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WRITTEN BY BLAIR SINGER  
DIRECTED BY JOHN RANDO

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# Troubadour Theater Company's *Oedipus the King, Mama!* and Chekhov's *The Seagull*

Mama's boys  
By Steven Leigh Morris  
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## Oedipus the King was a mama's boy. If

Sophocles didn't make that clear enough in his tragedy of 429 B.C., the Troubadour Theater Company's 2009 B.C.E (Burbank, California) version does, with the image of Oedipus' husky-voiced wife, Jocasta (Beth Kennedy) — who the king (director Matt Walker) will soon figure out is his mother — flipping open the neckline of her slinky red gown (gorgeously garish costumes by Sharon McGunigle) to pop out a cloth boob for him to suck.

"There you go, feel better now, Sweetie?" Jocasta comforts the monarch as he fingers the painted nipple.

Where I come from, that's called driving home a point.

I should mention that Oedipus, who has a shock of black hair uncontained by a useless headband, and matching bejeweled white shirt and flared trousers with bright-red fringe, bears a striking resemblance to Elvis Presley — or, to be more precise, to a desperate Elvis impersonator. And that the onstage band, helmed by Musical Director Eric Heiny, accompanies a series of Elvis' ditties, which the clown company croons with comedic accomplishment, often swaying and sashaying to Ameenah Kaplan's vintage choreography, which really belongs on a ghost-memory episode of the *The Ed Sullivan Show*.

If you haven't figured it out by now, *Oedipus the King, Mama!* is a musical parody of Sophocles' play, of musical shtick, of Elvis mania and of cheesy theatrical devices. In the tradition of the Troubies' mashing of classic lit into pop music (*Twelfth Dog Night, Alice in One-Hit-Wonderland, Much Adoobie Brothers About Nothing*), the event's thrill hangs on the tautness of the theatrical wires that bind the classical source material, the music and the freewheeling improvisation. In early years, the troupe would get carried away goofing with the audience so that the source material melted into oblivion. In the last couple of seasons, however, Walker and company have mastered a form of their own making. Even with the absurd juxtaposition of ancient Greek tragedy with Elvis Presley — created, I'm guessing, for no larger reason than the *double-entendre* of the words king and mama —

it's kind of amazing how faithful this rendition is to the intricate structure of Sophocles' play, despite Jocasta's brother, Creon (Rick Batalla in a luminous-green wizard suit, with pointy hat), confiding after one improvised diversion that he'd forgotten where they were in the play.

The event opens on an almost bare stage, with Walker, dressed in black and standing by a music stand, apologizing to the critics. For reasons related to the economy, he says, the company has been forced into performing a concert reading of the play. Even so, he adds, they're charging full price, because to not do so, "well, that would be stupid."

He's onstage with Batalla, Kennedy and Breanna Pine, also in dark concert-reading attire, when James Snyder bounds onto the stage in a glittery Greek tunic. Despite a few jokes about Snyder's "wax job," his CDs for sale in the lobby from *Cry Baby*, which he performed on Broadway last year, and the subtle absurdity of the visual spectacle, Walker is determined to press on: "Oedipus the King," he recites formally with just a trace of pomposity — "a tragedy in five acts." This mere description prompts a groan from Batalla and the swift departure of Kennedy to pick up her residuals checks from her post-office box. Yet the interplay among the quintet has the same kind of gentle humor as *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*, a TV show from the Elvis era, pattering along with an amiable good cheer over a petty, subterranean conflict — a prequel to a show that's about to explode into something Monty Python-esque, with teeth being spat out, ketchup blood streaming down faces, and a dead-queen piñata.

Through all of this, Walker's Oedipus has a trick knee (the consequence of a post-birth mutilation of his feet) that forces his leg to pop out with every second step — a physical twitch that Walker beautifully integrates into his Elvis plastique. (Mike Jespersen's set also includes a handicapped zone in which to park his chariot.)

