

LIMINAL'S KOSKY'S HUGHES'S ARTAUD'S SENECA'S *OEDIPUS*

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INTRODUCTION

In a dark, claustrophobic garage on the Melbourne Fringe, squeezed up so close to the stage that I could have felt the plague-breath hot on my cheek, I am watching *Oedipus*. Whose *Oedipus*? And who's Oedipus? Where did he come from? Where did this pollution begin? Questions like this call for investigation, but as in every Oedipal narrative, the answers only seem to open up more questions, 'knotted and twisted together... tangled in the knotted mesh of causes' (Hughes 1969: 35 & 52). This drive to determine origins feeds a compulsive Oedipal urge to dig out answers at any cost, projecting responsibility onto distant agents but ultimately uncovering it deep in your own body. The *Oedipus* I am watching is Ted Hughes's translation of Seneca's text, but it has passed through multiple incarnations to reach this point. Since Peter Brook's experimental staging of the work in 1968, the Hughes translation has been performed some eighteen times on three continents, and—it could be argued—has achieved canonical status in its own right. This paper charts the performance history of Hughes's Seneca's *Oedipus*, and at the same time opens discussion about the issues raised by this particular strain of classical reception: authenticity, originality, translation, transmission, possession.¹

There is no established model for conceptualising and representing a classical performance tradition. Present paradigms for interpreting ancient text in modern performance are still formative and incomplete. Some of the problems current in performance theory—such as how to capture in retrospect an essentially transient medium, and whether the 'deficient' or 'trace' text left by a script can legitimately be separated from the augmentation provided by live performance (Rozik 2008: 90; Worthen 1997: 51–52)—have been variously articulated but remain unsolved in relation to classical performance reception.² Much recent scholarship favours a (New) Historicist approach, which enables individual productions to be brilliantly contextualised in their socio-political or cultural-aesthetic environment, but may not altogether account for a relationship to the source-text.³ Source-text and performance text are generally treated as interdependent but still distinct entities rather than a single continuum, separating ancient material from its equally vital modern manifestations. Although this development has significantly influenced the study of ancient Greek drama since the mid-1990s, Roman tragedy has enjoyed little comparable attention.⁴ Seneca's source-texts, meanwhile—those 'deficient' literary artifacts—are often analysed in isolation, while their continuing evolution in the commercial theatre is overlooked.⁵ At its most extreme, this leads to the refusal to countenance Senecan drama as any kind of performance text whatsoever. This position is unsustainable; as far back as 1968, performance theorist Richard Schechner (whose *Oedipus* is examined below) recognised that:

there is no alternative for the theatre critic but to relinquish his precious authority. He can speak only of artworks-in-progress. A performance occurring as he writes, halfway around the world, may alter the nature of the artwork he is so confidently expounding.

(Schechner 1969: 54)

This paper does not pretend to fix the methodological rift between performance theory and the branch of Classical scholarship which conventionally isolates written text as a

self-contained object of study, but acknowledges its existence as problematic. As a contribution to the ongoing dialogue, I would like to propose that the performance transmission of this particular play may be modelled or (re-modelled) using two images pertinent to anyone's Oedipus: paternity and plague. Metaphors drawn from biology have been used before when describing the processes of textual and/or performance transmission. Literary precedence has been figured somewhat controversially as paternity ever since Harold Bloom committed what he termed 'the infliction of the [Freudian] 'family romance' upon the traditions of poetry (Bloom 1997: 61). Bloom argues that 'the poet's difficult relation to precursor and to Muse is a version of this common malady', that is, anxiety arising from the desire to supplant a father or father-figure (Bloom 1997: 63).⁶ This appropriation of the Oedipal metaphor is extreme, but not unique. Director Jonathan Miller, proposing an image for the continuity of the written text within the staged texts it generates, suggests that 'the relationship between script and performance is strikingly similar to that between genetic instructions and the biological individuals to which they give rise' (Miller 1986: 67–68, also 35). The script, in other words, provides a 'genetic code' modified more or less radically by external circumstances as it moves from body to body.⁷ Even mutated in translation, a considerable proportion of core 'genetic' material might be retained. Discussing twentieth-century directorial interventions into classical drama, Amy Green then draws on Miller's image when she refers to new productions as 'new branches on the source-text's family tree' (Green 1994: 11, 13–14).

When the play is a translation, however, and when that translation has assumed a status independent of its ancient model, the notion of a 'source-text' itself becomes problematic.⁸ Hughes's performance genealogy is, like Oedipus', non-linear: it turns back on itself, it runs both ways, it reaches back hungrily for remote and secret causes. To conclude that Seneca's 'original' work has simply been mediated by Hughes, then further mediated by a director, misses the point; this sequence retains the linearity which Oedipus defies, or defiles. *Oedipus* may be defined instead as the fusion of multiple superimposed realisations, or as the gestalt of all his presences onstage. As W.B. Worthen asserts, 'the [dramatic] work at any time consists in the multiplicity of its versions, the history of its transmission, reception, consumption' (Worthen 1997: 13; see also 15–16). Therefore, because Ted Hughes's text has been for most contemporary actors, directors and audiences their first (if not only) impression of Seneca's *Oedipus*, I would like to unpick a primal moment from *Oedipus*' embarrassment of origins, and examine this translation's conception. I then want to adapt the question posed by Edith Hall *et al.* in their 2004 publication *Dionysus Since 69*: following what Hall terms 'the 1968–69 watershed', how do we explain the radical proliferation of performances of ancient tragedy in general (Hall 2004a: 1)? And specifically, how do we explain the unrivalled dominance of Hughes's *Oedipus*, its rapid ascent to almost seminal status? What does it now mean to perform this text? What is its genealogy and legacy? And what happens when a translation ceases to be merely a limpid transmission device, and becomes instead a concrete canonical source-text? Whose is this *Oedipus*?

