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That's Amore

By J. Hoberman

OEDIPUS REX. Written and directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini, after Sophocles. Produced by Alfredo Bini. Released by Horizon Films. At the Public Theater, opening December 7.

LA RICOTTA. Written and directed by Pier Paolo Pasolini. Distributed by Ziv International. **WHOEVER SAYS THE TRUTH SHALL DIE.** Directed by Philo Bregstein. Produced by Frank Diamond (VARA-TV, the Netherlands). Distributed by the Minnesota Film Center. At Entermedia, December 5 and 9.

THE UNCONSCIOUS AND ITS RITUALS: PHANTASIES OF THE PHALLUS. A videotape by Annabella Miscuglio. At the Kitchen (Video Viewing Room), December 6 and 8.

Pier Paolo Pasolini was a restless spirit with a talent for controversy that has extended beyond the grave. It's been nine years since the poet/novelist/director/theoretician/lover-of-rough-trade was bludgeoned to death on a desolate Roman beach, and, pace Philo Bregstein's documentary-portrait *Whoever Says the Truth Shall Die*, the debate still rages whether this was a political assassination or the martyrdom that Pasolini courted all his adult life. (According to his biographer Enzo Siciliano, the poet was not infrequently found "injured and bleeding" after his "nightly journey into the darkness.") Perhaps it was both. "The last person to know oneself is oneself," Pasolini told an interviewer—and that could serve as the epigraph for the director's 1967 *Oedipus Rex*, which has its belated New York premiere this week at the Public Theater.

Anyone capable of casting his mother as the Madonna, as Pasolini did in *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, is bound to bring some heavy baggage to the central myth of the Freudian faith. By any standard, Pasolini's *Oedipus* is an unusually personal film. The director's hatred for his father (an authentic fascist) is as well documented in his writings as his excessive love for his mother. Drawn mainly from Sophocles' tragedy, the major action of the film is framed by two obliquely autobiographical sequences.

The first is set—just around the time that Freud gave theoretical form to the Oedipal complex (*The Ego and the Id*, 1923)—in Lombardy, where Pasolini lived as a child. It presents a bourgeois family very much like the filmmaker's own. Not only is papa a soldier, but mama (Silvana Mangano) is wearing clothes modeled after those worn by Mrs. Pasolini. In a sense, *Oedipus Rex* opens in Paradise. When Pasolini envisions a bucolic picnic where the women servants traipse merrily into the field away from the camera and the helpless bambino, it's an inspired use of long shot to connote the infinite, infantile bliss of the mother-child dyad. Close-ups of the baby nursing are sandwiched between close-ups of Mangano's masklike face; the camera makes an ecstatic, blurry pan around the trees overhead. Nature dances to the infant poet's gurgle of love.

But this perfection cannot last. Back home, the young uniformed father glares down at his offspring with unconcealed hatred. Erasing the image, a title has the effect of engraving Dad's nasty thoughts in stone: "You are here to take my place in the world, to rob me of all I possess and thrust me into the void." Hilariously, Pasolini intercuts a close-up of the baby's solemn nonreaction before flashing another missive, as elegantly lettered as a wedding announcement. "The first thing you will steal from me is her." Going Freud one better, Pasolini projects the



Mother and Child Reunion: Silvana Mangano and Franco Citti get close in Pasolini's *Oedipus Rex*.

Oedipal conflict back onto the father; coming around another bend, he makes Mangano seem older than her husband, imbuing the triangle with a tinge of sibling rivalry.

An erratic and showy filmmaker, Pasolini often worked better in a short form. *La Terra vista dalla Luna* (*The Earth as Seen from the Moon*), an episode from the 1967 anthology film *The Witches*, is his most perfect film—a goonish shaggy-dog story in which a green-haired, mute Silvana Mangano mysteriously enters the shantytown existence of the inane Toto and his moronic son, Ninetto Davoli. *La Ricotta*, which was part of the 1962 anthology *RoGoPaG* and is showing this week along with *Whoever Says the Truth Shall Die* in the Gay Film Festival, is another gem in which an unemployed worker, hired to play the Good Thief in a tacky movie on the life of Christ (directed by no less a presence than Orson Welles), stuffs himself with cottage cheese and dies of indigestion on the cross. Although even briefer, the first section of *Oedipus* ranks with these. Fluidly disjunctive, it's a blithe, intuitive-seeming, haiku-perfect variation on a well-worn theme.

The kicker is another poem. After challenging his son, the father begins nuzzling mom. Far away in his bed, baby starts to cry. Next thing we know, the little fellow toddles to the balcony—his first steps?—and tearfully watches larger-than-life parental shadows dance across the curtains of a room across the courtyard. The primal scene is cast upon the primal screen: Fireworks go off, startled baby cries again, mom and dad tumble into bed. With perfect dream logic, dad grabs baby by the feet. There's a burst of archaic music, and we're plunged into the Moroccan desert where little Oedipus, now trussed up to a stick, is abandoned in the wilderness and recovered by the servants of the king of Corinth. It's childhood's end. Nothing in *Oedipus Rex* ever regains the sublime weirdness of its first 20 minutes.

