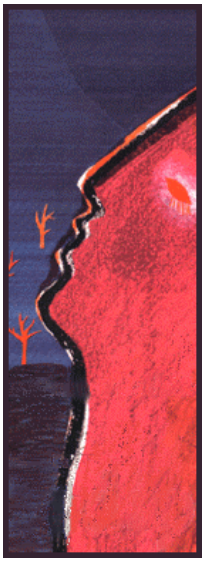


## introduction *on* oedipus

The World Première of Blake Morrisons' new version of 'Oedipus' opened on 6th September 2001. It was commissioned and performed by Northern Broadsides Theatre Company and began it's 10 week tour at their base, the Viaduct Theatre, Halifax.

Blake had translated another play for Northern Broadsides back in 1995 – Kleist's 'The Cracked Pot'. The play was hailed as 'an instant classic' and Barrie Rutter, Artistic Director of Northern Broadsides, played the clump-footed Judge Adam.

'There's another play about a judge with deformed feet – Sophocles' 'Oedipus'. Why not give it a go?' Barrie asked. It took Blake a while to come round to the idea, but he soon breathed new life into this classic drama.

The tour was performed as a double-bill, with 'The Cracked Pot' and 'Oedipus' played [illegible]side. One comedy, one tragedy, both classics - one German, one Greek, both translated into the Yorkshire vernacular. Both judges were guilty of the crime in question, but Adam knows and tries to hide it, whereas Oedipus doesn't know and tries to discover it. This must be the only double-bill in history linked by characters who have bad feet - so far.

Blake's version is not as heavily based on vernacular language as The Cracked Pot, but the tone, energy and style are solidly northern. As Blake says himself, his version was written for the stage and is therefore focussed on performance rather than an accurate translation of the Greek.

In our version of the play, Blake has removed certain elements of the original text, such as place names. The idea of removing or translating the name of Oedipus himself did arise, but the name itself holds much more meaning in the Greek than simply 'Swollen Foot' as many people know it. Here is a brief translation of the name:

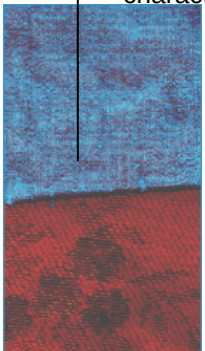
Οεδιπους

The name is made up of two words, οιδεω (pronounced 'oid-e-oh') and πους (pronounced 'poos' like juice). The first word is a verb meaning *to swell, swell up* - the second is the noun '*foot'*, hence the initial meaning of 'swollen foot'.

When you begin to look at the Ancient Greek language though, the word 'poos' has a variety of implied meanings, one's which are not necessarily as straight forward as swollen foot but still would have been as important to a Greek audience. The following is a list of the various meanings:

What *lies just before one* (i.e. at one's feet).
Something that is *close* (right in front of you, at your feet).
Anything *obvious* (Greek way of saying 'like the back of your hand' but using foot imagery instead).
At *full speed* (swift of foot).
*On the track or trail* (an image of hunting on foot).
The *very next* thing (next step).
As *quick* as you can (pull your socks up).

As you read on, you will see how these meanings relate more and more to the play and the character of Oedipus.



## plot

SOME twelve years before the action of the play begins, Oedipus has been made King of Thebes in gratitude for his freeing the people from the pestilence brought on them by the presence of the riddling Sphinx. Since Laius, the former king, had shortly before been killed, Oedipus has been further honoured by the hand of Queen Jocasta.

Now another deadly pestilence is raging and the people have come to ask Oedipus to rescue them as before. The King has anticipated their need, however. Creon, Jocasta's brother, returns at the very moment from Apollo's oracle with the announcement that all will be well if Laius' murderer be found and cast from the city.

In an effort to discover the murderer, Oedipus sends for the blind seer, Tiresias. Under protest the prophet names Oedipus himself as the criminal. Oedipus, outraged at the accusation, denounces it as a plot of Creon to gain the throne. Jocasta appears just in time to avoid a battle between the two men. Seers, she assures Oedipus, are not infallible. In proof, she cites the old prophecy that her son should kill his father and have children by his mother. She prevented its fulfilment, she confesses, by abandoning their infant son in the mountains. As for Laius, he had been killed by robbers years later at the junction of three roads on the route to Delphi.

