Phèdre

BY JEAN RACINE

TRANSLATED AND ADAPTED BY TIMBERLAKE WERTENBAKER
DIRECTED BY CAREY PERLOFF
AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER
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THE WORLD OF PHÈDRE

- Helios: Sun God
- Jupiter
- Pitheus: King of Trézène
- Pandion: King of Athens
- White Bull
- Pasiphaë
- Minos: King of Crete
- Aethra: Wife of Minos
- Aegeus: (adopted) King of Athens
- Pallas
- Minotaur
- Ariadne
- Phèdre
- Theseus: King of Athens
- Antiope: An Amazon
- Acamus
- Hippolytus
- Aricie
- Pallantidae: (six sons; dead)

 Valle de los Céntauros

Map showing locations such as Attica, Crete, Trézène, Naxos, Epirus, Ionian Sea, Aegian Sea, Saronic Gulf, Corinth, Mycenae, Argos, Sparta, Troy, and Crete.
CHARACTERS, CAST, AND SYNOPSIS OF PHÈDRE

CHARACTERS AND CAST
HIPPOLYTUS   Jonathan Goad
Théramène    Sean Arbuckle
PHÈDRE        Seana McKenna
OENONE        Roberta Maxwell
PANOPE        Sophia Holman
ARICIE        Claire Lautier
ISMÈNE        Mairin Lee
THESEUS       Tom McCamus

SETTING
Trézène, a town in southern Greece beside the sea.

THE STORY SO FAR
It has been six months since Theseus, legendary hero and king of Athens, left his wife, Phèdre, in the care of Hippolytus, his son by the Amazon Antiope, in Trézène. Hippolytus had moved to Trézène soon after his father married Phèdre, at which time the new queen made clear she had no intention of living in the same city as her stepson. When Theseus departed, he also left in his son’s care the political prisoner Aricie, daughter of noble Pallas, Theseus’s uncle and challenger for the Athenian throne. No one has heard from Theseus, and rumors are circulating that he may never return.

SYNOPSIS OF THE PLAY

ACT I. Hippolytus tells his tutor, Théramène, that he intends to leave Trézène in search of his father. Théramène theorizes that one of the reasons the prince is anxious to leave is to avoid his hateful stepmother. Hippolytus explains that it is not from the queen, but another woman that he flees: Aricie, with whom he has fallen in love after a
lifetime of denouncing romantic passion as folly. His love for her can never be consummated, however, because of his father’s lasting vendetta against her family.

Oenone, Phèdre’s nurse, enters and announces that Phèdre is suffering from some unknown torment and is near death. Hippolytus and Théramène leave as the queen enters so as not to aggravate her. Oenone begs a distraught Phèdre to reveal the true cause of her suicidal despair, and the queen confesses her incestuous love for Hippolytus. She describes how, when she first met him in Athens years ago, she purposefully treated him cruelly, going so far as to have him exiled to Trézène, to protect herself from her desire. Her plan had been successful until her unwitting husband left her in Trézène while he traveled abroad.

The servant Panope enters with news: Theseus has died and Athens is divided over the selection of his successor. Some are faithful to Phèdre and her son by Theseus, while others support Hippolytus. Yet another faction has voiced allegiance to Aricie. Oenone celebrates the change in circumstances as Phèdre is now free to pursue Hippolytus guiltlessly.

A CT II. Aricie’s confidante, Ismène, predicts that with Theseus dead Hippolytus will treat Aricie with more kindness. Ismène explains that she has witnessed subtle hints of his affection. Aricie doubts Ismène’s intuition, but confesses she hopes it to be true because she is in love with the prince.

Hippolytus finds Aricie to inform her that, as the new king of Trézène, he is granting her freedom. He also takes the stance that, because his grandfather, King Aegeus, was adopted, his own father, Theseus, had no legitimate blood claim to the throne of Athens, and therefore neither does he. He promises to champion Aricie as the rightful heir and declares his love for her.

Théramène announces that Phèdre seeks Hippolytus, and Aricie leaves. At Oenone’s insistence, Phèdre pleads for the safety of her son during this moment of political upheaval, but she quickly turns the conversation towards her shameful attraction to Hippolytus. She asks Hippolytus to punish her—“The wife of Theseus dares to love his son. / Do not let the foul monster escape you.”—and when he fails to act, she attempts to kill herself with his sword. She flees as Théramène enters. The tutor announces that a tribunal has appointed Phèdre’s son king of Athens. Disgusted, Hippolytus vows to “place someone worthy on the throne.”