TED HUGHES: DEEPER INTO LANGUAGE

Hughes's Seneca's *Oedipus* is an extraordinary work of dramatic poetry in its own right. The flavour of its distinctive breed of violence is apparent as Hughes catches Seneca's plague:

nobody weeps there are no tears left the groans are for the
 living not the dead screaming is not mourning but torment or terror many die
 of terror leap screaming from windows gulp down poison stab themselves for

terror fathers with roasting eyes stoke their son's bodies in the
 flames mothers stagger to and fro between their children's beds and the
 flames finally throw themselves into the flames mourners fall down
 beside the pyres and are thrown into the flames survivors fight for fuel even
 snatching burning sticks from pyres even throw their own families on
 top of other people's pyres it's enough if the bones are scorched
 (Hughes 1969: 15)

The rhythm is relentless, the images raw, the terror palpable, the syntax almost falling apart as infection takes hold and as desperation melts in your mouth. But this is surely to be expected from the sometime poet laureate who delivered us *Crow* and *Orghast* and armfuls of letters to Sylvia Plath. *Orghast* in particular, Hughes's subsequent collaboration with Brook, experimented with a radical approach to dramatic language which developed in part from its treatment in the *Oedipus*.⁹

Before examining *Oedipus*' performance history, then, its connections with *Orghast* should briefly be considered. *Orghast* was the kind of project that could only have succeeded in 1971. Ted Hughes, Peter Brook and a group of actors collaborated intensively for three months in Tehran, not only creating an epic-scale performance but inventing an entirely new mythology and a corresponding new language. The name of the language, like the production, was 'Orghast'. The resulting performance was staged as part of an international arts festival at Persepolis, using a variety of site-specific locations including the tomb of Darius. *Orghast*'s three episodes spanned an entire night, from sunset through firelit darkness to sunrise over the desert. Into this prodigious fusion of human history and natural grandeur, Brook's actors brought Hughes's poetry, a poetry neither Anglo-Saxon nor Gaelic nor Ancient Greek nor Old Persian nor pretending to be anything like proto-Indo-European, but devised in a language that pulled itself up from the biophysical roots of human speech, a solid, material, instinctive, untranslatable, embodied language: Orghast.

Unfortunately, Hughes's explanations of how he arrived at the phonetics and morphology of this raw physical language are vague at best, but its rationale is nonetheless fascinating for what it reveals about the project's ambitions.¹⁰ Peter Brook was working to develop the connection he perceived between language and the vocal or auditory body:

The deeper into language one goes, the less visual/conceptual its imagery, and the more visceral/muscular its system of tensions. This accords with the biological fact that the visual nerves connect with the modern human brain, while the audial nerves connect with the cerebellum, the primal animal brain and nervous system, direct. In other words, **the deeper into language one goes**, the more dramatic it becomes—the more unified with total states of being and with the expressiveness of physical action.

(Smith 1972: 45)

Brook conceptualises the experience of spoken language as a kind of synaesthesia in which more sophisticated and superficial visual pathways are bypassed as sound resonates directly through the nervous system, like a musical instrument being plucked. The phrase 'deeper into language' can have two meanings for a performer dealing, like Brook, with ancient text. One is diachronic: the further back into linguistic history you go, the closer you come to a biophysical origin for speech. The other is synchronic, and this is the one most pertinent to a remodelled definition of classical performance text: the

more you permit yourself to be affected, to be taken over by the sound rather than the semantics of spoken language, the easier it is to express the linguistic in physical terms.

To take a fairly standard example, consider the sounds of ritual grieving as represented in Greek tragedy, the full-throated *aiaiai* and *io-ah* of a chorus in mourning. Staying on the surface produces a rather self-conscious 'Alas!' But a performer who takes the quality of those open vowels into her mouth and her chest and her hands can transform her whole body into an index of grief. For something a little more articulate, that wonderful word *apolōlamen*, 'we have been destroyed', enables an ululation not unlike keening or even sobbing, prompting a particular oral engagement that can find analogous extension throughout the performer's physicality. This comes dangerously close to the claim that all language can be rendered onomatopoeic, that is, sound and sense somehow coincide on an experiential level.¹¹ Absorbing sound somatically seems easier in a second language, something which Brook also observed after working with actors in ancient Greek: 'The very words themselves embodied, in vocal form, the experiences they described', Brook reports, concluding that 'it is possible for actors, whatever their origin, to play intuitively a work in its original language' (Smith 1972: 39–40).¹² This does not necessarily suggest that ancient languages possess any greater plasticity than modern ones, simply that their unfamiliarity makes them more malleable, more phonemically tactile.

The idea that a similar tactility or materiality might be found in modern English informed Ted Hughes's approach not only to the *Oedipus* but to his overall poetics from the late 1960s onwards. Hughes's use of language has been called earthy, muscular, concrete. Compare, like Thomas West (1985: 44–45), Shelley's skylark—'Hail to thee, blithe spirit... like an unbodied joy... thou art unseen, but yet I hear thy shrill delight'—to Hughes's: 'leaden / with muscle... scrambling in a nightmare difficulty / up through the nothing / its feathers thrash, its heart must be drumming like a motor... Wings almost torn off backwards'. Regardless of whether Hughes's poetic vocabulary necessarily makes his work more material than Shelley's (or anyone else's), it is apparent that that Hughes, in conjunction with Peter Brook, was developing during the *Oedipus* a particular usage of language which gives this translation its powerful sensory impact. When this impact is no longer confined to poetics but is mediated by the embodiment of a live actor, Hughes's (Brook's) principle of somatic speech intersects with the Oedipal principles of performance transmission. Origins are not simple. They must be recovered, every time, under the skin of every individual performer. 'Language itself', writes Brook, 'could be seen as a metaphor of the DNA spiral, transmitting a code from generation to generation' (Smith (1972: 51). Once again, biology becomes metaphor of choice for the recurrent but evolving experience of a discourse imprinted not on paper or hypertext but on the human organism.¹³

Having teased out some of the principles which informed the construction and style of the scripted text, it is possible to discern these still-resonant concepts lingering within the performance tradition of Hughes's Seneca's *Oedipus*. Hughes's translation has become so popular that the statistics speak for themselves.

