

Phèdre: A Primer

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I saw the plot unfolding and me in it,
Where we touched like cripples. Your first scene.
The surreal mystery of our picnic quarrel
Opened your performance quietly.

And you had opened the vein.
And recognised gold. A cry of bereavement.
You had picked up the skein of blood
That twitched and led you, ignoring me.

Not out of the labyrinth
But to the very centre,
Where the Minotaur, which was waiting to kill you,
Killed you.

- Ted Hughes, "The Minotaur 2"ⁱ

1) Collaboration

Written by Jean-Baptiste Racine
Translation by Ted Hughes

A production of the Department of Dramatic Arts of the Marilyn I. Walker School of Fine and Performing Arts, Brock University

February 17, 18, 19, 2011 at 7:30pm; February 18 at 1:00pm.
Sean O' Sullivan Theatre, Centre for the Arts, Brock University, St. Catharines, ON.

Characters and Cast (Students of the Department of Dramatic Arts)

Phèdre , Queen of Athens	KASEY DUNN
Theseus , King of Athens, Phèdre's husband	MICHAEL PEARSON
Hippolytus , son of Theseus and Antiope, an Amazon	ERIC FRANK
Arcia , granddaughter of Erechtheus, once king of Athens	EMMA BULPIN
Oenone , Phèdre's nurse and confidante	LAUREN BEATON
Théramène , Hippolytus' friend and councillor	JOSH DAVIDSON
Ismène , Arcia's attendant	KÉDIE MCINTYRE
Panope , citizen of Troezen	MADISON ROCA

Production Team

Director	VIRGINIA REH
Scenographer	DAVID VIVIAN
Audio Designer/Assistant Technical	DOUG LEDINGHAM
Lighting Designer	KEN GARRETT
Technical Director	ADRIAN PALMIERI
Head of Wardrobe	ROBERTA DOYLEND
Production Manager, MIWSFPA	BRIAN CUMBERLAND

Assistant Designer, student	NICK CARNEY
Stage Manager, student	HARRIET GREENOP
Assistant Stage Manager, student	MELISSA GALLANT
Dramaturge, student	SPENCER SMITH

Crew (students of DART 2P42 in the Department of Dramatic Arts)

KANTHAN ANNALINGAM	ALEXANDRA PETRUCK
CAROLINE DE ROSE	NIKKI PRUDDEN
JOHN MCGOWAN	KAITLIN RACE
EVAN MULRONEY	DYLAN SYLVESTER
JO PACINDA	SARAH WALLER

2) Play Synopsis

On the shores of Troezen, a Grecian stronghold and the childhood home of King Theseus, the ailing queen, Phèdre, represses a terrifying secret: the obsessive love for her step-son Hippolytus. When the absent king is believed to be dead, Phèdre, with the help from her confidante Oenone, confesses her passion to Hippolytus. However, Hippolytus refuses to reciprocate. Phèdre is tortured by Hippolytus' rejection, but the nightmare only truly

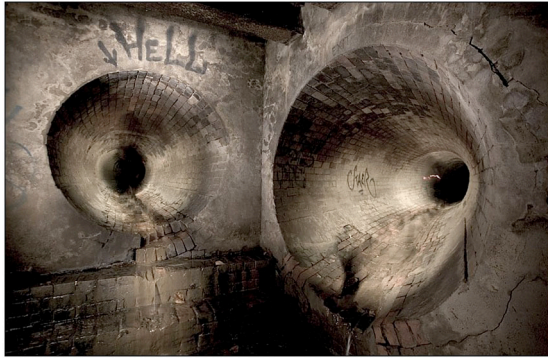


Fig. 1 Images of the tunnels beneath Brisbane inspired our scenographic design.

begins when her legendary husband, Theseus, finally returns home. Hippolytus confesses to his father that he is in love with Aricia, the Athenian princess who is held prisoner in Troezen by Theseus. Fearing exposure, Phèdre accuses her stepson of rape. The result is emotional and physical carnage. At the play's conclusion three principal characters are dead: one by the wrath of the father, two by suicide. In an act of atonement Theseus adopts the distraught Aricia as his own daughter.

Phaedra and Hippolytus, one of the most powerful stories in all of classical mythology. Ted Hughes' contemporary translation (1998) is based on the French neo-classical playwright Jean-Baptist Racine's canonical play, *Phèdre* (1677). While the plot and characters remain the same, the most significant difference between this translation and the original is within the poetic language. Racine's play follows the early modern style of Alexandrine verse, 12 syllable rhyming couplets, but Hughes exchanges the structured rhymes for muscular, jagged, free verse.

