

Oedipus in Edinburgh — Robert Icke's election-night update is slow and teasing

★★★★☆

Oedipus is not yet king in Robert Icke's slick modernisation of Sophocles's tragedy. Set on election night, as votes are counted, it finds this polished professional on the cusp of fulfilling his political destiny. Obama-style posters line his campaign HQ. Exit polls point to a landslide lead. He has already told TV news crews his first presidential plans. They prove presumptuous. His fate has already been cast.

That line between public and private, personal and professional comes to the fore here. As in his Hamlet, Icke's drama (for Internationaal Theater Amsterdam, performed in Dutch with English surtitles) underlines the duality of the political family. Hans Kesting's energised Oedipus swaps his suit for sweatpants and clears the office floor for a celebratory family meal — their last before they become public property.

They already carry political capital — Marieke Heebink's Jocaste the spit of a supportive spouse, his three kids proof of his paternal credentials — but each has personal secrets. One son's heartbreak emerges. Another is outed, gently, over dinner. As Oedipus toasts his wife, his children cringe: TMI. Icke's text toys with that central taboo — Jocaste joking that she has three sons, not two: "One's 45." It significantly ups the stakes too: a whole family is on the line.

Oedipus can feel overly condensed: all revelation, no action, a wait for the penny to drop. Icke draws that out, so tense it's teasing, breaking the slow realisation into stages. The first, confirmation of his complicity in the car crash that killed Jocaste's first husband, could kill off his political career in itself. "It's the same accident," Kesting sighs, shoulders slumped. The two that follow fast obliterate his entire sense of self. He staggers around like a blinking amnesiac on discovering he was adopted, no longer sure of his start or his stock. When the full horror finally dawns, he all but disintegrates. Half-dressed, hardly verbal, he curls up on the floor in a foetal ball. A digital clock had counted down the seconds — somewhat contrivedly, speeding up to keep pace.

It's unnecessary, given the extent of Oedipus's devastation. His tragedy isn't just a tragic descent, but a complete loss of self — an unbecoming that supplants a promised becoming. That is underlined by Hildegard Bechtler's white-walled space — half office, half home, fully temporary. It's cleared out over the course of the play, leaving Oedipus alone in an existential void.