Source: APGRD database, supplemented by Factiva

Year	Director	Translator	Location
1968	Peter Brook	Ted Hughes	London, U.K.

1972	Lawrence Hardy	?	South Africa
1972	?	Hugo Claus	Rotterdam, Netherlands
1973	?	Ted Hughes	Los Angeles, USA
1974	Antoni Ros Marba	?	Barcelona, Spain
1977	Richard Schechner	Ted Hughes	New York, USA
1977	John Ginman	Ted Hughes	Birmingham, U.K.
1978	Yurek Bogajewicz	Ted Hughes	Vancouver, Canada
1982	Gunter Kramer	Konrad Heldmann	Stuttgart, Germany
1982	Bernie Burk	?	Zimbabwe
1983	Martin Jenkins	Ted Hughes	BBC Radio, U.K.
1988	Jon Pope	?	Glasgow, U.K.
1988	John Durnin	Ted Hughes	Cheltenham, U.K.
1994	Sarah Stanley	Ned Dickens	Toronto, Canada
1994	Franz Marijnen	Hugo Claus	Brussels, Belgium
1998	Donald Sumpter	Ted Hughes	London, U.K.
1998	Jean-Claude Fall	?	Montpellier, France
1998	John Durnin	Ted Hughes	Exeter, U.K.
1999	Stratford Summer Season	Ted Hughes	Stratford, U.K.
2000	Barrie Kosky	Ted Hughes	Sydney, Australia
2000	?	?	Campania, Italy
2002	Michael Chase	Ted Hughes	Gloucester, U.K.
2005	Ike Schambelan	Ted Hughes	New York, USA
2005	Oliver Plunkett	?	London, U.K.
2005	Mike Dickenson	Ted Hughes	Townsville, Australia
2006	Benjamin Ford	Ted Hughes	Nottingham, U.K.
2006	Joseph Lavy	Ted Hughes	Seattle, USA
2008	Dominick Pangallo	Ted Hughes	Salem, USA
2008	Mary Sitarenos	Ted Hughes	Melbourne, Australia
2008	?	Frederick Ahl	Ithaca, USA

Out of the thirty documented performances of Seneca's *Oedipus* since 1968, six are in languages other than English; four used unknown or unspecified translations; one is by Frederick Ahl, one (unpublished) by Canadian Ned Dickens; but an overwhelming

majority of directors, eighteen in total, used Ted Hughes's text. This figure of 60% shoots up to 75% among English-speaking productions alone. Hughes has provided the dominant medium through which actors and audiences have experienced Seneca's *Oedipus* over the last forty years. Venues have included drama schools, BBC radio, a burnt-out car, and New York's Theatre for the Blind. Because the volume and diversity of productions precludes a full survey here, this paper will concentrate on the most influential to examine how four different directors brought *Oedipus* into the light: Peter Brook in 1968, Richard Schechner in 1977, Barrie Kosky in 2000 and Mary Sitarenos in 2008.

SOME VERSIONS OF THE PLAGUE

Foremost among Britain's avant-garde directors, and frustrated by a 'deadly' commercial theatre which 'approaches the classics from the viewpoint that somewhere, someone has... defined how the play should be done' (Brook 1968: 14), Peter Brook spent the 1960s searching for a new theatrical language. A proportion of Brook's experiments were modelled on the work of Antonin Artaud, who shared the vision of a theatre that consumed its audience like religious ecstasy: transformative, irresistible and cruel.¹⁴ Not surprisingly, Artaud adored Seneca, calling him 'the greatest tragic author in history', and the best example of what Artaud himself meant by Theatre of Cruelty (Artaud & Cohn 1963: 67). Artaud's comparison of theatre to plague—itself heavily influenced by accounts like Seneca's which fuse biophysical and social breakdown—describes a cathartic descent into 'latent disorder' which purges violent impulses through overstimulation (Artaud 1958: 27). Artaud's plague incorporates the physical ghastliness of preceding epidemics with nauseating acuteness. The plague's social consequences should be especially familiar:

Once the plague is established in a city, the regular forms collapse... Pyres are lit at random to burn the dead, with whatever means are available. Each family wants to have its own. Then wood, space, and the flame itself growing rare, there are family feuds around the pyres, soon followed by general flight, for the corpses are too numerous... The stench rises in the air like a flame.

(Artaud 1958: 23)

Artaud goes on to propose that 'the theatre, like the plague, is a delirium and is communicative... Like the plague, it is the revelation, the bringing forth, the exteriorization of a depth of latent disorder by which all the perverse possibilities of the mind... are realised' (Artaud 1958: 27–30). Theatre provides libidinal release; it brings poison to the surface in order to purge society of the cruelty it harbours. The kind of theatre Artaud has in mind here is altogether his own. Although the dream was never fully realised in Artaud's lifetime, his manifesto for a Theatre of Cruelty has inspired experimental directors, including Brook, to attempt it: a total immersion in sound, light, image, myth, shock and sensation that brings its audience to the senses which everyday life has dulled. Properly exercised, Cruelty should provide a catharsis as terrifying and purifying as plague.

Sophocles, who originally added plague to Oedipus' issues (Knox 1956: 134), touches very lightly on the specific conditions of his Theban miasma. It is simply a *nosos* that blights the country, in particular striking pregnant women and fertile crops (Sophocles, *Oedipus* 25–30, 167–202). Seneca's plague, however, is a fierce concentration of symptoms contracted from multiple sources, sources whose influence is already endemic. The biological metaphor of infection proves just as appropriate for the performance tradition of Seneca's *Oedipus* as the biological metaphor of reproduction.