Racine's *Phèdre* is inspired by the myth of

Setting

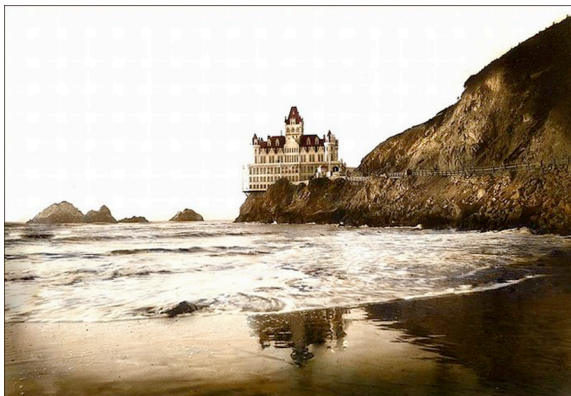


Fig. 2 Living on the edge. The Cliff House, San Francisco, circa 1900. Another inspiration for our scenographic design.

Troezen - a town in southern Greece on a large peninsula known as the Peloponnesus, during Theseus' reign as King of Athens. Troezen is where Aethra, a princess of Troezen, slept with both Aegeus and Poseidon in the same night, and became pregnant with Theseus. Theseus spent most of his childhood in Troezen.ⁱⁱ

Normally the royal family would reside in Athens, however, in *Phèdre*, the court is moved temporarily to Troezen, a familial safe haven, after a period of upheaval in Athens. Theseus

has just killed most of the Pallas family - political enemies - and captured their princess, Aricia. However it is not long before Theseus yearns for adventure again and leaves his family in Troezen to travel the underworld with his best friend Pirithous.

3) Director's Notes

The Phaedra-Hippolytus-Theseus myth has fascinated playwrights throughout the ages. The tragedy is at once epic and domestic. From my own student days in University I have been drawn to Racine's masterpiece version. In it he distills the best of his major sources, particularly Euripides' *Hippolytus*. From Euripides he borrows the fundamentally principled Phaedra, a good woman who is tormented by a forbidden passion and decides to die rather than surrender to it.

Phèdre was Racine's final "pagan" play (his last two plays, written for a girls' school came from the Hebrew bible.) On the verge of his return to Jansenism, Racine endows his *Phèdre* with vaguely Christian values, whereas Euripides' Phaedra holds the false accusation of Hippolytus in her dead hand. Racine's *Phèdre* chooses lingering death by poison to reveal the truth and salvage the shards of her dignity and name.

Hughes' powerful modern verse enhances this tragedy of good but flawed people. They are recognizable to us. At first, his deliberate use of Greek, Roman and French names for the characters and the gods may confuse, but it strongly reinforces the universality and timelessness of the play, a timelessness which has guided the artistic choices of this production.

The driving image behind our production is the labyrinth. The text makes frequent reference to the mythical labyrinth where Theseus overcame the Minotaur with the help of Phaedra's sister Ariadne. Words like "beast", "monster" and "maze" abound. Our concept is that the characters who are confined together on this wild and remote island kingdom of Troezen are each trapped in their own labyrinth and when they finally reach the heart of the labyrinth the monster confronted is the self.

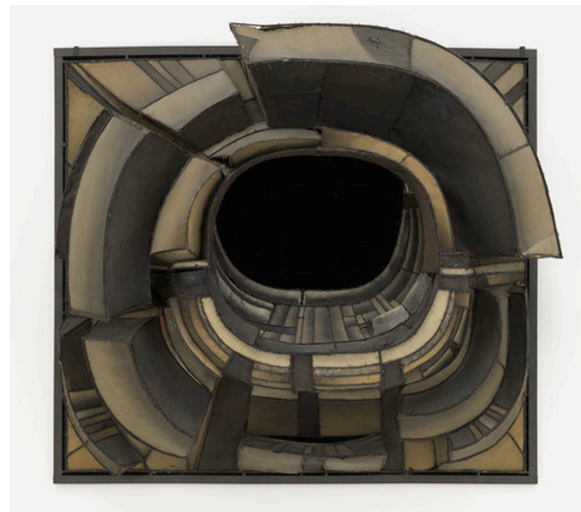


Fig. 3 Lee Bontecou. *Untitled*. 1961. Welded steel, canvas, black fabric, rawhide, copper wire, and soot.

4) Scenographer's Notes

In this production Troezen is situated in a white stage environment of abstracted architectural gestures of heroism and utility. The actors are perched at the edge of a towering vessel of unsorted hallways, sitting like a maritime buoy in the straits of fate and destiny.



Fig. 4 Looking across to Manhattan from Staten Island, New York.



Fig. 5 Stratford Shoal Lighthouse, Long Island Sound

Our creative research was informed by disparate references such as the coastal areas around capital cities, the tunnels beneath the urban firmament, and some favourite works of modern art. In a similarly eclectic manner the characters are costumed in a contemporary style of urban ethnicity, broadly informed by street and haute couture.

Seeking contemporary manifestations of the idea of the labyrinth, the driving image of the production, the spectacular tunnels of Brisbane, Australia provided another significant inspiration. (see fig. 1) These haunting subterranean networks of journeys and spatial relations corresponded to the fabulous constructions of the American sculptor Lee Bontecou (see fig. 3), discovered during a recent visit to the Museum of Modern Art in New York.

