

OEDIPUS: PRESS RESPONSES

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Sophocles in a new adaptation created by Robert Icke

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EDFEST MAGAZINE

Lyn Gardner

★★★★★

“I am me. I am me,” declares Oedipus. But the truth is that Oedipus—a compelling Hans Kesting—doesn’t know who he is in Robert Icke’s startlingly contemporary and razor-sharp version of Sophocles. It’s as if Icke has taken a knife to the original and excavated its glistening heart so we can see it in all its pumping glory.

It starts with a film of Oedipus, a modern politician, on the verge of a great victory. He is going to clean up the country which is sick with corruption. The election result is not yet in, but there is a real sense that this man is the right one for the job, the chosen one. He is, but not in the way he thinks. His throwaway promise that he will investigate the death of the former ruler Laius will come back to haunt him before the night is over. I don’t think I have ever felt quite such a sickening sense of rising dread in the theatre.

Over the next two hours as the on-stage digital clock ticks down Oedipus moves from saying “I am me” to not knowing who he is and becoming obsessed with knowing who he is. He journeys from a man who thinks he is at the start of something to a man who realises that he is at the endgame. As the evening progresses, the space—Oedipus’ campaign office (designer, Hildegard Bechtler)—is gradually dismantled around the characters.

This is so niftily done, with an almost insouciantly low-key but effective stagecraft and layered scripting. Just as Oedipus’ throw away promise comes back to bite, so too do many of the exchanges between the characters. Antigone (Gaite Jansen) worries about losing her identity to her dad’s political status, and we can see in this young teenager the woman she will become. We know too how Oedipus’ dismissal of Creon as mediocre and weak will play out in the next generation, and how the bickering between Oedipus’ two sons over a family chicken dinner—one of the production’s best scenes—will eventually erupt into war. Everything is just so, meticulous, but deceptively casual.

If that makes it sound as if it is too self-conscious, it is not. It is full of heart and psychological acuity. “I can’t lose him twice,” cries Jocasta towards the end, almost in the same moment as Oedipus calls out “Mum!” like a lost child. It is utterly truthful; completely devastating.

THE OBSERVER

Kate Kellaway

★★★★★

On stage there is a digital clock, and as the scarlet seconds tick away, the drama – Sophocles’s Oedipus, in a brilliant modern version written and directed by Robert Icke, with the Internationaal Theater Amsterdam – happens in real time. This show is one of the unmissable highlights of Edinburgh’s international festival. Hildegard Bechtler’s sleek set returns us to the world of Ivo van Hove’s astounding Roman Tragedies (Icke, just finishing as an associate director at the Almeida in London, is often described as Van Hove’s English protege, although he is victoriously his own man, his 2015 Oresteia another theatrical winner). The family likeness between these Dutch productions is unmistakable: Oedipus’s office space recalls Julius Caesar’s in Roman

Tragedies. It's a power hub of sleek lines, swivel chairs and screens that never sleep. Icke's adaptation begins with footage of Oedipus as a politician, on the eve of a presidential election: "We are sick," he tells camera and crowd, "the state body is sick."

Oedipus is played with magnetic naturalism by Hans Kesting (also Mark Antony in Van Hove's production). He is relaxed yet wired and, with Creon, a suitably stressed Aus Greidanus Jr, as spin doctor, expected to know the way forward for his country. But before long, the man will cease to know who he is. Knowledge is key as we touch on a familiar question: how much should we know of our politicians' private lives? The thrilling power of this show is in hearing classical dialogue in a contemporary context. We listen to what Oedipus and his family are feeling. Emotion is pared to the bone, in keeping with the bare lines of the set. There is a visceral inescapability to the talk. And it's fascinating watching theatre in another language – you miss the nuances and become hyper-aware of the body language. Dutch, with its vicious Rs, sounds on a dangerous roll (there are subtitles, obviously). One or two shaming English phrases sing out, such as "new age bullshit".

The cast is first-rate – flawless. As Jocaste, Marieke Heebink is devastating – and devastated – as she spills the details of her past to Oedipus. Frieda Pittoors as Merope, the woman who passes for Oedipus's mother, is excellent too: a brittle old lady, comically marooned, never parted from her handbag. Tiresias (Hugo Koolschijn) has a weariness in his blindness, and the moment in which he describes the enormous sky and the tininess of human beings is beautifully achieved. The scenes at the family election night dinner are marvellous. You sense the hubris of premature celebration – the guzzling of champagne, the boasting with mouths full – and there is a wonderful moment in which the homosexuality of one of Oedipus's sons is revealed. In Icke's hands, Oedipus becomes a play about love. But it's also about accepting your fate. There is an extraordinarily powerful moment in which Oedipus stands – idly bouncing a tennis ball – and says: "You start in the dark. You breathe your way out."