This information makes Oedipus uneasy. He recalls having killed a man answering Laius' description at this very spot when he was fleeing from his home in Corinth to avoid fulfilment of a similar prophecy. An aged messenger arrives from Corinth, at this point, to announce the death of King Polybus, supposed father of Oedipus, and the election of Oedipus as king in his stead. On account of the old prophecy Oedipus refuses to return to Corinth until his mother, too, is dead. To calm his fears the messenger assures him that he is not the blood son of Polybus and Merope, but a foundling from the house of Laius deserted in the mountains. This statement is confirmed by the old shepherd whom Jocasta had charged with the task of exposing her babe. Thus the ancient prophecy has been fulfilled in each dreadful detail. Jocasta in her horror hangs herself and Oedipus stabs out his eyes. Then he imposes on himself the penalty of exile which he had promised for the murderer of Laius.

## barrie *on* choruses

Andy Whitehead (one of the actors) said that as a chorus you don’t know who you are. It’s a good question - you aren’t anybody, but that is a positive. The nature of choruses

is they are like the cement on a brick wall. The play, the wall, cannot stand up without them. Unless the poet makes the chorus have different voices, or makes the chorus be proactive, they are generally commentators on the play, the state of the world at any time they do it. And they do at some points represent the people, the vox popular. But the chorus does not necessarily act as a driver of the narrative and yet the narrative can't be driven without them. That's the wonderful theatrical paradox of a chorus. What they don't is disagree amongst themselves, unless the poet has you within internally. Every one of the chorus says every line.

Now physically, we might be in a different place, but every one of the chorus means every line. So it's always a composite thing. There's an example in the Oresteia that Tony Harrison wrote of the chorus disagreeing, well I think this, well I think that, but the 12th voice says 'well I think the meeting as a whole would agree, another meeting is what we need.' They come back together, but that's a deliberate many-headed Hydra, many headed thought, and then they come back together as one. You can't do that by body language unless the poet gives you the words to do it.

The chorus rehearsed using blinkered glasses, so that they had no peripheral sight at all, only forward sight. It's just a way of giving you a mask and keeping you together. The trick is that if you're in front, have to trust those behind you that you can't see. The responsibility is always the person behind so that if you have to retreat 100 yards it's the person who just touches the back that says we've reached. And you always touch or are in touch with the person in front.

You should never turn the head and look a different way, it's forward the whole time. Touch becomes the thing. When we have peripheral vision, we naturally for a straight line. It happens every single time, it's human nature. When you're in a bunch and you've only got blinkered sight like that, you don't even think about going into a straight line. Because you can't turn to check where your colleague is, you can only touch.

There's a great comfort knowing there's someone behind you touching you. Now, you have to find that out for yourselves, 'cos I promise you, you can't do it automatically you have to go through the same agonising process – there's no short cuts. And you come out of it the other end and you think – 'What was all the fuss about'.

In theory the chorus is made up of the elders of the town but in practice we are all here, every man Jack of us, newly weds, kids, farmers, accountants, the lot, and it represents the people. But still we are one voice, we are one thing. We have different aspects of our voice, we even have different sounds of our voice, but we're all one voice.

## blake *on* writing

I've never written an original play so the first thing is that I've got a given. I've got something to work with and work around and I do, for the early stages at least, try to do a very literal translation. With Sophocles I had to work with existing translations and around them and find something 'sayable'.

Obviously it makes a huge difference when the structure's already there in place. You don't tamper lightly with a dramatic structure - it's a given. If it's a classic there's a reason it's a classic - it's a survived all that time because there's something about the way it's structured that makes it dramatic. So that's very different from say with a poem or prose where you're inventing and you have to work from scratch. If you're writing novels, which I've done and doing memoirs, you'll be writing dialogue and you're going to want to make the dialogue sound sayable, plausible. Again there's a parallel with writing plays where it's all dialogue.

I think it's very important that I'm writing for the theatre, I'm writing plays to be performed, for people to get up and say the words and for them to sound plausible - *to* and *for* an audience living in the 21st century. There are some very good academic translations – they're literal, they're deeply informed by a knowledge of the language, by the times and often they're not without inventions. But sometimes, by god, they're dead on the page; they're so inert! Obviously their main priority has been to produce an 'accurate' version of the original and not for it to become a play text. The particular kind of theatre we are doing at Broadsides is very dependent on the vernacular, on speech.

I think Barrie has an agenda and the agenda is the Northern tongue. However he would put it, and it's vernacular, it's Northern, it's rough and tough. It doesn't lack depth, it doesn't lack it's own beauty but there is maybe a harshness about it - a roughness which you would say is the opposite of received pronunciation and a more genteel kind of speech. That's what he wants, that's what he wants to be heard in theatre.

