

# The Oedipal Present: Feminism, Religion, and Global Crisis in Ella Hickson's Postmodern OEDIPUS

By Mia Clarkson

## Introduction:

*'It's all a bit much, but for the first time in 2,500 years you can watch Oedipus and not quite know what's going to happen next.'*<sup>1</sup> The 2025 production of OEDIPUS<sup>2</sup> using Ella Hickson's own adaptation of Sophocles' Oedipus Tyrannus has garnered much attention. Though much of its response has been negative, Hickson's piece of classical reception holds valuable evidence that ancient tragedy remains highly relevant. Many critics of OEDIPUS (2025) have found issue with Hickson's liberal approach to adapting Oedipus Tyrannus, as they claim she has strayed too far from the tragedy's original message. As Hickson herself states, adapting an ancient tragedy is *'quite hard'*.<sup>3</sup> Despite this, it can be understood that OEDIPUS (2025) intends to be different. Observing Hickson's script through this lens reveals invaluable reassessments of women's stories, modern societal conflicts, and the effects of misused religion. The classical reception of Oedipus Tyrannus is often dominated by Freud's androcentric interpretation of the myth to address male identity – Hickson's portrayal of Jocasta works against this, reclaiming Jocasta's place in the story of Oedipus and deepening the audiences' connection to her character. OEDIPUS, as adapted by Hickson, is an intriguing piece of classical reception, exposing the multifaceted nature of tragedy in postmodernism.

## Retelling Jocasta:

The centralisation of Jocasta's story is perhaps the most impactful example of Hickson's literary license. Sophocles' original heroine is adherent to ancient Greek presentations of women's lack of control and is an example of their necessary subjugation. Jocasta's initial power (her equal ruling with Oedipus) is dampened heavily, perverted by the revelation that this subversive role is only fuelled by her subconscious motherly authority in her relationship. Jocasta's motherly tone is captured by Fagles' 1984 translation; *'into the palace now. And Creon, you go home. Why make such a furor over nothing?'*<sup>4</sup> While Hickson does maintain Jocasta's stark defiance of

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<sup>1</sup> Bano, T. (2025). *Oedipus at the Old Vic review: Bewildering chaos with Rami Malek strangely mannered*. [online] The Standard. Available at: <https://www.standard.co.uk/culture/theatre/oedipus-old-vic-review-rami-malek-b1209249.html> [Accessed 10 Jul. 2025].

<sup>2</sup> OEDIPUS (2025) by E. Hickson. Directed by H. Shechter and M. Warchus [The Old Vic, London. March 22, 2025].

<sup>3</sup> Hickson, E. and Warchus, M. (2025a). *Adapting Oedipus - Oedipus*. [online] *Old Vic*. 6 Jan. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EL9qTp5pU6U> [Accessed 10 Jul. 2025].

<sup>4</sup> Sophocles (1984). *The Three Theban Plays: Oedipus the King*. Translated by R. Fagles. Penguin, p. 196.

religion, claiming it produces ‘crazies, wackos’,<sup>5</sup> she moves past androcentric explorations of infanticide thus giving sympathetic reason for Jocasta’s defiant attitude. Hickson’s version of Oedipus Tyrannus seeks to explain Jocasta’s ignorant secularism, rather than weaponize it. The first inkling of the trauma faced by Jocasta at the hands of her religion comes in Jocasta’s first direct interaction with Creon in which Hickson writes ‘*My family and I [...] were saying how much we miss you... we miss your piety*’ (Creon, p. 24). Jocasta’s alienation from her own society and family is amplified by Hickson’s choice of language. ‘*My family and I*’, in other words, those who remain pious (as Hickson later has Creon address the vehemently religious People as ‘*my people*’ (p. 19)) are gathered by their religion. It is made evident that if Jocasta is to belong once again, she must give in to the very thing that has scarred her so deeply. Hickson’s chorus (or the People) is projected onto the audience, as Rami Malek’s Oedipus stands at the edge of the stage, addressing the audience as the cheers and boos of a crowd (imposed onto the viewer) sounds loudly.<sup>6</sup> In performance, Hickson’s piece forces audiences to examine their attitudes towards women, discomfiting them with a display of religious alienation. While ancient audiences were intended to shame Jocasta as a unified body for the sake of civic excellence,<sup>7</sup> Hickson’s modern audience finds itself confronted by the continued influence of patriarchy that seeks to isolate women who lack conformity.