THE GUARDIAN

Mark Fisher

★★★★★

The play has hardly begun and already you're making mental connections. In Robert Icke's vivid reinterpretation of the Sophocles tragedy, Oedipus is a modern-day politician on the eve of an election victory and is making policy pledges on the hoof. Couldn't you just imagine Boris Johnson doing the same thing any time he has the attention of the TV cameras? Here, Oedipus is promising an inquiry into the death of Laius, the former king, without having run the idea past Creon, his second-in-command. It creates a behind-the-scenes tension that recalls the love-hate rivalry between Blair and Brown or, perhaps, Johnson and Gove.

And, with this week's news, the promise of an investigation into a suspicious death calls to mind the questions around the suicide of financier Jeffrey Epstein – a name you think of again when Jocasta reveals how young she was when Laius made her pregnant. The campaign posters and T-shirts make Oedipus look like Barack Obama.

Impressively, none of this feels forced. On Hildegard Bechtler's arid conference-room set, all strip lights, TV monitors and functional carpet, Icke stays true to the governing forces of the Sophocles original while touching a 21st-century nerve in its discussion of honesty, truth and cover-ups in public life. The fate that threatens Hans Kesting's superb Oedipus – playful, principled and in control – is not just a private misfortune but a public scandal in waiting.

With his family gathered round, he is like a Joe Keller or an Eddie Carbone, a much-loved Arthur Miller patriarch whose downfall will send shockwaves through a whole community. Played straight through in this Internationaal Theater Amsterdam production, the narrative exercises a thriller-

like grip, the countdown clock marking time, not only until the election results, but before the secrets of the past explode into the present.

The dilemma becomes ours: this Oedipus is such a decent sort, with his faith in transparency and willingness to collaborate, that we'd rather ignore the inconvenient truth of his less-than-blameless past. As that truth hits home, and he stumbles backwards step by painful step from Marieke Heebink's spirited Jocasta, we feel the despair of hope and ambition thwarted by unhappy circumstance.

SUNDAY TIMES

David Jays

★★★★★

Oedipus in the Edinburgh International Festival, was worth the trip to Edinburgh. It's from Internationaal Theater Amsterdam and Robert Icke, a devastatingly clear-sighted director of classics at the Almeida, in north London. This modern Oedipus is one poll from power. On election night, he dines with family at campaign headquarters while they wait for the future.

Making him a politician is a smart touch. (Icke's touches are always smart.) It's not just the Obama-esque birther controversy that dogs him, more that modern politics demands heels dug into strong positions: certainty over nuance, mission statement over human mess. That tenacity will destroy Oedipus.

Hans Kesting is a ferocious actor, but as Oedipus it's the tenderness that slays you. Every time he proclaims love for his family or pulls Jocasta down for a fumble, the chokehold tightens. A timer counts down at the back of Hildegard Bechtler's smoothly anonymous set, until it hits a line of implacable zeros. "People don't have ends," Oedipus barks as events begin to hollow out his life. "Stories end." By the time this one ends, you can barely breathe. Icke's style is unmistakable.

NEW STATESMAN

Rosemary Waugh

Robert Icke has a thing for playing with time. The British director's Oedipus for Internationaal Theater Amsterdam, which premiered in the Netherlands in April 2018 and now makes its UK premiere at the Edinburgh International Festival, is performed to an illuminated stop clock counting down from two hours to zero. Or does it?

Time is slippery where Oedipus is concerned. The programme states the running time as "approximately two hours", the EIF website says "1 hour 45 minutes", and the digital display itself reaches 00:00:00 at a crucial juncture somewhat prior to the curtain call. In fact, 15 minutes have already disappeared when the actors first speak following a video clip that – I swear – does not last a quarter of an hour. Moreover, if you train your eyes on it, I'm sure that clock possesses the ability to magic away whole minutes from the display. And its seconds? I'm not sure they really last a whole second. Maybe they're more like an eighth of a second...

There could, of course, be nothing dodgy with the clock. This could be a trick of perception – can I really estimate the duration of a video that accurately? – because what actually matters here is the sense that time is sped-up and the doomed Oedipus (Hans Kesting) is unstoppable hurtling towards the revelation that will seal his fate.

Performed in Dutch with English subtitles, Icke's take on Sophocles' tragedy imagines Oedipus as a maverick politician on the cusp of winning an election with promises of a better, brighter and fairer future for the populace. His campaign posters are borrowed straight from the Obama

electoral campaign and so are his critics: there are cries for Oedipus to make public his birth certificate. As they wait for the results to come in, Oedipus and his family retire to the campaign HQ, which is being rapidly dismantled and packed away by the hangers-on of Team Oedipus.

