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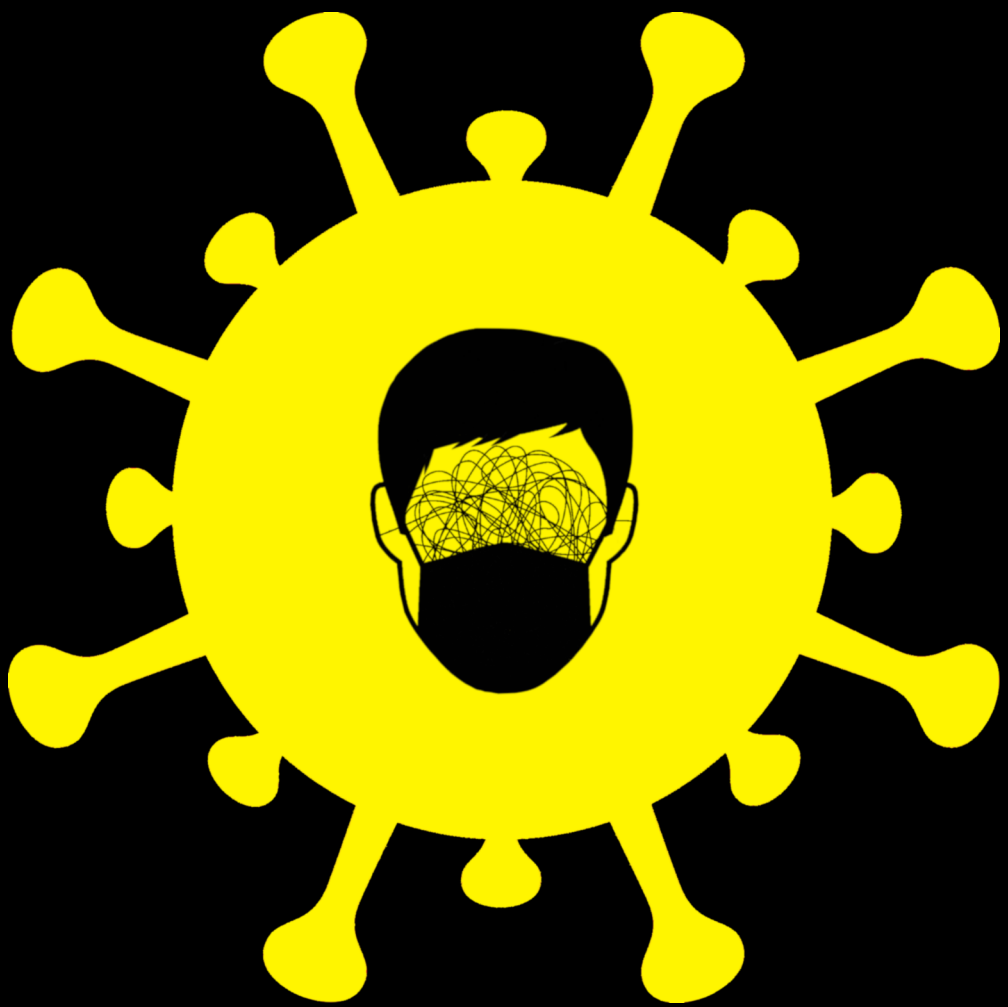
Pandemic Perspectives: Reflections on a Post-Covid World



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Oedipus in the times of Covid

Charlotte Parkyn[1]

[1] University of Notre Dame London Global Gateway, UK; cparkyn@nd.edu

Correspondence: Charlotte Parkyn: cparkyn@nd.edu

Abstract:

The tragedies of fifth-century Athens have frequently been used as a mouthpiece for social commentary. It is a genre that many directors and playwrights, particularly during times of uncertainty, societal change or devastation, have returned to time and again for inspiration. During the Covid-19 pandemic, a number of theatre companies have looked towards the dramas of the ancient Greeks to help their audiences make sense of the worrying and isolating situation they found themselves in. One tragedy in particular seemed most fitting for this collective experience: Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. In this paper, I will explore why this tragedy appealed during the Covid-19 world crisis and how two separate theatre companies - Theater of War Productions, a professional group working in the field of applied drama; and Rickmansworth Players, a small amateur theatre group - used the play to curate cathartic discussions with the communities they engage with.