When I started with Oedipus I wasn't thinking of very many modern parallels. I wanted to get a good, sayable draft out, something that cut through the dead language of most of the translations I had read, cut away the dead wood and started to find these spurts of life, the saplings that we could grow something from. But I've found that the more I've worked on it, some very contemporary themes have emerged.

First of all, the play opens with the plague and we've just had this plague throughout the country, foot and mouth disease. In about the 12th line of the Sophocles, you've got a reference to dying cattle and it's impossible to read the play which includes references to shepherds and is set in a town which has a strong rural element to it to read it without being conscious of that parallel.

Then I think it's been hard not to look at Oedipus, who, if you like, was a popular leader and has come in with great huge expectations because he's beaten the sphinx. Then there's trouble - there's plague, people are unhappy, there's economic decline and a city that's in trouble, that's dying. Isn't this the parable of new labour? I remember the euphoria of '97 and a there's a lot of disillusioned people out there and there's a lot of people who feel this country's not working. Some of the behaviour of Oedipus, it's been impossible not to think, oh yeah there's a Blairism, there's a Prescottism.

Without really looking for them, I slowly became conscious of modern parallels. These themes come screaming out of the text after a bit. So in all these ways it seems the play has many resonances for today's audience.

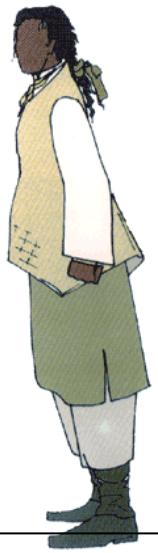
## jess *on* design

The first thing that struck me about the play was that the city in which it was set was suffering from a plague. The society was falling apart and as a consequence, the environment as a whole was suffering. During the twenties and thirties, there was a lot of art work coming out of Spain that used the idea of rubbish, an ugly form, to create a

piece of work which was aesthetically pleasing. I liked the idea of visually seeing the effects of the plague in terms of the surroundings – amenities not being provided, no-one collecting rubbish, repairs not getting done. I wanted the audience to know immediately that things were out of balance, so I included in my designs a lot of rubbish strewn around the wooden flooring where most of the action takes place.

I also noticed that the theme of communication came up time and time again. I became intrigued by the idea of modes of contact and the rough cables used in telecommunication. I went to Morocco whilst thinking about the set design, and was heavily influenced by a number of pictures I took there. There seemed to be wires everywhere and at times it was as if there were holding the buildings up, rather than vice versa. I started to use this notion in my design, stringing thick wires around the entrance to the house of Oedipus which also began to act as a barrier, like raw iron gates. The tension in the wires reflects the tension in the house and the tension between the rulers and the ruled, the privileged and the starving. The theme of communication was also used when choosing the rubbish around the flooring. Much of it comprises of bundles of newspapers, old news cast aside. The action in the play comes thick and fast, and within the space of a few minutes, a new piece of news, piece of the jigsaw, comes to light and everything changes.

For the costume designs, I very much wanted to have a stark contrast between the household of Oedipus, who were rulers of the own, and the townspeople who were basically dying of the plague. Oedipus, Jocasta and Creon were all dressed in fine fabrics, with expensive dyes and woven threads. The colours of the fabrics have traditionally been associated with the upper and ruling classes, and I tried to design the costumes so that they would reflect this without being specific about a time. Similarly with the people's costumes, the aim was to make them timeless by using classic cuts and drawing inspiration for a variety of cultures, designers and time periods. When you are trying to design something along these lines, you are aware that 20 years down the road, they will look incredibly dates, but the trick is to make your audience now feel they aren't date-specific.



## critics ...us

Edith Hall
Times Literary Supplement

The challenge facing any adapter of *Oedipus Tyrannus* for the stage is that it is a highly intellectual drama, long on ethics, metaphysics and epistemology, but short on action and the type of emotionally show-stopping scene associated with Sophocles' contemporary Euripides.

Blake Morrison's shrewdly pitched Yorkshire vernacular *Oedipus* is effective, because he realises that the tragic power of the original is predicated on the audience's

experience of pleasurable language. His muscular, caustic and knowing poetic dialect, rhythmic and occasionally rhymed, provides a satisfying solution to the irony, integrity, naturalness and beauty of the diction not only make it worth listening hard, but also do some justice to their famous Greek original. In a moment exemplifying the adaptation's pungent, speakable idiom, Oedipus reprimands an unusually bolshy Tiresias: "Stop blethering, you grumpy old sod."

