

  
**NAXOS**  
AudioBooks

Sophocles  
**Oedipus the King**

With **Michael Sheen** and full cast

**CLASSIC  
DRAMA**



NA217712D

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1	The riddle of the Sphinx	2:41
2	A crowd gathers outside the Royal Palace of Thebes	6:04
3	Enter Creon, brother to Jocasta	3:30
4	Chorus: Strophe/Antistrophe	4:14
5	Enter Oedipus	4:31
6	Leader of the Chorus speaks	1:27
7	Enter Tiresias	11:29
8	Chorus: Strophe/Antistrophe	2:31
9	Enter Creon	1:15
10	Enter Oedipus	5:33
11	Enter Jocasta	2:30
12	Leader of the Chorus	5:11
13	Oedipus	3:53
14	Leader of the Chorus	1:41
15	Chorus: Strophe/Antistrophe	2:30
16	The messenger from Corinth	7:31
17	Oedipus and Jocasta	1:38
18	Chorus: Strophe/Antistrophe	1:15
19	Enter the Shepherd	4:35
20	Chorus: Strophe/Antistrophe	2:07
21	Enter the Palace Messenger	5:32
22	Oedipus returns	9:48
23	Creon returns	8:10
24	Final Chorus	2:26

**Total time: 1:42:19**

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# Sophocles

## Oedipus the King

This play belongs to a theatrical tradition two thousand years older than the world of Shakespeare. Its author, Sophocles, was born in 497 BC, five years before the battle of Marathon; and as a fifteen-year-old youth he led the chorus which celebrated the naval victory of Salamis over the Persians. He was one of three great ancient Greek tragedians, all near contemporaries. The eldest, Aeschylus, actually fought in the battle of Salamis in 482 BC; while the youngest, Euripides, was born in that same year.

Sophocles enjoyed a far from tragic career at the height of Athenian prosperity, and died at the age of ninety, shortly before Athens fell to a league of other Greek states. *Oedipus the King* was probably composed in about 429 BC and is one of 123 plays that Sophocles is known to have written – though only seven have survived in their entirety.

Ancient Greek tragedy expresses a questioning and even sceptical sensibility that is rooted in a polytheistic religious outlook. It arose out of sacred dances and songs performed before an audience by a

chorus. At some point an unfolding narrative developed out of these, and eventually a single actor – an individual voice – was heard. When Aeschylus added a second speaking voice, the drama was born. And when Sophocles added a third actor, the chorus was relegated to the role of a commentator rather than a participant in the action.

The chorus therefore represents a kind of audience within the play itself, one that directs and expands our emotional response to the action with interludes of lyrical reflection. However, it still plays an important part within the drama, as it expresses the hopes and fears of the larger community in which the central characters interact. In this respect it provides a religious backdrop to the drama, placing the specific events within a broader context of community and religious laws.

For the Greeks, religion was a question for the community more than for the individual. So this religious context does not have very much in common with our own world view, which tends to be either secular

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or monotheistic, and is a consideration for the individual alone. In the age of Sophocles the whole community built up a protective relationship with the realm of the unknowable in the form of prayers and sacrifices to the gods. This relationship underpins all of Greek drama. And it is through the chorus that this relationship is mainly expressed.

On this religious foundation is constructed an intense psychological thriller of daring acuity, hailed as a classic even in ancient times. Aristotle saw it as the very model of tragic drama. On the most obvious level, its taut plot unfolds with swift and relentless power. Much of its pressure is generated by the 'Oedipal' nature of the impulses it lays bare, but it takes us far beyond Freud. *Oedipus the King* is an exploration of the nature of the self, of human freedom and human knowledge.

These themes are held in place by means of a device, called 'tragic irony', which is a particular trademark of Sophocles as a playwright. Tragic irony hinges on the fact that the story of Oedipus, even in Sophocles' day, was ancient myth. It is about a man who is told that he is fated to murder his father and marry his mother; in trying to avoid this prophesy, he actually fulfils it. The

original audience were already very familiar with the outlines of this story. And this enabled Sophocles to load almost every line with an extra layer of unconscious meaning – even a certain metaphysical texture – for an alert audience to appreciate.

The play describes a man's gradual discovery of the truth about his past. This truth is available to him from the moment he steps through the gates of Thebes, and discovers that the city has recently lost its king. But he chooses, for fifteen years, to make no enquiries at all about how his predecessor on the throne has died. The reason can only be that he already knows at some level the whole truth of what he himself has done. As he uncovers the truth, he is uncovering his own self-deception.

