

JOCASTA: A MUSICAL TRAGEDY

By Louis Barabbas

SYNOPSIS

Remote, neutral and landlocked, 1920s Patrida is at least one big war behind the rest of the world. It is a nation choked by tradition, gasping towards the distant promise of modernity. Though at times the air feels charged with potential, the ground beneath tugs hard at the leaden steps of those who trudge upon it.

King Laius believes his marriage to popular socialite Jocasta Creon will be a sufficient gesture towards progress, but a series of explosions on the day of their wedding fosters a paranoia in him that will grow ever more caustic throughout his life. Strict curfews and dawn raids follow, with hundreds of public officials and academics being rounded up under charges of dissent. History teacher Henry Lesser, whose publications are now deemed seditious, finds himself at the centre of a growing political movement that adopts the name Sphinx. Attention is drawn away from the general discontent when Jocasta gives birth to a son, inspiring weeks of media interest. A royal visit to fortune tellers, designed to be a harmless PR stunt, results in the king receiving a private warning that shoots a bolt through an already fevered mind: the young prince will murder his father and marry his mother.

The king behaves strangely upon his return, drinking heavily and lambasting the child in its cot, arousing concern among the household staff. That night a mysterious fire breaks out in the nursery. Among the charred ruins nothing remains of the infant prince. In the confusion a servant flees into the night carrying a smouldering bundle but the only witness is the ever-wakeful Robert Creon (Jocasta's brother and chief political advisor to the king); he keeps what he sees to himself. Jocasta, wracked with grief at the loss of her son, is forcibly sedated and committed to an institution for the dangerously hysterical. Her husband, however, is unmoved, the very picture of stony calmness. Robert is quick to suggest the arson was a deliberate attack, taking advantage of the furore to implement drastic public assembly restrictions. Tensions in the capital rise and it is not long before troops fire shots into a peaceful demonstration. Henry is taken into custody and subjected to relentless interrogation about Sphinx. After weeks of systematic abuse he perishes in his prison cell.

Years later Henry's daughter Edith reignites the movement and takes it underground, shifting its focus to one of direct militant action. Jocasta, now discharged from hospital, has become a figure of respectful pity, busying herself with well-intentioned yet impotent gestures of social conscience, repeatedly thwarted in her attempts at real usefulness by her now continually drunk and power-obsessed husband.

A naively energetic newcomer known as Caliper Lee arrives in town, his cruel nickname inspired by the correctional supports he wore as a child. There are ancient burn marks on his body, but they pale in comparison to the fire in his eyes. An impetuous thirst for adventure results in him joining Sphinx just as newly escalated public unrest is at its most tangible. It isn't long before an abrupt siphoning of public funds into the construction of a giant royal statue becomes the catalyst for widespread revolt.

The capital is in uproar. During the chaos Cal becomes lost and disorientated. A grenade falls at his feet and he flings it away in panic. Multiple blasts tear

through the night, clearly a devastating chain reaction. When the smoke clears he sees the scattered remains of his comrades and loses consciousness.

In the aftermath of the failed uprising, the newspapers glory in their new hero: Caliper Lee, the man who single-handedly brought down Sphinx. Laius, though once again secure in his reign, is jealous of the attention being lavished on this mysterious figure. His increasingly petulant outbursts finally push Jocasta too far, years of frustration rising to the surface as she confronts the bewildered monarch with incandescent rage. He flees in confusion and, beneath his own controversial statue, encounters the brooding Cal who is in no mood for the ravings of a mad old drunk. The two men, simultaneously victims and architects of their own misfortune, fall to blows in the darkness. There is the sickening crack of skull against bronze and Cal flees the scene, unaware of the identity of this broken man lying in the dirt.

In order to sidestep public commotion the King's death is attributed to natural causes. Everyone agrees Jocasta is a welcome change of figurehead in these sunnier times. She is determined to pour funding into public works but Robert insists they continue with a policy of austerity to ease the national debt. As a compromise they launch a campaign to restore short-term morale focusing on the capital's newfound hero. Cal is installed in the palace and forms an instant bond with the queen. The two marry in a triumph of media orchestration.

Happy years pass and children are born. Jocasta grows ever more confident as ruler, loosening her brother's grip on everyday aspects of government. In an effort to re-exert his declining influence Robert immerses Cal in a world of financial power games and insider trading. Jocasta discovers that all her public infrastructure initiatives have been lining the pockets of private firms linked to her own family. Realising she is herself compromised Jocasta abdicates the throne to join Edith and what is left of Sphinx. A guerrilla campaign ensues, capturing the imagination of the world's press. Jocasta's public approval ratings soar. Meanwhile Robert, all too aware of his teetering authority, finds evidence that will obliterate his sister's popularity whilst simultaneously establishing an incontestable blood tie between himself and the old regime: Cal is the old King's son, husband to his own mother, brother to his own children. Here is a polluted dynasty with one single clean thread: Robert Creon.

The scandal breaks and Jocasta is devastated, putting up no resistance when troops overwhelm her stronghold. Imprisoned and denied access to her young children, all appears lost. Cal is no help; he wanders incredulous, robbed of his sight by a stress-induced neurological disorder. With a last colossal effort Jocasta makes her escape but, finding herself cornered on the roof, she leaps to her death in a moment of grim tranquillity.

In Robert Creon's inaugural address as King he promises stability, security and prosperity. His audience is clearly distracted though – there is a growing hum that gradually fills the air and drowns out his speech. Suddenly thousands of people sweep through the assembly like a great river that has burst its dam. Edith is among them, carried aloft, her voice the loudest of all. The new king is wrenched from the podium and swallowed up by the crowd, his screams barely audible over the sound of singing. A new era has begun.