

THE TIMES

"Gospel at Colonus" ascends to Edinburgh Festival heaven

The gospel choir version of Oedipus at Colonus, led by the Blind Boys of Alabama, is a thrilling theatrical and musical event at the Edinburgh International Festival

By Robert Dawson Scott
23 August 2010

That black shape you thought you saw whirling through the Edinburgh night sky at the weekend was probably the roof of the Playhouse theatre, blown off by the glorious eruption that is *The Gospel at Colonus* and by the stomping, cheering response from 3,000 theatregoers who could scarcely believe their eyes and ears.

It is one thing to observe that the impassioned, ritualised, highly decorated, call and response of a gospel church service has a good deal in common with what we know of the way classical Greek drama was performed. In some ways, the National Theatre of Scotland's production of *The Bacchae*, with its twelve strong chorus of black women, was mining the same idea.

It is quite another to take that insight and apply it thoroughly and exhaustively to a specific play in a way which, without traducing either of the originals, harnesses the power of both to create something quite new and quite marvelous. But that's what Lee Breuer and Bob Telson did when they first brought Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, with its blinded hero, together with the Blind Boys of Alabama, the legendary gospel group, more than 25 years ago.

The monotheistic Christian view of the world in a gospel service is obviously very different from the Greek pantheon (though Jesus is carefully never mentioned; only god). Oedipus' eventual death, protected by Theseus in a grove outside Athens so as to fulfil all the prophecies that dogged his tragic life, and his transfiguration, accompanied by the song Lift Him Up, with the ecstatic high vocals of Carolyn Johnson-White soaring into the stratosphere, is also performing a different allegorical function from Sophocles' version (and, frankly, a much more satisfying one dramatically; in the original it is simply reported in a brief speech).

But from the moment the Rev Dr Earl F. Miller (a real preacher in full Martin Luther King mode) opens proceedings with "Think no longer that you are in command here", a rhetorical flourish of which Milton himself would have approved, you can feel yourself succumbing to something that transcends any doubts.

This production came to Edinburgh once before, in 1982, when it was still a work in progress, with an a capella quintet called 14 Karat Soul as the chorus. I saw that production and felt the potential even then. It is exciting to see it brought to fruition so spectacularly. As a nice middle-class European white boy, I have seldom felt less qualified to pass judgment on a show. But then again judgment is not what you need here; just lie back and praise the Lord – whichever one you choose.

The Gospel at Colonus, Playhouse Theatre, Edinburgh.