

Oedipus review — Sophocles reworked as chilling thriller

★★★★

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's 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.