Reviews

SOPHOCLES: "OEDIPUS TYRANNUS"

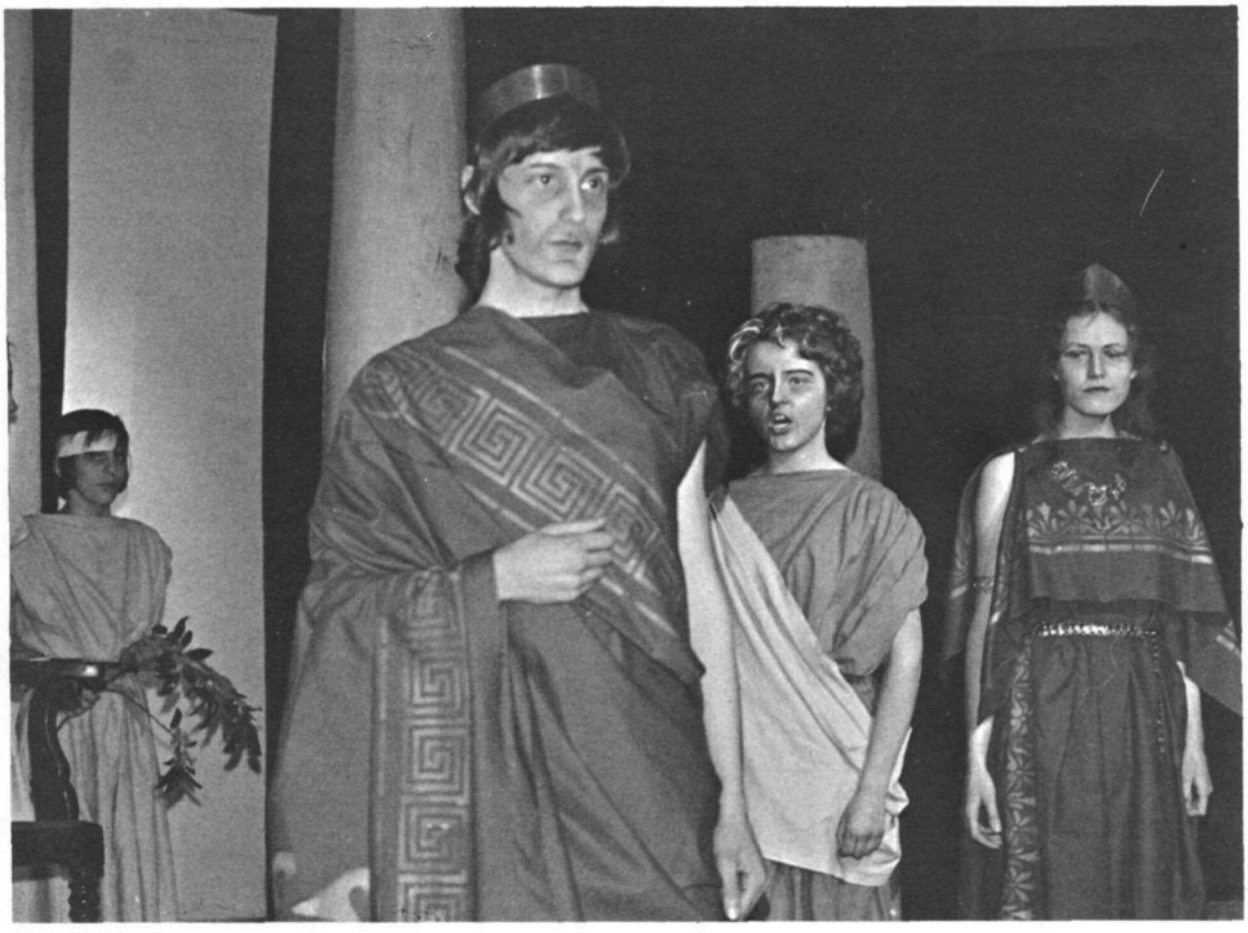
Today, when the new holds firm sway over the old, there is something thrilling in the notion of a very old thing being revived in an authentic way. Indeed a whole industry has grown up around this thrill with conservation, revivals and authenticity all the rage and a great legend has come into being of history-seeking Americans hungry for the real thing. It was in this spirit that I approached this production of a genuine ancient play, performed in genuine Greek in a genuine ancient fashion. With only rather rusty Greek which was anyway never very good, it was primarily as a curiosity that the performance was anticipated. Before long, however, it became clear that this ambitious schools' production of 'Oedipus Tyrannus' was a highly polished and an entirely successful piece of serious drama. The fluency of the actors in a language whose foreignness is proverbial, was very impressive and there was never any difficulty in picking up key words or understanding what was happening at any moment.

