

The Greeks Streamlines Sophocles's Theban Trilogy Into Three Nimble, Strikingly Modern One-Acts

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Throughout [Burning Coal Theatre Company's *The Greeks*](#), Ian Finley and Alex Tobey's nimble and strikingly contemporary adaptation of Sophocles's Theban trilogy, the playwrights remind us that the gods are capricious in bestowing favors.

That was certainly true last Friday night, as the storms that caused me to miss the first five minutes perfectly underscored the remainder of the performance. When the foolish, fateful pronouncements of Oedipus, Polynices, and Creon in *Oedipus Tyrannus*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone* were answered more than once by real thunderbolts (plus an eerie chorus of emergency broadcast tones from phones in the audience), little doubt remained that the gods were near and clearly not amused.

It took considerable discipline to reduce these pillars of world drama to three streamlined one-acts. Finley's script and Tobey's economical staging for *Oedipus Tyrannus* essentialize the trappings of power in one instantly recognizable modern icon: a press-conference podium festooned with microphones. Oedipus (a crisp Sean Wellington), Thebes's chief executive, mans it confidently at first, but as developments undermine his position, he clings to it more and more like a life preserver—or an anchor—in heavy seas.

Modern politics and technology deftly infiltrate these tales. As the sardonic seer, Tiresias, George Jack sneers that Oedipus has brought him to the palace as a meaningless photo opportunity: "a blind man, here for the optics." After Oedipus falls, his calculating functionary, Creon (Mark Filiaci), claims that his "great relationship with the press" could have buried his scandal in a week "if we gave them a better story to run with." And it's ironic, maybe even prophetic, when Trump's favorite social-media platform helps seal the fate of the tyrant in *Antigone*, as Ellie Barone, playing the besieged, determined title character, debates mediated activism with him.

As the Chorus, the forthright Jess Jones and Jonathan Able give it to us straight as they guide us from CAM Raleigh's expansive main floor to its catacomb-like lower galleries for the final act. As with earlier translations, their task isn't just expositional but also instructive. "There are some words you ought to know," they say, before defining the ominous Greek terms of true disaster. A tragedy, they remind us, is not a story where bad things happen, but one "where what must happen, happens."

Their tutelage is timely. As the Chorus reinforces the tragic themes, particularly in the relentless momentum of the final act, the reason why they must do so is clear. Exile, hubris, and autocracy are still on the march, 2,500 years after Sophocles first wrote three plays to solve them. It seems the lessons of classical tragedy will repeat indefinitely until they have been learned.

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