

# Theater

**Remixing Aeschylus, The Seven spills classic tragedy onto today's mean streets**



**Muthafucka: Edwin Lee Gibson as Oedipus**

## HIP HOPLITES

BY MICHAEL FEINGOLD

The plays we call “Greek tragedy” all came from Athens, where the annual tragic festival was both a religious and a civic event: Sacred to Dionysus, it began with a procession around the whole city, called the Panathenaeid, during which offerings were made to Athena, the city’s patron goddess, whose attributes were viewed as generally opposite to the wine god’s. The body of myth and ritual that hangs over the plays, mixed with the civic history that produced them, was a common language, a spiritual melting pot inside which the plays simmered and ripened. What we have of them today is the meat of this stew without its juice, dry and bare.

Of the three tragedians whose works survive, Aeschylus, high in wisdom and solemnly ceremonial, is the hardest for us to understand. We see the power of the tragic dilemmas he dramatizes; if we’re lucky, we get a whiff of the grave beauty in his writing, thought of as weighty even in his own time. (Aristophanes makes memorable fun of this concept in *The Frogs*.) What we rarely get in modern productions of Athenian tragedy, and virtually never with Aeschylus, is the living dimension that makes the plays more than historical artifacts to be viewed from the other side of a glass case.

Which is why, though with plenty of mixed feelings and lingering questions, I applaud Will Power’s *The Seven*. If you said that Power and his director, Jo Bonney, were trying to revitalize the theater with the infusion of contemporary pop performance styles, or trying to convey the sensibility of urban America’s new and broadening ethnic mix, that would all be commendable. But to use Aeschylus as the core of that effort—and *Seven Against Thebes* at that, one of his most infamously austere and static plays—shows both true daring and true integrity.

And the bleak, stark, unsheltered feeling with which *The Seven* concludes does put it, for an instant, up on the high plane where Aeschylus thrives. I’m not sneering:

An instant of pity and terror, in a modern rendering, is a high average. I remember Tyrone Guthrie’s *Oresteia*, with its giant figures in stunning masks and cothurni designed by Tanya Moiseiwitsch. It too had only one truly spine-tingling moment, at the end of the *Agamemnon*, when the chorus held up Moiseiwitsch’s version of the net, bloodied and torn, in which Clytemnestra had trapped her husband. That moment made me sense what

pity and terror on the cosmic plane might mean. Other experiences have expanded that sense: Martha Graham’s *Night Journey* and *Phaedra*, the Breuer-Telson *Gospel at Colonus*, Serban’s trilogy, Mnouchkine’s tetralogy. Imagery, music, and gesture have conveyed what words alone could not. The Athenians, whose masked actors sang through amplifiers, and who called the big central space on their stages “dance floor” (*orkestra*), would have understood.

Power’s aim in *The Seven* isn’t to contemporize the ancient story but to remix it into the hip-hop mainstream. His partial triumph is that, though he doesn’t succeed in reawakening the story or giving it contemporary meaning, through it he brings an extraordinary range of dictions and musical styles to our stage. No one would call his script great poetry, but it makes the possibility of dramatic poetry come alive, particularly when Bill T. Jones’s street-inspired choreography sets the words in motion, with astonishing vibrancy. The problem, in a sense, is that Power and his collaborators have done their vernacularizing too well. Where Aeschylus was hieratic, ritualistic, and steeped in public concerns, hip-hop is colloquial, profane, individualistic, and satiric—a language of the alienated rather than a discourse among citizens. For the Athenians, tragedy was a public confrontation with issues of public responsibility, and dignified accordingly in tone (Aristotle’s “unity of action”). Hip-hop, with its barrages of words on the beat and its constant shift of samplings, is tragedy’s virtual opposite, always expanding to crowd the available space with sound and movement, where tragedy deliberately leaves gaps for contemplation. To bring Aeschylus down to the street, with its slangy mix of jokes and ironies and pop culture allusions, is to turn him into a later, more prankish writer, Euripides or Aristophanes. (Structurally, *The Seven* is in fact much closer to *The Phoenician Women*, Euripides’ half-spoofy play on the same story.)

One might have hoped for the opposite process, hip-hop raised to tragic grandeur, but that was unlikely; the form, in all its excitement, is still waiting for its Homer. If Power had stuck to the original play’s austerity instead of literalizing its backstory—neither Polyneices nor the seven invading champions ever appear in Aeschylus’s play—he might have made something theatrically vital and wildly new for hip-hop, especially with the long lament that closes the original. Still, *The Seven*’s aesthetic range is impressive, and Bonney’s cast is superb: Benton Greene and Janyl Dobson as the warring brothers, Tom Nelis as Eteocles’ sinister aide, Pearl Sun and Flaco Navaja in small but pivotal roles. Most spectacularly, there’s Edwin Lee Gibson’s Oedipus, an outrageous, comically toxic blend of Superfly, B.B. King, and Al Jolson. Imagining those icons in a play by Aeschylus tells you at once exactly how brilliant, and how wrongheaded, *The Seven* is.