

Oedipus The King, Mama

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The Troubadour Theater Company is back with *Oedipus The King, Mama*, one of their funniest shows ever and of those I've seen the best danced bar none.

Unlike Troubie's classics *Much Adoobie Brothers About Nothing*, *As U2 Like It*, *It's A Stevie Wonderful Life*, and their upcoming Christmas production *Frosty The Snow Manilow*, *Oedipus The King, Mama's* title doesn't immediately give away the name of the singer whose songs it features, however a look at the show's poster quickly reveals that the ruler in question is none other than the King of Rock and Roll, Elvis Presley himself. Among the Presley classics performed with slightly (or not so slightly) altered lyrics are "A Little Less Conversation (A Little More Action Please)," "Teddy Bear," "Roustabout," "Jailhouse Rock," and "Love Me Tender."

At first, though, it seems that there may not be any real show at all this time, but merely a "staged reading of 'Oedipus The King, A Play In 5 Acts,'" or so announces Troubies' Artistic Director Matt Walker, garbed in basic black and standing on a bare stage in front of a music stand beside a similarly-clad Beth Kennedy and Jen Seifert. Not long afterwards, costar James Snyder rushes in—late, a vision of beefcake in skimpy ancient Greek duds, wondering aloud (as we all have been doing) what has happened to the Troubies' usual full-scale production. "Guys, we talked about this," explains Walker. "It's the economy." The quartet then proceed to sing along to an old Elvis' recording of "It's Now Or Never," prompting Snyder to exclaim, "You couldn't even afford a karaoke track!? I mean, I was Cry Baby on Broadway!" (And Snyder was indeed last seen in the title role in the Tony-nominated musical, in a theater with at least a thousand more seats than the Falcon. Oh the indignity!)

Obviously, they're only fooling us. "We got a band and they're in costume!" proclaims Walker, and who should appear but a toga-attired Rick Batalla and his accordion, which when you think of it really isn't that much better that what we've had so far, and before long, Walker has been abandoned by his castmates, leaving only the Troubies mastermind and his music stand center stage.

And then, as we've known all along it would, the show *really* begins, curtains parting to reveal the mythologically-costumed full company, musical director Eric Heiny and his four-piece band, and head honcho Walker returning in full Elvis mode (that's all-in-white "Las Vegas Elvis") with a rubber-legged gait that must be seen to be believed.

Oedipus (for those who've forgotten their college Ancient Literature class) is the hero of a Greek tragedy by Sophocles, a young man given some uber bad news by the Oracle at Delphi. Poor Oed, says the Oracle, is destined to kill his father and marry his mother! After answering the riddle of the Sphinx and defeating her, *Oedipus* is made king by the Thebans. He fulfills the Oracle's prophecy by marrying the widowed Jocasta (aka his mom)—and a happy ending is had by none.

Audience members need not know even this much of the Greek legend in order to enjoy Oedipus The King, Mama. About halfway through the show, Beth Kennedy (as Jocasta) brags to Walker (as her husband/son) that "I'm following a lot of (the plot), probably about 64% of it," prompting Walker to look out at the audience and quip, "That's better than most of them." I may not have followed Jocasta's 64%, or even half that much of the admittedly mangled Sophoclean tale. No matter. I enjoyed Oedipus The King, Mama 100%.

Jocasta's brother Creon here becomes Crayon, portrayed by resident Troubie zany Rick Batalla, who arrives in green satin robe and pointy green satin hat bragging appropriately (given his name) that "Crayon is no threat. He's non-toxic." When Jocasta finally appears, a sultry vision in a slinky red gown, the occasion is one worth capturing digitally. "I want to see those on Facepapyrus in the morning," she orders the paparazzo who's snapped her pic.



As the evening progresses, other Presley songs become show highlights, many performed by members of the obligatory Greek Chorus, usually with appropriately tweaked lyrics. "Devil In Disguise" features Breanna Pine, who "looks like an angel" and Joseph Keane, "a devil in disguise." Lisa Valenzuela belts out "Trouble," danced by a topless* sphinx. "Return To Sender," features a tap solo by Kimberly Woods, and Keane and Woods do an "interpretive dance" to "Suspicious Minds" ("So if a big guy you know, calls you a murderous mofo"), Keane wearing a white spandex "sperm suit." James Michael Lambert shows off velvet pipes with "It's Now Or Never." "(You Ain't Nothin' But A) Hound Dog" becomes "I Eat Nothing But A Corn Dog," and "Heartbreak Hotel" features the lyric, "I'm feeling worse than if I'd watched Saved By The Bell." In "Are You Lonesome Tonight," the question "Is your heart filled with pain, shall I come back again?" becomes "Now my heart's filled with pain, cause I'm in public domain." You get the picture.

How much of the irresistible Troubies' banter is adlibbed and how much is written to sound adlibbed is any audience member's guess, but whatever—it's hilarious. (At one point during the performance reviewed here, a cast member joked, "You silly man, adlibbing in such a foolish way," and later, the house lights were turned up so that Walker et al could greet Keane's mother and Morrison's parents, seated in the audience.)

There's not a single weak link in the entire Troubies cast, beginning with head Troubie Walker, a hoot in the title role. Batalla is his always wacky self and Kennedy is never anything less than a dazzler. (Her "I'm never going to speak again" riff goes on and on to escalating laughter). Snyder does indeed bring Broadway star power, a voice to rival Elvis's (he was Cry Baby after all!), great comic chops, and leading man good looks to the role of "Young Elvis."

In supporting roles, dance captain Keane is a charismatic standout and he and the lovely Morrison are the show's best dancers. Oedipus is also a kind of mini Happy Days reunion, bringing back together Walker, Keane, Morrison, and the always wonderful Lambert from the recent national tour. As blind prophet Teiresias, Mike Sulprizio is another laugh-getter.

Andy Lopez (Guy Drunk On Wine), Breanna Pine, Danielle Thorpe (Priestess), Kimberly Wood (Young Jocasta), and the aforementioned Seifert (Old Servant) and Valenzuela complete the absolutely terrific cast.

Heinly and his onstage band are sensational, no big surprise in a Troubie show, but worth restating. Jeremy Pivnick's lighting adds pizzazz to every number and Robert Ramirez's sound design is a textbook example of how to mix voices and musical accompaniment. Sharon McGunigle's costumes spoof Ancient Greece to perfection, with boobs* and buns* aplenty. Mike Jesperson's set consists mostly of a few pillars and a door or two, but Troubies shows are never about the sets.

What does set Oedipus The King, Mama apart from other Troubies extravaganzas I've seen is its particularly energetic choreography by Ameenah Kaplan, fresh from her triumphant re-choreographing of Altar Boyz. There's scarcely a song without a dance attached to it, and cast members are given the onstage workout of their lives—and a great showcase for their triple-threat talents.

The words Troubadour Theater Company are a virtual guarantee of sold-out houses at the Falcon, and with reason. There are probably more laughs per minute in a Troubies show than in just about any other around town. Oedipus The King, Mama is no exception.

*Warning: No *actual* breasts or buttocks are bared in this production.

Troubadour Theatre Company, Falcon Theatre, 4252 Riverside Drive, Burbank. Through September 27. Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays at 8:00, Saturdays and Sundays at 4:00. Reservations: 818 955-8101 www.falcontheatre.com

--Steven Stanley
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Photos: Chelsea Sutton

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