A CT III. Phèdre regrets her declaration of love and despairs at Hippolytus’s rejection; she nevertheless clings to the hope that she might tempt him with power if not love. Oenone leaves to relay Phèdre’s offer to Hippolytus, but quickly returns with news: Theseus lives. Sure that Hippolytus will report her infidelity to his father, Phèdre
can think of no way to hide her shame but in death. Oenone, however, offers an alternative: they must falsely accuse Hippolytus of violent lust for his stepmother. She obtains Phèdre's approval of her plan as the queen flees at the sight of her approaching stepson and husband.

Theseus questions Hippolytus about Phèdre's hasty departure. Hippolytus refuses to reveal his stepmother's crime, but he does request to be sent abroad, claiming he wishes to test his courage and prove himself as the son of a great hero. Theseus, upset by his wife's abrupt exit and his son's request to leave, seeks Phèdre for an explanation.

A c t Ⅳ. Oenone convinces Theseus that Hippolytus, in his father's absence, made improper advances towards Phèdre. Theseus rages against his son, first exiling him and then calling the wrath of the god Neptune down upon him. Hippolytus still refuses to reveal Phèdre's crime out of concern for his father's pride. Instead, he points to his famous virtue as evidence of his innocence, and, when this argument fails, he confesses his love for Aricie. An incredulous Theseus drives him away.

Phèdre enters, terrified that Theseus has done harm to Hippolytus. She begins to defend her stepson, but stops when she learns that Hippolytus is in love with Aricie. Theseus leaves to honor Neptune's sacred altars. Realizing now that he is indeed capable of love, but only for her young rival, Phèdre works herself into a jealous rage and lashes out at Oenone.

A c t Ⅴ. Hippolytus explains to Aricie all that has transpired, swearing her to secrecy. He asks her to join him in exile. Aricie agrees when Hippolytus outlines his plan to marry her in the ancient temple near the gates of the city. Hippolytus leaves as Theseus approaches, and the king attempts to convince Aricie that his son's love for her is false; but it is Aricie who plants seeds of doubt in the king. Aricie leaves Theseus with his uncertainty, and the king calls for Oenone to come and defend her accusations. Panope answers his call instead and reports that Oenone has thrown herself into the sea and Phèdre, too, talks of death. Understanding that he might have been mistaken, Theseus revokes his curse.

It is too late, however. Théramène enters in tears and describes how a monster—part bull, part dragon—erupted from the sea and attacked the prince. During the battle, Hippolytus's chariot broke apart and his terror-stricken horses dragged him, entangled in the reins, to his death. Phèdre enters and exonerates her stepson of any wrongdoing before collapsing from the suicidal poison she has ingested. Theseus, to appease the spirit of his wronged son, adopts Aricie as his daughter.
THE FEARSOME POWER OF WORDS

BY DIRECTOR CAREY PERLOFF

In October 2008, Timberlake Wertenbaker and I were invited to travel to the Stratford Shakespeare Festival in Ontario, Canada, to workshop a new translation of Racine’s Phèdre, which a.c.t. had commissioned the year before. After an extraordinary week of work, we were all anxious to continue exploring this rarely produced French classic.

Fast forward to June 2009, when I arrived at Stratford to begin rehearsals for the full production. On the first day of rehearsal, Seana McKenna raised her hand and said something to the effect of: “I’m curious to know exactly where we are in this play. Our characters pray to Greco-Roman gods, but we’re wearing 17th-century French costumes while speaking the text in a modern translation underscored with music by an experimental American composer.” She was right.

Even in 1675 when it was written, Phèdre was a fascinating hybrid: a highly Catholic play of sexual transgression set in ancient Greece. Performing the play today, the worlds of Louis xiv’s Paris and Euripides’ Athens conjoin with our own, as we bring 21st-century North American sensibilities, sexuality, and sense of taboo to this classical play of honor and betrayal.

