

quent labor-supported theatres. In France today, the industrial suburbs of Paris and Lyons elect Communist officials who, in turn, support municipal theatres which are based on revolutionary values. Roger Planchon's company is the best example. And in England, the labor movement has given extensive backing to Arnold Wesker's Center 42 project.

I do not know of any current American examples. Yet labor-backed theatre did exist here, powerfully, in the 1930's and again for a time after the war. The Theatre Union of New York was but the leading instance among dozens of such theatres in America. . . .

We know very well that conditions have changed, and the leadership of the labor unions now dissents in few particulars from the values of the middle class. Yet not all unions have gone along—remember the film, *Salt of the Earth*, produced by the Mine, Mill, and Smelters Union? And not all locals agree with their national leadership. There is reason to believe also that on some issues, particularly those of job dignity as distinct from wages (which union leaders look after very well), the workers in America remain restive and alienated, even from their leadership. Cannot these resources be tapped anew for a theatre of dissent?

*Lee Baxandall*

## OEDIPUS VERSUS SHERLOCK HOLMES

### The Editors

...I should like to point out that several commentators have spotted certain "improbabilities" in the plot of *Oedipus*. The most important of these raises the question of how *Oedipus*, married to *Jocasta* for many

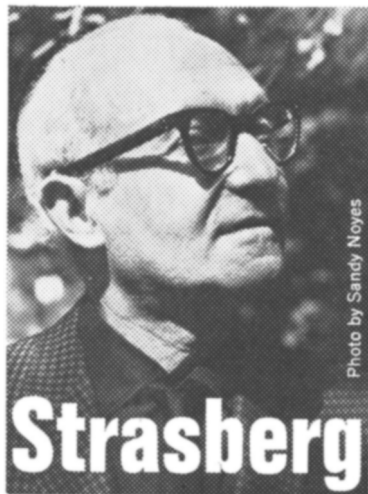


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years and king of Thebes, had *not* come to hear or had *not* asked to know the details of Laius' murder.

In terms of cold logic, of course, the question is not unjustified. Those

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who wonder, however, seem to forget that the old myths constituted a *given element* for Sophocles and released him from preoccupation with details of probability. What is significant is not so much the naturalistic probability of the story as the *drama* which is contained in it. To a certain point, naturalistic probability may be sacrificed to drama—especially when the “improbability” relates to action outside rather than within the play, to events which took place *before* the actual action of the play begins. Even the “rationalist” Aristotle observes that “Stories . . . should have nothing irrational in them; if, however, this is impossible, care should be taken that the irrational circumstance *does not pertain to the story*, as in the case of Oedipus not knowing how Laius died” (*Poetics*).

Karl Harshbarger [“Who Killed Laius,” T28; TDR Letters, T29], ob-

viously influenced by the old, ludicrous conception that *Oedipus* is the first detective story ever written, says that Laius was killed by the Theban lords who probably paid some bandits to do the job; it was the Chorus which prevented the discovery of Laius’ murderers and it is the Chorus which now asks the new king to carry the responsibility for the death of the old one, fabricating a perfect alibi for itself. . . .

Even if viewed “logically,” the double version of Laius’ murder can be easily explained: Creon, Jocasta, and the Chorus base their knowledge of the murder on what the surviving shepherd told them. He was the only eye-witness—and he reported that the murderers were *many*, while in reality there was only one. . . .

Oedipus says that he killed *all* of Laius’ attendants, and we know that one of them was saved. But why should it seem strange if, in the heat and confusion of the clash, the excitable youth had thought he had killed them all and if the shepherd having simulated death should have gotten away the moment the murderer had turned his back?

Even if these “detective story explanations” can be challenged, one thing is certain: the idea that Laius was killed by the Chorus is absurd and unacceptable. How can we reasonably believe that the Chorus, knowing that *it is* the author of the crime, advises Oedipus to consult Teiresias, and thus risk being found out? And how can we believe that Teiresias can charge the innocent Oedipus with the murder when, as a seer, he should know who the real murderer is? Or must we believe that he too (a “man of gods”) conspired with the Chorus to annihilate Oedipus?

