



# 'Oedipus' for the times succeeds

By ROBINSON DUFFY  
For the News-Miner

Have you ever had one of those days? You know, when nothing seems to be going right; you start out as king of the world, but then everything unravels around you.

Oedipus had one of those days, and we all get to watch.

The fact that Sophocles' masterpiece is limited to the space of about 24 hours, coupled with the unreachable expectations from playgoers familiar with the story of "Oedipus Rex," makes this a difficult show to pull off.

But Theatre UAF does an admirable job, making the production its own, infusing it with ideas and images relevant to today's audiences.

In essence, director Anatoly Antohin is saying to the audience, "You think you know Oedipus? You don't know anything."

And he's right.

All the stories we associate with Oedipus—killing his father, marrying his mother, the sphinx's riddle, his triumphant rise to the throne—they all happened years before the action of the plays begins. These events are alluded to, but do not make up the plot.

This is not a high-adrenaline drama full of sharp twists and shocking turns of fate. It is a meandering mindscape revealing a man as he slowly discovers his own nature.

And I emphasize "slowly." The play drags at times—painfully—especially in the second half, after Oedipus has discovered his crimes and emotes about the powerlessness of man before the crushing hand of fate and the gods.

When Oedipus emotes, he EMOTES. Thankfully, Levi Ben-Israel is a powerful actor with an excellent command of the craft. His Oedipus is strong, arrogant and utterly doomed. I would have liked to see a little more range from him, however. As Oedipus

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the Politician, Ben-Israel is superb, rattling off rhetoric. But his Oedipus the Human was less believable. It's not quite clear if Ben-Israel's Oedipus sorrows because he committed crimes or because he got caught—a decision any actor tackling the role needs to make.

The entire ensemble worked well together, with standout performances from several actors. Matthew Krell's Creon was perfect, looking down on Oedipus, his arrogant brother-in-law/nephew, with scornful contempt.

Jon-Kiefer Bowne, as the blind prophet Teiresias, continued to show his incredible knack for playing wizened figureheads. I hope in the future, for Bowne's sake, he can escape this typecasting and use his powerful delivery and commanding physique in more leading roles.

Disappointing, however, was By Valentine as Oedipus' mother and wife, Jocasta. While she and Ben-Israel had a wonderfully bizarre chemistry between them, she often was lacking in energy and direction. Her motivations and feelings were not properly telegraphed to the audience, leaving her character contrived.

The Chorus, a difficult aspect of ancient Greek theater, was handled surprisingly well in this production. Letting veteran actor Chip Brookes lead the chorus was a wise move. His dramatic timing brought life to the chorus' surprisingly long monologues, while the other six members supported the themes through artistic tableaux.

Visually the play is dark, eerie and perfectly suited to the story. The minimalist set, designed by Timaree McCormick, features a prominent staircase spanning the width of the stage. It is touted by



John Hagen/News-Miner

**MODERN OEDIPUS**—Cast members of the Theatre UAF production of "Oedipus Rex."

as the "largest staircase ever created in Fairbanks." It certainly is impressive; a black monolith rising above the stage, topped with razor wire and a screen projecting images of blind and deformed men wracked in torment—imagery of Oedipus' tortured mind.

The space McCormick has created is huge. Thanks to the masterful use of all three dimensions, it often dwarfs the characters, making them small and insignificant—a beautiful effect.

Kade Mendelowitz's lighting design was fluid and full of artistry. He uses the monotone set as a palette for his lights, painting moods and themes to enhance the action. He utilizes a wonderful, hatching effect that makes everything, even the actors, appear corroded.

The costumes were somewhat distracting. An incongruous mix of modern military garb, ball

gowns, royal vestments, Greek tunics and ancient robes, they didn't seem to have a common thread connecting them. The color schemes were thematically provocative, but the mix of styles and time periods left me puzzled.

The production's notes say that "art is rarely ever about what it appears to be," and that is very true of this production. This play is not about the Greeks. Antohin has tried to make a play that is about America in 2005; an America where we all need to do a little self-reflection and discovery, ask difficult questions and take responsibility for the plagues of our society.

It's a noble endeavor, not easily accomplished. But Theatre UAF's "Oedipus Rex" succeeds.

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