

# Oedipus: perfectly complex but a bit under-powered

When, in 1945, Laurence Olivier's Oedipus finally discovered the grim truth – that he had accidentally slain his own father (Laius) years earlier and married his mother (Jocasta), bringing parricide and incest to the heart of Thebes, he let out a howl that entered the theatrical annals. It was a sound so intense it made those who heard it, according to the critic Kenneth Tynan, feel as if they'd been at the Somme together. The screech was borrowed from nature: either an ermine caught in a trap or a baby seal, it's not quite clear which.

No such blood-curdling cry is heard in Robert Icke's 2018 version, presented in Dutch with surtitles by the Internationaal Theater Amsterdam, run by Ivo Van Hove, a kind of inspirational father-figure to the prolific 32-year-old hotshot. Instead, when the awful revelation arrives – a moment signposted in advance from the first second of the show, a large electronic clock ticking down to 00 – Hans Kesting's shell-shocked kingpin goes mute.

He has just won a general election in this topical, modernised account, promising to purge sickness from the land. Minutes later, however, he and Marieke Heebink's Jocasta are saying good-bye in an intimate fashion – there's a half-naked romp on the floor that leaves Kesting lying abandoned, prone, legs in the air, like a helpless foetus.

Icke made his name with his monumental, and coolly modern, reboot of *The Oresteia* at the Almeida in 2015 – the equivalent of a single-sitting box-set. His tendency with classics is to shape the text according to his bold vision, kick away inherited baggage. Here he enlarges Jocasta's psychological hinterland – making it plain, in a poignant confessional delivered in a corner of the office-suite that has provided Oedipus and his team with a makeshift campaign HQ, that she was groomed and raped by Laius as a girl. Her devotion to the baby she had to abandon (this damaged man she can now call her son) means "Oedipus" is her tragedy too. "I can't lose you twice," she says – and (minor spoiler alert, the play's been around since 429BC) heads off to kill herself.

The evening usually ends with the self-blinded king going into exile, as the chorus proclaim "Count no man happy until he dies". In this version, the verse has been ditched in favour of ordinary speech, there's no chorus and the emphasis falls on Oedipus asserting his right to gaze on his mother's corpse. He was blinded to the truth before – now he wants to confront it head-on.

Freud, who regarded Hamlet (which Icke has also directed, ably) as a neurotic who repressed his mother love, might have approved of the suggestion that the pair remain smitten. Broadly, the reading intrigues, although the blind, seer-like Tiresias looks too glaring an interloper from a more conventional (classical Greek) world of gods, fate and foreboding. The script's understatement – not helped by the distancing effect of surtitles – gives the two-hour piece a slight waiting-room ambience that the hectic count-down can't fully dispel.

Icke-world is getting as familiar as Ikea. Hermetic (often functional and sterile) environments, a rumble of sound beneath the dialogue, savagery lurking beneath contemporary, clean-cut exteriors. Oedipus here stares in the mirror and asks: who am I? Is there an identity crisis looming for this fêted director? I admire his intellectual mission. I just wish he'd shake up his house style a bit.