Not that the film's middle section isn't fearfully ambitious. Large chunks are nearly silent, with Pasolini's hand-held camera nervously darting around and through the action as though documenting a ritual for the Museum of Natural History. The mise-en-scène is steeped in reverentially daft exoticism. By 1967, Pasolini had replaced the Roman subproletariat with that of the third world as the "sacred barbarians" who were "the last bastion of authenticity," destined to re-

deem the degenerate bourgeois world with "the violence—archaic, obscure, and vital—of their sex organs." As played by Franco Citti, the street tough hero of *Accatone*, Pasolini's Oedipus is amply violent and plenty obscure. Citti's heavy-lidded, bulging eyes are glassy with incomprehension. He's less a tragic figure than an impulsive, willful one who responds to any provocation with unthinking rage. Mocked by the Delphic oracle, which raucously prophesies that he will kill his father and sleep with his mother, Oedipus laughs too. He lacks the imagination to see that it isn't a joke.

Pasolini wanted the central part of the film to be a kind of dream; what it more closely resembles is the pastiche barbarism of John Milius's *Conan* or John Boorman's *Excalibur*. But where Boorman's dankly oneiric Camelot is a misty composite of Malory, Wagner, and Jung with a '50s bad girl thrown in for sex, and Milius's boulder-brained Hyborean Age combined preadolescent pulp with Nietzsche, Max Steiner, and the hardhat analysis of '60s hippies, Pasolini's never-never land is a cross between the Club Med and a MacDougal Street tchotchke emporium. Its landscapes a stunning arrangement in ochre, brown, rose, and pale blue, the film conflates Moroccan mud cities with Rumanian folk music and samurai mishegas, interrupts the action with touristy inserts of storks and native boys, chanting choruses and incidental capering dances. The stylized costumes are ridiculous even by Boorman's standards. Characters clank through the desert in outsized medallions—the beatnik designer jewelry of the titans. Priests wrap their heads with strings of sacred clamshells, kings proclaim their power with golden stovepipe crowns, commoners make do in ersatz bearskins and outsized sombreros fringed with bells.

The imagery in *Oedipus Rex* can be so kitschy you might think you're watching a sword-and-sandal epic starring Arnold Schwarzenegger, Joan Collins, and a Ray Harryhausen Sphinx. But there are also moments when Pasolini transcends the clutter of his sources. A round of keening, thumping Japanese music propels the disoriented Oedipus away from the Delphic oracle and sends him aimlessly charging through herds of bony cattle and ragged boys. The long, frenzied sequence in which he kills Laius (a dead ringer for Charlton Heston's Moses) and his bodyguards, pushes Kurosawa beyond choreographed pictorialism into a "sever of anti-patriarchal bloodlust. At its

best, *Oedipus Rex* is a parched anxiety spasm of heat and dust and blazing light.

Despite the uncanny presence of Mangano's Jocasta—the creamy impasto of her face is the most authentically paleolithic element in the film (like the Egyptian queen in *She*, she seems to have been preserved for a thousand years)—Pasolini puts far more emphasis on parricide than incest. And, conscious or not, the film's libidinal economy has a logic all its own. Pasolini's Sphinx could have been designed by Judy Chicago; it's a stylized, walking vagina, with a corona of straw surrounding an intricately oval-shaped curlicue of beads. No need to solve this riddle; Oedipus blindly attacks the thing and drives it into the abyss. Immediately, a manic celebration led by Pasolini axiom Ninetto Davoli, here a happy-go-lucky messenger boy ("Ninetto is a herald..." one Pasolini poem proclaims), breaks out. Ding, dong, the witch is dead—but only for the moment: the first time newlyweds Oedipus and Jocasta make love, Pasolini shock-cuts to a crying baby in a field full of plague-gnawed corpses. The only time Oedipus seems to be enjoying his wife, he's enthusiastically calling her "madre."

Weakest when it sticks closest to Sophocles, *Oedipus* suffers severe second half longeurs. Considering Citti's limitations, Pasolini seems perversely tenacious in stretching out the already revealed mystery of Sophocles' play. (The period charm of Julian Beck's Tiresias is scant compensation.) After Oedipus has plucked out his eyes Ninetto hands him a flute and—presto!—leads him through the streets of 1967 Bologna ("the city where I started writing poetry and where, most naturally, I found myself integrated into bourgeois society"). The blindman plays first for the tourists, then pipes a Russian revolutionary anthem for the workers, as they curiously whiz past the cement factory on their bicycles. But Pasolini's notion of the revolution turns out to be totally literal. With epic circularity, Oedipus winds up in the piazza of the opening scene.

For Pasolini, *Oedipus* seems to have been something like a blindman's vision of Paradise Lost. (So much for the horror of self-recognition.) The film is the Public Theater's wonderfully perverse idea of a Christmas show. Take your mom. Dad won't mind.

A more graphic account of love Italian-style is provided by *The Unconscious*
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