odyssey.

Finally, a word about Ron Sossi, who, in his 46th year of running the Odyssey Theatre(s), continues to seemingly revel in doing so. It is rare for an Artistic Director to survive that long in such a demanding position, but to survive in it and continue to foster and do noteworthy work that is frequently experimental as well, is almost unheard of. Los Angeles theatre has been lucky. May its luck continue.

Top image: Members of the cast of Oedipus Machina *at The Odyssey Theatre.*

All photos by Enci Box

WHAT: *Oedipus Machina*

WHERE: Odyssey Theatre, 2055 So. Sepulveda Blvd., Los Angeles, CA 90025.

WHEN: Wednesday, 8pm, July 8 only; Thursdays, 8pm, July 2, 16 & 23 only; all Fridays-Saturdays, 8pm (NO performance July 4); all Sundays, 2pm. Ends July 26.*

**The third Friday of every month is wine night at the Odyssey: enjoy complimentary wine and snacks and mingle with the cast after the show.*

HOW: Tickets $34, available at www.OdysseyTheatre.com or 310.477.2055 ext. 2.

Special "Tix for $10" performances on Thursday, July 2 & Wednesday, July 8, only.?

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