It is the balancing of these elements that makes working on Phèdre such a fascinating adventure. The play begins with a terrible secret: the passionate, uncontrollable love of Phèdre for her stepson, Hippolytus. Over the course of a taut 90 minutes, as secret upon secret is exposed, the tide of erotic love threatens to overwhelm the entire societal structure of the court of Theseus. Phèdre’s desire is not only transgressive, it is fated: in some frightening way, she is paying for the sins of her mother, Pasiphaë, the descendant of the Sun who lusted after a bull and gave birth to the Minotaur. Phèdre exerts every ounce of will to resist her longing while secretly knowing that resistance is pointless. In Racine’s pitiless world, eros is a disease that cannot be easily cured, a pollution that is impossible to purge, a visitation from an angry and destructive god. “This is not sweet love coursing through my veins / but Venus tooth and claw gnawing my limbs.”

The conflict is heightened immeasurably because Phèdre is a queen, presiding over a politically divided court in which her own children are pitted against the potential claims of the stepson she loves. Thus desire, that most private of emotions, is played out in a public arena that is as fraught for Hippolytus as it is for Phèdre. For Hippolytus is also passionately in love with a forbidden object of desire (an enemy princess). The entire action of the play centers on the act of speaking. The characters become convinced that to speak the truth
is to purge the pain of their love, but in fact the opposite occurs: the act of naming the desire brings it to life. Speech is irreversible: a single word can cause a cataclysm, but the lovers in this play cannot resist the impulse to articulate their love. And once spoken, their words can never be retracted.

In many ways Phèdre is closer to Greek tragedy than to the unruly, multistoried tragedies of Shakespeare. Racine famously observes the unities of time, place, and action, so the piece is spare, inexorable, and intense. Its stark theme is built on contrasting images of fire, heat, and the watchful eye of the sun, versus darkness, the sea, and the labyrinthine recesses of the human heart. It is both archaic and Catholic, primal and courtly, passionate and highly formal. Most importantly, the enormity of feeling in Phèdre is captured in a poetry that is extremely elegant and precise. Without the constraint of its language, the sheer force of emotion in the play would devolve into melodrama. The characters in the play almost never touch, yet the sexual heat between them is enormous.

One of the gifts of working with Timberlake is her ability to sculpt a line of dialogue that is both subtle and simple, speakable and resonant, leaving a great deal to the actors’ and audience’s imaginations. For this translation, she has created an unrhymed ten-syllable line in place of the twelve-syllable French alexandrine, and has avoided the rhyming that often makes English translations of French slightly laughable.

Thus our actors speak this verse in natural English rhythms, their bodies sculpted by the shape of French classical costumes while cursing the cruelty of Neptune. In the fusion of these worlds, multiple metaphors and images resonate against each other: the Greek labyrinth and the stultifying French royal court, the restless ache of the cello and the very immediate and recognizable heartbeat of a woman’s desire for a forbidden man.
Timberlake Wertenbaker is an internationally recognized, multi-award-winning playwright, translator, and adaptor. She is the author of many plays for the stage and radio, notably *Our Country's Good* (1988), *The Love of the Nightingale* (1989), and *Three Birds Alighting on a Field* (1992). An American-born and -educated European (she was raised in the French Basque country and studied in the United States as well as France) who has lived in London for the past three decades, she has tremendous linguistic dexterity and is a deft translator/adaptor of the great writers of European drama, including Marivaux, Anouilh, Maeterlinck, Pirandello, Sophocles, and Euripides. Her previous work at a.c.t. includes translations of Sophocles' *Antigone* (1993) and the a.c.t. commission of Euripides' *Hecuba* (1995 and 1998), both directed by a.c.t. Artistic Director Carey Perloff.

Perloff first approached Wertenbaker to translate Racine’s version of Euripides’ tragedy in 2007. Wertenbaker spoke with us from her home in London about the play’s journey from the 17th-century page to the a.c.t. stage.

**As a playwright who writes original work, what brought you to translation and adaptation, and how is the skill set necessary for translation different from that needed to write an original play?**

They are actually very different, which is why I like doing both. Translating is a very good way to rest from writing plays. A translation is very technical in that you are trying to put something from one language into another. It becomes more than technical, however, because you have to understand and get involved with the play. Translating requires very different parts of the brain and the emotions. I think when you’re writing a play, you’re dealing with your own imagination. You’re dealing with your own monsters, and you’re acknowledging them as your own. When you’re dealing with someone else’s characters,
you're also dealing with their heart. What makes this playwright's heart beat? You have to try to get to know that playwright, which is why it's very important to be able to read the text in the original language. I think it's very difficult if you don't. Translation is a very good way to get to know other playwrights and how they work. I enjoy it very much, and I only translate plays by playwrights I really admire.