The textually transmitted disease spreads through Classical literature and beyond, its severity fluctuating with contemporary taste. You can of course pick up a touch of *loimos*, like everything else, from Homer (*Iliad* 1.8–53, but Thucydides was largely responsible for bringing plague into the literary tradition (*History of the Peloponnesian War* 2.47–54), passing it on from medical textbooks to narrative prose. Then Lucretius (*De Rerum Natura* 6.1138–1286) introduces it to Latin letters. The plague mutates, jumps genres, gets into the *Georgics* (3.489–93) and starts attacking Virgil's livestock. From here, it's no surprise that Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (7.523–613) picked up the disease and allowed it to proliferate.

The only consistent sign of plague is fever. Other symptoms might skip a generation, only to reappear strengthened by additional variants in subsequent outbreaks. For example, families burn their dead on other people's funeral pyres everywhere except the *Georgics*, even providing the final telling line of Lucretius' *Rerum Natura*: *rixantes potius quam corpora desereuntur* ('they brawl rather than desert the bodies', 6.1286). Thucydides' overcrowded Athens degenerates into Ovid's wasted landscape, exaggerated by Seneca into an earth without space for burial or wood for burning (*History* 52.4, *Metamorphoses* 7.613, *Oedipus* 68). Virgil's main contamination is the bull that collapses untouched at the altar, barely squeezing out enough blood to stain the knife, blackened by an *exiguo sanguine* that continues to seep through Ovid and Seneca (Virgil, *Georgics* 489–93; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 7.599; Seneca, *Oedipus* 140–41, 348–49). *Contactos artus sacer ignis edebat*, Virgil finishes *Georgics* 3 (3.493)—'unholy fire feeds on infected limbs'—and Seneca repeats this memorable closing line almost verbatim as *sacer ignis pascitur artus* (*Oedipus* 187–88).

Seneca's plague is far less visceral than it could have been, however, considering Lucretius' ulcerated, rotting bodies and the swollen tongues that steal speech and reason from victims in all three other Roman poets (*aspera lingua* occurs at Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura* 1149–50; Virgil, *Georgics* 3.508; Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 7.556). Ted Hughes's Thebans, on the other hand, oozing and coughing and vomiting blood, seem to have had direct contact with Thucydides. Or possibly Artaud. The strains of plague are so thoroughly intermingled by the time they filter down to 1968 that it is practically impossible to try and pin down the allusions. It is clear, however, just how convoluted the spread of this particular trope has been, and how messy the question of sources. The plague provides a particularly fine example of non-linear transmission, but may be taken as representative of Hughes's *Oedipus* as a whole performance text.

PRODUCTION HISTORY

Brook In 1968

The social and countercultural revolutions of the 1960s transformed ideas of what theatre could do, what it was *for*. Revisionist productions of the classics—that is, mainly Shakespeare and Greek tragedy—participated in stretching perception to its limits, using canonical material to defy conventional styles of acting, staging, rehearsing and making meaning from text. Bound up in a general rejection of tradition and authority was the paradoxical yearning to return to a state of primitive communion with the world, an intensity of experience impeded by modern inhibitions. As Amy Green argues, Western directors of the 1960s were inspired to 'burrow into Greek and Roman plays as tunnels to primal emotion [in which]... contemplation gives way to visceral response' (Green 1994: 42).¹⁵ Antiquity was figured as a kind of Dionysiac utopia which could be recreated via the medium of theatre (Schechner 1969: 217). Peter Brook was alternating experimental work such as *Marat/Sade* and the Artaudian Cruelty season of 1965 with

revisionist classics like his groundbreaking *King Lear* (1962) and *Midsummer Night's Dream* (1970). Concurrently, he was writing *The Empty Space*, which was published also in 1968. So when Laurence Olivier summoned Brook to the National Theatre in the revolutionary month of May and dropped Seneca's *Oedipus* in his lap, Brook leapt at the chance to put Artaudian theory to work. *Oedipus* was primal, it was savage, it was the archetypal ritual of purification in blood; finally, here was an opportunity to create Holy Theatre in the West End. Brook ditched the translation commissioned by Olivier—a prose version by BBC radio producer David Turner—and approached Ted Hughes for something a bit more organic.¹⁶

Hughes obliged. Also fascinated by mythic origins, by the potential of spoken language to dig deep into the subconscious and root out hidden meanings (Smith 1972: *passim*; West 1985: 63–84; Scigaj 1991: 1–2), he became the ideal collaborator. Some years later, Hughes explained his translation process in a radio interview (Correy & Ravlich 1982). Not interested in restaging Seneca as a Roman curiosity, or even in the kind of scholarly accuracy and 'literal meaning' attempted by Frederick Ahl, for example (Ahl 2008: 4), he and Brook 'just wanted to use the text as the basis for a ritualistic drama about *Oedipus*'. Hughes felt that Seneca's version tapped into something 'very barbaric, very raw' which Sophocles' more cerebral, more superficial treatment could not deliver.¹⁷ Having discarded rhetorical structure, mythological references, and finally abandoning formal syntax altogether, Hughes was left with what he calls 'something essential... this little naked knot' which could be developed by Brook and his cast. Hughes's language is so condensed, so explosively compressed that it gives the audience no respite from the ailing world it contains.

Despite Hughes's protestations, his *Oedipus* retains patterns and emphases that are recognisably Seneca's, rather than Sophocles', or (for instance) Freud's, or Stravinsky's. It feeds back not just into the *Oedipus* myth but into a particular branch of the myth's evolution. *Oedipus*' immediate declaration of his own guilt, the gruesome plague, Manto's haruspicy, the raising of Laius and Jocasta's onstage suicide conform to the contours of Seneca's script. Structurally and stylistically, too, Hughes's *Oedipus* resembles his Latin counterpart, advancing through immense, torrential monologues executed under intolerable pressure that has squeezed out every auxiliary word, producing concentrated essence of sensation. In some ways, Hughes outdoes even Seneca's excesses: his necromancy is more monstrous, his eye-plucking more vicious, his gods not merely indifferent but 'dead of the plague' (Hughes 1969: 21). Frederick Ahl's may be a more linguistically accurate rendition, but this cannot guarantee dramatic effectiveness. The bibliography on translation theory is extensive, with the particular problems of stage translation prompting healthy debate over the past two decades.¹⁸ Susan Bassnett summarised the issue in 1991:

The dramatic text cannot be translated in the same way as the prose text. To begin with, a theatre text is read differently. It is read as something incomplete, rather than a fully rounded unit, since it is only in performance that the full potential of the text is realised.