Looking at Sophocles from the Yorkshire angle has allow Rutter to discover an iconoclastic new Tiresias (usually realised as a neurasthenic mystic), whom he plays as a robust and witty Yorkshire peasant, more than a match for his overlord. The troubled community portrayed in the play is a tightly knit agricultural township, identifiable neither as ancient Thebes (place names are scarcely used) nor exactly as modern Yorkshire. Countryside imagery saturates the townspeople's vernacular: Oedipus says to Creon, his corpulent brother-in-law, "You're as dainty as an otter with a salmon in it's maw."

There are no specific topical allusions, although fresh impetus is lent to the sense of public crisis both by the descriptions of the plague-stricken cattle and by the piles of rubble in the subterranean tunnel leading out of the viaduct (used to excellent effect in the closing scene, when Oedipus stumbles off, tapping his walking stick, into the darkness of exile). The opinionated chorus of artisans and labourers speak in disciplined unison and with emotional commitment, creating rhythmic accompaniment to their poetry by banging oil drums and stones. The production is a lesson in ensemble acting, for the uniformly excellent chorus members also play the roles of shepherds and messengers, the employees of royal houses. Class tension, crucial to this play, is suggested by Jessica Worrel's set and costumes: the simple, tasteful browns and beiges of the worker's clothes contrast with the inspirational blacks, blues and crimsons worn by the house of Laius. The top family in this provincial township have amusingly awful taste – the pivitol dialogue between Oedipus and Jocasta takes place on a purple shag-pile rug.

It is fashionable to find humour in Greek tragedy. Like Deborah Warner's production of *Meadea* earlier this year, this *Oedipus* plays with comic fire. The fruity-voiced Sarah Parks,a superb Jocasta, is both sexy and maternally bossy, making the relationship between her and Oeidpus unusually credible. But her first entrance if funny, as is her delivery of the famous "Freudian" lines, when she claims that most men have slept with their mothers, at least in their dreams. The production manages nevertheless to relocate itself in the tragic register in time for the conclusion. This is because it is paced to perfection, representing the precise architecture of Sophocles' plot. This flexible, creative treatment of a classic of the Western repertoire take several risks but fully justifies them, because nothing is allowed to obscure the great strengths of the original play – it inexorable rhythm, its intellectual clout and its aural beauty.

## jude *on* workshops

The next few pages have a selection of text from the play. These can be used by teachers or group leaders to run workshops. They may also be of interest to other people who are interested in Blake's version of 'Oedipus'.

The selection is intended to give an overall impression of the play as a whole. They can be used before or after seeing the play, or they can stand on their own if you did not get chance to see us.

There are five duologues which are representative of the moments of realisation for Oedipus, e.g. when he realises he may he murdered Laius, when he finds out that who he thought was his mother was not actually her etc.

Here are a few workshop suggestions that I would use during our education events:

1. Divide the group into 3's (or 4's if it is a large group). Give each group one of the duologues and a 'director's' sheet. Ask them to prepare the piece, being clear that the director must take charge of how the piece looks and comes across.

Points to make:

- Always read through the piece first. Make sure you understand everything in it. If there is something you don't understand, interpret it and stick with that.

- Directors should always decide from the outset where the audience is going to be. Often when a number of groups work in the same space, they tend to cling to the walls and create a piece that that looks fine to them but naff for an audience.

It is often useful to get two people to do one of the pieces in front of the whole group before the exercise commences, and then ask the group to be collective directors – how can the piece be improved, what can the actors do differently. In my experience, the group usually has very little to say. I then repeat the exercise at the end of the session and the results are very clear to see. Doing this also allows the participants to see how much they have learned from the session.

This exercise is great for allowing participants to see the difference to a piece having a director can make. More often than not, young people have little or no experience of working like this – their work is heavily focussed on devising where everyone is involved in equal roles.

*

Directors Sheets:

It is your responsibility to decide how the piece should come across to an audience. You must make sure your actors understand exactly what you are asking them to do. Your main priority is to ensure the audience understand the piece and their attention is held throughout.

What is happening in this scene?
Who holds the higher status in the scene?
Does this status shift from one character to another?

Look at the scene from the viewpoint of an audience.
Does the movement in the scene hold your attention?
How can the movement represent the power balance between the characters?
What can you suggest to make it more interesting?