**WHAT ABOUT RACINE’S PHÈDRE INSPIRED YOU?**
I think I always wanted to translate Racine, because he's a great playwright. I was educated in France, so I studied him a lot. He is someone who dissects emotion in a way I think no one else does. His work is incredibly precise. It's like watching someone take the skin off a body on an operating table and go through the body bit by bit. Racine goes through each emotion bit by bit. So, although he is a very dark playwright, he's wonderful to translate. It's also very challenging, because you've got these twelve-syllable alexandrines, a specific French form of verse, which is more natural to speak in French than in English, because it follows the breath. A French alexandrine is about the length of a breath. English is a much heavier language than French; English is also stressed—you don't have the same stress on every syllable the way you do in French—therefore you have to translate it with a shorter line. That is why I chose a ten-syllable line. I wasn't trying to achieve iambic stress, I just wanted it to be as natural as possible.

**HOW DO THE TECHNICAL DIFFICULTIES OF GOING FROM FRENCH TO ENGLISH IN SUCH A STRUCTURED MEDIUM AFFECT YOUR ABILITY TO STAY FAITHFUL TO RACINE’S LANGUAGE?**
I think there's always something lost in translation, but you have to ask yourself: Would you prefer to lose something, or would you prefer to lose the whole thing? To say that Racine is untranslatable is to basically say, “Don't translate Racine,” which means, “Don't bring into English one of the most interesting playwrights France ever produced.” Having said that, he is incredibly difficult to translate. The famous lines you get in Phèdre are extraordinary. And you can't get that in English, you just can't get the same thing from one language to another. The moral difficulty is that Phèdre operates on a line-by-line basis. The whole action of the play goes from one line to the next. It's unbelievably precise and logical. I believe, and not everybody agrees with me, that you have to translate it line by line. If you try to generalize, or if you try to make it more poetic by shifting four or five lines, you're going to miss out on the emotional action of the play. You have a choice: you may have to lose a bit of poetry, and sometimes you have to lose a bit of precision. You just do the best you can and hope that out of that you get some sense of what the play is about.
WHERE IS THE LINE BETWEEN TRANSLATION AND ADAPTATION, OR IS IT A SLIDING SCALE?

I always put “translated and adapted by” [next to my name in the credits], because I translate and then I might cut five or six lines. I think I’ve cut about fifteen lines out of Phèdre, but I’ve tried to make a very exact translation to the best of my ability. An adaptation is something completely different. You’re freer. You just use the material. So I would say, for example, that Racine freely adapted Hippolytus, by Euripides. He almost wrote a completely original play. We only have three terms: “translated,” “adapted,” and “based on.” The definitions are very wide, and one term has to include something that may just be a question of cutting a couple of lines, or a very free interpretation. With Phèdre, I really tried to be as faithful to the French as I could. And the French is complicated.

HOW DO YOU PRESERVE THE UNIQUE VOICE OF EACH CHARACTER WHEN YOU’RE TRANSLATING?

It is all in the Racine. We live in the 21st century, however, so the translation has to be in language that belongs to the 21st century. The difficulty is that the characters have to obey the rules of their own century, and you still have to convey something of that in a 21st-century setting. It’s not that you rethink the characters; a lot of it is unconscious, like most writing, and you just try to get into the play and hear the different characters speaking. There is some difference in voice. These characters don’t speak in any kind of dialect, however, and they don’t have a class distinction. Everyone speaks extremely well. What you do get is that each character has a shape and a repetition of one or two words, and that’s usually the clue to the character. For example, Phèdre’s theme running through the play is the theme of the monster: the monster that she is the child of, the grandchild of, and the monster that she herself becomes—the monster that kills Hippolytus. That’s something that she often repeats, so you begin to get a sense of her language in that way.

DO YOU THINK THAT RACINE’S VERSION IS MORE ACCESSIBLE TO MODERN AUDIENCES THAN EURIPIDES’ HIPPOLYTUS?