(Bassnett 1991: 120)

Stage translation is part of the collaborative venture which produces a theatrical event. Bassnett's openness could be expanded still further, because any single performance—even any given production—can only generate a fraction of the potential recombinations and remobilisations available to the text. Hughes's translation therefore responded not only to the poetics inscribed in Seneca's written words but to the material conditions of their expression as avant-garde drama.

Brook's set was a giant gold cube, rotating in the darkness. The chorus surrounded the audience, their utterances orchestrated like music, like an oratorio scored for the full intimidating range of the human voice, from rumbling growl to piercing shriek. The cast, who included a rather bemused John Gielgud as Oedipus, wore plain dark suits and delivered most of their lines from a state of hyper-charged stillness, which erupted periodically into frenzied movement: Creon spinning like a dervish as he raised the ghost of Laius, Manto spasming in a kind of 'epileptic fit' as she disembowelled the bull.¹⁹ Jocasta's suicide seems to have involved stylised impalement on a spike, Oedipus' blindness dark eyepatches. The acting was depersonalised: psychology was sacrificed to vocal intensity and hypnotic rhythm (Esslin 1968; Atkins 1968; Croyden 1969).

It all sounds fairly standard now, but in 1968 this approach to ancient drama was revolutionary. Reactions were skeptical, especially to the notorious finale which featured a colossal gold phallus paraded onstage to the tune of 'Yes, we have no bananas'.²⁰ Critics accused Brook of resorting to 'sensational but senseless' gimmicks (Atkins 1968: 354) that served the director's avant-garde enthusiasms rather than 'the play's inner meaning' (Marowitz 1968: 124). As an injection of the spiritual into mainstream theatre, Brook's Hughes's Seneca's *Oedipus* could be regarded as a bit of a failure. On the other hand, it represents an offering at a crucial moment in the development of classical performance reception, when Western theatre was embroiled in paradigm shift: old modes worn out, but yet to fully develop a new vocabulary.

Schechner in 1977

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, Richard Schechner's New York Performance Group were rolling around in orgiastic nudity to the strains of *Dionysus in 69* (Foley 2004). Moving forward to '77 finds Schechner's company staging their own Hughes's Artaud's Seneca's *Oedipus*. In some ways, Schechner's choice was informed by the same impulses that attracted Hughes and Brook. Committed to creating an alternative to the proscenium corsetry and deadened nerves of mainstream commercial theatre, he tapped into the classics for a transfusion of liberating energy. Schechner also insists on the capacity of performance to function as secular ritual, enabling both actors and audience to transcend inhibitions and experience heightened modes of awareness (Schechner 1988: 175–79). It ought to be possible, Schechner argues, based on anthropological observation of tribal communities as well as the principles of forms such as Noh and Kathakali, for Western theatre to rediscover an 'efficacious' or transformative dimension (Schechner 1988: 118–21). While Schechner's interculturalism may seem distastefully superficial at times—he states that 'the 'birth ritual' of *Dionysus in 69* [during which Pentheus crawled through the legs of several naked women] was adapted... from some photographs I saw in a book about the Asmat of West Iran' (Schechner 1988: 131)—his call to halt America's dissolution into alienated social apathy was urgent and sincere.

Schechner's *Oedipus*, like many Performance Group projects, therefore placed its audience in a participatory relationship to the work through its construction of space.²¹ Consciously rejecting Brook's austerity (Green 1994: 53), Schechner sited his production in an amphitheatre full of earth, taking an altogether more visceral approach to releasing the primal force of ancient myth. Although later moved to condemn the Roman practice, comparing gladiatorial combat to 'snuff porn' (Schechner 1988: 170 & 185n.10), he was nevertheless prepared to employ the sacrificial premise of Roman *munera* and the 'decadence' of staged executions in the interests of manipulating audience experience. This was ritual theatre of a different breed, sunk in the blood and sand and stink of the arena; one critic called it 'a death ceremony which... is muscular, sportive and raucous'

(Kowsar 1978: 414). Oedipus staggered round and round his circular pit, trapped and vulnerable, victim and murderer. Actors writhed and wallowed in the sand, unearthing buried masks and burying their Teiresias until only her lips remained. Jocasta wore a swollen pregnant belly, stabbing it repeatedly during her suicide to release a gush of bloody fluid (Green 1994: 57).

Somewhat chaotic, this production came in for its share of criticism, compared by one disgusted reviewer to 'sloppy children playing in a summer sandbox' (Swortzell 1978: 414). Like Brook's, however, it was something of a landmark in renewing the possible permutations available to Hughes's Seneca. Revisionist precedent had been set at the National Theatre; now, the most progressive of the avant-garde could legitimately combine the responsive immediacy of Happenings, performance art and environmental staging with an opportunistic pastiche of the ancient world. Schechner is the only director to have exploited the presence of Roman antiquity between the lines of Seneca's *Oedipus*. This adds another complicating factor to his reception: how are the arena's 'death ceremonies' to be understood? As ritual, or entertainment? The unmistakable symbol of a Roman Empire popularised in sword-and-sandal cinema is here warped back into its more ancient form, the wooden palisade thrown up to contain a public scourge, the hounding of this season's culprit/s to the point of no return. Pagan blood-sports have been recuperated. To stage the scapegoat-narrative of Oedipus in such a setting appears to embrace the archaic function of gladiatorial combat in expiating collective civic guilt, playing out poison *à la* Artaud, but this is almost as anachronistic for Senecan Rome as for New York in 1978. The set's thematically integral operation embeds Hughes's text in contradictory perceptions of arena culture, evoking a disconcerting blend of communal sacrificial ritual and jaded imperial appetites. Transplanting Seneca's Thebes into a rough echo of the Roman amphitheatre implicates Schechner's audience in its spectatorial dynamics. They are cast as consumers of violence which has been simultaneously sacralised and sensationalised.