What connection can there be between the gang of murderers of

Harshbarger's imagination and Sophocles' Chorus?—a Chorus which exhibits nobleness of spirit, common sense and moderation, sorrow for the calamities that befall its city, respect for the gods, fear of divine justice?

How is it that this criminal and machiavellian Chorus can utter those most wise words—that human life is “vanity and nothingness,” human happiness a mockery, and close the tragedy by putting Solon's “Call no man happy till he is dead” into marvelous poetry?

How is it that the Chorus-murderer does not consider *its own end, the inevitable* (according to its own logic) *punishment*? Does it not think that “no lie can go undiscovered for too long,” as Sophocles himself said? . . .

Most important, Harshbarger's “invention” indicates, among other things, that he has forgotten completely the *nature* and the *function* of the Chorus in tragedy. He forgets that the Chorus did not consist of individuals with personal passions and ambitions but rather stood as a *symbol* of common sense and “moderation”—a symbol which was not involved in the plot of the drama, a poetic element which gave universality to and purified the action and the passions of the heroes.

Marios Ploritis

*This letter was originally published as an article in the July 25, 1965 issue of the Athenian newspaper Eleftheria. The author is a prominent Greek critic, essayist, and director who has translated more than sixty plays. He is president of the Greek Center of the International Theatre Institute.*

—Editor's Note

#### Note: Oedipus—The King

Briefly, the value of Harshbarger's article is that it makes us re-think a

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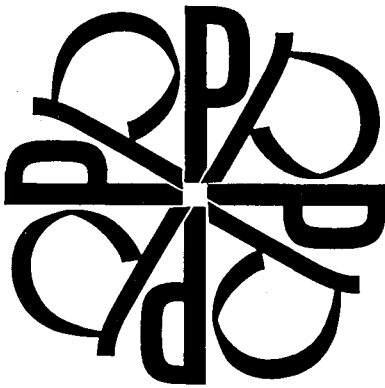
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classic. His essay points to the central movement of the play—which is not the guilt or innocence of either Oedipus or the Chorus, but what Oedipus thinks of himself. Written over the entrance to the sanctuary of the Delphic Oracle is the instruction, “know thyself,” and the pivot of the play is Oedipus’ re-evaluation of who he is.

At first he is the king of Thebes and the true son of the king of Corinth. This ancestry gives him his pride and justifies his position: a usurper in Thebes, he is a prince in Corinth. As the play unfolds, Oedipus is deprived of his Corinthian father and with him his birthright. Shortly after the Corinthian Messenger leaves, Oedipus says to Jocasta, “Though I’m proved a slave,/thrice slave, and though my mother is thrice slave,/you’ll not be shown to be of lowly lineage.” And several lines later, Jocasta cries: “O Oedipus, God help you!/God keep from you the knowledge of who you are!” But Oedipus is determined—not to find the murderer, but to find out who he is. He soon recognizes (without stating) that he cannot be of royal blood without being the murderer.

Having suffered self-imposed exile, he cannot bear orphanhood and low birth, which would make him a foundling in Corinth and a usurper in Thebes. He wishes to restore his kingdom at any price, and that means he must be a true son of Laius. It is this consideration, and its concomitant fear of not being anyone of importance, that guides him to avoid asking about the number of murderers and survivors in his interview with the Shepherd. Instead, he asks the Shepherd if he is the legitimate son of Laius and Jocasta. “A slave? Or born in wedlock?” Oedipus asks. The Shepherd replies that “the child was called his [Laius]’ child; but she within,/

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your wife would tell you best how all this is." Jocasta is already dead or about to kill herself; she cannot answer the question. Oedipus, upon hearing the Shepherd's story, screams out his guilt. He accepts *all*: the murder and the incest.

He pays heavily to be Oedipus, *the king*; but he has brought back his birthright which, I think, was most important to him. The crime—committed or not—is taken by Oedipus as his own property. In *Colonus* he uses both birthright and crime as currency. Faced with the choice between anonymous innocence and identifiable guilt, between being a common man and king, Oedipus picks the more notable. Oedipus knows himself. What Harshbarger asks is: do we know Oedipus? To accept a crime is not necessarily to commit one, as all good Christians know.

*Richard Schechner*

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