The expansion of Jocasta’s traumatic past is central to Hickson’s OEDIPUS. Fagles’ translation of Sophocles’ play reveals the apathetic attitudes of men towards female grief, especially regarding the death of children. Studying Oedipus Tyrannus in more literal translation certainly raised questions regarding the true feelings of ancient women. Sophocles’ Jocasta only refers to the infanticide of her son briefly, simply relating it to her secularist beliefs that prophecies are false.<sup>8</sup> Did ancient Greek women have similarly impassive attitudes towards the common practice? Alternatively, is Sophocles’ depiction of female attitudes towards the death of children untrustworthy in its androcentrism? Favouring the latter is the aforementioned fact that Jocasta’s motherly instincts play a large role in Oedipus Tyrannus. One may presume that because Jocasta holds some power over Oedipus due to her subconscious motherly role, her maternal instincts must have also led to pain regarding her child’s death regardless of social conditioning. As if in answer to this curiosity, Hickson adapts Oedipus Tyrannus into a piece steeped in maternal grief. ‘*The child... my child... My tiny, perfect child will have cried and cried – until he... – and I wasn’t allowed to help him*’ (Hickson, 2025). Unlike Sophocles’ original Oedipus, who briskly questions Jocasta on the location of Liasus’ death, Rami Malek’s Oedipus is taken aback by the

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<sup>5</sup> Hickson, E. (2025). *OEDIPUS*. Adapted from *Oedipus Tyrannus* by Sophocles. Nick Hern Books, p. 21.

<sup>6</sup> *OEDIPUS* (2025) by E. Hickson. Directed by H. Shechter and M. Warchus (The Old Vic, London. March 22, 2025).

<sup>7</sup> Goldhill, S. (2005). *Love, sex & tragedy : how the ancient world shapes our lives*. Chicago: The University Of Chicago Press.

<sup>8</sup> Sophocles (1984). *The Three Theban Plays: Oedipus the King*. Translated by R. Fagles. Penguin.

revelation that his wife had a baby with the former king.<sup>9</sup> Thus, Hickson reminds the audience of Jocasta's isolation – of her anguished silence – through Oedipus' surprise. However, Hickson interrupts this deeply sorrowful conversation with Creon's arrival. This invasion of intimacy symbolises both the disregard Jocasta has faced previously concerning her grief as well as Creon's overbearing religious presence which seeks to dominate her character. This characterisation is furthered by Shechter, Warchus (directors), and Rae Smith's (costumes)<sup>10</sup> visual creativity. Indira Varma's (Jocasta) vibrant red dress is juxtaposed continuously with Nicholas Khan's (Creon) black robes, evocative of a priest's garb.<sup>11</sup> The trauma that Hickson identifies within the ancient character of Jocasta is that which is found within countless women throughout history. It is the terror of loss; '*if an oracle can make them kill a baby, you think they'll be dissuaded from killing you?*' (Hickson, 2025). As Hall discusses; '*nobody ever uses the defense in Oedipus that he (Oedipus) had no intention*' to commit heinous crimes.<sup>12</sup> Yet, the mere mistake costs the royal couple everything. Hickson addresses this issue directly, having Jocasta question how she and her son can be punished for a crime they did not know they were committing.<sup>13</sup> In all her progressiveness, Hickson maintains the pain of tragedy. Scene Seven, after the climax of the story, opens as Jocasta begs Oedipus to stay '*No. No – there's a world where we can... we can go... As mother and son – family [...] I can't lose my child again*'.<sup>14</sup> '*Oedipus exits*' leaving Jocasta alone with Tiresias. Hickson's use of speech translated into performance by Indira Varma,<sup>15</sup> broken and lost, brings viewers to tears. Jocasta's tragedy is truly pushed to the forefront by Hickson, emphasising the relentless cycle of pain which trumps that of Oedipus himself.

In Hickson's OEDIPUS, Jocasta's fate is fundamentally altered. Hickson makes the bold decision to keep Jocasta alive, as she escapes into the night with the help of Tiresias rather than being found hanging in her bedroom. In fact, Hickson somewhat maintains Sophocles' original story as Creon informs the audience (the People) that Jocasta has hanged herself in order to appease them. Rather than bluntly altering Jocasta's ending, Hickson changes the lens through which the

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<sup>9</sup> OEDIPUS (2025) by E. Hickson. Directed by H. Shechter and M. Warchus (The Old Vic, London. March 22, 2025).

