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# Rosetta

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**Review: *Stinkfoot* by Jeff James; The Yard Theatre, 23<sup>rd</sup>  
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*Rachel Starling*

*University of Birmingham.*

Since the mid twentieth century we have seen Classical plays return to the stage in various forms, whether in the original Greek for a more highbrow audience, as political statements during times of upheaval or unrest, or simply presented in translation for the sake of introducing new audiences to an ancient and influential art form. During this Classical revival, plays and characters with which we can most identify or who present the greatest shock factor are more likely to be recycled on stage – from the rebellion and familial dedication of Antigone in her title play or the unavoidable horror and revulsion of Oedipus' actions, to the heart-wrenching ambiguity of Medea's moral compass. These plays call to directors for their ability to evoke pathos and to leave the audience wondering what the right course of action would have been for these unfortunate characters. But when there are thirty tragedies to choose from, it is inevitable that some will be left behind. With this in mind, it was particularly refreshing to see that director Jeff James had endeavoured to bring Sophocles' *Philoctetes* back to life in the form of his adapted work, *Stinkfoot*. *Philoctetes* stands out amongst the surviving tragedies for its portrayal of pure hopelessness. Whilst we see a plethora of suffering in Greek Tragedy, the characters that suffer so greatly rarely do so in complete isolation – there is always a chorus to hear of their woes, or a companion to help them survive their plight. Although there is, as ever, a Chorus in Sophocles' work, they speak mainly to Neoptolemus, advising him of what to do and how to do it. In *Stinkfoot* the cast is stripped to a bare minimum of three actors, removing outside influences and intensifying the sense of isolation.

The script remains extremely loyal to the original text up until the final lines. This script is adapted to suit a modern audience; colloquial in all the right places, but still getting across the exact meaning of the original text in a modern lexis, which is a great achievement. To further the sense of abandonment and despair the scenery is minimalist, with only a bath for Philoctetes' rags, boxes which represent the pitiable

clutter of an abandoned hero, and two vultures left to remind us that death is hovering over this suffering figure. As it is a reception play certain changes are to be expected within the text, and one such change was the casting of a woman for Odysseus. The technique of gender swapping is usually carried out to encourage us to look at a character from different angles, yet this switch neither added a new dimension nor detracted from the plot, and seemed like a gender change for the sake of equal casting.

Despite this, Rosie Thomson played Odysseus admirably, presenting a ruthless and brutal character with whom it is difficult to sympathise. In *Philoctetes*, Odysseus is absent for over half the play as Philoctetes and Neoptolemus converse in a cave, yet in *Stinkfoot*, even though Odysseus is physically away from the cave, Thomson remains on the edge of the stage prompting Neoptolemus to give certain information and to react in certain ways, creating a sinister devil-on-your-shoulder effect wherein the influence and manipulation of Odysseus is inescapable. The production did not use stage hands, leaving the actress, whilst in character, to move the set around and to adjust the lighting. When Philoctetes collapses to the floor in pain we are given a vile but effective show as Odysseus throws three bags of treacle at the ground by Philoctetes' foot, representing the explosion of his pus-filled wound and the all-encompassing pain that this causes. To have Odysseus throw this instead of a stage hand is a very deliberate move, as it represents that Odysseus is not only the cause of his suffering as he left him on Lemnos but, due to the heartless manner of the bags being thrown, it adds a sadistic element to the character.

Due to the ever present manipulation of Odysseus, Joshua Miles' Neoptolemus is much weaker than his Sophoclean counterpart. He is presented as having no true autonomy, acting out Odysseus' orders with no desire to do so, and knowing that it goes against his beliefs of what a noble man should do. Yet alongside this susceptibility he is also shown as kind and considerate, without any hint of the brutal man that will kill Priam at the altar. He is most certainly moulded into a more sympathetic character in this production, as he deeply cares for Philoctetes and his ordeal, even when attempting to harm his chances of survival; his anguish as he is pulled in two directions is palpable.

Philoctetes himself is a sight to behold. Coated in treacle made to represent the ooze from his festering foot, he is the living embodiment of disease. Alongside this, his entire leg is wrapped in cling film over thick layers of this goo which drags behind him as he walks, arching and staggering towards Neoptolemus and Odysseus. This physical theatre is visually dramatic and leaves the audience cringing at every stumble. Daniel Millar plays Philoctetes as a man who has been alone for so long that he can barely speak to begin with, stuttering his way through desperate words to find out who has invaded his cave. Even in his calmer moments Millar intermittently allows his character's hands to shake, reminding us that he is not only constantly in pain, but traumatised by his isolation after a life of comradeship and the mutual brotherhood of war. This brings the text into a more modern mind set – Sophocles has Philoctetes coherent right from his first encounter with Neoptolemus, whereas Jeff James visualises him as more of a traumatised soldier.

While this reception play is born of a Tragedy, it is not a Tragedy in itself. There are moments that, as a Classicist, are strikingly off – for example, there are throwaway lines given by Philoctetes that, due to the way they are delivered, are played for laughs. And yet, with its modern setting and vernacular, I found myself able to laugh along with the rest of the audience. In a way that is reminiscent of the Tragi-Comedy *Iphigenia at Tauris*, the play turns our expectations around in the final section, leading to a happy ending but with a darker challenge to it. By the end of the play Neoptolemus can no longer bear to be the cause of suffering and he agrees to take Philoctetes home. The ghost of Herakles is transformed into a final desperate attempt by Odysseus to get Philoctetes to understand the reality of the situation, as she stands in an obvious disguise that fools nobody. As Philoctetes and Neoptolemus exit the stage, Odysseus exclaims “this isn't how the story ends!” Whilst breaking the fourth wall and creating a supposedly happy ending, the audience manages to forget the point of this mission which is rather understated in the play; the need to win the Trojan War. Without Herakles' bow and the aid of Philoctetes, Troy cannot fall. An ancient audience would know the importance of one man's suffering to save a nation, yet this modern production is more concerned by characters on an individual basis, and the relief of Philoctetes' suffering was enough to justify the loss of the war. This creates an interesting contrast and shows how versatile a Classical play can be when it is adapted with a radically different cultural aim in mind.