* These pages may be photocopied for use in workshops.

Think about the language.

- Are the actors talking only to each other & not bearing in mind their audience?
- Can the audience understand what the actors are saying?
- Are all the words being spoken clearly?

What emotions take place in the scene?

- Does either or both of the characters go through a range of emotions?
- If so, how do these emotions affect the delivery of the speech?
- How do these emotions affect the movement of the piece?

Oedipus: Creon, friend and brother, what's the message?

**Creon**: **When a day fairs up cobbled roads turn smooth**
**And cartloads feel faffly as a feather.**

Oedipus: I can't tell whether to grieve or celebrate.
The message, Creon – what did the oracle say?

**Creon**: **Shall I repeat in front of everyone**
**Or would you like a quiet word inside?**

Oedipus: Say it right out. There are no secrets with us.
The health of these people means more to me
Than even my own.

**Creon**: **Here's what was said then.**
**That to banish the plague, we've to destroy**
**The source of infection. We're stuck until we do.**

Oedipus: Yes, but what source? And how? It's very vague.

**Creon**: **The source of the infection is a man –**
**A murderer. Exile him, or shed his blood.**
**In retribution, then we'll be cured.**
**It's from him that all our troubles have sprung.**

Oedipus: So who is this man we have to get shot of?

**Creon**: **It's a long story. It goes back to when**
**Laius was in charge here before your time.**

Oedipus: As you know, I never met Laius –
Sad to say, he's only a name to me.

**Creon**: **Laius was murdered. And the gods above say**
**His murderers must be made to pay.**

Oedipus: But how can we find them when they've long since fled
The scene and the corpse is nothing but a worm-bag?

**Creon**: **They're here, so I was told. Seek, and live in hope.**
**Don't bother seeking and we're all dead rope.**

**Oedipus**: **Creon, friend and brother, what's the message?**

Creon: When a day fairs up cobbled roads turn smooth
And cartloads feel faffly as a feather.

**Oedipus**: **I can't tell whether to grieve or celebrate.**
**The message, Creon – what did the oracle say?**

Creon: Shall I repeat in front of everyone
Or would you like a quiet word inside?

**Oedipus**: **Say it right out. There are no secrets with us.**
**The health of these people means more to me**
**Than even my own.**

Creon: Here's what was said then.
That to banish the plague, we've to destroy
The source of infection. We're stuck until we do.

**Oedipus**: **Yes, but what source? And how? It's very vague.**

Creon: The source of the infection is a man –
A murderer. Exile him, or shed his blood.
In retribution, then we'll be cured.
It's from him that all our troubles have sprung.

**Oedipus**: **So who is this man we have to get shot of?**

Creon: It's a long story. It goes back to when
Laius was in charge here before your time.

**Oedipus**: **As you know, I never met Laius –**
**Sad to say, he's only a name to me.**

Creon: Laius was murdered. And the gods above say
His murderers must be made to pay.

**Oedipus**: **But how can we find them when they've long since fled**
**The scene and the corpse is nothing but a worm-bag?**

Creon: They're here, so I was told. Seek, and live in hope.
Don't bother seeking and we're all dead rope.

**Oedipus**: **No doubt you've heard that when we asked at the oracle**
**What we should do to be rid of our sorrows**
**Their answer was 'Find the men who killed Laius.'**
**Use your gift of vision and help us find him.**

Tiresias: A fat lot of good vision has done me.
If I'd been using it when you asked me here
I'd have thought better of it and not come.

**Oedipus**: **What are you on about, you old blatherhead?**

Tiresias: Let me go home – that's what I'm asking.
Things'll turn out better for us both if you do.

**Oedipus**: **Let you go home? But you've only just got here.**
**You're asked to save the town you grew up in**
**And you refuse, you grumpy old sod? I'm dumbstruck.**

Tiresias: Well, I'm dumbstruck too. Better to say nowt
Than to let anger like your spill out.

**Oedipus**: **I invited you here, in all courtesy,**
**To do us a favour. So get a move on –**
**we're not letting you leave until you've spoken.**

Tiresias: You want me to speak because you don't know the truth.
I do know – that's why I'll never reveal it.
My grief's are best unspoken – aye, and your's too.

**Oedipus**: **Have I understood you straight? You know the truth**
**But rather than say it out loud, you'd prefer**
**To let your own people die from the plague?**

Tiresias: I won't inflict pain on me or on you.
That's all there is to it. I've said enough.