<sup>10</sup> Old Vic Theatre. (2025). *Oedipus - Old Vic Theatre*. [online] Available at: <https://www.oldvictheatre.com/stage/oedipus/> [Accessed 9 Jul. 2025].

<sup>11</sup> OEDIPUS (2025) by E. Hickson. Directed by H. Shechter and M. Warchus (The Old Vic, London. March 22, 2025).

<sup>12</sup> Hall, E. (2010). *Greek tragedy suffering under the Sun*. [online] Oxford New York Oxford University Press, p.303. Available at: <https://edithhall.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/03/greek-tragedy.pdf> [Accessed 10 Jul. 2025].

<sup>13</sup> Hickson, E. (2025). OEDIPUS. Adapted from *Oedipus Tyrannus* by Sophocles. Nick Hern Books.

<sup>14</sup> Hickson, E. (2025). OEDIPUS. Adapted from *Oedipus Tyrannus* by Sophocles. Nick Hern Books, p. 42-43.

<sup>15</sup> OEDIPUS (2025) by E. Hickson. Directed by H. Shechter and M. Warchus (The Old Vic, London. March 22, 2025).

audience views the story by cleverly prefacing Creon's construction as a religiously driven lie. Hickson reveals a new, feminist possibility that plays with Sophocles' destruction of Jocasta. Jocasta's survival works to taunt Oedipus Tyrannus' patriarchal influences, deeming Jocasta's death a doctrine of comfort. Hickson's Creon simply lies to soothe his patriarchal, religious need: *'She must be shamed [...] She must be shamed!'*<sup>16</sup> Jocasta's ending is refreshing, as Hickson frees her from the historical stereotypes of women succumbing to their societal shame, driven to suicide by their disorderly emotions. OEDIPUS (2025) calls everyone who witnesses it, in literary or stage form, to question the stories they have been told about women through men's eyes.

### Cyclicism:

According to Aristotle, a tragic hero must be neither wholly good nor wholly deplorable.<sup>17</sup> Hickson's piece of classical reception appears to extend this literary construct to her whole cast, broadening the sense of moral ambiguity beyond Oedipus to Creon, Jocasta, and even the People. Through this collective convolution, Hickson depicts the rift between regressive and progressive society.

One can attempt to describe the effects of OEDIPUS' (2025) reverent performances of contortion and rhythm, but it is ultimately impossible to confine the power of the Hofesh Shechter Company<sup>18</sup> to words. In Shechter's own words, *'I want to connect with something raw and real, with the essence of the human spirit – our helplessness and hope – and to awaken people to the possibilities of change'* (Shechter, 2017). OEDIPUS opens with a dance, which continues to act as supplement to the choral odes of Sophocles' original play. Shechter's interjections of the traditional theatrical acting of Malik and Varma are long and visceral. At times, his dancers move in hypnotic unity, periodically they claw and tumble against one another. Their unity reaches back across thousands of years to the choreography of traditional tragedies while occasional violence references modern society's identification of the faults in religion. Hickson's inclusion of the dance sequences within her text pays great homage to ancient Greek tragedy and religion, acknowledging the lost importance of bodily movement. The chorus is admired by Oedipus in Hickson's adaptation as he remarks *'they've been up for days, chanting, singing – no water, no food and they're still going. They're strong. Something's fuelling them'*.<sup>19</sup> Hickson's writing and Shechter's interpretive choreography transform the ancient chorus from an influential force on the audience to a display of societal unity and turmoil cultivated by tensions. In the context of our modern world, Hickson and Shechter acknowledge the vitality produced by the humanity of

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<sup>16</sup> Hickson, E. (2025). *OEDIPUS*. Adapted from *Oedipus Tyrannus* by Sophocles. Nick Hern Books, p. 44.

<sup>17</sup> Aristotle (1996). *Poetics*. Translated by M. Heath. London: Penguin Books.

<sup>18</sup> The company responsible for the dancers and choreography of OEDIPUS (2025).

