

REVIEW: UVM's Oedipus: ritual's the thing

by Dan Wolfe

I approached UVM's recent production of Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* with a certain amount of trepidation, occasioned in part by an interview with Director Robin Fawcett that I read, and in part by the possibility of being disappointed in the production of what is a favorite play of mine.

I am relieved to report that my fears were groundless: the play received a vibrant, ritual-filled production at the hands of Fawcett, her backstage cohorts, and a cast who seemed to comprehend the fullness of what they spoke.

This was a highly theatrical production, where the stage set, like a movie score, warned us when dangerous territory had been reached. The House of Labdakos literally began to crumble before our eyes, thanks to the work of Jeff Modereger, W. M. Schenk, and John G. Williams.

Another strong point in the production's conception is the use of three actors, the classically correct number, and the moving of the rest of the cast into the chorus. The transitions for the actors from the chorus to character back to chorus was seamless.

The *Oedipus* of Casey Clark was well thought and sometimes poignant, but lacked the *hubris* with which he is so frequently charged in the text. He was also a bit too conversational in speech.

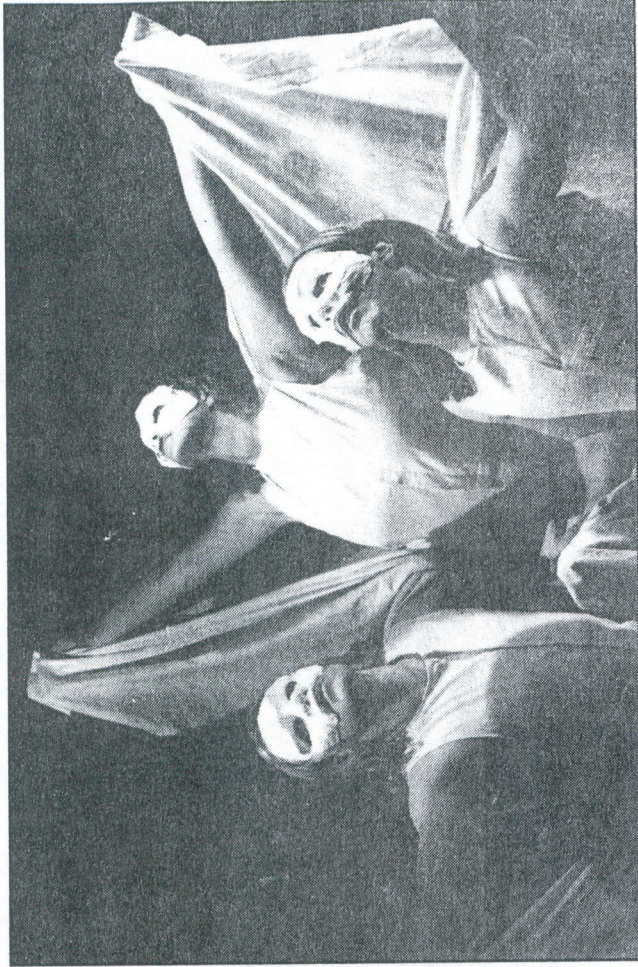
At the play's climax he was somewhat moving, as he must be if we are to see his personal loss amidst the ruin he has wrought. He could have, however, capitalized more on the fact that, in contemporary terms, he realizes his own worst fears.

Beneath the terms that he was constrained by custom to use - references to Fate and to the actions of the gods, Sophocles knew human motivation only too well.

The *Jocasta* of Stephanie Roy was intelligent, but needed to let her flashes of intuition of the truth of the situation underpin her line readings more, so that, for example, her speech to Oedipus about the effect of dreams should simultaneously soothe him and disturb her.

John D. Alexander as *Creon* was brilliant. I found his the most appropriate portrait of the evening.

As to the rest of the cast, Aaron Michael Masi was well cast as the *Choragos*, commanding in presence and voice alike; Paul Soychak was a bit too facially active for the blind seer *Tiresias*, and a bit too high-pitched in voice for someone of so grave a character - a bit more deep annoyance borne out of the knowledge that he speaks the truth and less petulance is called for; the *Corinthian Messenger* of Brendan Salmond was a bit broad, and more from Attic comedy than tragedy with his country bumpkin attitude, but in a



Members of the Oedipus Rex Chorus, left to right, Jeremy Gilpin, Carrie Schwartz and Sean Madden. (Photo by William DeLillo, UVM)

play that has so little relief he was welcome.

The chorus deserves real applause for their split-second timing and the cogency of their acting and speaking. They underscored the ritualism of the drama well. Peter Jack Tkatch gets plaudits also for the intelligence of their speech.

Costuming for the chorus was suitably uniform and multipurpose. The costuming of Creon was exactly right, that of Oedipus and Jocasta appropriate enough, except for the stole which Oedipus wore. A white silk dress scarf would have achieved the purpose with less distortion.

To Robin Fawcett go the real thanks of the evening for the boldness of the conception that could so easily have fallen into Tom Lehrer parody. At every instance she made bold choices in physical casting, the costuming of the principals, the dancing of the chorus in their formal odes. Not once did the execution of all these goals do injury to the timelessness of the play. If I was a bit leery because of her words, her management of her collaborators was masterly and apposite.

Knowing some of the talent that is currently available, could we hope for a *Medea* - and not by Jeffers either - next year built with the same care?