Keywords: COVID-19, Theatre Studies, Oedipus Rex

> "Aren't you ashamed of yourselves? Squabbling like children over a toy! All while your people are suffering from an undiscriminating plague" (Parkyn: 11)

In August 2020, this line hung heavy in the air during one of the Rickmansworth Players' early rehearsals for *Oedipus the King*. The cast had swapped their usual cosy local hall for an exposed concrete car park, and their seating for the readthrough was a mixture of socially-distanced camping chairs, upturned buckets and blankets. The cast fidgeted uncomfortably due to their new surroundings but also when this line was read. Rather than continuing with the next line in the script, there was a lengthy pause. A chorus member broke the silence with a large sigh exclaiming: "Jesus, that is exactly how I feel!".

The tragedies of fifth-century Athens have frequently been used as a mouthpiece for social commentary. It is a genre that many directors and playwrights, particularly during times of uncertainty, societal change or devastation, have returned to time and again for inspiration. During the Covid-19 pandemic, a number of theatre companies have looked towards the dramas of the ancient Greeks to help their audiences make sense of the worrying and isolating situation they found themselves in. One tragedy in particular seemed most fitting for this collective experience: Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex*. In this paper, I will explore why this tragedy appealed during the Covid-19 world crisis

and how two separate theatre companies - Theater of War Productions, a professional group working in the field of applied drama; and Rickmansworth Players, a small amateur theatre group - used the play to curate cathartic discussions with the communities they engage with.

The myth of Oedipus, the king of Thebes whose hubris ultimately leads to the discovery that he has killed his father and married his mother, is well known in western cultures especially since Sigmund Freud gave the plot a nod when naming his infamous complex. When the text is taught in schools or performed on stage, there is a strong focus on Oedipus' ultimate downfall and questions whether the character is truly unable to escape his fate and is responsible for his actions. However, while this is the main focus for the latter part of the play, there is a subplot that can be overlooked.

From the beginning of the play the audience is informed through the pleas of a priest that a devastating plague has engulfed Thebes and is greatly impacting affecting its citizens (lines 1-67). This epidemic continues to feature at the front of the action for the first part of the production. Via his brother-in-law, Creon, Oedipus is told that Apollo's oracle claims that the plague is the result of 'miasma'. This ancient Greek phrase is often translated as 'pollution' in English. However, this translation does not fully grasp the meaning it had to the ancient Athenians. In this particular case, miasma was used in reference to describe tainted actions committed by an individual that had manifested themselves into a physical disease which needed to be expunged - Oedipus having unknowingly murdered his father and committed incest with his mother. The disease is at the forefront of their minds and the action of the play until Oedipus cross- examines Tiresias, a blind prophet. As soon as Tiresias insinuates that it may be Oedipus himself who is the cause of the epidemic and has committed unspeakable acts, the king becomes consumed by the desire to discover the truth concerning his past. For the rest of the production the plague is barely acknowledged, in fact it is only commented on in four short instances, which is potentially a reason why contemporary productions have often relegated discussions of the disease to purely assisting in setting the scene for Oedipus' journey from king to outcast.

What is notable in Sophocles' writing, however, is how much stage time is given to discussion of the plague and the vivid language used to describe its severity. Why did Sophocles choose to significantly incorporate an epidemic into his production? It would appear that the playwright, who was known for drawing upon contemporary issues for his productions, was creating his play during a period where a plague was sweeping across Athens. Athenian historian Thucydides (c. 465 - 395 BCE) documented this event in his *History of the Peloponnesian War* where he provides a highly detailed account of the physical manifestation of the disease and the societal impact it had on the whole city (ii 47 – 54). Research by Antonis Kousoulis and others (2012: 155-6) cross references Thucydides' account with the language Sophocles uses in *Oedipus Rex* and finds many similarities between the two, such as descriptions of animal illness, death and the impact on female anatomy. Also, both men similarly describe how citizens looked for a divine solution to the natural disaster.

