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### Thebes in London

- *The Burial At Thebes*  
Shakespeare's Globe; 12 October 2008
- *Oedipus*  
Olivier Theatre; 29 November 2008

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Last autumn, I was able to see two newly commissioned, different takes on Sophocles' Theban Cycle staged in London. The first, *The Burial At Thebes*, was an opera in one act directed by Derek Walcott performed at The Globe, using Seamus Heaney's 2004 reworking of the *Antigone* as the libretto. The second was the National Theatre's *Oedipus*, also without an interval, in a new version by Frank McGuinness, directed by Jonathan Kent, and starring Ralph Fiennes.

*The Burial at Thebes*, hyped in endless pre-production articles appearing in most broadsheets, was all set to be a masterpiece: both Walcott and Heaney are Nobel Prize Winners for Literature and this would not only be the first operatic version of any of Heaney's work, but the first opera to be staged at The Globe. Unfortunately, perhaps as a punishment for the ancient Greek crime of *hubris*, the production fell far short of the hyped-up bar.

The performance came across as a poor, amateur production, with bizarre rag-tag costuming, lazy casting (the chorus was made up of Creon's government cabinet, complete with all types of stereotyping: the Minister for Culture was a woman, the Minister for Information was a young, white, ponytailed man, the Minister for War was a large black man), and dreadful blocking. The Globe warns that 'no seat does not have a view obscured at some point', and most directors and actors therefore block the action accordingly to make the most of the various sightlines around the auditorium. Yet most of the actors appeared to stand next to a pillar for most of the performance, and the chorus spent most of their time sitting along the back of the stage – from my seat, only slightly right of centre, this meant that two chorus members were almost always obscured, and that the front third of The Globe's thrust stage was rarely used.

However, I shall spare you a further detailed list of all of its shortcomings – a glance at the theatre pages of most London and national newspapers for the third week of October will give you scathing reviews galore (Richard Morrison’s comment in *The Times* on 14 October that ‘[saying this] is as dull as ditchwater is a monstrous slur on stagnant puddles’<sup>1</sup> and Edward Bhesania’s final flourish from the same date in online paper *The Stage* that ‘Burial at Thebes... like Antigone herself – though more deservedly so – ...could well do with being walled up in a tomb and forgotten’<sup>2</sup> are both particularly expressive). Instead, I aim to focus on the comparisons that one can make when viewing this modern open-air opera, and considering how ancient Greek dramas may have originally been performed.

As this was an opera, *The Burial At Thebes* offered the student of ancient drama the opportunity to see a Greek play being sung (alongside a small amount of interpretative dance). Ancient Greek tragedies were in verse, and often sung, with the chorus dancing in tight formation. Whilst some modern stagings and many translations are in blank verse, this is not necessarily something to which the modern ear is attuned. Therefore having the majority of the play being sung added perhaps a more traditional flavour to the play, as well as giving the modern spectator a taste of a singing Antigone.

Unfortunately, the singing was at the expense of the words for almost the entirety of the performance. The libretto was helpfully printed in the programme, but continually dipping back and forth to check the words meant that some of the action (not that there was much) was missed. The music was little help in this aspect: adding little to the production, its monotony actually took much away.

The main casualty was any sense of energy. I may already have hinted at a lack of dynamic movement onstage (most ‘action’ was entirely static, and usually obscured by a pillar), and there was also little dynamic aural action: when burning exhortations were rendered as long, drawn-out wails, it was hard to get a feel of any urgency or panic.

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<sup>1</sup> [http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts\\_and\\_entertainment/stage/opera/article4938354.ece](http://entertainment.timesonline.co.uk/tol/arts_and_entertainment/stage/opera/article4938354.ece)

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.thestage.co.uk/reviews/review.php/22103/the-burial-at-thebes>

The production appeared to take some cues from its Shakespearean environment, and the only spoken-word elements to the opera were two long expositional speeches (the traditional 'messenger speeches', an integral part of Greek tragedy), which were given by 'lower class' characters. While this allowed some sense of energetic delivery back into the production, the audience were certainly not hanging on every word (having the script printed in the programme compounded this; it was easier to just read the speeches quickly and then drift off watching a helicopter through the aperture in the roof).