Unlike in the original, there is no suggestion Oedipus was given the prophesy of murdering his father and marrying his mother prior to doing either. His first notification comes from the aged Teiresias (Hugo Koolschijn), whose words Oedipus dismisses as either New Age claptrap or politically motivated lies. Icke's Oedipus, then, is never given the chance to at least try avoiding the prophesy by, for example, not marrying someone older than him. It's a minor change, but it heightens the sense that it's Oedipus's obsessive search for the truth of how Laius, his political predecessor and wife's former husband, died – not the fact he made the famous errors – that sees him zooming towards his own downfall at supersonic speed.

Icke's other time-bending productions, Shakespeare's Hamlet and Ibsen's The Wild Duck, both at the Almeida Theatre, slowed everything down to the speed of black treacle dripping off a cold spoon. The Wild Duck did this by repeatedly breaking up the performed sections of the narrative with meta-theatrical monologues about the writing of the play and its historical context, so the impending tragedy was kept tantalisingly out of reach. Andrew Scott's Hamlet, meanwhile, delivered his lines with such huge, heavy and long pauses the collective breath-holding of the audience was almost audible. But where they were both masterpieces of delayed gratification, Oedipus is a 100-metre dash straight into a brick wall.

Icke is frequently compared to Ivo van Hove, artistic director of the Toneelgroep Amsterdam, which merged with Amsterdam Stadsschouwburg to become Internationaal Theater Amsterdam in January 2018. From a British perspective, both men create the type of slick, sexy and radical rewrites of the classical canon deemed European in approach. There are similarities, but it's a lazy comparison: while Van Hove regularly directs visually and formally impressive work that's easy to objectively admire but hard to respond to emotionally, Icke is all about big, messy, overwhelming feelings. Look at the audience of an Icke play as the lights go up and it's not uncommon to see whole rows of people wiping tears or sitting silent and shell-shocked.

Oedipus is no different. And with everything moving so fast, it becomes a race just to process the emotions of the piece while watching it. Many of the most affecting moments involve Jocaste (Marieke Heebink) who, in Icke's version, expands to become almost as important a character as her husband/son. Revealing the secrets of his past involves voicing her own buried trauma of being impregnated as a 13-year-old by Laius, then having the child instantly abducted, presumed murdered.

As these horrible truths burble up and out of her, she recounts how the pregnancy made the skin of her adolescent body turn translucent and the doctor damaged the baby's legs wrenching him out of her. It's a brutal and viscerally personal story pitched right into the heart of this posturing political set-up, where crucial plot points relate to chauffeur protocol, boy racer mishaps and dinner table debates about mistresses. Heebink's hands look like they're physically holding her body together as she speaks and, for the only time in the whole play, everything goes still.

FINANCIAL TIMES

Matt Trueman

★★★★

Oedipus is not yet king in Robert Icke's slick modernisation of Sophocles's tragedy. Set on election night, as votes are counted, it finds this polished professional on the cusp of fulfilling his political destiny. Obama-style posters line his campaign HQ. Exit polls point to a landslide lead. He has already told TV news crews his first presidential plans. They prove presumptuous. His fate has already been cast.

That line between public and private, personal and professional comes to the fore here. As in his Hamlet, Icke's drama (for Internationaal Theater Amsterdam, performed in Dutch with English surtitles) underlines the duality of the political family. Hans Kesting's energised Oedipus swaps his suit for sweatpants and clears the office floor for a celebratory family meal — their last before they become public property.

They already carry political capital — Marieke Heebink's Jocaste the spit of a supportive spouse, his three kids proof of his paternal credentials — but each has personal secrets. One son's heartbreak emerges. Another is outed, gently, over dinner. As Oedipus toasts his wife, his children cringe: TMI. Icke's text toys with that central taboo — Jocaste joking that she has three sons, not two: "One's 45." It significantly ups the stakes too: a whole family is on the line.

Oedipus can feel overly condensed: all revelation, no action, a wait for the penny to drop. Icke draws that out, so tense it's teasing, breaking the slow realisation into stages. The first, confirmation of his complicity in the car crash that killed Jocaste's first husband, could kill off his political career in itself. "It's the same accident," Kesting sighs, shoulders slumped. The two that follow fast obliterate his entire sense of self. He staggers around like a blinking amnesiac on discovering he was adopted, no longer sure of his start or his stock. When the full horror finally dawns, he all but disintegrates. Half-dressed, hardly verbal, he curls up on the floor in a foetal ball. A digital clock had counted down the seconds — somewhat contrivedly, speeding up to keep pace.

It's unnecessary, given the extent of Oedipus's devastation. His tragedy isn't just a tragic descent, but a complete loss of self — an unbecoming that supplants a promised becoming. That is underlined by Hildegard Bechtler's white-walled space — half office, half home, fully temporary. It's cleared out over the course of the play, leaving Oedipus alone in an existential void.