In the play *Oedipus* the man is given a glimpse of his own myth, which he has struggled all his life not to have to embrace. Of course, the question with regard to the prophecy he is given (in modern science-fiction terms, the time-traveller from the future) is whether the future already exists or not. It is a question we naturally feel ambivalent about. We want meaning, a sense of myth, a feeling that our life is leading somewhere, that it is connected to a larger pattern (envisaged here as some kind

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of divine purpose) but we also want to feel that we can forge that destiny ourselves.

The audience, like the oracle, knows where the life of Oedipus is leading, and that his very will to be free of that conclusion is going to take him there. And the terror we feel is also for ourselves. For us too, perhaps, all our efforts to find fulfilment are simply bringing us step by step to some terrible fate. All his life Oedipus asserts his freedom of action, but he becomes truly free only in his search for self-knowledge, which ends with the destruction of that self.

Sophocles' intentions with this play must pass not only through the interpretations of the actors and the director, but also through the altogether more grievous process of translation into modern English. This version has been set in unresolved – that is, relatively strict – blank verse, in an attempt to match the mainly iambic rhythm of the Greek. Generations of English translators of Sophocles have put their shoulders to the iambic pentameter, and no modernist translator has offered any convincing reason for abandoning this tradition. I have thereby been able to distinguish the choral odes by some very simple and clearly heard changes of metre, including some free verse.

I have tried to be true to the meaning of each word in its context, while at the same

time conveying that meaning with an immediately clear and resonant impact. I have adopted modern, idiomatic English, but I hope that the underlying sense of the metre allows for the language to shift smoothly into a more complex, less naturalistic mode of expression, where the dramatic context calls for it. Again, the choruses should still be recognisable by a more richly metaphorical and formal language as well as by their tone.

Clearly, between all these aims, together with the demands of the metre, there has to be some give and take. One's hope is that any clangers that this process throws up, does not interrupt, even for the scholarly listener, the sublime progress of Sophocles' masterpiece to its terrifying and piteous conclusion.

**Notes by Duncan Steen**

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## Cast

Oedipus	<b>Michael Sheen</b>
Jocasta	<b>Nichola McAuliffe</b>
Priest	<b>Edward de Souza</b>
Creon	<b>Adam Kotz</b>
A Messenger from Corinth	<b>Neville Jason</b>
A Shepherd	<b>Bruce Alexander</b>
Tiresias/Narrator	<b>John Moffatt</b>
A Messenger from the Palace	<b>Jonathan Keeble</b>
Head Chorus	<b>Heathcote Williams</b>
Strophe	<b>Bruce Alexander</b>
	<b>Laura Brattan</b>
Antistrophe	<b>Karen Archer</b>
	<b>Jonathan Keeble</b>



As one of the most gifted of the younger generation of British actors, **Michael Sheen** has been seen widely on stage and screen. His memorable performance in the title role of *Henry V* for the Royal Shakespeare Company was preceded by appearances in contemporary plays, including Osborne's *Look Back In Anger*, and Pinter's *Moonlight* and *The Homecoming*. The title roles in *Peer Gynt* and *Romeo and Juliet* are also in his repertoire. Among his film work is *Wilde*, *Mary Reilly* and *Othello*. He is increasingly active as a director (*The Dresser*, *Badfinger*). Since he left RADA, Sheen has recorded extensively for Naxos AudioBooks, reading Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* and *The Idiot*; *The Picture of Dorian Gray* and *Great Poems of the Romantic Age*. He has also directed *Romeo and Juliet* for Naxos AudioBooks.



**Nichola McAuliffe** is a wonderfully talented and versatile actress. She starred in seven series of the hugely popular *Surgical Spirit* for Granada Television. Numerous theatre credits include several West End runs. She was presented with a Laurence Olivier Award for her role in *Kiss Me Kate* for the RSC.



**Edward de Souza** (*Don Quixote*, *The Canterbury Tales*, *The Island Race*, *The New Testament*, *Hamlet Prince of Denmark*, *The Life of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart*) has played leading roles in over a dozen West End plays and in several seasons with the Royal Shakespeare Company, Stratford, at the Old Vic and the National Theatre. His film credits include *The Thirty-Nine Steps* and *The Spy Who Loved Me*.



**Adam Kotz** has worked extensively in leading roles with, in particular, The Royal National Theatre and Cheek by Jowl Theatre Company. Plays include *Racing Demon*, *Measure for Measure* and *A Family Affair*. TV and film work includes *Band of Gold*, *Touching Evil* and *Shot Through the Heart*.