A visit to the Arthur Kill, a tidal strait between Staten Island, New York, and the New Jersey Mainland revealed the juxtaposition of abandoned shipwrecks, relics of modern industry and proximity to one of the busiest and most intriguing harbours of a world capital - a stimulating contemporary suggestion of site for our production. (see fig. 4) At the outer reaches of this maritime region the functional style of a typical lighthouse in Long Island Sound provided an early architectural inspiration for the performance space. (see fig. 5)

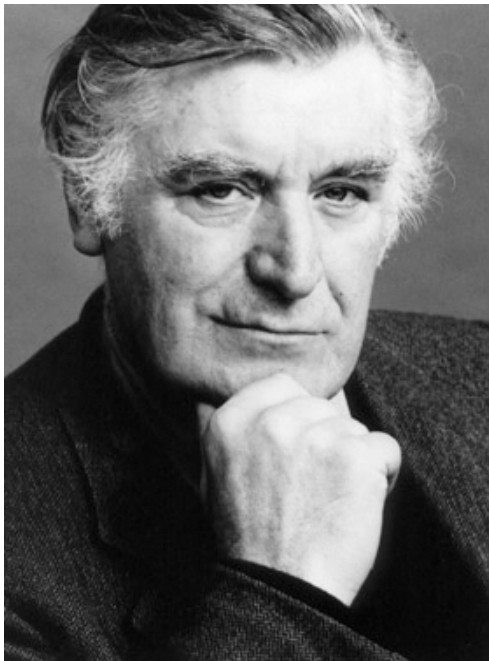
5) The Playwright: Jean-Baptiste Racine (1639 - 1699)ⁱⁱⁱ



French playwright and poet, Racine is considered by many as one of the greatest tragic dramatists in the history of theatre. He was informally educated by the Jansenists of Port Royal, France, but was estranged from them between 1666 and 1677, during which time he wrote the majority of his plays. His tragedies derive from various sources: Greek and Roman literature - *Andromaque* (1667), *Iphigénie* (1674), and *Phèdre* (1677); Roman history - *Britannicus* (1669), *Bérénice* (1670) and *Mithridate* (1673); contemporary Turkish history - *Bajazet* (1672); and the Bible - *Esther* (1689) and *Athalie* (1691). Racine's central theme is that of the blind folly of human passion, with its victims always in pursuit of an object and destined for disappointment. *Phèdre* is regarded as Racine's masterpiece.

Fig. 6 Jean-Baptiste Racine

6) The Translator: Ted Hughes (1930-1998)^{iv}



English poet and playwright, and one time husband to American poet Sylvia Plath. Hughes' prolific career focused on animals and the beauty and violence of the natural world. His most famous collections of poems include: *Crow* (1970), *Cave Birds* (1975), *Seasons Songs* (1976), *Wolf-Watching* (1989), and *Tales from Ovid* (1997). Hughes was appointed Britain's Poet Laureate in 1984. He also wrote the play *Orghast* (1971), in an invented language, with stage director Peter Brook, and published a children's version of Seneca's *Oedipus* (1968). *Birthday Letters* (1998) is a collection of 88 poems that describe his turbulent relationship with Plath, who committed suicide in 1963.