<sup>19</sup> Hickson, E. (2025). *OEDIPUS*. Adapted from *Oedipus Tyrannus* by Sophocles. Nick Hern Books, p. 13.

dance and thus religious celebration and reverence. Despite the Chorus' ancient appearance, closer inspection reveals their Nike socks, waterproof shells, and baseball caps,<sup>20</sup> placing them in Hickson's futuristic setting, *'Thebes – 2520'* (2025). The postmodernist nature of Warchus and Shechter's production is emphasised through an observation of the chorus' role in modern performance. Soulele's (2023) thesis on the *'reformation'* of the chorus post-1945 highlights a mass movement towards an emphasis on music in tragic performance. The work examined by Soulele (2023) still relied heavily on the voices of their chorus (through chants and lessened dialogue) as well as Greek influence in the music itself. Thus, Shechter's removal of choral dialogue can be interpreted as a further movement away from Hickson's OEDIPUS' ancient roots. Instead, his soundtrack seeks to connect the chorus of OEDIPUS (2025) to all societies, at all times, through his combination of electronic and ambiguously traditional music.

The vastness of time between Sophocles' original play and Hickson's adaptation is further emphasised by her choice to remain in the same city. Oedipus' story has come full circle. The significance of this date, that it is the inverse of the play's running year, is rooted in Hickson's epigraph. *'The future isn't what it used to be'*.<sup>21</sup> As society moves forward, we appear to regress, seeking comfort in traditions that have historically led to systematic harm (as discussed concerning the character of Jocasta). The use of costuming is essential to Shechter and Warchus' stage production of OEDIPUS. Not only does the subtly modern clothing of the chorus remind the audience of Hickson's meta theatre by linking them to the viewer further, Creon's black robes symbolise centuries of religious oppression. They transform Sophocles' worthy character into an embodiment of continued corruption. Smith's costuming<sup>22</sup> brings Hickson's tragedy more poignantly into current affairs as Creon's adamant that Jocasta must be shamed and his saccharine reverency reflect modern uses of religion to push selfish ideals. What was once the goal of Athenian tragedy, to promote civic ideology that often excluded minorities, has become Hickson's target of critique.

#### Oedipus and Jocasta's secularism:

Despite Hickson's critique of prejudiced religion, Oedipus and Jocasta's secularism does not escape her critical writing. OEDIPUS still maintains Sophocles' original message: that Jocasta and Oedipus' distrust and even disdain for religion leads to a subconscious moral nihilism culminating in their incestuous relationship. One way in which Hickson varies her adaptation of Oedipus Tyrannus is through Oedipus' final moments. As Jocasta begs Oedipus to lead the people to Corinth, Hickson writes Oedipus' acceptance of his fate – *'I am banished. The rains*

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<sup>20</sup> OEDIPUS (2025) by E. Hickson. Directed by H. Shechter and M. Warchus [The Old Vic, London. March 22, 2025].

<sup>21</sup> *Angel Heart*. (1987). [Film] Tri-Star Pictures.

<sup>22</sup> Including the use of modern articles of clothing for the chorus as well as Creon's robes which are evocative of western religious garb.

*will come, and the people will be healed*'.<sup>23</sup> In this private setting with his wife, Hickson presents Oedipus' attitude towards religion as unchanged shown through his lack of religious language. However, Scene Eight features an eye-less Oedipus who admits he is '*guilty, guilty of the pride and mindless rage... guilty of the hubris that had me presume I solved the sphinx with my own mind, when in fact the Gods were speaking through me. I am guilty of the cynicism with which I treated the word of the oracle*'.<sup>24</sup> Oedipus, ever the politician, gives into the formidable beliefs of the masses. Unlike Fagles' translation, Hickson does not include Oedipus' reverent cries that Apollo '*ordained my agonies*'.<sup>25</sup> Fagles' translation maintains Sophocles' submissive Oedipus whereas Hickson's version maintains Oedipus' sense of individuality to a greater extent. Through this ejection, Hickson maintains Oedipus' speculative nature to a larger degree. Therefore, it is made clear in Hickson's adaptation that secular ideas are not to be wholly condemned as Oedipus never fully renounces them – at least not in a way that seems genuine to the audience. Just as Hickson does for Jocasta, she gifts Oedipus' character dignity. In OEDIPUS' penultimate scene (Scene Eight), there are no exclamations of '*agonies*'. Instead, Oedipus faces the people with a brave humility, accepting guilt to save them and allowing himself to be led out of the city. Sophocles' once extravagant peripeteia for his tragic hero is reduced by Hickson, becoming succinct. While this does work to maintain Oedipus' integrity, it also brings forth a new kind of melancholy which is quieter than that of Sophocles' long, dramatic speeches. Rather, Hickson's Oedipus is presented as a societally defeated man who nevertheless maintains his personal dignity by helping his people and suppressing his true beliefs for the People's sake.