Kosky in 2000

Perusing the program of Barrie Kosky's 2000 production for the Sydney Theatre Co, on the other hand, you could be forgiven for regarding this play as Hughes's original work. 'Seneca is interesting but irrelevant for this production', declares Kosky, in his program notes. 'Greek and Roman theatre practice is interesting, but irrelevant'. What *is* relevant for this production is Ted Hughes: extensive quotes from his *Oedipus*, excerpts from other writings, a three-page biography. 'Thank you, Samuel Beckett', writes Kosky. 'Thank you, Sigmund Freud. Thank you, Karl Jung. Thank you, Antonin Artaud. Ghosts. Everywhere'. But the ghost in the credits whose absence is most conspicuous is Seneca's.

Kosky traps his actors on a platform some four metres square: a padded cell with a spongy floor and walls of pockmarked black vinyl. The containment is oppressive. Oedipus prowls like a caged beast, paces like a man condemned. Along with the actors, Kosky's audience is quarantined in this Thebes, a seedy pit of drought and disease where corruption—just as in Thucydides and in Artaud—afflicts the community morally as much as physically. Oedipus, with his broad Australian vowels and rolled-up sleeves, his paranoia and blustering opportunism, becomes our pharmakos, our Everyman. The rhythm of the production is perfectly pitched, each successive episode building from a whisper to an terrible climax, then dropping away for a breath or so before gathering momentum again. In true Artaudian style, Kosky brings his audience to the brink of dissolution and beyond. Horror succeeds horror, but the progression here is not relentless; rather, it comes in pulses or surges that culminate in Oedipus' howl of

discovery: 'My mother!' How, you wonder, can the scenes coming up—the blinding, the suicide—possibly top *that*? You are already shattered, overstimulated, burnt out. Enter the messenger. And as she cradles Oedipus in her arms, she croons, ever so gently, her account of his blinding. 'Everything that had been torment suddenly it was sobbing' (Hughes 1969: 51). Kosky provides Artaudian catharsis, superbly timed, in the most unexpected of places.

Although the plague has stayed the same for centuries, the most dramatically unstable part of Seneca's *Oedipus* is the choral ode to Bacchus. This is a Senecan interpolation, with no equivalent in Sophocles, although it does owe a lot to Euripides' *Bacchae* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses* (3.511–733).²² Seneca's ode separates Manto's entrails from Creon's necromancy, providing a beautiful, even whimsical interlude flowing with honey and wine (not to mention pirates). Ted Hughes, however, had little use for mythological embroidery, and replaced the ode altogether with an elemental chant that combines non-verbal vocalisation with a series of refrains:

DANCE DEATH INTO ITS HOLE
 DANCE DEATH INTO ITS HOLE
 INTO ITS HOLE
 ITS HOLE
 ITS HOLE
 ITS HOLE
 HOLE (Hughes 1969: 30–31)

This might have suited Peter Brook's earnest pursuit of transcendence, but Barrie Kosky had little use for a return to nature. Kosky replaces the chant that replaces the ode with a surreal visual assault on reason accompanied by wild electronic keening. Manto drags Creon through an orgy in the underworld. A demented Tiresias gibbers in her underwear. There are faces buried in the floor. *They are still alive*. Kosky has located the unspeakable heart of his Oedipus in the place where Hughes's translation left a hole. This dark, empty, fertile hole—this womb, if you like—can now be occupied simultaneously by infinite potential texts: Seneca's maenads coexist here with Brook's pantheistic invocation and Kosky's postmodern nightmare. Hughes's empty space is also now a challenge to future directors to define their Oedipus by what they discover emerging from this generative black hole in the middle of the play.

The desire for origins, to determine current identity in terms of its beginnings, is a powerful impulse, and the motive which links the history of Oedipus to the history of its modern performances. Seneca's treatment seems ripe for conversion into ritual, but religious ecstasy cannot be induced—as one of Brook's reviewers disparagingly pointed out—within the social script, the social contract of a modern night at the theatre. Or can it? Attempts to tap into authentic ancient blood-roots leave an audience skeptical intellectually and aesthetically cold, especially in a play that shatters the concept of authenticity itself. Who 'wrote' the performance text that was Kosky's Hughes's Oedipus? Who authors a collaboration, particularly a live cross-media trans-lingual collaboration?²³ How can a director resolve the challenge of staging not only a play that represents ancient myth but a play that represents its evolution and transmission? Restaged rituals like Brook's Artaudian shamanism or Schechner's arena are brilliantly conceived, but just as alienating, in their way, as kings in heroic poses or a chorus in bedsheets. Another solution is Kosky's: deliberately sever all contact with the ancient world and treat the script like the product of the twentieth century which, in a sense, it is. A performance text's sources may be determined, in part, by its various framings, by the points of origin picked to serve particular productions: although primeval ritual inspired

Hughes and Brook, the more historically specific 'death-ceremonies' of Ancient Rome furnished Schechner's amphitheatre, while Kosky identified Hughes's translation as his authority. Mary Sitarenos, meanwhile, the final director to be considered here, locates it in the subconscious somatic imperatives of her own performers.

