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Channeling Oedipus

by Pamela Ryckman
 June 2005

George Ashiotis extends a hand to an actress, who in turn grips his elbow, a natural gesture for someone accustomed to working with the blind.

"This is our Jocasta," he says, introducing Melanie Boland, a cast member of Theater by the Blind. "We have played mother and son and lovers. And now we're both!" Boland is cast opposite Ashiotis in the company's upcoming production of *Oedipus*, a play based on the Greek tragedy in which a man blinds himself after learning that he has killed his father and married his mother.



A scene from *Oedipus at Theater By The Blind*. Left to right: Melanie Boland, Pamela Sabaugh, and George Ashiotis.

Theater by the Blind, a troupe of both sighted and visually impaired actors, will perform Ted Hughes' translation of Seneca's original text in June at the Mint Theatre on 43rd Street in Manhattan. This is only the third time the play has been produced in the United States since its inception and the first time a group of blind actors has tackled such provocative material.

Two months before the show is scheduled to open, Ashiotis and Ike Schambelan, the company's co-artistic directors, have convened five actors for a read-through of the script. Schambelan calls the meeting to order with a sing-along to the satirist Tom Lehrer's "Oedipus Rex": "There once lived a man named Oedipus Rex / You might have heard about his odd complex / His name appears in Freud's index / 'Cause he loved his mother!" Schambelan, who is sighted, dives into Act I and the visually impaired actors scramble to find their place in the text. "You sighted people!" Ashiotis huffs, feigning irritation. "I know," quips Schambelan, "pushy, pushy!" A Chorus member uses magnifying glasses and holds her face just inches away from the paper to decipher her lines, while Ashiotis lets his fingertips graze the Braille sheets on the table before him.

The first time the Chorus opines on Oedipus' plight, the reading is disjointed; actors deliver individual lines awkwardly, without cadence or unifying tone. It doesn't work. So Schambelan experiments, asking the actors to recite together, to overlap and chime in when they feel moved to do so. A woven fabric of sound emerges, here a bass note, there a fevered gasping soprano. Around and around, their voices form a swirling cloud, interjecting and repeating, gaining energy and urgency, describing the stench of curdling blood and rotting flesh that plagues forsaken Thebes, pulsing to a palpable, primitive crescendo. When it is over, silence hangs over the room. Even the actors are stunned.

Ashiotis and Schambelan claim to have chosen this manuscript for its "gorgeous and evocative language," but they were also eager to confront the stereotypes associated with blindness that the story

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reinforces. Theater by the Blind says its mission is to “change the image of the blind from one of dependence to independence, to fight stereotypes and misperceptions associated with blindness.” Since 1991, the group has been performing original and sometimes irreverent skits explaining what it’s like to be blind, often poking fun at their ailments. In their cheekier moments, the actors have disarmed sighted audiences by performing songs with eye references like “I Only Have Eyes For You.”

Over the past few years, Schambelan and Ashiotis have veered away from calling attention to their actors’ disabilities by performing traditional murder mysteries. This way, visually impaired actors are encouraged to embrace meatier roles and audiences are impelled to accept them as sighted characters on stage. “Our goal is to do excellent art at a professional level. We do everything because we are working actors. People see us move around naturally, interact naturally, and be professional about what we’re doing. I think that in and of itself breaks down stereotypes,” Ashiotis says.

He insists that while the company wants to advance the careers of blind actors, directors feel no pressure to include a certain number in every cast. They will not put a blind actor in a major role if he is new and inexperienced. “Other groups seem more geared towards teaching, which we’re not. If we meet someone who has talent, we will help him hone it and develop in the craft, but we’re not going to teach him,” he says.

Though Theater by the Blind actors try to transcend the misperceptions associated with blindness, critics and spectators often won’t let them. Audience members sometimes spend the first part of a show trying to determine which actors are sighted and which are blind. When Ashiotis was the first blind actor ever to play the role of Hamlet, critics tried to link blindness with the text thematically. “I don’t like the metaphor that’s associated with Hamlet being blind. I never thought he was blind. I thought that maybe he was overly cautious; he just waits too long to make his move,” says Ashiotis. He wants to be evaluated as an actor first and resents when his blindness is brought to the forefront of a review.

But Ashiotis’ sight has become worse over time. “I am more cautious than I was before. I don’t know if I’m pulling something off as naturally as I might have done five years ago. It worries me, but not to the point of stopping me in my tracks,” he says. While he has at times walked to the wrong place on stage or fumbled with a prop, 30 years of acting experience allows him to compensate well. And regardless, Ashiotis thinks his fears are mostly the same as sighted actors’ fears.