It must be said that the nature of Jocasta and Oedipus' disbelief is quite complex as depicted in Hickson's OEDIPUS. The curiosity Oedipus is so famous for is '*weirdly, in this case, [...] a fearful thing*'.<sup>26</sup> While Sophocles' (1984) Oedipus verges on denial of the gods due to his hubris, Hickson's troubled hero finds connection with Jocasta and her atheism through his shared religious trauma, causing both him and his wife (or mother) to stray from their society's adamant beliefs to find their own truth. As Hickson has Jocasta state in Scene Three '*I know him and he knows me... there is a truth between us*'.<sup>27</sup> Oedipus also appears to have an acute understanding of Jocasta's trauma relating to her lost child which Creon does not possess: '*You disgust me*.'

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<sup>23</sup> Hickson, E. (2025). *OEDIPUS*. Adapted from *Oedipus Tyrannus* by Sophocles. Nick Hern Books, p. 42.

<sup>24</sup> Hickson, E. (2025). *OEDIPUS*. Adapted from *Oedipus Tyrannus* by Sophocles. Nick Hern Books, p. 45.

<sup>25</sup> Sophocles (1984). *The Three Theban Plays: Oedipus the King*. Translated by R. Fagles. Penguin, p. 241.

<sup>26</sup> Hickson, E. and Warchus, M. (2025a). *Adapting Oedipus - Oedipus*. [online] *Old Vic*. 6 Jan. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EL9qTp5pU6U> [Accessed 10 Jul. 2025].

<sup>27</sup> Hickson, E. (2025). *OEDIPUS*. Adapted from *Oedipus Tyrannus* by Sophocles. Nick Hern Books, p. 25.

*What you did to her! What you and King Laius made her do! She was seventeen!*<sup>28</sup> Sophocles' original portrayal of the relationship is broadened by Hickson, developing into an emotionally based bond. While Jocasta's trauma still remains elusive due to the confines of Sophocles and Hickson's tragic plots, Oedipus' is presented more directly to the audience.

*I walked out into  
the desert. I walked further and further, I was a teenage boy,  
I was confused and uncertain and – ...  
To spend your life with that sort of, swimming  
around in your body, in your mind...  
Because of the insipid, snake-charming, shit that you  
people... you disgust me.* (Hickson, 2025, p. 33-34.)

Hickson expands on the consequences of the oracle given to Oedipus. The detrimental effects of religious tradition are directly implemented upon Oedipus' character through his disturbed rant to Creon. Malek's performance of this monologue is broken and furious as his inner turmoil spills over onto the stage.<sup>29</sup> The exploration of age intensifies Oedipus' vulnerability, creating sympathy for his character. Sophocles' Oedipus the King (1984) abides strongly by Aristotle's (1996) identified conventions of tragedy, including that a hero should inhabit a liminal space between likeable and dislikeable. Hickson somewhat strays from this, choosing to create great sympathy for her tragic hero, calling her audience to experience Sophocles' ancient play anew from a more empathetic standpoint.

Hickson's Oedipus could be labelled the most balanced character of her work. Sophocles' Oedipus, as well as the Oedipus of modern myth (for example the common conception of the Freudian Oedipus), maintains a childish, extreme quality due to his hubris. In contrast to this, Hickson presents her Oedipus inhabiting the middle ground between Jocasta and Creon. This is visually depicted within Shechter and Warchus' stage production by Smith's choice of costuming. Visually, Jocasta (wearing a vibrant red dress for the duration of the play) and Creon (in his pitch black robes) are highly juxtaposed. This perhaps represents Jocasta's mature dismissal of her society's beliefs, choosing to stand out starkly from the traditions of her people. Creon's robes are powerful and looming. This choice of colour ensures the audience is aware of his near constant presence beside or behind Oedipus, mirroring his attempts to influence the King. Malek's Oedipus dons a white shirt and grey trousers for the majority of the play.<sup>30</sup> Shechter and Warchus' production captures the liminality of Hickson's Oedipus. However, it is not only through visual cues that the audience comprehends Oedipus' refreshingly balanced personality, Hickson also captures it in words.

