

British Theatre Guide

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Oedipus

Sophocles, in a new version by Frank McGuinness
RNT Lyttelton
(2008)

Jonathan Kent has not had the greatest year at the Theatre Royal Haymarket but he more than redeems himself with this exhilarating, modern dress revival that might just throw the now somewhat neglected genre of Greek Tragedy back into the mainstream.

With the assistance of a slangy but highly effective contemporary translation from Frank McGuinness, he makes *Oedipus Rex*, the first play of a Trilogy that ends with *Antigone*, into something that seems entirely fresh, even though, throughout, everyone in the house knows exactly what will happen next.

He is aided by a cast that is fronted by Ralph Fiennes and Claire Higgins but has tremendous depth not only in the major parts but also a fifteen strong chorus. These ageing men not only advance the plot but regularly transform themselves into an excellent male voice choir, most adept at two and three part harmonies.

The Olivier stage has been transformed by Paul Brown into a bulging, tarnished copper circle with a partial revolve that slowly takes a pair of 20 foot high doors, also in copper, in a full circle like some gigantic sundial inevitably zeroing in on a symbolic, dark midnight.

During the hundred minutes of its cycle, the shaven-headed, designer-dressed Fiennes as the initially unemotional but proud Oedipus, King of the Thebans, fulfils a destiny that is almost too terrible to contemplate or take in.

One by one, the pieces of an intricate jigsaw are put into place as individuals, each of whom knows part of the story but none the whole, impart information to the King, as if plunging nails into the coffin to which by the end of the play he would dearly love to retire.

Slowly, the man who had been combative with his brother-in-law, Jasper Britton's nattily-suited Creon, and triumphal when he thought his troubles were over, becomes cowed by the knowledge of his unwitting and unnatural misdeeds. These eventually condemn both his natural parents to death and plunge the kingdom into the kind of terrifying darkness that Oedipus suffers after blinding himself.

This has all been predicted by the seemingly mad old seer Teiresius, on this occasion played by Alan Howard, who, when Peter Hall produced *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus* together at the National a dozen or so years ago, had the leading part in a memorable production complete with traditional masks.

Sharing the glory with Fiennes is that wonderful actress Claire Higgins, playing his wife-mother Jocasta. As proud and fiery as her husband, the Queen is also both maternal and protective, quick to denounce suggestions that Oedipus might be the mysterious man who killed his father. However,

the seer's prognostications are finally confirmed as two other fine actors, both playing shepherds, Malcolm Storry and Alfred Burke, put the final pieces of the puzzle together.

All builds to an unbearable and deeply affecting ending, as Fiennes moves into top gear in an evening that proves that he is a really wonderful stage actor, who can hold an audience in the palm of his hand. Then, with blood streaming out of his eyes, Oedipus raises an unholy ascending wail, which must have scared the four young children cast as his offspring even more than it did a full house quaking in the auditorium.

It will be no surprise if Ralph Fiennes gets nominated for a number of best actor awards over the next few months, while Claire Higgins' support also deserves recognition. Perhaps though, the man who should get most credit is Jonathan Kent, without whose epic vision an absolutely stunning, in all senses of the word, evening would never have been created.

Reviewer: [Philip Fisher](#)