Ashiotis would know—he used to be able to see. A first generation Greek American raised in Astoria, Queens, he was born with retinitis pigmentosa, a degenerative eye disease that affects color, dimension and his ability to focus. His light perception began to diminish noticeably at age five. Ashiotis remembers being 16 and spotting the moon out of the corner of his eye; it disappeared just as quickly when he turned to focus. Though he never studied acting formally, he began performing in community theater at age 18 and has always loved the limelight. “I honestly feel like acting chose me. I remember being a kid and turning on the radio and finding a familiar song and just singing like I was in front of a stadium of fans. So there was always that ham in me from the start,” he says. It is clear from photographs displayed around Ashiotis’ living room that he is proud of his life on stage. Though he cannot see the images, he delights when his frequent guests admire him in various productions or posing with former Mayor Rudolph Guiliani after having accepted an award on behalf of Theater by the Blind.

Yet before committing to professional theater, Ashiotis taught computer technology to the visually impaired at The Lighthouse, an education and rehabilitation center for the visually impaired on 59th

Breckenridge

The Independent Press Association-NY recently honored *The Brooklyn Rail* with the following awards:

1st place: Best article about Immigrant Issues or Racial Justice--Gabriel Thompson, "One Immigrant's Journey" (September 2004).

1st place: Best article about the Arts*--Amy Zimmer, "The Brownsville Rec. Center" (April 04)

2nd place: Best article about the Arts--Brian Carreira, "Harlem Arts: A Faux Renaissance" (Dec 03/Jan 04).

2nd place: Best editorial or commentary--T. Hamm, "The Issue is Free Speech" (Dec 03/Jan 04).

3rd Place: Best Investigative News Story--Marjory Garrison, "Minimum Matter of Survival" (May 04)

Honorable mention: Best Investigative News Story--Williams Cole, "Housing vs. the RNC" (June 04).

Honorable mention: Best Original Feature--Yvette Walton, "My Life in the NYPD" (Dec 03/Jan 04).
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Street, and worked as a piano tuner and as an art representative for a deaf textile designer. In a little studio on 57th Street, Ashiotis and the designer figured out ways to do business. She read his lips and he tried to decode her limited speech, though he admits that at times he had no idea what she was saying.

Because of these experiences, it is easy for Ashiotis to provide for his actors' unique needs. Each actor in a Theater by the Blind cast learns lines from a script specifically tailored to his ability to see. Some members study from tapes and Braille scripts generated from Ashiotis' Braille printer, while others use very large type. Actors also receive help from a set designed with their needs in mind. The company's designer creates a stage with high color contrast to make it easier for actors with partial sight. The edges of steps are often outlined in a lighter wood and a white doily is laid on a dark wood table to indicate where a glass or ashtray should be placed. Newel posts, banisters and area rugs are used as reference points, helping actors orient themselves on stage. Ashiotis is quick to point out that sighted actors also use helpful devices, such as glow-tape to direct them in the theater's dark wings and that, while Theater by the Blind provides for the group's special requirements, the company demands a set that is as believable and functional as any sighted troupe's. "I always say to a set designer, 'I want the set to be functional for me, but I don't want you to compromise your artistic integrity.'"

Artistic integrity sometimes comes with a price. In presenting *Oedipus*, Ashiotis and Schambelan risk alienating their established audience, who may prefer lighter fare. Additionally, Ashiotis has reservations about the clichés established in the play. He balks at the exaggerated, distorted images of blindness, with Tiresias as the blind prophet, bestowed with second sight, juxtaposed with the disconsolate Oedipus, who blinds himself as the most abject punishment. "It's really tough for a blind person to have to live up—or down—to those extremes," says Ashiotis, who says these erroneous notions invade his daily life. He continues to be amazed when people either expect him to have supernatural gifts—"They ask me to give them the lotto number!"—or consider him a helpless, hopeless burden on society. He recalls a time when a man helping him out of the subway muttered, "Oh, why do I have to be good?" "And I wondered, does he think I'm deaf too?" Ashiotis laughs.

Ironically, by channeling Oedipus, Ashiotis hopes to show spectators that blindness is not a wretched fate. He cringes at the notion of visual impairment as some sort of divine retribution. "*Oedipus* was the last play I wanted to do. But then I realized it's really a play about acceptance," Ashiotis says. He draws a parallel to his own situation, revealing that it was not until he recognized and embraced his own limitations that he was able to move forward with his life. "In some ways, Oedipus is blind throughout the whole production. He gains his sight at the end by grappling with his own destiny, instead of running from it."

Seneca's Oedipus, translated by Ted Hughes, runs June 3-26 at The Mint Space, 311 W. 43rd St, Manhattan (Tues.-Sat., 7:30pm, Sat. and Sun. at 3pm) Tickets: \$30 (\$25 for students and seniors), at (212) 868-4444 or www.smarttix.com. For more info on Theater by the Blind: www.tbtb.org

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