Fig. 7 Ted Hughes

7) Family Tree

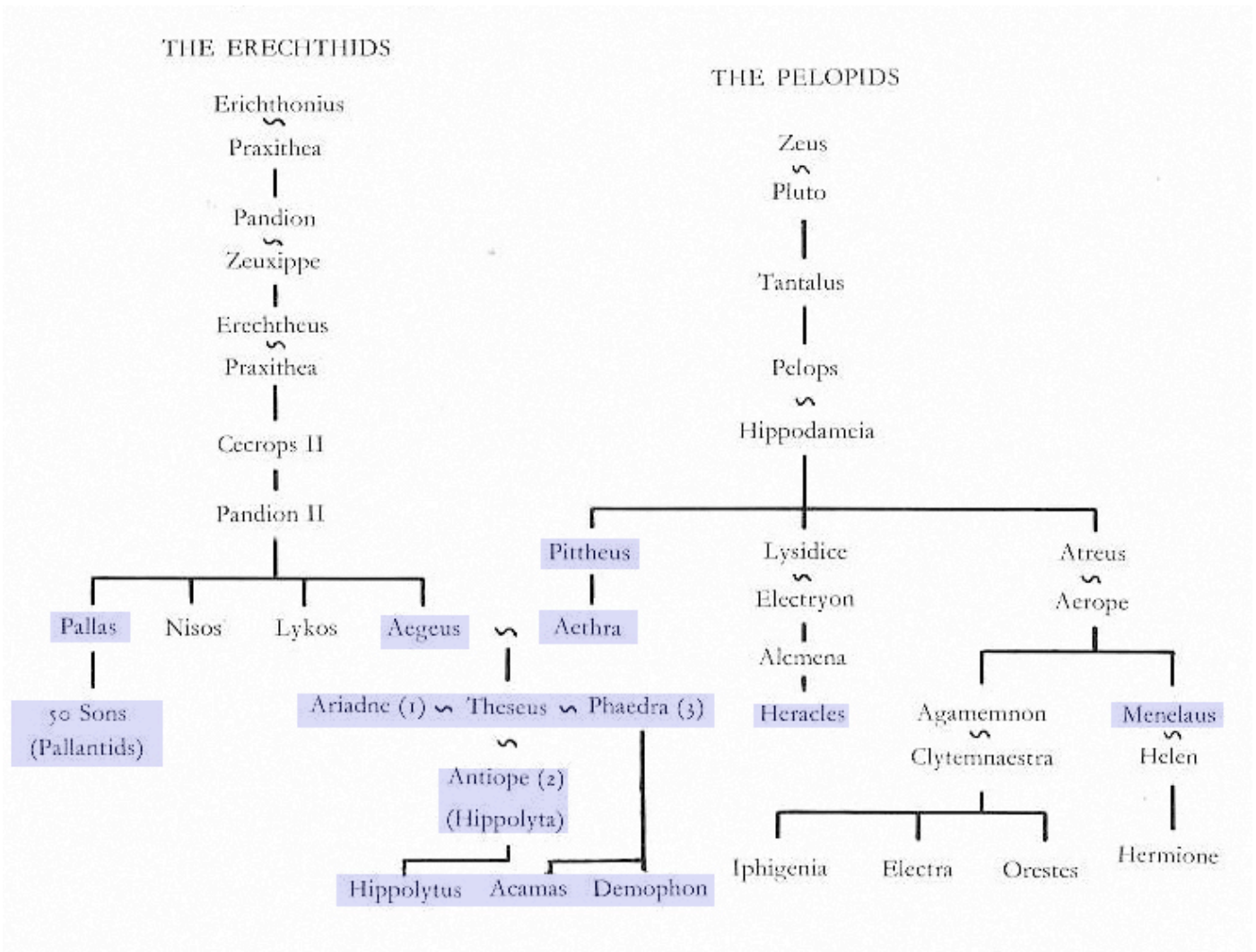


Fig. 8 A chart focusing on the family history of Theseus

8) The Myths: Theseus, Phaedra, and Hippolytus^v

Note from the Dramaturge: Classic Greek mythology is very difficult to verify and at some points within my research there were conflicting accounts of certain myths. The selected myths below are versions that I feel best support our production of *Phèdre*.

Theseus

Son of Aegeus and/or Poseidon and Aethra, Theseus was the King of Athens, and legendary hero of Attica. His greatest achievement was unifying the many small, independent communities of the land into one state - Greece, with Athens as its capital. He was often compared to Hercules, embarking on several adventures, and conquering beasts and bandits that included: Periphetes, Sinis, Sciron, Cercyon, and Procrustes. His most famous exploit was the slaying of the Minotaur which required him to go to Crete as one of the youths whom the Athenians sent annually to Minos as tribute (as victims for the Minotaur).

Ariadne, daughter of Minos, fell in love with him, and with her help he slew the Minotaur and escaped from the Labyrinth. He took Ariadne away with him, but later deserted her on the island of Naxos. Among his other adventures was the battle with the Amazons, whose queen, Antiope, he seized and bore their only child, Hippolytus. Theseus fell out of love for Antiope, however, once he met Phaedra. On Theseus and Phaedra's wedding day, Antiope entered the party and killed herself. In Athens, Menestheus seized the throne and Theseus fled to the island Skyros where he was thrown off a cliff by King Lycomedes. His bones were later brought back to Athens and his tomb was dedicated to the poor and helpless.

Phaedra

Daughter of Minos and Pasiphäe and sister to Ariadne, Phaedra's brother, Deucalion, offered her to Theseus as a wife, in an attempt to form an alliance between Crete and Athens. Phaedra bore two sons: Acamas and Demophon. After Theseus killed the sons of Pallas, he returned to Troezen for purification. Phaedra accompanied her husband and settled in quarters overlooking the stadium. There, she observed Theseus' son, Hippolytus, exercising naked every day, and fell madly in love with him. On the same spot where Phaedra spied on Hippolytus, a temple for Artemis Catascopeia (the Spy) was eventually built. When Hippolytus spurned her advances, she committed suicide, and left behind a note that accused him of trying to rape her. Theseus found the letter and immediately asked his father, Poseidon, to kill Hippolytus.

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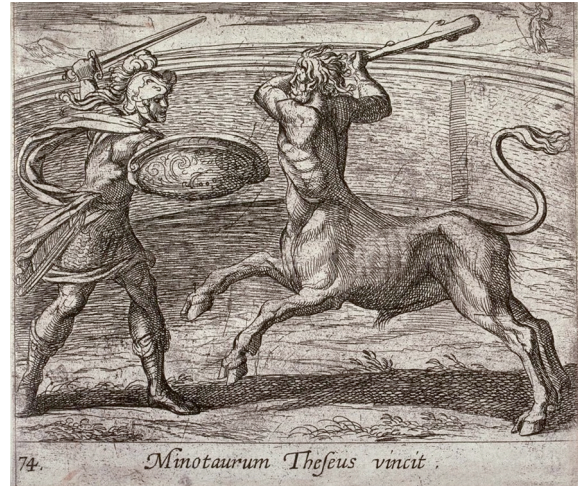


Fig. 9 Minotaurum Theseus vincit (Theseus and the Minotaur), pl. 74 from the series Ovids Metamorphoses. Antonio Tempesta: Italian, 1555 - 1630.