Athenian tragedy was not only for entertainment but it also served a community function. The Greeks experienced the ritual of theatre in order to produce a sense of catharsis (Wiles 2000: 43). The concept of catharsis through theatre is most commonly associated with Aristotle and his *Poetics*. While much discourse has taken place over what exactly Aristotle was articulating in regard to the term catharsis when discussing tragedy, we can summarise as such: catharsis is a therapeutic form which purifies the extreme emotions of the audience when they witness a tragedy on stage unfurl. Today, one could argue that if Aristotle's opinion on catharsis and tragedy were correct, the theatre of fifth-century Athens was a space where mass therapy took place. The productions would arouse emotions such as fear and sadness amongst the audience and subsequently quell them, meaning that the collective would continue to work in the civic space without the threat of extreme psychological distress.

Bryan Doerries, an American playwright and theatre practitioner has long been fascinated by how Greek tragedy could be used as mass therapy (2016). He claimed that 'if ancient Greek tragedies could speak directly to me...they could also speak to anyone who had lived the human experiences they described...' (Doerries 2016: 6-7). Prior to the pandemic with the theatre company he co-founded, Theater of War Productions, Doerries had spent many years working with specific communities to present dramatic readings of predominantly Greek tragedies. These readings would be followed by a town hall-style discussion with the audience, designed to confront social issues that were raised in the productions by eliciting personal emotional reactions to these themes. Audience members would be invited to share their experiences and thoughts with the goal of 'helping to break down stigmas, foster empathy, compassion, and a deeper understanding of complex issues' (Theater of War, *About us*). In response to the Covid-19 crisis, *The Oedipus Project* was created.

Frequently, Doerries and his team have reacted to issues and situations that have suddenly been brought to the front of public consciousness, for example, in 2016 they premiered *Antigone in Ferguson* in response to the death of Michael Brown at the hands of a police officer which had caused the Missouri city of Ferguson to become increasingly divided and troubled. Unable to deliver book a town hall where the audience could inhabit the same physical space as one another, *The Oedipus Project* had to be innovative and recreate the same sense of collectiveness within the digital platform world of Zoom. The intention with this production was to use Sophocles' tragedy as 'a catalyst for powerful, healing online conversations about the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic upon diverse communities throughout the world' (Theater of War, *The Oedipus Project*). On 7 May 2020, *The Oedipus Project* premiered. Rather than the bustle of waiting in the lobby of a theatre prior entry to the auditorium for a performance, people sat down in living rooms, at kitchen tables, on their beds, and at desks staring at a screen that reported the host would allow you in shortly from this virtual waiting room. Then, suddenly, Doerries appeared on the screen.

He explained that they were trying to convene their online events as close as they could to the format they used for their live events. The running order would be the same: the actors would first read the play and then four community panellists would kick off the discussion with their responses to what they had just witnessed. Doerries would facilitate this and the following audience discussion, however instead of approaching a microphone to speak to a crowded room full of people, an individual would indicate their desire to speak by virtually 'raising their hand' which involved pushing a button at the bottom of their screen. For those who have taken part in meetings via Zoom and other such video platforms as a part of everyday life in 2020, they would be aware of the pitfalls - bad connections, participants talking without unmuting themselves, unwanted background noises etc. – however, this was a slick production and clearly stage managed as if it was a live show. Of course, there were the occasional frozen images or late cues, but this did not detract from the performance.

The dramatic readings previously Theater of War Productions curated usually have involved a troupe of actors sitting on stage behind a table. Actor, David Strathairn had described these plays as not needing 'the accoutrements of a staged production to be effective. No lights, no costumes, no set, no musical enhancement. The story is delivered raw and unadorned directly to the ears of the audience' (MacGregor 2017). In converting this set up to a video call platform, Doerries embraced *zoomcraft* with a plumeaplomb. Just like a regular video conference call, all the audience could see were the head and shoulders of the cast and only when they were present in a scene. The focus was on their faces and the words they spoke. All had neutral backgrounds to provide no additional distractions. More than ever before, this town hall audience was up close with these actors, hanging on their every word.

The ensemble for the premiere of *The Oedipus Project* was remarkable. Golden Globe nominee, Oscar Isaac, and double Academy Award winner, Frances McDormand, played Oedipus and Jocasta. When

the time came to demonstrate the blinding of Oedipus, Isaac scraped black makeup over his eyes, in what could be described as a clawing effect, as he loomed out of his darkened background into his camera for the audience to bear witness to his plight.

