

Oedipus, King of Thebes (Egypt): Re-Orientations by Egyptian Arabic Playwrights

Twentieth-century Egyptian dramatists variously adapted *Oedipus Tyrannos*, blending “East” and “West” to answer local and global questions of continuing importance, especially for westerners unfamiliar with the re-Oriented voices of Egyptian intellectuals addressing Eurocentric colonialism, pan-Arabic nationalism, and Muslim fundamentalism and ecumenism. Tawfiq al-Hakim’s *King Oedipus* (1949), Ali Ahmad Bakathir’s *Tragedy of Oedipus* (1949), and Ali Salim’s *Comedy of Oedipus: You Killed the Beast!* (1970) offer distinct perspectives that apply Sophocles neatly to their own social agenda for an Egypt in flux through Oedipus’ eyes—and blindness.

Tawfiq al-Hakim offers his predominantly Muslim audience no Greek fatalism with capricious gods (Wahab 1974) and less humanistic centering on Oedipus the mystery-solver (al-Ra’i 1992). Teiresias is the conspirator that Sophocles’ Oedipus suspects, likely symbolizing Egypt’s struggles with Britain (Munir 1979; cf. Khalaf 2002). Oedipus is intellectually fixated on identity and “truth” (Atiyeh 1972; Starkey 1977), a devoted family man driven to self-destruction by Jocasta’s suicide, not culpability (al-Ra’i 1992).

Bakathir crafts a more Islamically-grounded Oedipus in response to pan-Arabic shame after the 1948 Arab-Israeli War (Selaiha 2001). Teiresias speaks in Quranic tones that guide a Marxist/atheist Oedipus toward enlightened recognition of the divine (Carlson 2005). Oedipus, originally a socialist egalitarian and publicity hound, recognizes his manipulation by a corrupt priest of the status quo. This debate between religious façade and prophetic truth leads Oedipus to accept his malfeasance and appoint Teiresias as Thebes’ moral authority.

Ali Salim satirizes Nasser's lionization before the 1967 Arab-Israeli War and Egypt's humiliation afterwards. Oedipus is preoccupied with revealing 'truth' (he did not kill the beast; he human, not divine pharaoh), conveniently concealed during his power grab. Tiresias is conscience and reason, but a Cassandra, and a comically intrusive emcee who appears just to profess deep thoughts; Jocasta is worried about marrying down as Sophocles' Oedipus feared; Creon is an officious revolutionary general, as dutiful as Sophocles' character claims. Most amusing and compelling are Salim's Egyptian characters (Awaleh, a stereotypically abusive police chief; Horimheb, haughty university president and defender of privileges; Senefru, a playwright muted by state orders). Nasser's bureaucratic web, his self-imposed hero cult, and the UAR's omnipresent "group think" are ridiculed with the recurring crowd chant "Oedipus killed the beast!" Salim finishes where Sophocles started, appealing to Oedipus' godlike wisdom, but this "unintentionally" risible prequel (Farag-Badawi 1981) ends in a mystical exit and a declaration that Thebes will survive without its hero-king. Not quite *Oidipous at Kolonos*, but a lot more fun.

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