Fig. 10 *Phèdre* (2009) National Theatre, London. Helen Mirren as Phaedre, Dominic Cooper as Hippolytus

Hippolytus

Son of Theseus and the Amazon Antiope, chaste Hippolytus dedicated himself to Artemis (the goddess of hunting and chastity), training to become an excellent hunter and charioteer. Not only did Hippolytus reject all women, he even despised Aphrodite, the goddess of love. This rejection motivated the goddess to enact revenge on Hippolytus by making his step-mother, Phaedra, fall desperately in love with him. Phaedra's love is rejected and the scorned queen accuses Hippolytus of attempting to rape her and his father, Theseus, asks Poseidon to punish him. The god sent a bull from the sea, which frightened the horses Hippolytus rode out of Troezen on, and killed him. Phaedra's lies were revealed and father and son reconciled on Hippolytus' deathbed.

9) Lexicon of our Labyrinth: People and Places^{vi}

Mythical Characters Mentioned in the Play

Aegeus - King of Athens and father of Theseus. He married Aethra, daughter of Pittheus, King of Troezen. Aegeus departed from Athens before the birth of Theseus, but instructed Aethra to send the boy to him as soon as he could lift the stone under which a sword and a pair of sandals lay concealed. Years later, when the young Theseus arrived in Athens, his life is threatened by Medea, who has taken refuge with his father. Aegeus recognized Theseus' sword and sandals and Medea was chased out of Athens. Theseus later sailed to Crete where he destroyed the Minotaur. Upon his return voyage, he forgot to hoist white sails - the prearranged signal for success - and Aegeus, concluding that his son was dead, threw himself from a high rock into the Aegean Sea, which was named after him.



Fig. 11 Mont Saint Michel, France. This island Monastery of Mont St-Michel and the surrounding tidal flats off the coast of Normandy inspired the scenographic design.

Antiope - queen of the Amazons and sister to Hippolyte. She was the mistress of Theseus and mother of Hippolytus.

Ariadne - the daughter of Minos of Crete and sister to Phaedra. Having fallen in love with Theseus, she gave him thread with which he was able to find his way out of the labyrinth. After Theseus had kill the Minotaur, he escaped, taking Ariadne with him, but he later deserted her on the island of Naxos.

Diana - Roman equivalent for Greek goddess of hunting, chastity, and the moon: Artemis.

Juno - Roman equivalent for Greek goddess of heaven and wife of Zeus: Hera.

Minos - the son of Zeus and Europa, husband to Pasiphäe, and father to Phaedra, Ariadne, and Deucalion (his successor). Minos is a famous lawgiver who became a judge in the lower world. Poseidon caused Minos' wife, Pasiphäe, to fall in love with a bull which Minos had refused to sacrifice to him. When Pasiphäe gave birth to a monster, the Minotaur, Minos had a labyrinth built by Daedalus to imprison it and exacted tribute (the sacrifice of seven young men and seven young women) from the Athenians until Theseus intervenes and kills the monster.

Neptune - Roman equivalent to the Greek god of the sea and brother to Zeus and Hades: Poseidon.

Pasiphäe - daughter of Helios, wife of Minos, and mother Phaedra, Ariadne, and the Minotaur.

Venus - Roman equivalent for Greek goddess of love: Aphrodite.

Mythical Places Mentioned in the Play

Acheron - a river located in the Epirus region of northwest Greece. It flows into the Ionian Sea in Ammoudia, near Parga. Known as the river of pain and one of the five rivers of the Greek underworld.

Amazons - a nation of all-female warriors, presumed to reside in Asia Minor or Libya. Notable queens of the Amazons are Penthesilea, who participated in the Trojan War, and her sister Antiope, who is seized by Theseus.

Athens - the capital and largest city of Greece; dominated the Attica border within ancient Greece; one of the world's oldest cities.

Crete - the largest and most populous of the Greek islands and the fifth largest island in the Mediterranean Sea.

Mycenae - now an archaeological site in Greece, located about 90 km south-west of Athens, in the north-eastern Peloponnese.

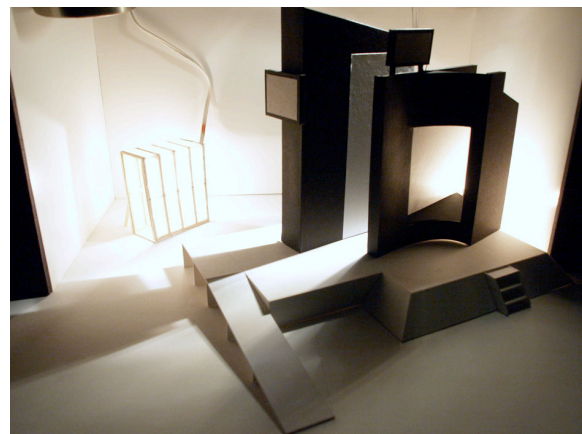


Fig. 12 The 1/2" scale maquette of the set design.