In order to ensure that this production still communicated on a community level, Doerries enlisted public advocate, Jumaane Williams, to play the Chorus. Within Greek tragedy the chorus played an extremely important role. This homogeneous group role was to offer the audience alternative points of view and question the action taking place on stage. In Sophocles' tragedy the chorus were a group of Theban elders; in this production Williams represented citizens of the world.

While the production was powerful, it was the town hall discussion that followed which was fascinating and moving. The panel included an ER physician, a first responder, a homeless and housing advocate, and the executive director of an Asian - American federation. They all could see parallels in the production to what they were witnessing day- in day- out during the pandemic. The international audience also agreed. The speakers kept coming back to a desire to retain some hope amongst the anguish and stress, just like the Theban community, but that the pandemic's constant bombardment drains that hope and leaves a chasm of frustration with the situation. This event was a forum where the audience could escape but simultaneously process the anxieties they were facing knowing they were not alone.

This idea of collectively processing the pandemic and its stressful impact through the lens of *Oedipus Rex* was also touched upon in a small community theatre group in the UK a few months later.

Rickmansworth Players has a dedicated membership. Some members who had been a part of the company for over 20 years relish their weekly rehearsals as a way of breaking away from the stresses of everyday life. England's first lockdown had scuppered plans for their regular May production and by the summer, when restrictions had started to ease, the ensemble were desperate to start working on a new piece in person. The pitch was that the production would have to adhere to social distancing guidelines – for example, keeping cast members at least 2 meters apart - and to be 'Covid-secure'. It seemed timely to do a production of Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* particularly as, as noted by one of the cast, there seemed many lines that could have easily been said by the government during the pandemic, as one of the cast noted. I worked with the company on producing a new adaptation, *Oedipus the King*.

As rehearsals commenced it became clear that the play resonated with the group. Prior to each rehearsal, the cast members would hear either a Downing Street briefing or would be aware of the most recent statistics of cases and deaths that had been released by the government that afternoon. We soon made sure to put some time aside at the start of each rehearsal for the group to talk. Frustrations would be aired at the restrictions and not being able to see family members. Concerns about job security and being on furlough were mentioned. There were worries that close relatives who were shielding may get sick, and sadness at seeing first-hand the impact of Covid-19, either through working in hospital settings or watching a loved one pass away. The sense of isolation and, in some cases, trauma that the group had suffered during the first lockdown meant that they needed a place to talk.

While working with the script, it was clear that the cast saw connections between the characters and people they knew and applied that in performance. Oedipus quickly became a Donald Trump / Boris Johnson hybrid, and a nod to the slogans that were used by the British government were inserted:

> 'So, in the meantime dear people: Stay alert. Stay safe. Keep your distance. Wash your hands. Wear a mask. Hopefully we will soon find out the truth and save the city. We must, or we will be destroyed.' (Parkyn: 3)

The four actors who made up the chorus adopted personas that represented different attitudes present among the general public: the strict law abider, the rule breaker, the government sympathiser, and the government sceptic. Despite the emotional rollercoaster the play can be, at the end of each rehearsal we all felt a little lighter. The stresses that we had walked in with had been at least temporarily lifted.

In conclusion, Sophocles' ancient play, written and performed during the time of a plague that killed one-third of the Athenian population, is a timeless story of arrogant leadership, ignored prophecy, and a disease that ravages. At the time the play was first performed, the audience would have been reeling in the wake of a pestilence and its economic, political, and social aftermath, just as we currently are. Seen through this lens, *Oedipus Rex* appears to have been a powerful public health tool for helping Athenians communalise the trauma of the plague, through a story that is as relevant now as it was in its own time.

It is clear from the two examples discussed in this paper that these productions themselves did not resolve fully the emotional reactions to the Covid-19 pandemic, however they helped begin the process of mentally digesting the situation, and encouraged individuals and communities to understand that it was ok to feel - just like the Athenians did all those years ago.

Competing interests

The author worked with one of the case studies, the Rickmansworth Players, on their production of *Oedipus Rex*

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