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<sup>28</sup> Hickson, E. (2025). *OEDIPUS*. Adapted from *Oedipus Tyrannus* by Sophocles. Nick Hern Books, p. 34

<sup>29</sup> *OEDIPUS* (2025) by E. Hickson. Directed by H. Shechter and M. Warchus [The Old Vic, London. March 22, 2025].

<sup>30</sup> *OEDIPUS* (2025) by E. Hickson. Directed by H. Shechter and M. Warchus [The Old Vic, London. March 22, 2025].

*'Every king in history has been backed by God, it's only us in our endless rationality, on and on. We know everything, do we? You've never once had an experience, a feeling – of grandeur, bigger than yourself that makes you wonder whether there might be something that knows more than you do?'*<sup>31</sup>

Hickson's inclusion of Oedipus' questioning maintains his famously curious nature, but her adaptation appears to encourage this mode of thought. Oedipus adapts throughout the play, beginning as a character relatively similar to Sophocles' original, who believes himself, and his own mind, superior. However, as the play progresses, as seen here in Scene Three, Hickson presents Oedipus' rationality and adaptability as a strength rather than hamartia. Hickson's Oedipus is aware that there is something out there, based on the fear and obedience he has shown in response to the oracle given to him as a boy, but he chooses not to label it. His questions reveal that he believes in human knowledge, yet doubts it is infallible. Through this, Hickson directly highlights the issues presented by Creon and the People's unquestioning faith: it leads to irrational violence, punishment, and shame. Nevertheless, he holds Jocasta accountable as she is *'as blindly committed to your cause as they are to theirs'* (Hickson, 2025). Hickson raises the point that Jocasta's adversity to religion, born of trauma, is damaging in its isolation of her character. Hickson reveals the extent of Jocasta's isolation through her reaction to Oedipus, having her back away, claiming *'you're a believer'* (Hickson, 2025). Jocasta, in her fear and disdain, is even willing to verbally distance herself from her husband. Despite the dire ending he faces, Hickson's Oedipus remains the hero of the story as he rationally decides to give into the pleas of the people<sup>32</sup> by blinding and banishing himself, claiming somewhat of a religious motivation. What Sophocles presents as an emotive, irrational expression of shame,<sup>33</sup> Hickson decides to shed new light on the selflessness of Oedipus' blinding. This culminates in Oedipus' final line of Hickson's adaptation: *'What do you see? Antigone? Tell me. Are the people healed?'* (Hickson, 2025, p. 47). Hickson erases the hubris of Oedipus, opting to tell a tale of the devotion of a rational man to a people that are incontrovertibly faithful. What remains for Oedipus after sacrificing all for his People? The stains of his own blood, a symbol of his self sacrifice, evocative of his mother's red dress.

*'Our present global situation'*<sup>34</sup>:

Hickson pulls Sophocles' tragedy into the modern world with another contextually relevant topic: climate change. Hickson makes the choice to depict the plague of Thebes as a drought

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<sup>31</sup> Hickson, E. (2025). *OEDIPUS*. Adapted from *Oedipus Tyrannus* by Sophocles. Nick Hern Books, p. 23.

<sup>32</sup> *'I am banished. The rains will come, and the people will be healed'* (Hickson, 2025).

<sup>33</sup> Sophocles (1984). *The Three Theban Plays: Oedipus the King*. Translated by R. Fagles. Penguin.

<sup>34</sup> Hickson, E. and Warchus, M. (2025a). *Adapting Oedipus - Oedipus*. [online] *Old Vic*. 6 Jan. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EL9qTp5pU6U> [Accessed 10 Jul. 2025].



rather than a sickness as seen in Sophocles' (1984) original tale. Catherine Anderson (2025) describes the lighting as directed by Shechter: '*The lighting is simply spectacular and turns this Thebes into a land where the giant sun feels like it has come far too close to the Earth.*' Shechter and Warchus' production is intensely minimalist, featuring shifting black pillars and an unforgiving blaring sun. This choice does work to the effect of enhancing Oedipus' positive kingship early on in the play as Hickson depicts him willingly sharing his water – '*I've decided to release our private store of water*'.<sup>35</sup> However, OEDIPUS' story of denial and ignorance concerning its tragic hero perhaps mirrors Hickson's political climate. Oedipus' initial ignorance concerning his people's religious pleas is a great example of Hickson's meta theatre, reflecting the way in which modern politicians refuse to address the overwhelming pleas of their citizens to sufficiently aid the climate crisis. Oedipus' decision to temporarily alleviate the drought is highlighted by Creon who interjects with '*I'm not sure releasing more water is the answer*'.<sup>36</sup> Thus Hickson's OEDIPUS can be examined as a contemporary piece of commentary on world leaders' lack of action concerning the global climate crisis.