'Oedipus Tyrannus', which has unfortunately become confused for many with the neurosis which Freud named after its hero, is a pattern for tragedy as a dramatic form evoking, as Aristotle requires that it should do, the emotions of pity and fear; it is the story of a great man destroyed as a result of his own tragic fatal flaw (hamartia) but in the end achieving a new dignity as he resigns himself to his destiny. At first Oedipus rails against the seer and defiantly closes his mind to the words of the gods, and his pride (hubris) thus sends him headlong to his own undoing. He relentlessly seeks out the truth only to find that he is his father's murderer and his mother's husband. The queen commits suicide while Oedipus, blinded by his own hand, goes in to await exile as the chorus points the moral:

> "Then learn that mortal man must always look to his ending
> And none can be called happy until that day when he carries
> His happiness down to the grave in peace."

The tragedy deals with the conflict arising out of man's capability of reaching great heights and on the other hand his pathetic subjection to the power of the gods.

The play also requires a rather formal presentation and this was successfully achieved in the RGS/CNHS joint production though certain sensible compromises were made such as increasing the complement of actors beyond the two or three principals customary in ancient Greece. In addition to the main actors, a chorus acts both as the crowd and as the mouthpiece of good sense and to point the moral, thus by their occasional odes giving form and direction to the play. The chorus was led with great skill by Anne Grikitis and Lorna Smithers who together with the other members of the chorus added much to the whole effect of the play. They were accompanied by the plaintive music of a single oboe which added atmosphere and this, combined with the chorus' occasionally total mastery of the complicated rhythms of the verse, took poetry as near to music as it can get.



Certain of the actors deserve special mention which is in no way to detract from the general standard achieved. The two messengers who describe Jocasta's suicide and Oedipus' blinding spoke their lines with total conviction, especially S.E. Higgins whose voice evoked true emotion by his impassioned yet controlled tone. M. Shanks as Jocasta's brother, Cleon, adopted a more modern acting style and was the most real of the characters, confidently holding the audience's attention by his rather imperious stage presence. Jocasta was quietly and movingly played by Rachel Bowlby. She strongly conveyed the unfortunate queen's horror and panic as she realised what would arise out of Oedipus' inquiries: her final exit was one of the most moving moments in the play.

The greatest praise, however, should rightly go to N.R. Griffiths who completely mastered his long and difficult part as Oedipus. His words were always clear while his reserved, dignified manner of acting never flagged. Perhaps a Roscius might have found fault, the uninitiated barbarian could only feel admiration.

There were many memorable moments when the production was particularly successful but to recount them all would be tedious. Specific mention, however, should be made of the polished manner in which the long passages of stichomuthia or stacatto-like dialogue were delivered, between Oedipus and first the messenger and then the shepherd, when the crucial revelations are made. Here there was much suspense, tension and dramatic intensity.

The producers, Miss Ackerley, Mrs. Burn, Mrs. Duff, Mr. Shipley and Mr. Squires deserve both praise and gratitude. Their production respected tradition without being enslaved to it and was highly finished and professional in its execution. 'Novo' readers may feel doubt as to the truthfulness of this seemingly undiscriminating panegyric but they can only be those foolish enough to have missed this rare theatrical event.

Michael Gillis.

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Ars adeo latet arte sua. Almost as soon as the solemn chords of the overture had announced the start of this quite exceptional occasion, it was clear that a bold experiment had been amply justified: Mr. Wolstenholme's last official appearance as director, not to mention fifty years of R.G.S. music, was being honoured in the best possible way.

An auspicious rendering of the Commendatore's footsteps which open Mozart's overture to 'Don Giovanni' led neatly into the allegro, taken at a more gentle pace than the *presto agitato* treatment it so often receives; and the judicious tempo allowed some delicate playing by the inner parts to be properly heard.

The performance of Beethoven's 7th Symphony which followed showed all the benefits of the several hours' intensive rehearsal that day, but with none of the loss of energy which might have been expected in one of the most taxing symphonies in the repertoire. The rhythm of the first movement was splendidly sustained; indeed it was perhaps rather too strenuously emphasized during the quieter and more mysterious passages. But the rendering was full of fine touches – the neat playing of the oboe and strings "marking time" in octaves at the end of the slow introduction, the clean trills of the violins, and the good ensemble at that point where elephants appear to be tramping up the scale in unison. The horns too recovered from one or two anxious moments earlier to enjoy their triumphant call at the end.

The'cellos in their turn clearly enjoyed their theme in the 2nd movement, and produced some fine *sostenuto* playing. The orchestra's power of dynamic contrast showed probably to best effect here, and the Conductor secured a well-sustained *crescendo* at the return of the principal theme. Then came the great test of stamina in the last two movements: judging by the bobbing heads of the audience the "apotheosis of the dance" proved infectious, as indeed it should. The scherzo before it was played complete, and was crisp and accurate – no mean feat when the bars fly past at