Meanwhile, Kennedy's Tennesseean Jocasta oozes with sexuality that's something between feline and reptilian. At one point during the show I saw, she slithered up and down the audience railing, a few feet from where I was sitting. From the stage, Oedipus cautioned her that I was a critic, and that, as queen, she should behave with more decorum.

"I'll do *anything* for a good review," she grunted, straddling the crossbeam. Okay, she got what she asked for.

One revelatory moment of improv came when a feather from one of the costumes drifted from the stage up and out into the audience. Walker and Batalla seized the moment and followed it, with a running commentary on how such a tiny object could defy gravity. They each reached for it, into the sky, as it mocked their will. Midair, it broke into two pieces — one for each of them to grasp at. And so they split focus, like the feather itself, crawling over audience members while reaching, reaching skyward for the unreachable.

That moment serendipitously captured this company's quintessence — a largely spontaneous, brilliantly performed diversion, lighter than air, which can have 100 people wailing with laughter over a speck of a concept, caught on a breeze.

**In her staging of Anton Chekhov's 1896 *The Seagull***, director Marjo-Riikka Makela has actress-diva Arkadina (Devin Mills), who visits the rustic Russian estate of her ailing brother, Sorin (Bobby Reed), attached to an entourage. A cluster of devotees follows her every step, as though tethered by the chin to the back of her collar. It's a slapstick device, meant to tug Chekhov's impressionistic study of artists and unrequited love into something more expressionistic, like one of

the symbolist visions imagined by her callow playwright son, Konstantin (Matthew Anderson).

As the entourage exits with Arkadina in Act 1, one of them sings the anthem from *The Sound of Music*, and we're almost back into the world of goofy anachronisms that populate the works of the Troubadour Theater Company.

Similarly, Makela is reaching for the light, in a play that's frequently interpreted as morose. Perhaps the more gloomy renditions have something to do with Konstantin's suicide attempts, and his rage at being overshadowed by both his mother and her interloping boyfriend, a writer named Trigorin (George Villas), both of whom are far more famous than Konstantin. (This is a family obsessed with fame.)

Whereas the Troubadour's purpose is to hang *Oedipus the King* upside down on a hook, Makela aims to keep *The Seagull* circling in a bay of emotional truth. One scene in particular underscores *The Seagull's* Oedipal underpinnings: As Arkadina changes the bandage on her son's head wound, he complains about the intrusions of Trigorin, of how blissful their life and love were before "he" showed up. It's as though the young playwright is speaking to a former lover.

The production at Artworks Theatre in Hollywood (which uses Paul Schmidt's colloquial translation from the Russian, and is costumed in period by Jenny Lind Bryant) contains some lovely performances: Amelia Rose's tragic Nina — the young actress with whom Konstantin is obsessed — has the winsome quality of a reed in a marsh, as the winds of time, of professional failure and of her enduring, abused love for Trigorin slowly bear down upon her. Michelle Murphy gives the estate manager's gloomy daughter Masha a powerful strain of sarcasm, and Reed's ill Sorin has a vaudevillian spark. Villas' Trigorin and Mills' Arkadina, both initially too mannered, settle into a style that straddles the divide Makela aims for, between emotional credibility and comedic remove.

In Act 1, that divide looks like a small rip in the seam: In the stronger Act 2, the slapstick comes into focus as Konstantin's comic nightmare — a refreshingly bold directorial attempt in a work by a playwright who's almost defined by his impressionist view of life. And though the production suffers from some lackluster performances, its second-act power suggests that I may have seen the first act on an off-night.

**OEDIPUS THE KING, MAMA!** | By SOPHOCLES and the TROUBADOUR THEATER COMPANY | FALCON THEATER, 4252 Riverside Drive, Burbank | Through September 27 | (818) 955-8101

**THE SEAGULL** | By ANTON CHEKHOV | Artworks Theatre | 6569 Santa Monica Blvd., Hlywd. | Through September 12 | (800) 838-3006.