Oedipus: No doubt you've heard that when we asked at the oracle
What we should do to be rid of our sorrows
Their answer was 'Find the men who killed Laius.'
Use your gift of vision and help us find him.

**Tiresias**: **A fat lot of good vision has done me.**
**If I'd been using it when you asked me here**
**I'd have thought better of it and not come.**

Oedipus: What are you on about, you old blatherhead?

**Tiresias**: **Let me go home – that's what I'm asking.**
**Things'll turn out better for us both if you do.**

Oedipus: Let you go home? But you've only just got here.
You're asked to save the town you grew up in
And you refuse, you grumpy old sod? I'm dumbstruck.

**Tiresias**: **Well, I'm dumbstruck too. Better to say nowt**
**Than to let anger like your spill out.**

Oedipus: I invited you here, in all courtesy,
To do us a favour. So get a move on –
we're not letting you leave until you've spoken.

**Tiresias**: **You want me to speak because you don't know the truth.**
**I do know – that's why I'll never reveal it.**
**My grief's are best unspoken – aye, and your's too.**

Oedipus: Have I understood you straight? You know the truth
But rather than say it out loud, you'd prefer
To let your own people die from the plague?

**Tiresias**: **I won't inflict pain on me or on you.**
**That's all there is to it. I've said enough.**

Oedipus: Something you just said scares me rigid.

**Jocasta**: **What do you mean? I've said nothing to worry you.**

Oedipus: I thought I heard you say Laius was killed
where three roads meet.

**Jocasta**: **That was the story.**
**It still is as far as I know.**

Oedipus: Where was this?

**Jocasta**: **At a place called Fokis – where the backroad**
**From Daulia meets the one from Delphi.**

Oedipus: And how long ago was it?

**Jocasta**: **Before your time –**
**But only just. You arrived shortly after.**

Oedipus: Oh, god, what else have you in store for me?

**Jocasta**: **What's wrong, You look like you've seen a ghost.**

Oedipus: Don't ask. Not yet. Tell me about Laius:
What did he look like?

**Jocasta**: **He was tall. Dark-haired, grey at the front.**
**His build, well not so different from yours.**

Oedipus: Then I'm doomed. The executioner won't
have far to look. I can see his blade flashing in the sunlight.

**Jocasta**: **Don't mauder like this. You're frightening me.**

Oedipus: It seems Tiresias has eyes after all.

**Oedipus**: **Something you just said scares me rigid.**

Jocasta: What do you mean? I've said nothing to worry you.

**Oedipus**: **I thought I heard you say Laius was killed**
**where three roads meet.**

Jocasta: That was the story.
It still is as far as I know.

**Oedipus**: **Where was this?**

Jocasta: At a place called Fokis – where the backroad
From Daulia meets the one from Delphi.

**Oedipus**: **And how long ago was it?**

Jocasta: Before your time –
But only just. You arrived shortly after.

**Oedipus:** **Oh, god, what else have you in store for me?**

Jocasta: What's wrong, You look like you've seen a ghost.

**Oedipus**: **Don't ask. Not yet. Tell me about Laius:**
**What did he look like?**

Jocasta: He was tall. Dark-haired, grey at the front.
His build, well not so different from yours.

**Oedipus**: **Then I'm doomed. The executioner won't**
**have far to look. I can see his blade flashing in the sunlight.**

Jocasta: Don't mauder like this. You're frightening me.

**Oedipus**: **It seems Tiresias has eyes after all.**

**Messenger:** **Who's this woman you're so worried about?**

Oedipus: Merope – my mother – Polybus' wife.

**Messenger:** **Why should an old woman make you fearful?**

Oedipus: I don't mind telling you. It was prophesised
That one day I'd wed my own mother,
Having first killed my dad.

**Messenger:** **Is that the only reason you've stayed away from Corinth?**
**I should be kicking myself then.**
**I came here to do you a good turn; if only I'd known,**
**I could have done you a second good turn**
**And put your mind at rest for good.**

Oedipus: At rest?
Do that and I'll pay you anything.

**Messenger:** **Well, I hoped if you came back with me to be rewarded.**

Oedipus: But I can't return with my mother alive…

**Messenger:** **That's just the point, she's not your mother.**

Oedipus: Merope's not my mother? What about Polybus then?

**Messenger:** **He's less claim to be you're dad than I have.**

Oedipus: So why did he tell everyone I was his son?

**Messenger:** **I gave you to him when you were a baby,**
**With my own hands.**

Messenger: Who's this woman you're so worried about?

