

## SEX IN THE HEAD

*Helen Mirren takes on the last taboo in "Phèdre."*

BY JOHN LAHR

"I want to be the Sarah Bernhardt of my generation," Helen Mirren confided to her older sister before auditioning, successfully, for Britain's National Youth Theatre, at eighteen, in 1963. More than forty years on, with scores of outstanding stage and screen performances behind her, Mirren has accomplished her mission; in Britain, her prowess and her popularity are uncontested. As if to underscore the point, she has taken on the great classical role that Bernhardt played throughout her career, from age twenty-nine until her late sixties: Phèdre, in Jean Racine's 1677 tragedy (in a translation by Ted Hughes, at London's Royal National Theatre). Thanks to a venture called "NT Live," "Phèdre" was the first of four National productions to be broadcast in art cinemas around the world; Mirren's performance has been shown globally on more than two hundred screens so far and seen by about thirty-five thousand paying customers. Statistically speaking, Mirren, not Bernhardt, is now the most famous Phèdre of all time. However, it's the nuance, not the numbers, that makes her performance authoritative. Mirren's dissection of the Athenian queen who falls in love with her stepson takes the audience into the darkest recesses of the heart of an emotional terrorist, whose only hostage is herself.

"My own craving fills me with horror," says Phèdre, the wife of Theseus (Stanley Townsend), Athens's rambunctious, long-absent king. She desires Theseus' son, Hippolytus (Dominic Cooper), who loves Aricia (the compelling Ruth Negga), the daughter of a former enemy, whom Theseus has forbidden to marry. As a defense against her incestuous feelings, Phèdre throws up a perverse firewall. She persecutes her beloved Hippolytus into exile and forces herself into a suicidal solitary confinement. "I turned against myself—to defend myself," she confesses to her starchy nurse and retainer, Oenone (the expert Margaret Tyack). Hysterics

are melodramatic, and Phèdre is a sensational early example of this self-aggrandizing breed whose sexuality takes the form of scene-making. Phèdre is a gourmand of grief: she stuffs herself on shame, binges on lamentation, gobbles down grievance. The exhibition of her suffering is both an act of abdication and an unforgettable attack.

Even before she appears onstage, Phèdre's reputation as a "diabolical woman" precedes her. From Hippolytus, we hear of her "futile hatred" of him; from his counsellor, Thérémène (John Shrapnel), we learn that Phèdre is "a dying woman, wanting only to die," "tired of herself, tired of the very daylight"; from the exasperated and exhausted Oenone, we know that she wishes "to shut the whole world from her sight." Phèdre, a demigoddess and descendant of Helios, the sun god, is defined by shadow. "I want to be hidden in a dark wood," she says. Nonetheless, in her first entrance, veiled in purple and propping her febrile body up against the marble palace wall, Phèdre staggers into the scorching day and presents herself almost as a sacrifice to the vast azure sky. "Maybe you blush to see me like this. / You god of the sun—look at me for the last time," she says. Phèdre's pain is real; it is also, however, a form of seduction, an unconscious strategy to bind the world's attention to her. When Theseus is declared dead, after many years of wanderlust and derring-do, Phèdre finds herself free to confess her feelings to the abashed Hippolytus. "Look at me—see a woman in frenzy," she says to him. His indifference inspires her to even greater theatrics; she falls to her knees, clinging to his leg. Calling herself "depraved," a "monster," a "disgusting pest," she grabs Hippolytus' sword and prods him to put an end to her savage love:

Look—my heart. Here.  
Bury your sword here.  
This heart is utterly corrupt.  
It cannot wait to expiate its evil.

I feel it lifting to meet your stroke.  
Strike!  
Or am I beneath your contempt?

Phèdre's obsessive, autoerotic suffering runs the risk of being dramatically one-note; Mirren, however, finds deep seams of emotional truth that transcend Racine's structural contrivances. She parses Phèdre's brazen abasement with an excitement that manages to suggest both self-destruction and sensuality, both guilt and predatory wiles. Theseus may be, as Phèdre says, "the laughing ravisher of a thousand women"—Ariadne and Helen of Troy are among those he has kidnapped on his rambles—but Phèdre is the one he kept. Like her character, Mirren knows how to deploy carnality to her advantage. She arrives onstage with a clear-eyed sexual alertness. "Venus has fastened on me like a tiger," she says, her hand falling across her abdomen, and you believe her. Describing the "hideous injury" of love at first sight, Phèdre tells Oenone, "I could not speak. I could hardly stand. / I knew then the goddess had found me— / The latest in the lineage that she loathes."

As Mirren plays her, it's the battle that Phèdre wages against her fate, not her sexual feelings, that makes her heroic. "The curse of Venus is fatal," she says early on, adding, "I die last and the most miserable." Her blighted family tree looms large in her mind, if not in ours. She is the sister of Ariadne, who hanged herself, and the daughter of Minos and Pasiphaë, who had sex with a bull and gave birth to the Minotaur. "What a crazed, pitiful thing / She made of my mother!" Phèdre says of the goddess of love. "It is impossible / To humiliate me any further," she brays at Venus, after Hippolytus cold-shoulders her.

But contemporary audiences don't even believe in their own gods, let alone the classical ones. Because Phèdre's lineage has little purchase on the current imagination, her terror loses much of its weight. Voltaire called Racine's Phèdre the "masterpiece of the human mind." The play certainly contains great psychological insight and poetry; to a modern audience, which expects character to be revealed through action, however, its dramaturgy feels static. Almost all the crucial events happen offstage, and are narrated but not shown. Although three of the five main characters are dead by

the finale—a trifecta of torment—only Phèdre dies in front of us: she poisons herself offstage, but still manages to stagger out to give Theseus a white-faced but lucid explanation of her gesture. Racine's characters are well-polished messengers of themes, integers in an Aristotelian equation, factored out to yield a stately balance. The play is one thousand six

Hughes's version, Racine's ravishing alexandrines are stripped down to a rough, muscular, vernacular directness. Hughes's idiom has its own fierce urgency; its sinew is most vividly on display in the blood-spattered Thèramène's heart-wrenching soliloquy—Shrapnel nails it—in which he reports on Hippolytus' violent death in a tidal wave, which was summoned by the



*Dominic Cooper, Helen Mirren, and Stanley Townsend in Racine's tragedy.*

hundred and fifty-four lines; its dramatic reversal—the return of the presumed-dead Theseus—arrives at line 827, exactly the play's halfway mark.

The director, Nicholas Hytner, who partnered with Mirren for a superb 2000 production of Tennessee Williams's "Orpheus Descending," another tale of doomed love, has given "Phèdre" the advantage of a gorgeous Bob Crowley set, one of the best for any National production I've seen. Crowley fills half the stage with a cloudless cerulean sky, the rest with the monumental forms of a low-angled marble roof, pocked marble walls, and a jagged, crumbling outcropping of stone. Brightness bears down on the behemoth lair and its dwarfed denizens, a cunning correlative for a tragedy in which heat, and hiding from it, are central. In Ted

gods to kill the son whom the outraged Theseus believed had cuckolded him:

The horses galloped away with their  
weightless bundle  
That had fed them, and that was your  
son.  
We followed—all of us crying openly  
Like forsaken children.  
The trail was easy—he had signed every  
stone,  
Left us a rag of flesh on every thorn.

Hytner's sure hand slips only in the casting of Townsend as Theseus. A huge man with a long gray ponytail, Townsend is a swashbuckling but jarring presence. He looks the part; he just can't play it. He gives a minor-league performance in a major-league production. Still, the shock and awe of the play come powerfully through; it is a tragedy for Phèdre and a triumph for Mirren. ♦