Labyrinth - in the context of Greek myth the underground maze built by the cunning craftsman Daedalus, in which King Minos confined the Minotaur who found and ate all humans forced into it.

Sparta [a.k.a. Lacedaemon] - a prominent city-state in ancient Greece, situated on the banks of the River Eurotas in Laconia, in south-eastern Peloponnese.

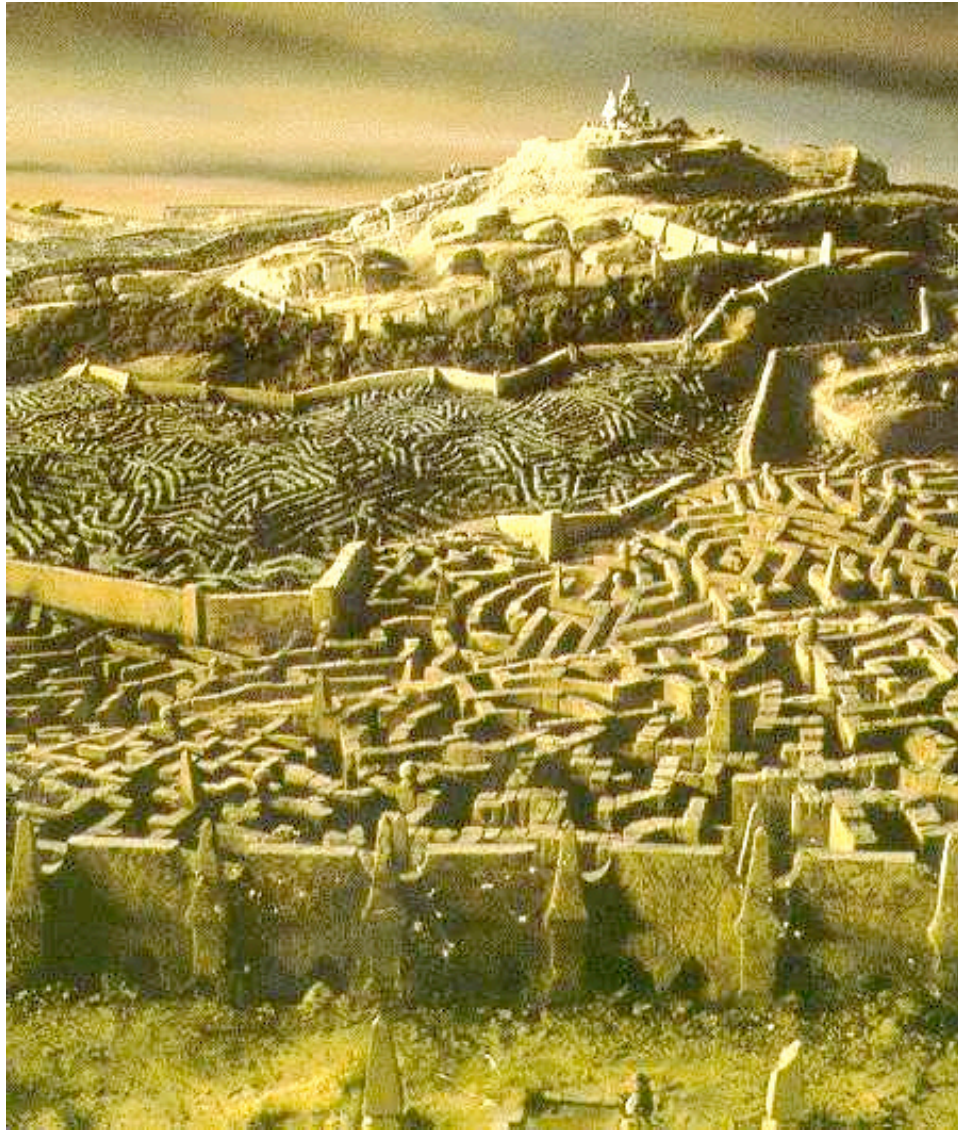


Fig. 13 Labyrinth, the essence of our overall concept. From the Jim Henson movie of 1986, *Labyrinth*.

10) The Many Faces of Phaedra

There have been three major incarnations of the Phaedra myth in theatre, spanning an entire millennium, in countless translations. Below is a list of five major differences found in each version.