Another benefit to those wanting the feel of an original production was the fact that it was staged in the open air. Obviously The Globe is a recreation of an Elizabethan theatre, but it can be seen as a vague approximation of the ancient Greek theatre (it is certainly more realistic than sitting in the dark in a Victorian proscenium arch theatre). I was lucky enough to attend a matinee performance – thankfully on a lovely late autumn afternoon (I fear that rain would have cleared the theatre). Whilst ancient Greek performers would presumably not need to try and drown out aeroplanes on a flight path overhead, the lack of stage lighting was certainly an original factor. We have become accustomed to theatrical lighting being used to indicate time of day, the passage of time, location, mood, and suspense. Warm, bright sunshine was an ironic jar to the grim, dark events unfolding onstage.

Jonathan Kent's *Oedipus* was performed in an almost opposite situation: in the National Theatre's Olivier Theatre it was a starkly lit production, often with parts of the stage in darkness; a revolving set dominated by a giant set of bronze doors; and whilst the set on this 'open stage' was circular, the audience were sat in a fan-shape to the front only, more in the manner of the proscenium arch rather than around the front *and* sides of The Globe's thrust stage. This performance was also primarily spoken, but as a nice comparison to *The Burial At Thebes*, the choral odes were chanted or sung.

However, unlike the dire monotony of *The Burial At Thebes*, these sung interludes worked. The chorus – made up entirely of men (Clare Higgins as Jocasta had the only speaking female role in the production) – started their first choral ode by chanting the names of deities whilst sitting at a table, as if praying or saying grace. This then made it easier for the audience to accept the notion of chanting and singing

– alongside the occasional dancing – as part of this world as created by the production.

Importantly, especially when in contrast with *The Burial At Thebes*, the delivery of this chorus (which was certainly clear to understand – no printed text required here) had all the dynamic urgency of the spoken word, and did not slow down or dilute the action of the play.

Ralph Fiennes (who appeared to be in his Voldemort costume from the Harry Potter film franchise, and doing his best Patrick Stewart impression) made an imposing Oedipus. His initial entrance was framed by the huge doors, emphasising the liminal qualities of the character – on the threshold of monstrosity, a man who is his own children's brother. His interaction with Clare Higgins' unconsciously maternal Jocasta underlined the fact that this was not just a drama affecting the city of Thebes, but a bitter family tragedy. The choral interludes, often accompanied by foot-stomping and slow clapping, gave only an ominous respite to the fraught drama of each episode.

The production was not without its faults. The set, which was an amazing feat of mechanical engineering, was perhaps too clever for itself. The stage was a bronzed dome, with an off-centre set of giant doors, and – rather bizarrely – a picnic table, over to stage right. The stage itself and the doors would revolve, perhaps in a manner to suggest the passage of time or maybe even a countdown – the doors only returned to their original position right at the end of the performance – but the picnic table, despite being *on* the revolving stage, did not. I know that I certainly spent far too long working out the logistics of this, and therefore definitely missed some of what was happening on stage.

The slightly domed stage also distracted attention from the action. The curvature of the stage – perhaps it was to approximate a shield, or the top of a globe? – was not consistent. At some points the actors were clearly having to stand on a slope; at others, as the stage revolved, it was a level acting field. This slope gave most of the cast a bizarre gait at times, and certainly made Ralph Fiennes' initial stance very striking (although since he appeared to walk more normally on the more level stage, I cannot assume that he was enacting Oedipus' etymological limp).

As the performance ended under an artificial sunlight streaming out from the translucent back wall, indicating the judgment of the sun god Apollo, I could only think that this production had succeeded in incorporating and invigorating original elements within modern stagings of classical drama where the genuinely sunlit *The Burial At Thebes* had failed.