THE TIMES

Ann Treneman

★★★★

It's election night and there's an Obama-like feel of hope and expectation in the air. A news clip flashes up on a screen that shows a buzzy crowd with "Vote Oedipus" placards. The man himself, in this last TV appearance before the results, gives an impromptu speech about why politics must expose the secrets and lies of the past.

This is Oedipus as we haven't seen him, an entirely modern politician as envisioned by the director-writer Robert Icke in this Dutch-language production from Internationaal Theater Amsterdam, part of the Edinburgh International Festival. There are references to Barack Obama, but to me he seems much more like Jed Bartlet of *The West Wing*. The Big O wears an air of invincibility as he ducks into his campaign headquarters and we see him, in the flesh, exultant, preparing for a night with his family.

First, though, Oedipus calls for his version of a pollster: Tiresias is a blind visionary who infuriates Oedipus by telling him that he doesn't know who he is. "Ik ben ik," Mr O declares in Dutch (the English translation that flashes above for once superfluous). Tiresias now says that he will lose the election and kill his father and have sex with his mother. This leads O to reach for the nearest bread board (so Dutch) and slam it, vertically, on to the table.

Icke, known for his revelatory interpretations of the classics such as his spellbinding *Oresteia* in 2015, is most associated with the Almeida Theatre in north London, but here he is working with the company previously known as Toneelgroep Amsterdam, the artistic home of the global theatrical superstar Ivo van Hove, to whom Icke is often compared.

It's a superb interpretation of Sophocles' story that feels modern and timeless. It oozes confidence, and Hildegard Bechtler's open-plan office and kitchen set is sleek and inviting. The family dinner scene is particularly riveting. The children are Kennedy-esque, all hair and teeth and preposterous confidence. Their grandmother Merope, with her grey bun and taciturn ways, is played by Frieda Pittoors with total authority.

But it is the first couple who fascinate the most. Hans Kesting is a searching and intense Oedipus, and Marieke Heebink is superb as his sultry wife, Jocaste, complex and passionate. The flame is certainly still alive between them as they dance with the fates.

Icke loves an onstage countdown clock, and this show (just under two hours) has a large one. But, as the story unfolded, with some box-set gripping moments, I found myself wishing for time to slow down, for the play to be longer. Sophocles would be pleased to have become a modern cliffhanger thriller.

THE STAGE

Natasha Tripney

★★★★

The clock is ticking. Robert Icke's reworking of Sophocles – his first production for Internationaal Theater Amsterdam, performed in Dutch with surtitles – casts Oedipus as a politician on the night of an election.

The production takes place in his campaign office, the clock counting down the minutes in real time as Oedipus, his family and staff, await the election results. Over the course of two hours, secrets will emerge that will steer him towards tragedy, beginning with his decision to dredge up the circumstances of the death of previous leader Laius in a car crash. The audience is fully aware of the destination but the production's power lies in the way it reveals the shape of the road, the awful dawning of the truth.

Icke employs many devices that have featured in his previous work. Along with the clock, there's scene-setting video footage care of Tal Yarden and a sleek, minimalist set by Hildegard Bechtler, full of tastefully plain furniture and an abundance of concealing screens. To say the aesthetic is familiar would be an understatement, but at the same time Icke makes these classical characters feel contemporary, nuanced and human, working the same magic as he did in his adaptation of the Oresteia, drilling down through the emotional layers of the text. It's not quite as poetic or expansive as that earlier adaptation, but it's no less potent.

As his dad expires off-stage from cancer, Oedipus fixates on the prophecy delivered by Tiresias. He attempts to shrug it off, but he can't. An early scene in which Polynices comes out to his family underscores the play's themes, but the real strength of Icke's production is the way it makes it clear that this is as much Jocasta's tragedy as that of Oedipus.

Marieke Heebink – a magnificent Medea in Simon Stones' production for the company – plays Jocasta as a woman who has survived an abusive relationship and has now found a contentment that will soon be brutally ripped away from her. The devastating scene in which Heebink reveals the full horror of what she went through, the extent of her misuse at the hands of powerful men, her child taken from her when she was little more than a child herself, is captivatingly played. The sense of long-buried pain rising up in her is palpable, like bile in the throat.

Hans Kesting's charismatic Oedipus is equally compelling. The scene in which they cling to one another, after the truth of the situation becomes clear, is incredibly powerful. They're both superb performers – the whole ensemble is strong but they're operating on another level – and they are electric together. Longing, loss and love radiate from them in equal measure.

The ITA house-style can be unremittingly clinical and this production does little to alter that – it's starting to feel a little repetitive. But Icke has a lightness of touch that Ivo van Hove sometimes lacks. His grasp of tension and the inexorable is second to none, and his ability to take these plays and reshape them while retaining their essence remains impressive.