**Oedipus:** **Merope – my mother – Polybus' wife.**

Messenger: Why should an old woman make you fearful?

**Oedipus:** **I don't mind telling you. It was prophesised**
**That one day I'd wed my own mother,**
**Having first killed my dad.**

Messenger: Is that the only reason you've stayed away from Corinth?
I should be kicking myself then.
I came here to do you a good turn; if only I'd known,
I could have done you a second good turn
And put your mind at rest for good.

**Oedipus:** **At rest?**
**Do that and I'll pay you anything.**

Messenger: Well, I hoped if you came back with me to be rewarded.

**Oedipus:** **But I can't return with my mother alive…**

Messenger: That's just the point, she's not your mother.

**Oedipus:** **Merope's not my mother? What about Polybus then?**

Messenger: He's less claim to be you're dad than I have.

**Oedipus:** **So why did he tell everyone I was his son?**

Messenger: I gave you to him when you were a baby,
With my own hands.

**Oedipus: Is this the man this man's been talking about**
**The man we've sent for?**

Jocasta: This man, that man,
The other man – God knows which man he means.
Pay him no attention: he'll get you nowhere.

**Oedipus: But we must pay attention: these are pictures**
**In my life story, they're missing evidence,**
**They're clues to the mystery of my origins.**

Jocasta: Some mysteries are best left unsolved.
Who we are's what we make of our lives
Not where we come from. If you've any sense,
You'll not pursue this – I've suffered enough.

**Oedipus: Why should you suffer? Your ancestory's secure.**
**The lines in your brow run back centuaries.**
**If it turns out my mum, nan and great-gran**
**Were all slaves, it won't be any skin off your nose,**
**It won't make the blood in your veins any less blue.**

Jocasta: I beg you Oedipus, leave it at that.

**Oedipus: I'll only leave it when I've untied the knot.**

Jocasta: What about our knot? You'll destroy us.
When I say stop, it's for the best, believe me.

**Oedipus: I'm sick of being told what's best for me.**
**Let me be the judge of that.**

Jocasta: You're a poor judge then;
If you do find out who you are, you'll regret it.

**Oedipus: Where's that shepherd? Fetch him someone, at once,**
**And let my wife stew in her noble juices.**

Jocasta: You miserable fool. I'd have preferred
A kinder epigraph, but that's my last word.

Oedipus: Is this the man this man's been talking about
The man we've sent for?

**Jocasta: This man, that man,**
**The other man – God knows which man he means.**
**Pay him no attention: he'll get you nowhere.**

Oedipus: But we must pay attention: these are pictures
In my life story, they're missing evidence,
They're clues to the mystery of my origins.

**Jocasta: Some mysteries are best left unsolved.**
**Who we are's what we make of our lives**
**Not where we come from. If you've any sense,**
**You'll not pursue this – I've suffered enough.**

Oedipus: Why should you suffer? Your ancestory's secure.
The lines in your brow run back centuaries.
If it turns out my mum, nan and great-gran
Were all slaves, it won't be any skin off your nose,
It won't make the blood in your veins any less blue.

**Jocasta: I beg you Oedipus, leave it at that.**

Oedipus: I'll only leave it when I've untied the knot.

**Jocasta: What about our knot? You'll destroy us.**
**When I say stop, it's for the best, believe me.**

Oedipus: I'm sick of being told what's best for me.
Let me be the judge of that.

**Jocasta: You're a poor judge then;**
**If you do find out who you are, you'll regret it.**

Oedipus: Where's that shepherd? Fetch him someone, at once,
And let my wife stew in her noble juices.

**Jocasta: You miserable fool. I'd have preferred**
**A kinder epigraph, but that's my last word.**

Chorus work

The following pages have selections of text from the choral scenes. They are adapted from the play for use in a workshop. Here are a few suggestions on how to use them:

Divide the group into 8's (or divisions of). Give each member of the group a copy of the text. Give each of the groups one of the following tasks:

1. Each person should take a verse each (they may have more than one verse if the groups are smaller). Ask them to prepare a performance of the piece, incorporating movement with the 'relay' effect of following on from someone else.

2. One person should read the whole piece, with the whole group reading the last line of each verse together in unison. Ask them to prepare a performance of the piece, incorporating movement with the 'unity and separation' effect of following joining in as a whole.

