

Theatre

The gods and Greek bureaucracy almost robbed Peter Hall of his triumph with *Oedipus* in the open air

Greek chorus of approval

Lyn Gardner

IT IS Saturday night, around midnight, and a white moon shines over the ancient open-air theatre at Epidaurus, illuminating the tips of the pine trees where they meet the mountains in a haze of violet.

On the stage below, Alan Howard's *Oedipus*, the blinded, bloodied but unbowed old man of Sophocles' last play, *Oedipus At Colonus*, written when the playwright was in his nineties, is being summoned with a clap of thunder and a flash of lightning. He is the underworld. Howard's frail figure, fully masked, like the rest of the actors, and swathed in a cloak the colour of dried blood, looks tiny and huge at the same time, as if the natural grandeur of the amphitheatre dwarfs his physical presence while magnifying the immensity of his Lear-like suffering.

Several hours before, as dusk fell about 9pm, 10,000 people had climbed the stony footpaths of the hillside, taking their places on the rough stone seats in the amphitheatre (which dates back to 300BC) to witness the premiere of the National Theatre's productions of *Oedipus The King* and *Oedipus At Colonus* directed by Peter Hall. It is Hall's first production with the National Theatre since 1988, when the company's artistic directorship passed to Richard Eyre.

The atmosphere is all expectation, like a cross between a pop concert and a night at the opera. Women in evening dress mingle with families encumbered with squabbling children and gum-chewing teenagers. A black Labrador, evading the efforts of several policemen to catch him, bounds joyfully across the open circle of sand that represents the lower stage area, sniffing at the masked actors who stand and sit in stark, unmimicked poses. The dog weaves in and out of the circle of oil drums that line the stage and which will soon be ablaze, sending smoke across the dark mountainside.

As Peter Hall enters the amphitheatre there are bursts of spontaneous applause. He makes his way to his seat like a weary athlete doing his lap of honour. Well-wishers appear immediately, asking to take his photograph. If there were babies to be kissed, you imagine that they might be thrust into his arms.

In the Greek theatre world, Hall

has the status of a minor god, regarded as the world's leading authority on the staging of Greek drama. His work has been widely seen in Greece. His production of the *Oresteia* played Epidaurus in 1982, the late Shakespeare six years later. He also directed *Coriolanus* at Herodes Atticus in 1985 and *Lysistrata*, in a version by Rajit Bolt, translator of the *Oedipus Plays* here, in 1993.

The skies darken, sheets of flame illuminate the stage and Alan Howard hobbles down the long, crimson-coloured catwalk — created by Greece's leading designer, Dionysis Fotopoulos — addressing the chorus huddled below but speaking directly to the audience. "I am human and I pity you..." The drama has begun.

Off stage, the drama has been going on for months. It is three years since the Greek government invited Hall and the National Theatre to stage the *Oedipus Plays* at Epidaurus as part of the 1996 Athens festival. They were aware that the interest generated would be a great opportunity to sell contemporary Greece and its ancient culture around the world.

But attitudes and the government have changed. There were mutterings that the festival should consist entirely of work produced in Greece by Greeks for Greeks. There was a feeling that outsiders, whatever their reputation, were not wanted. After a meeting with the Greek ministry of culture earlier this year, Hall and Eyre decided that there was little sign of cooperation on the project and that they had no choice but to withdraw.

The news made headlines in the Greek papers, a furious row erupted and, as a result of diplomatic activity at ambassadorial level, a further invitation and assurances of full cooperation were extended.

Even so, there were plenty of times in the weeks before the performances when it seemed as if fate was conspiring to prevent the production taking place. Roger Chapman, the National Theatre's head of touring, says that it has been the most difficult production that he has ever worked on. The party from the National Theatre arrived last Sunday, ready for six nights of rehearsal scheduled to run from 11pm to 7am in order to beat the 100-degree midday heat and comply with regulations that demand that, as an ancient site, Epidaurus must be kept open to the public during daylight hours.

The non-appearance of the soldiers from the Greek army who had been



Man behind the mask... Greg Hicks as Tiresias, whose strange alien appearance, snaky tongue and pelvic contortions are one of the evening's greatest pleasures

Alan Howard, who prefers not to wear his contact lenses when fully masked, veered off the catwalk and fell, breaking his wrist. The gods were not being kind.

Howard, despite being in considerable pain, was still eager to perform but the dispute with the archaeological authorities remained unresolved. At this point Greek tragedy turned to farce, with the arrival on stage of a fire engine. The authorities declared that fire could be used provided that the fire engine was left where it was — in full view of the audience — and a Greek fireman was assigned to stand by each blazing oil drum, ready to douse it if necessary. Hall announced he was going home. The British ambassador and the Greek ministry of culture intervened. Hall got his fire, minus the fireman and engine. The show would go on.

In the early hours of Saturday morning, an hour after the rapturous applause for Hall's ritualised, and early theatrical production has died away, the national team are fighting exhaustion with elation. The technicians are grabbing something to eat before spending the rest of the night clearing the site and preparing for next week's opening in the Olivier auditorium — itself loosely modelled on Epidaurus.

Chapman exudes the laid-back good spirits of a man who might have spent the last week lying on a Greek beach rather than grappling with Greek intransigence and bureaucracy. Hall is talking animatedly about improvements to be made for the Olivier opening "Breasts," he says, catching sight of Greg Hicks, who plays Tiresias, and whose strange alien appearance, snaky tongue and pelvic contortions are one of the evening's greatest pleasures. "We must get you breasts immediately."

I asked Hall if all the worry and effort has been worthwhile. "Of course," he says. "Epidaurus is magical. It takes you back to the beginning of theatre. It is where the sky meets the earth. It lifts the spirits." Perhaps the Olivier will prove to be a harder nut to crack.

The *Oedipus Plays* are at the Olivier National Theatre, from September 7. Box office: 0171 928 2252.

chosen to appear as extras was a more hiccup beside the bombshell that the archaeologists who manage Epidaurus had decided that, despite several months' notice, under no circumstances could fire be used on the site. Hall and Fotopoulos insisted that fire was crucial to the production, the authorities were equally adamant that it would not be allowed.

After consultation with Eyre, who had to be summoned from the audi-

ence at the Royal Court in London, Hall and Chapman decided to go ahead with the technical rehearsal on Thursday night, so they would be in a position to premiere on Friday and Saturday if the archaeologists relented. As the rehearsal began, Chapman was served with a writ threatening immediate arrest if a match was struck.

Worse was to follow. A couple of hours into the technical rehearsal,

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Οι θεοί και η ελληνική γραφειοκρατία παραλίγο να στερήσουν τον Peter Hall από τον θρίαμβό του στον Οιδίποδα. Άρθρο που περιγράφει τις δυσκολίες και καθυστερήσεις που αντιμετώπισε στην Ελλάδα ο Peter Hall στο στήσιμο της παράστασης στο Αρχαίο Θέατρο της Επιδαύρου.