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BWW Reviews: The Antaeus Company Successfully Mounts the World Premiere of THE CURSE OF OEDIPUS

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by Gil Kaan

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Desiree Mee Jung, Terrell Telford Photo by Maia Rosenfeld

The Curse of Oedipus/by Kenneth Cavander/directed by Casey Stangl/Antaeus Theater/thru August 10, 2014

Sophocles's classic Oedipus trilogy has been successfully re-envisioned, incorporating various versions from other ancient Greek poets while updating the language. Original themes (lust for power, right and wrong, the priorities of love over loyalties) need no updating to the current times. Playwright Kenneth Cavander's found the ideal collaborator in The Antaeus Company for finessing his original two night's worth of performances into its current smartly-written, easily comprehensible, two-and-a-half hour narrative.

Casey Stangl deftly directs her large fittingly-cast group of 22 talented performers staging them off and on the mosaic-tiled central square stage; whether in united protest, war rally, or mass mourning as parents or friends of sacrificial infants. The crowd scenes and the more intimate ones move at an efficient, quick pace. The one-hour-plus first act flew by.

The god Apollo (well played by Barry Creyton with a delicious Patrick Stewart-ish devilishness) and semi-god Dionysus (Stoney Westmoreland having so much fun with the hedonistic human half of his character) hold court over the proceedings perched on their balcony as if watching from the heavens. They, nattily riffing off each other, provide a funny and informative commentary as they both predict events before they occur and justify them afterwards.



(L to R): Keri Safran, Eve Gordon, Reba Waters Thomas, Chad Borden Photo by Maia Rosenfeld

Evening begins with mellow conga drums played enticingly by Geno Monteiro. Turns out Monteiro's more integral to the play than mere background music. Monteiro's subtle command of a range of percussion instruments bookmark and emphasize the defining moments of the actions (i.e., mob attack, impending arrivals, death scenes, the destructive earthquakes).

After Apollo's and Dionysus' intro, the story launches into the choosing of the four Thebian infants to be sacrificed to the powerful, riddle-asking Sphinx. Only with the correct answer to the Sphinx' riddle will the sacrifices be halted. King Laius' advisor Creon picks the four names with, unfortunately, the fourth name his own son

Haimon. In desperation, Creon offers up as a reward, his own sister Jocasta, to the solver of the riddle. A stranger named Oedipus enters Thebes, solves the Sphinx' riddle, and thereby, saves the four babies and future babies from being sacrificed. Coincidentally, King Laius has just been killed returning to Thebes. So, in need of a new king, Creon crowns Oedipus much to the delight of the grateful Thebians. Oh, and as mentioned before, the solver of the riddle gets the just-widowed queen Jocasta's hand. And, yes, the widowed queen is the same Jocasta, Creon's sister.

After years of prosperity, a plague befalls Thebes' crops and newborns. Teiresias, a revered blind soothsayer (a solid Bernard K. Addison), foresees the cure as ridding of the poison still evident in Thebes. As fate would have it, the poison is King Oedipus himself. Seems that unbeknownst to Oedipus, he has fulfilled the gods' prophesies that the son of Laius would kill his father and then sleep with his own mother.

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Chad Borden and Kwana Martinez Photo by Maia Rosenfeld

Tony Amendola excels as Creon, the wise confidante turned power-hungry tyrant. Amendola's Creon possesses all the requisite gravitas and in-the-shadows humility required of a king's right hand man.

Terrell Tilford commands the stage, as he should, as the bold and conquering Oedipus. Bravo to Tilford's eventual transformation into a pitiful blind beggar as he's exiled in the countryside.

As Jocasta, the wife/mother of Oedipus, Eve Gordon quite believably manipulates her statesman brother and seduces the new hunky stranger (pre-maternal relation knowledge). Gordon makes the very most of her moments on

stage, especially in her final "Curse You" speech.

Chad Borden masterfully underplays the character named Manservant, Laius' "favorite" assistant. Borden's Manservant knows his place in Thebes' pecking order. But his perceived lower-class status and lack of knowledge prove vital to more than one character of this play.

Now grown-up, Oedipus and Jocasta's four children and Creon's son make a second act appearance. Each actor as the respective siblings individually make their mark. As the fatally feuding brothers, J.B. Waterman nails the wronged, trusting Polyneices with Douglas Dickerman's perfectly pathetic as the power-hungry Eteocles. As the royal daughters, Lindsay LaVanchy grows a spine for her Ismene while Kwana Martinez stands up nobly as Antigone, who's, by the way, inconveniently in love with Creon's son Haimon (a sturdy Adam J. Smith).



The Corinth cast Photo by Maia Rosenfeld

Jonathon Lamer makes an impression in his smaller role as Theseus, the fair-minded king of Athens.

The versatile chorus (more than capably doing double, sometimes triple, duty as various herdsmen, soldiers, farmwives) include Ned Schmidtko, John Achom, Rafael Goldstein, Chris Clowers, Reba Waters Thomas, Susan Boyd Joyce, Desiree Mee Jung, and Keri Safran.

Applause to all tech elements that certainly live up to Antaeus Theater reputable standards. Francois-Pierre Couture designed the effective lighting and the minimalist set (with stretchy white cords hung throughout, acting as jail bars,

cobwebs, and earthquake rumblings). Kudos to the totality of the earthquake effects of Couture's lighting and the loosened cords, complemented by Monteiro's sounds. Very nice!

E. B. Brooks' use of the timeless linen costumes and 'hip' suits for the regal men give a modernizing feel to this fable tragedy.



Terrell Tilford Photo by Maia Rosenfeld

As in Antaeus Company practice, this play has been double cast. The cast being critiqued--"Corinth" cast rotates with the "Thebes," and with everyone mixing it up, as the cast called "Athens."

The Curse of Oedipus began as a two-nighter and has been edited down to its current two-and-a-half hours. Another half-hour shorter would make for a more streamlined show, but with so many good and/or important bits, what could

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