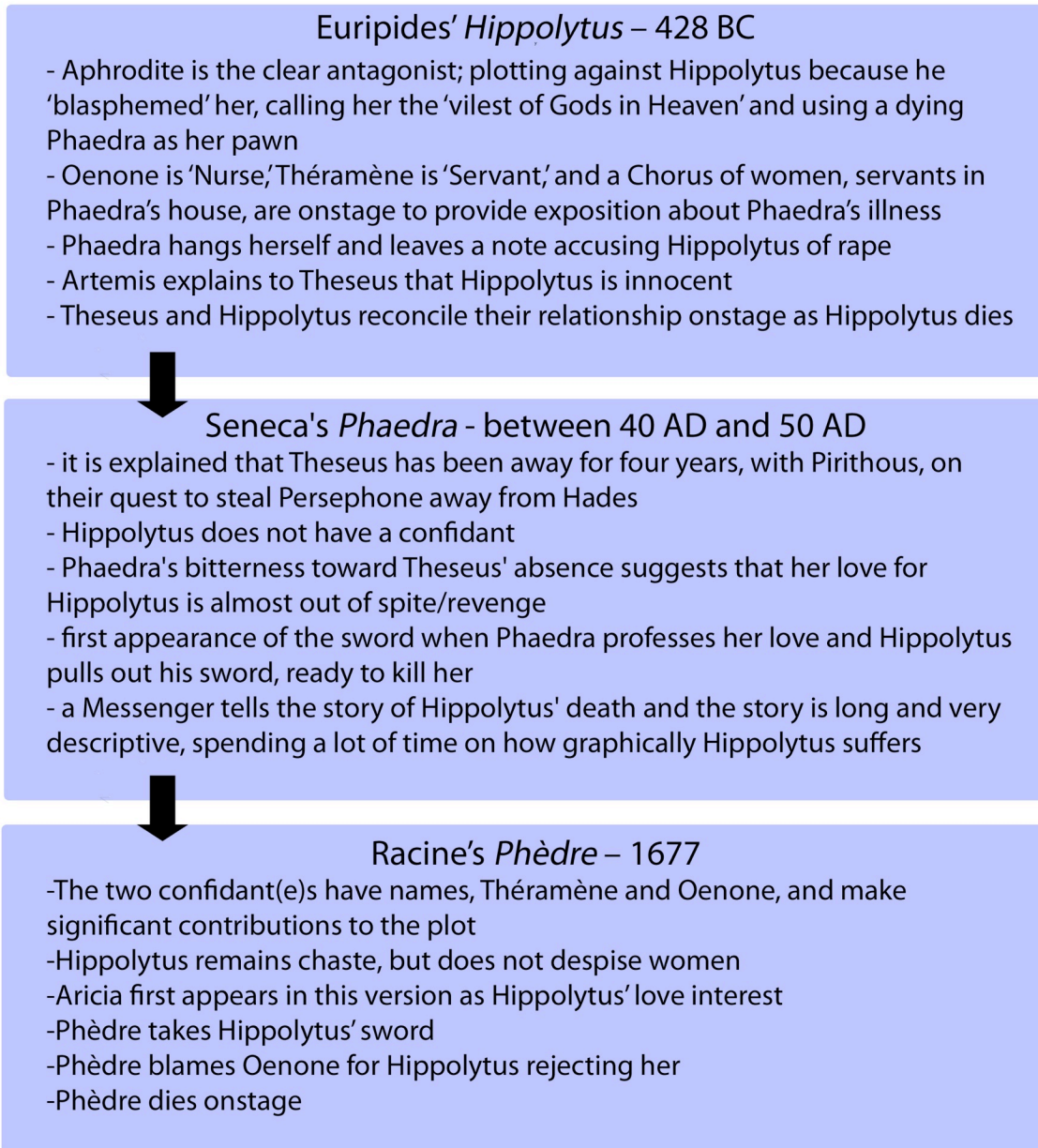


Fig. 14 Comparison of three major incarnations of the Phaedra myth

11) Dramaturge's Notes

Further Thoughts on Racine

Jean Baptiste Racine was educated by followers of Jansenism, a heretical Roman Catholic movement that affirmed predestination. Jansenism is rooted by the belief that God predestines a person to heaven or hell. Though a person may exercise free will in carrying out individual acts, which may be good or evil, he or she cannot change the mind of God and cannot necessarily 'earn' a place in heaven. ^{vii}

Phèdre was Racine's last 'pagan' play before returning back to his former faith and this spiritual threshold is apparent in the play. Phèdre is singled out by Aphrodite and, though she seems to exercise free will, every decision she makes only pushes her closer to the edge. Furthermore, it would appear that the gods have cursed all of the women in Phèdre's family: her mother, Pasiphæe, destined to mate with a bull, and her sister, Ariadne, destined to be abandoned by the man that she loved the most, Theseus. The presence of a curse that runs through the veins of her family reinforces the impossibility of Phèdre's escape from fate. Perhaps Racine was attracted to the story of Phèdre because her inevitable end mirrored his inescapable return to Jansenism.

Further Thoughts on Hughes

Ted Hughes' first marriage with poet Sylvia Plath ended in a brief separation and then tragedy when Plath committed suicide in 1963 by asphyxiation (by means of a gas stove). Hughes had been having an affair with Assia Wevill during his marriage with Plath, which resulted in the birth of a daughter named Shura. Hughes' relationship with Wevill met the same tragic end as his with Plath, when Wevill committed suicide in 1969 by asphyxiation (also by means of a gas stove); killing baby Shura, who lay in her mother's arms. Hughes eventually remarried in 1970 to Carol Orchard, who remained by his side until his death in 1998. Nicholas Hughes, son of Hughes and Plath, also committed suicide in 1999 after years of battling with depression. ^{viii}

Consider Hughes' perspective of love after so much self-afflicted tragedy. Did he remain optimistic toward love, or skeptical? Did he believe he had control over the actions of his loved ones, or did he see them destined for destruction? This idea of a predestined conclusion could have been what attracted Hughes to translating *Phèdre*. Did Hughes relate more to Phèdre, a victim of fate and circumstance, or Theseus, whose piety brings only pain to everyone around him? Or perhaps Hughes saw himself cast as the Minotaur, living in the heart of the Labyrinth. All those who passed through his life were nothing but lost souls, doomed upon entrance into the maze. The Minotaur was eventually conquered, as was Hughes, but not without casualties - victims of love's malicious grip.

