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All in the family

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OEDIPUS REX. Written and directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini. Adapted from the play by Sophocles. With Franco Citti, Silvana Mangano, and Julian Beck. A Horizon release. At the Orson Welles.

Sophocles's *Oedipus* may be the archetypal tragedy — both father and brother to all that have followed it — but Pier Paolo Pasolini presents its story as a rangy, eclectic film epic instead. No chorus, no strophes and antistrophes, no masks; lots of exotic headdresses, roaring swordfights, and endless treks across arid Mediterranean plains. In his 1967 film, Pasolini wrenches the myth out of any recognizably Greek milieu and deposits it in barren sands dotted by mesas and Babylonian mud fortresses. Outside the towns, the leaders of nomadic tribes hold court beneath golden canopies, and within their wives frolic in walled gardens. Clouds never dim the sky, and night never falls; the sun scorches every shot (often overexposing Pasolini's film) and, like the furies, hounds lone human wanderers, who crawl buglike across the desert until they're charred.

This environment, as much as the director, seems to dictate the film's skewed view of Oedipus's character. Sophocles's king is a clever guy — a distant relative of crafty Odysseus — who overconfidently follows the line of his reasoning until he discovers it's a lit fuse leading back to his explosive past. He's a prototype for scientific Western man, a managerial monarch who finally encounters a disaster impervious to his can-do methods. In the original tale, Oedipus wins the throne of Thebes by solving the riddle of the Sphinx — a monster that was cutting down the flower of Theban youth because they couldn't name what has four legs in the morning, two in the afternoon, and three in the evening (give up?). In Pasolini's version, the beastie doesn't have a chance to challenge Oedipus's wits before he bashes it with his



Silvana Mangano and Franco Citti: son and lover

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stubby, hollow bronze sword (which could double as a cheese slicer) and banishes it to the abyss whence it came.

This Madame Sphinx leaves Oedipus with a warning rather than a riddle before gurgling her last: "The abyss into which you thrust me is within yourself." For Pasolini, what dooms Oedipus isn't so much his overweening intelligence and arrogance as his mortal fear of introspection. Barbarous urges waylay him at every crossroads, and instead of staring them down he closes his eyes and lets them possess him. After visiting Delphi, as a young man, and first hearing the bad news about his fate, he wanders the desolate roads, unwilling to return to Corinth and his putative parents for fear of fulfilling the prophecy of incest and patricide; Pasolini shows him repeatedly covering his eyes and turning in circles, like a child playing pin-the-tail-on-the-donkey. He keeps surprising himself by finding new internal reserves of violence and lust. When he gets into a roadside fracas with Laius and the royal entourage, he slays his true father and everyone else in a series of spasmodic lunges, each of which leaves him spent and exhausted in the dust. His passion for Jocasta is so overpoweringly physical that the couple exchange only smoldering glances and carnal embraces, never words, until the revelations of Tiresias and the shepherd make a serious getting-to-know-you conversation imperative.

Pasolini makes sure his audience knows that Oedipus knows long before he lets on: as the new king asks his court about the circumstances of his predecessor's demise and mumbles, "I never knew the man," he's wearing the same crown that graced Laius's head before Oedipus hacked it off — and this yard-high golden miter is *not* a forgettable piece of headgear. Refusing to open his mind's doors to the knowledge that's insistently knocking there, this Oedipus is motivated by selfishness

— why give up a throne and a royal wife unless you have to? — as much as by his revulsion at the prospect of his primal transgressions. When he's finally swamped by the evidence and the rising tide of his own guilt, he performs his self-punishment as orgasmically as his crimes: a slow gaze up Jocasta's freshly hanged nude body, a quick grab for her breast, and a spurt of blood on the bedstead.

Although Pasolini's ritualized violence can be nauseating (loving close-ups linger over the festering corpses of plague victims in the fields outside cursed Thebes), it constitutes a true interpretive frame rather than, as in some of Pasolini's other adapted classics, a directorial mania. This *Oedipus* is as Dionysian as it is Freudian — and, with its Italian actors uttering phrases like "Va bene!" and "Basta!", more Latin than Greek. Franco Citti's blackhaired Oedipus has the boyish grin of a Pavarotti and the throaty yell of a Roman legionnaire. His hot-

blooded impulsiveness is written all over his sun-reddened skin — a contrast to Silvana Mangano's alabaster flesh, which hints at cool, unspoken knowledge within Jocasta. Pasolini's score is as multicultural as the costumes: a Japanese flute and drum drive Oedipus from the oracle, and the throbbing threnody that opens Mozart's *Dissonant Quartet* plays as a tragic refrain both on the soundtrack and out of Tiresias's pipe. If some of Pasolini's mannerisms come off as headstrong and unnecessary (those shaky, hand-held portraits, and those lettered placards illustrating dialogue as in silent film), on the whole his *Oedipus* is surehanded and provocative. Nothing like a filmed play, it's nonetheless open to the currents of the theater of its time — a period when artists like Peter Brook were just sinking their teeth into Artaud and tribal ritual (indeed, Living Theater guru Julian Beck, looking remarkably like John Malkovich, is Pasolini's Tiresias).

Most daring of all Pasolini's innovations — and, unless you know the director's bio, most inscrutable — are the 20th-century prologue and epilogue he drapes around the Oedipus saga. In the prologue (it appears to be 1920 or 1930), we watch an Italian woman give birth, then suckle her infant in a grassy meadow; when her soldier husband returns he eyes the child jealously as his supplanter. (Pasolini's father was a soldier and a Fascist, and the leftist director could be expected to harbor some murderous impulses toward him.) The growing child watches his parents' foreplay across a courtyard and cowers at a simultaneous fireworks display; the combined sexual/aesthetic thrill/threat triggers his portion of the collective unconscious — and the film takes off into the mythic beyond. In the epilogue, Pasolini less successfully attempts to distill *Oedipus at Colonus*; the blind Oedipus — or is it the prologue's child, now grown old? — is led by a teenage boy through the streets of contemporary Bologna and out into the same meadow, where he expires in peace. For Sophocles, Oedipus's redemption took as long to work out as his conviction; the film's truncated, elliptical finale is tacked on too abruptly to work. However, so much else here hews to the Sophoclean spirit, especially those visceral aspects of it most consonant with Pasolini's own brand of primitivism, that one wouldn't want to complain too vigorously. A director's reach should exceed his grasp — or what's a classic for? □