3. Each person should take a verse each. Then the whole group should decide on one word from each verse that holds the most meaning. When the 'narrator' of each verse reaches this word, the whole group should say it in unison, allowing the narrator to carry on until their verse is finished. Ask them to prepare a performance of the piece, incorporating movement with the 'sudden emphasis' effect of following joining in as a whole.

4. One person begins the piece. When they have reached the end of the first verse, the next person should come in and they read the second verse together. Carry this on until the whole group are reading in unison (they may have to repeat the process if the group size is smaller). Ask them to prepare a performance of the piece, incorporating movement with the 'building' effect of following joining in as a whole.

Points to make:

- Ask them to really think about how the piece flows from one person to another. It is very difficult to allow a piece to flow when people are speaking in unison, but when it comes off, the results can be very powerful.
- Allow them to be quite stylised in their movement – choruses are by their nature – a more stylised performance technique. With stylised work though, it is very important that the group works as a whole, so their movements should be relatively uniform.
- If you feel they have been successful, move the workshop on another stage by giving each group a different emotion to express as they perform the piece, e.g. fear, anger, hope, reverence, despair.

Chorus:

… Here's what to say:
Zeus, our immortal leader, gods of gods,
Whose feet we are not fit to lick, to you
We bow our heads and bend our knocking knees,
Fearing what holy terrors you've in store,
I beg you…

… Apollo, I beg you, if ever you've harnessed the sun to plough up
The storm-fields of disaster or drive off
The clouds of misery from man's gates,
Do it again now…

… Please Athena,
loveliest daughter, brainchild of Zeus,
make our lives sweet as milkchurns again,
hear us when we call…

… Little lives sink in the west
each dusk, like birds flocking after the sun,
till only one bird's left – the black Raven
of death, flapping it's wings in our faces
and raking our eyes out with it's claws…

… hear them,
Athena, it's you kind face they're looking at,
Send disease packing…

… strike it stone dead Zeus,
blow it away with gales, raze it with storm-clouds,
crush it with thunder…

… let the caverns
of the cold Atlantic cool it's fever
and waves wash it clean…

…till the plague god,
the god hated by all other gods,
dies in a blaze of light.

More chorus work:

The following page has a number of chorus sections incorporated into one.

Split the group into 10's (or just use 10 of them and ask the others to observe). Give each member one of the chunks of text from the next page (numbered one to ten). Ask them to read it in order, and the meaning will become clear.

Ask them to prepare a selection of short performances using the text.

This exercise is a good way of introducing the idea that a chorus must work as a whole, unified body. Without one of the members, none of the sections make sense.

Points to make:

- Again, it is imperative that the piece should flow. It is easy to become disjointed when you are speaking one after the other.
- The movements will probably be much more basic than the previous exercise, due to the shorter amount of time during the speeches. Warn them not to attempt too much with the movement, it is the words that are most vital here.

1

a. That was a strange riddle Tiresias came out with.
b. It's happening already.
c. Who was your mother Oedipus?
d. Fame, riches, marriage.
e. Citizens, good people, think on Oedipus.

2

a. I don't know if it's true.
b. People have begun to despair.
c. And who was your dad?
d. Oedipus had it all.
e. He it was who solved the Sphinx's riddle.

3

a. But I can't disproved it either.
b. When's Zeus going to act?
c. It's a mystery.
d. Look at him now –
e. Ruled this town for many years.

4

a. I've no gift of foresight.
b. Why hasn't he kept his promise?
c. But not a tragedy.
d. Doomed by star signs.
e. He was envied by all – now look at him.

5

a. Bu the pit of my stomach tells me
b. Laius was told that certain events would happen.
c. Whatever the answer –
d. In ignorance cropping his father's wheat.
e. Doomed to wander on some far black hill.

6

a. Something bad's going to happen.
b. Now no-one believes they will.
c. You're our leader.
d. And ploughing his mother's field.
e. Till the gods put him out of his misery.

7

a. There's nothing in the past.
b. The oracle won't keep it's word.
c. Your birth was human.
d. How could the gods
e. As we sit waiting for our last day on earth.

8

a. No sin or family fight.
b. The prophecies won't come true.
c. Whoever your parents are
d. Play with him so long
e. Remember it's only then that folks find peace.

9

a. That would justify me thinking badly of Oedipus
b. The gods are on their way out.
c. We'll sing and dance
d. And not weep to see
e. Whatever his luck in friendship, work or bed.

10

a. Yet I've this sense of doom.
b. Religion's disappearing from view.
c. And clam you as ours.
d. His suffering?
e. No man can be thought happy until he's dead.