12) List of Figures

Cover - *Phèdre* (2011), DART, Brock University, Production Poster (David Vivian). Inspired by the set design, also by David Vivian. - <http://www.brocku.ca/humanities/departments-and-centres/dramatic-arts/events>. www.brocku.ca. Web. 25 Jan. 2011.

Fig. 1 - Images of the tunnels beneath Brisbane inspired our scenographic design. http://www.sleepycity.net/photos/posts/31/646/Soft_n_Sweet. Sat. 29 Jan. 2011.

Fig. 2 - Living on the edge. The Cliff House, San Francisco, circa 1900. Another inspiration for our scenographic design. <http://www.cliffhouseproject.com/CliffHouseWithReflection.jpg>. Sat. 29 Jan. 2011.

Fig. 3 - Lee Bontecou. *Untitled*. 1961. Welded steel, canvas, black fabric, rawhide, copper wire, and soot, 6' 8 1/4" x 7' 5" x 34 3/4" (203.6 x 226 x 88 cm). Kay Sage Tanguy Fund. © 2011 Lee Bontecou. http://www.moma.org/m/explore/collection/object/81442.iphone_ajax. Sat. 29 Jan. 2011.

Fig. 4 - Looking across to Manhattan from Staten Island, New York. Photograph by Diane Cook and Len Jenshel. <http://www.onearth.org:8887/article/waters-edge>. Sat. 29 Jan. 2011.

Fig. 5 - Stratford Shoal Lighthouse, Long Island Sound. Historic American Engineering Record, Library of Congress, Call number CONN,1-BRIGPO.V,1-5. <http://loc.gov/pictures/item/ct0651/>. Sat. 29 Jan. 2011.

Fig. 6 - Jean-Baptiste Racine - http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Jean_Baptiste_Racine.jpg. www.commons.wikimedia.org. Web. 24 Jan. 2011.

Fig. 7 - Ted Hughes - <http://www.faber.co.uk/author/ted-hughes>. www.faber.co.uk. Web. 24 Jan. 2011.

Fig. 8 - A chart focusing on the family history of Theseus - <http://www.classictheatre.com/phedre/archives/DramaturgyPart4GeographyAndGenealogy.html>. www.classictheatre.com. Web. 20 Jan. 2011.

Fig. 9 - Minotaurum Theseus vincit (Theseus and the Minotaur), pl. 74 from the series Ovids Metamorphoses. Antonio Tempesta: Italian, 1555 - 1630. Early 17th century. Etching, 10.4 x 11.8 cm. Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco, California, USA. <http://library.artstor.org/library/welcome.html#3|search|1|theseus20and20minotaur|Multiple20Collection20Search||type3D3126kw3Dtheseus20and20minotaur26id3Dall26name3D>. www.library.artstor.org. Sat. 29 Jan. 2011.

Fig. 10 - *Phèdre* (2009) National Theatre, London. Helen Mirren as Phaedre, Dominic Cooper as Hippolytus - <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-1192471/Helen-Mirren-teams-young-Dominic-Cooper-triumphant-return-stage.html>. www.dailymail.co.uk. Web. 24 Sept. 2010.

Fig. 11 - Mont Saint Michel, France - <http://www.tyeliorn-bretagne.net/images/Mont.St.Michel.jpg>. www.tyeliorn-bretagne.net. Web. 12 Oct. 2010.

Fig. 12 - The 1/2" scale maquette of the set design. Photo by David Vivian.

Fig. 13 - Labyrinth, the essence of our overall concept - Image from the movie *Labyrinth* (1986). Jim Henson, director. <http://www.movieforum.com/movies/titles/labyrinth/castle.shtml>. www.movieforum.com. Sat. 29 Jan. 2011.

Fig. 14 - Comparison of three major incarnations of the Phaedra myth. prepared by Spencer Smith.

13) Bibliography

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ⁱ Poem found in *Ted Hughes Collected Poems*

ⁱⁱ Definition of Troezen found in *Cassell's Dictionary of Classic Mythology*

ⁱⁱⁱ Biography of Racine found in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*

^{iv} Biography of Hughes found in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*

^v Myth of Theseus, Phaedra, and Hippolytus found in *Cassell's Dictionary of Classic Mythology*

^{vi} People and Places of Classic Greek Mythology found in *Cassell's Dictionary of Classic Mythology*

^{vii} Racine's education noted in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*

^{viii} Hughes' past relationships found on <http://www.poets.org/poet.php/prmPID/113>