

Mash-Ups of Classic Plays (Featuring Abba!)

By Steven Leigh Morris
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There are no sly topical winks in Kenneth Cavander's problematic adaptation of the *Oedipus* trilogy. Cavander's new play, *The Curse of Oedipus*, which just opened at Antaeus Company, is pure classical gas.

Nor are there any modern-day army fatigues or national insignias worn on shoulders in Casey Stangl's beautiful, skillful staging — performed confidently and clearly —, accompanied throughout by Geno Monteiro's drumming on an array of percussive instruments. The blend of sounds and words allows the emotions underlying Cavander's play to swell and retreat, like breathing. (Monteiro, like the entire ensemble, is "partner cast," meaning that audiences never know which, of two actors learning every role, they're going to see at any given performance.)

In E.B. Brooks' costumes, there are tunics and trousers that support the play's reach for universal rather than topical concerns. Spider-web ropes dangle from the sky around the decapitated and tilting Greco pillars of François-Pierre Couture's set. Couture's cinematic lighting provides an often-smoky atmosphere to accentuate the beams that shine down, also like pillars.

The story combines Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* and *Oedipus at Colonus* with Euripides' *Antigone*. Sophocles wrote the more famous *Antigone*, but Cavander's stir-fry derives more from the few fragments of Euripides' text that still exist, in which the god Dionysos intervenes to relieve the relentless agonies stemming from one woman's noble determination, and the fearful silence of the townsfolk who support her, to honor the memory of her late brother, all in open defiance of the increasingly tyrannical king.

There's good reason to interlink the legends. You probably know that, despite his best efforts to avoid his infamous "curse," braggart Oedipus (Terrell Tilford, much brawn and bullying) fulfills it by murdering his dad, King Laius, and marrying his own mother, Jocasta (Eve Gordon) — not realizing at the time that either is his relative. Consistent with Sophocles, Cavander's Oedipus bursts into Thebes from Corinth, and with the words "I'll take care of it" promptly solves the riddle of the dreaded Sphinx, sparing Thebes from the Sphinx's demand that four children be sacrificed each month. "Now there's a man!" Jocasta swoons, gazing at Oedipus. But as the play amply demonstrates, one minute you're a hero, the next you're a blind, homeless wretch, cursed and reviled by those you once saved.

Among those children saved by Oedipus is the son of Jocasta's brother, Creon (Tony Amendola). Creon and his son (Adam J. Smith) figure prominently in both *Oedipus* and *Antigone*. It could be argued that Creon, as the figure of authority among mortals, emerges as the central character in Cavander's play.

Antigone (Kwana Martinez), daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta, defies her uncle Creon's (Tony Amendola) edict that of her two warring brothers, Polyneices and Eteocles (J.B. Waterman and Douglas Dickerman), who were supposed to have shared command of Thebes but were each killed at the other's hands, only Eteocles should be given an official dignified burial. Because Creon sees

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Polyneices as a traitor, he orders Polyneices' corpse be left above ground to rot. Antigone contends that to leave her brother to the mercy of vultures goes against divine law — and is caught burying him. Creon, now something of a control freak, orders his niece enshrined alive in a tomb.

So far, it's still just the three plays crammed into one, which raises the question of how the fusion benefits any of them. The dubious answer comes from tweaking the plot to keep, say, Jocasta, who otherwise would be dead, around for *Colonus* and *Antigone*. And there's the physical presence of two gods throughout the story, tying it together: Apollo, god of medicine and healing (Barry Creyton), and the god of fertility and wine, Dionysos (Stoney Westmoreland), who gaze down on the spectacle and spar philosophically, each with detached yet twinkling wit, regarding who deserves influence over the mortals below. Their debate can be boiled down to the conflicting views of "know who you are" (Apollo) versus "forget who you are" (Dionysos).

Creyton, an Englishman, well serves Cavander's droll repartee, while Westmoreland has an impish glee. When the gods abandon the heavens — a somewhat arbitrary resolve — to wander the travail-ridden plateaus of Earth, Oedipus' curse finally is lifted. Cavander's conclusion is that our woes derive from elevating gods, and not trusting our own powers. Joseph Stalin certainly would have agreed, which is one fly in that ointment.

The other fly comes from conflating the three stories. Though Cavander's prose is smart and lean, it nonetheless merely adds up to hurried variations on the best moments from your favorite Greek debacles. And the gods' intercession, albeit charming, doesn't provide the intended connecting tissue. It's more like bubble wrap.

Troubadour Theater Company's latest in a series of random fusions between a classical play and pop singers brings Abba together with Aeschylus' tragedy *Agamemnon*. Matt Walker directs in the company's trademark style of broad, interactive slapstick. The songs (musical director Eric Heinly) and choreography (Molly Alvarez) generally blow the seams off the literary material, subjecting it to freewheeling parody. This worked like a charm in *Oedipus the King, Mama!* — the Troubies' mix of Elvis Presley and you-know-what.

In *Abbamemnon*, however, an intriguing conundrum unfolds. The legend on child and spouse slaughter is so harrowing, and the Abba songs (to which the Troubies create new lyrics) so innocuously romantic, that the tragedy actually aids in giving the music a resonance. There is some

funny physical humor (Joseph Keane's Harold the Herald returns bloodied and with a huge spear through his guts), but these guys still can't dismantle *Agamemnon*, which has them in its vise-like grip. Despite all the campy sendups and contemporary references, and despite the fake-happy ending, the performance remains weirdly affecting, opening a door onto what this hypertalented troupe could do if they ever attempted a take-on rather than a take-off.

THE CURSE OF OEDIPUS | By Kenneth Cavander | Presented by Antaeus Company, 5125 Lankershim Blvd., N. Hlywd. | Thu.-Sat., 8 p.m., Sat.-Sun., 2 p.m.; through Aug. 10 | (818) 506-1983 | antaeus.org

ABBAMEMNON | Directed by Matt Walker | Troubadour Theater Company at the Falcon Theatre, 4252 Riverside Drive, Burbank | Fri.-Sat., 8 p.m.; Sun., 7 p.m.; Sat.-Sun., 4 p.m.; Through July 13 | (818) 955-8101 | falcontheatre.com