**Neville Jason** trained at RADA where he was awarded the Diction Prize by Sir John Gielgud. He has worked with the English Stage Co., the Old Vic Company and the RSC as well as in films, TV and musicals. He is frequently heard on radio. He also reads *Remembrance of Things Past*, Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, *Far From The Madding Crowd*, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* and Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* for Naxos AudioBooks.



**Bruce Alexander** is best known as Superintendent Mullett in *A Touch of Frost* and has appeared in many other TV shows such as *Berkeley Square*, *Casualty* and *Peak Practice*. He has also played major roles in the theatre, notably with the RSC. He is a director of ACTER which annually tours Shakespeare to US campuses.



**John Moffatt's** distinguished theatre career encompasses two hundred roles across the UK, forty-two major London productions and two Broadway appearances. He played Malvolio in *Twelfth Night* at the Open Air Theatre, Regents Park, appeared in Ingmar Bergman's production of *Hedda Gabler* and in *Married Love* directed by Joan Plowright. Film credits include *Prick Up Your Ears* and he has been seen on UK TV in productions as varied as *Love in a Cold Climate* and *Maigret*. He also reads Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* for Naxos AudioBooks and appears as Peter Quince in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.



**Jonathan Keeble** trained at the Central school of Speech and Drama. Theatre includes Coventry, Liverpool, Lancaster, West Yorkshire Playhouse, and a season at Manchester's Royal Exchange. He has featured in over 150 radio plays for the BBC and is an established voice actor. He appears in the Naxos AudioBooks recording of *Macbeth* and has recorded *Black Beauty* and *Classic Chilling Tales* for the label.





**Heathcote Williams**, poet, playwright and actor, has made a significant contribution to many fields. He is best known for his extended poems on environmental subjects: *Whale Nation*, *Falling for a Dolphin*, *Sacred Elephant* and *Autogeddon*. His plays have also won acclaim, notably *AC/DC* produced at London's Royal Court, and *Hancock's Last Half Hour*. As an actor he has been equally versatile – taking memorable roles in *Orlando*, *Wish You Were Here* and Derek Jarman's *The Tempest*, in which he played Prospero. Dante's *Inferno*, *Purgatory*, *Paradise* and *The Divine Comedy* are also available on Naxos AudioBooks read by Heathcote Williams.



**Laura Brattan** trained at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. She has appeared in the films *Crime Time* and *Tomorrow Never Dies*. Her many television credits include *Casualty*, *The Bill*, *Wycliffe*, *Little Lord Fauntleroy*, *Melissa*, *Five Children* and *Touching Evil*.



**Karen Archer** has worked for the Royal Shakespeare Company in *Nicholas Nickleby* and as Mrs Eryllyn in *Lady Windermere's Fan*, as well as across the country in plays such as *Ghosts*, *She Stoops to Conquer* and *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*. Her television appearances include *The Chief*, *Ruth Rendell Mysteries*, *Casualty* and *Chancer* and she has appeared in the films *The Secret Garden* and *Forever Young*.

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## The music on this recording is taken from the MARCO POLO DA CAPO catalogue

<b>SEIGEL ECLIPSE</b>	8.224069
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The Danish Chamber Players, Svend Aaquist	

### Music programming by Nicolas Soames

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DUNCAN STEEN – Translation

**Duncan Steen** was born in 1952 in Bedford and brought up in Mauritius, Scotland and Bedford, receiving an education at Bedford School. He has worked as an antiquarian bookseller and a gardener. Among his books are *The Essential Englishman* (Cassells) and *Intimate Letters* (Marginalia). Under his Buddhist name of Jinananda he has written *The Middle Way – The Story of Buddhism* (Naxos AudioBooks) and has contributed to many publications issued by Windhorse Press.

SIMON WEIR – Engineering and post-production

**Simon Weir** has recorded and edited *Hamlet* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* for Naxos AudioBooks, as well as editing over 100 spoken word recordings for the label. He spends much of his time engineering and editing classical music recordings for Radio 3 and many classical record companies.

Cover picture: Oedipus by Hemesh Alles.

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# Sophocles Oedipus the King

*With*  
**Michael Sheen**  
and full cast

In the hands of Sophocles, the master dramatist, the anguished tale of a man fated to kill his father and marry his mother retains its power to shock and move beyond any Freudian reference.

In this new translation, performed by an outstanding cast led by Michael Sheen, the searing inevitability facing Oedipus proves as shocking as it was 2,500 years ago when it was first presented in the theatre at Athens.

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