Furthermore, Hickson's work is a critique of overreliance on technology. The Oracle is presented as a '*reel-to-reel machine*' which reminds the audience and the people of Thebes of Laius' murder and instructs them to cleanse the land.<sup>37</sup> The voice of the Oracle is jarring, reminiscent of common AI synthetic voices. While the maniacal cackling<sup>38</sup> of the Oracle does identify with the possibility that the Delphic Oracle was often in a narcotic state (as suggested by a geological study),<sup>39</sup> Warchus and Shechter's choice to maintain Hickson's technological edge suggests the Oracle is more than a religious relay of information in OEDIPUS (2025). Rather, Hickson's Oracle is a metaphor for society's growing reliance on technology for truths. The danger of this is exposed by the fact that the Oracle encourages the People and Creon on a violent witch hunt, while Tiresias (a human source) reveals the truth almost immediately and in full.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, what Hickson (2025) seems to suggest is that although technology and AI are helpful, they are often mis-represented and interpreted as wholly reliable, allowing it to overrun spaces that should favour human input. Hickson's OEDIPUS successfully alters key aspects of Sophocles' Oedipus Tyrannus to comment on relevant contemporary issues.

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<sup>35</sup> Hickson, E. (2025). *OEDIPUS*. Adapted from *Oedipus Tyrannus* by Sophocles. Nick Hern Books, p. 11.

<sup>36</sup> Hickson, E. (2025). *OEDIPUS*. Adapted from *Oedipus Tyrannus* by Sophocles. Nick Hern Books, p. 12.

<sup>37</sup> Hickson, E. (2025). *OEDIPUS*. Adapted from *Oedipus Tyrannus* by Sophocles. Nick Hern Books, p. 18-19.

<sup>38</sup> *OEDIPUS* (2025) by E. Hickson. Directed by H. Shechter and M. Warchus [The Old Vic, London. March 22, 2025].

<sup>39</sup> McKie, R. (2003). *Delphic oracle was ancient glue-sniffer*. [online] the Guardian. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/aug/03/research.arts> [Accessed 10 Jul. 2025].

<sup>40</sup> Hickson, E. (2025). *OEDIPUS*. Adapted from *Oedipus Tyrannus* by Sophocles. Nick Hern Books.

## Conclusion:

Ella Hickson's modern OEDIPUS is a revitalisation of an ancient classic. Though not to the tastes of many, coming under the harsh critique of many theatrical journalists, it succeeds at its goal: using an ancient tragedy as a vessel to explore contemporary society as well as humanity itself. Despite Hickson's claim that OEDIPUS is '*not an intellectual adventure*',<sup>41</sup> her work can be analysed to reveal true literary worth. While OEDIPUS (2025) does remove '*the stuff that has kept Oedipus popular for 2,500 years*',<sup>42</sup> this does not mean it is a failed piece of classical reception. Rather, Hickson's OEDIPUS as well as Warchus and Shechter's stage adaptation explores aspects of Oedipus Tyrannus that have never been so thoroughly exposed on stage. Surely, this can be seen as a success, even if it defies expectation. Jocasta's character is brought to the forefront, garnering her recognition that has been due for thousands of years. Hickson's setting detaches Oedipus Tyrannus from its ancient shackles, allowing the exploration of multiple civilisations simultaneously and exposing new audiences to literary pieces that continue to thrive due to their ability to expose truths about humanity. OEDIPUS (2025) is not perfect, but neither are its characters, who speak for its audience.

(3,931 words)

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<sup>41</sup> Hickson, E. and Warchus, M. (2025a). *Adapting Oedipus - Oedipus*. [online] *Old Vic*. 6 Jan. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EL9qTp5pU6U> [Accessed 10 Jul. 2025].

<sup>42</sup> Lukowski, A. (2025). *Oedipus, Old Vic review: Rami Malek and Indira Varma star in this deeply confusing production*. [online] Time Out London. Available at: <https://www.timeout.com/london/theatre/oedipus-2-review> [Accessed 10 Jul. 2025].

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