Sitarenos in 2008

In contrast to Kosky's chamber of horrors, Liminal's Hughes's *Oedipus* is stark, even elegant. Five women, draped in rustling, bell-shaped black gowns move through Theban desolation with studied economy of form. Their set is dominated by a dead white branch. Oedipus is disembodied altogether: an eyeless white mask swings down on a wire. Interviewing Sitarenos, I asked about the mask. 'It's iconic', she said. 'Like a religious icon. So Oedipus can be *all kings, all politicians*. Something archetypal... The other actors bring the flesh, they are the body'.²⁴ An individual actor, however accomplished, would supply insufficient material to represent the Oedipus of this play, whose colossal persona, clotted with centuries of psychological trauma, exceeds the common limitations of human presence. As the bodiless mask faces us head-on, the whole stage-space behind it becomes Oedipus' body, the dark world of Thebes that sickens with the rotteness of the king, our civic unconscious.

This space, this kingdom *is* the king. He has no other identity. The plague is in his bones, whitened like the skeletal tree. He is swollen black with it; its voice speaks through his mouth. 'I am the plague', groans Hughes's Oedipus, 'I am the cancer at the roots of this city'. He echoes Seneca's doomed ruler, who recognises instantly that his curse has infected the state, his *manu contacta regna* (*Oedipus* 77–78). Laius's shade demands his exile, because only then will *Letum* (annihilation), *Lues* (plague), *Mors* (death), *Labor* (suffering), *Tabes* (corruption) and *Dolor* (pain) depart from Thebes (*Oedipus* 651–52). Sophocles' hero is a rational man attempting to pick his way through a cosmos tragically governed by Fate, but Seneca's Oedipus is already part of the disease, his universe in free-fall, harbouring dark secrets from the moment he utters his opening confession. As the Chorus make clear, however, he is not the ultimate source of Theban corruption (*non tua tantis causa periculis*. Seneca, *Oedipus* 709). Rather, he is merely this generation's manifestation of the Labdacid curse (710–63). 'Oedipus has come under the curse of Thebes', Hughes's chorus intone, in their version of the same ode (Hughes 1969: 39); or, as Sitarenos puts it, 'Rotteness is a dead king trying to talk. Everyone in this play is living inside a carcass'. In Sitarenos' production, Oedipus' personal entanglement with Thebes is shown by the mask that literally becomes the head of its onstage state.

Sitarenos' approach to acting and her approach to the Hughes text both privilege the subconscious. This *Oedipus* reaches back for knowledge rooted deep in physical memory. For Sitarenos, 'this is sacred text. It's all about knowledge as a living matrix... Meaning already resides in the body'. Hughes's Seneca's tragedy plunges deep into the irrational, the inexpressible somatic tyrannies—congenital or contracted—which human existence entails (Scarry 1985). You are bound by your body: its solid mass, its liquid stickiness, how far your ligaments extend, your tensions, your torsion, your metabolic efficiency, your rate of cellular breakdown, the limit of your breath. Circling back to the roots or the source is the Oedipal track, and one which Sitarenos deliberately sets out to follow. So what is the source of this production? Where is it rooted? An easy solution might be to pin it on Seneca, but Sitarenos does not regard the Roman playwright as quite ancestral enough. Like Brook, and Schechner, and Hughes himself, she embraces the primeval qualities of the Oedipus myth,²⁵ but feels that Seneca calls up themes whose antiquity resonates on a biophysical rather than aesthetic level. As an actor

carrying text, especially heightened poetic text like Hughes's, it is necessary to form a somatic connection to the language, to give it material shape and coherence within the boundaries of individual flesh. Organic metaphors for performance transmission, I would argue, are more than a cute rhetorical flourish. They seek to acknowledge the awkward, evasive presence of living bodies in receiving and retaining the classical past.

CONCLUSIONS

Live theatre, unlike any other medium, evolves. A classical drama may therefore be defined as comprising all the occasions on which it has been performed. Until inhabited and embodied by actors, a dramatic text remains lifeless conjecture. In 1970, Donald Mastronarde declared that 'the art of Seneca's *Oedipus* is not stage art' (Mastronarde 1970: 314), but the last forty years have overturned this death-sentence. Ted Hughes's translation has been crucial in the repeal, giving Seneca's *Oedipus* an audible voice in drama schools and in the commercial theatre. Hughes's collaborations with Peter Brook associate the text with Brook's experimental work on the classics, and with his profound influences on current dramatic training in the West. Hughes, as demonstrated by Kosky's program notes, has attained just as much authorial status as Seneca, perhaps more. His translation is an original work; it is canonical; it has a substantial performance history of its own.

Just as Oedipus the myth exists as a composite of innumerable permutations, so too does *Oedipus* the 'Senecan' tragedy. Since 1968, the text has been most regularly experienced in translation—Hughes's translation, to be precise, steeped in avant-garde mysticism—and in performance, continuing to affect its actors via physical imprint and its audience via living memory. Translation may intervene into the broad anonymous body of myth, but also intervenes more specifically into the identity of a particular textual organ. In framing and in content, Hughes's *Oedipus* is Seneca's, and vice versa. This is an *Oedipus* already saturated with textual precedent quite apart from its plot, such as that plague whose symptoms can be traced from Thucydides through Lucretius, Virgil and Ovid (and will later define the Artaudian plague that Cruelty's catharsis should spread). Seneca is neither a beginning nor an end-point, but one contributor among many to the performance-text that unfolds in the present moment. To claim a pure Roman *fons* for Seneca's (Hughes's) *Oedipus* becomes at once problematic, if not downright absurd. The source of *Oedipus* the play is as inscrutable as the source of Oedipus the king. The closer the text is examined, the more it dissolves into uncanny proximity, until its embodiment, in Sitarenos' words, 'comes full circle, but takes it further down'. A spiral (or a double-helix?) is produced that comes to reside tonight in the bodies of Sitarenos' actors, this generation's manifestation of humanity's curse.

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¹ Compare Worthen's comment (1997), 189–90 on the performance transmission of Shakespeare: 'Both texts and performances are materially unstable registers of signification, producing meaning intertextually in ways that deconstruct notions of intention, fidelity, authority, presence'.

² For discussion of current issues and divisions within performance reception scholarship, see Hall (2004b) and Montgomery Griffiths (2007 & forthcoming), both with relevant bibliography.

³ Primary examples include most of the articles in Hall (2004a); Hartigan (1995); McDonald (2003); and Hall, Macintosh & Taplin (2000). McDonald (1992) goes some way towards reconciling ancient and modern perspectives, especially her chapter on Harrison's *Trackers*, but stops short of developing this theory of performance transmission, retaining instead a universalist identification of the plays' 'true essence... in their *humanitas*', p4.

⁴ Discussion of Senecan performance has been largely restricted to hypothetical scenarios based on textual analysis, such as Sutton (1986), Fantham (2000) and Marshall (2000). The eclectic range of methodological approaches in Boyle's 2000 collection, in particular practitioners' accounts such as Volk's (2000) and Raby's (2000), are yet to be pursued. Boyle (1997) includes a detailed discussion of Seneca's influence on Renaissance tragedy, but retains a one-way text-based approach; for an interesting counter-proposal, see Goldberg (2000). The Senecan device of metatheatre identified by Boyle (1997) and Schiesaro (2003) would benefit from further investigation through the prism of staged performances.

⁵ Mastronarde (1970). More recent literary analyses of Senecan tragedy include Mayer (2002), Davis (1993), Segal (1986), Pratt (1983) and the articles collected in Boyle (1983).

⁶ In his preface to the second edition (1997), Bloom denies that his specific references to the Oedipus complex should be understood in psychoanalytic terms.

⁷ Worthen (1997), 21–22 regards a genetic model as ‘simplified’ (and it can be), but Oedipal genealogies are not straightforward. They are doubled, or short-circuited. Indeed, as the following discussion demonstrates, the written script itself is not necessarily consistent source material, and performance texts draw simultaneously on multiple signifying systems. The ‘genetic’ codes of performance include visual and kinaesthetic as well as verbal discourses.

⁸ The challenges of translation for performance are also contested theoretical territory. See for example Bassnett (1985, 1991, 1998); Scolnicov & Holland (1989); and Walton (2006).

⁹ According to Hughes, in the Correy & Ravlich interview (1982), ‘Orghast was really one step beyond Oedipus in stripping off that... intellectual and loaded side of language’.

¹⁰ Worthen (1997), 42 advocates ‘taking theatre practitioners at their word’. McDonald (1992) and Montgomery Griffiths (2007) provide examples of how this methodology might operate.

¹¹ See Walton (2006), 79–84, following Carson (2001) esp. 41–43 on the sounds of Greek pain.

¹² See also Green, 47 and Schechner (1988), 221–22 on Serban’s *Fragments of a Trilogy*.

¹³ McGann (1991), 144: ‘Because language is always materialized and embodied in one way or another, these material phenomena (they have an acoustic dimension as well) assume independent signifying functions’. McGann refers to printed text here, but the principle is transferrable to actors.

¹⁴ Macintosh (2004), 320 calls Brook ‘Artaud’s principle English disciple’, although he did not encounter Artaud’s work until collaborating with Grotowski in 1964. Brook (1987), 40.

¹⁵ See also Schechner (1988), 39–40 for an on-the-spot welcome to the 60s and Hall (2004a), *passim* for a retrospective reflection.

¹⁶ Hughes was initially recommended by Brook’s AD, Geoffrey Reeves, according to Scigaj (1991), 14. See also Williams (1988), 115. Brook outlines his version of a ‘Holy Theatre’, one which will restore a sense of ritual wonder, in *The Empty Space* (1968), 47–72.

¹⁷ All quotes in this paragraph are from the Correy & Ravlich interview (1982). Ahl (2008), 56 disagrees with Hughes’s primitivism. A recent collection of essays on Hughes’s relationship with the Classical past (Rees 2009) unfortunately came out too late to be included in this discussion.

¹⁸ Relevant examples include Scolnicov & Holland (1989), esp. Pavis in this collection; Walton (2006); Bassnett (1985, 1991 & 1998); and Ahl (2000).

¹⁹ See Hunt & Reeves (1995), 132 on Creon; and Atkins (1968), 353 on Manto. Whitaker (1999), 243–45 comments on the production’s ‘ritual of recognition and expurgation’.

²⁰ Easily the most memorable bit of the production, it seems from subsequent accounts. Stephen Berkoff’s reaction, quoted in McDonald (2003), 64 is typical: ‘When they wheeled on this big gold cock, I thought he was out of his tree’.

²¹ ‘In the created environment, transformed space engineers the arrangement and behaviour of the spectators’. Schechner (1969), 168.

²² For Ovidian intertext, see *Oedipus* 449–67. The *Bacchae* is most directly evoked by the references to Pentheus' *sparagmos* (Euripides, *Bacchae* 1114–1146, 1168–1300) at *Oedipus* 432–44 & 484–85, but is more implicitly recalled by invoking Bacchus throughout as patron deity of Thebes. Although Bacchus' flowing hair and effeminacy are typical attributes, they also form an essential part of Dionysus' Euripidean characterisation (*Bacchae* 234–36, 453–59; compare *Oedipus* 403–04, 412–16). Another text contributing to Seneca's ode may be Catullus 64, esp. lines 52–62 & 251–65 (compare *Oedipus* 487–501).

²³ According to McCallum (2000), 'there are many creative hands in this work. Sophocles supplied the original drama... Seneca, who lived in a much darker time, gave it blood and guts... Ted Hughes, in this brutally direct modern adaptation, has given it a savage contemporaneity... All the great work moves towards you like lava'.

²⁴ Sitarenos' remarks are drawn from an interview conducted on 31/10/08, about a month after the production.

²⁵ In the introduction to his translation, Hughes (1969), 8 describes Seneca's treatment as 'the raw dream of Oedipus, the basic, poetic, mythical substance of the fable'.