No. I think Racine, because his writing has this incredible restraint and Catholicism, is actually harder to understand than Euripides. Racine was dealing with what happens when you’re overcome by passion, however, and that’s eternal and goes through the centuries. We all understand passion. I think his ability to dissect it is actually very modern. It’s practically psychoanalytical in its precision, these hidden darknesses that are in the human being that he perceives and conveys. Euripides’ Hippolytus, which I’ve also translated, is a very different kind of play—partly because Phèdre is onstage much less; it’s not called
Hippolytus for nothing. What Racine did is to write his play about this woman, consumed by passion, and full of guilt and horror. That’s not in Euripides. Racine took some scenes and some lines [from Hippolytus], but not a lot. Racine also added the story of Hippolytus and Aricie. It’s extremely important in the play that you have this extraordinary, beautiful, innocent love that is destroyed. That’s so Racine. One of the things he seems to have been interested in is innocent love that has been corrupted or destroyed by others. And it makes Racine’s Hippolytus a very different character from Euripides’, where he’s repressed in a born-again-Christian kind of way. [Laughter]

Have you found that there are moments of passion for the characters that you as the translator must discipline yourself to keep restrained? It seems like it would be tempting to open the floodgates a bit.

I think that then you just wouldn’t have Racine, and you might as well write your own play. Here lies the responsibility of the translator in translating a great playwright. We mustn’t forget that in terms of the playwrights who have given something extraordinary to the
world, you have Shakespeare and you have Racine. We’re not talking about a minor playwright; we’re talking about a truly great and important playwright. I think you have to be as truthful to him as possible and hope that that speaks to the audience. You have to trust that Racine knew what he was doing. To try to change it, to make it more “accessible” . . . Why? People are going to see this play because they want to see Racine.

**HOW DO YOU THINK ENGLISH-SPEAKING AUDIENCES, WHO ARE ACCUSTOMED TO SHAKESPEAREAN TRAGEDY, EXPERIENCE FRENCH TRAGEDY DIFFERENTLY?**

I think that Anglo-Saxon audiences often make the mistake of going into a French tragedy thinking that they are going to get a lot of action, and that they are going to be in tears by the end. French tragedy doesn’t operate that way. You get Aristotelian pity and horror, but pity and horror don’t make you burst into tears, necessarily. French tragedy makes you look at the human being. You look at a character like Phèdre and you feel sorry for her, and you might be horrified by her, but you’re not necessarily in tears at the end. I think English-speaking audiences expect to be hit by tragedy in a different way. French tragedies work with great subtlety: they’re very still. They are full of passion, but it’s a passion that is always restrained, and I think the audience is meant to leave the theater in a state of wonder and horror or astonishment—but not feeling that they’ve been taken through an emotional wringer.

**DO YOU THINK ANYTHING HAS BEEN LOST IN TRANSLATION?**

Well, the answer to that is, I hope not! [Laughter] Carey knows this play very well, as well. And she knows French. I just hope the audience will go with this way of looking at character—which is sort of quietly ruthless, and ultimately, one hopes, moving . . . but again, in a very subtle way. In a very French, restrained way, but nonetheless the passions are there, and running very deep.
TIME FOR EXTRA DEEP BREATHS
An Interview with Phèdre Composer David Lang

BY ELLEN CASSIDY

David Lang has never quite fit into any musical box. Academics and critics have attempted to encapsulate his experimental musical style with such terms as “post-minimalist,” “totalist,” and “modernist rock,” but Lang is not interested in such labels. In 1987, he and two other composers fresh out of the Yale School of Music (Michael Gordon and Julia Wolfe) founded Bang on a Can, a groundbreaking organization devoted to providing a home for creators, like themselves, of uncategorizable music through commissions and performance opportunities. Over the ensuing years, Lang’s reputation and repertoire have grown, and in 2008 his little match girl passion—a setting of Hans Christian Andersen’s familiar tale in the format of Bach’s St. Matthew Passion—won the Pulitzer Prize for Music, settling Lang squarely front and center in the contemporary music world.

Lang first met A.C.T. Artistic Director Carey Perloff when they were both undergraduates at Stanford University, and their artistic partnership blossomed years later in New York when he composed music for her production of Brecht’s The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui at Classic Stage Company. Bringing Lang’s cutting-edge, genre-bending sensibility to the great classics of dramatic literature, their continuing collaboration has produced evocative scores, performed by some of the Bay Area’s most distinguished performance ensembles, for several A.C.T. productions, including Timberlake Wertenbaker’s adaptations of Sophocles’ Antigone (Rova Saxophone Quartet, 1993) and Euripides’ Hecuba (Kitka, 1995), Shakespeare’s The Tempest (Kronos Quartet, 1996), and Schiller’s Mary Stuart (Chanticleer, 1998), as well as the A.C.T.-commissioned opera The Difficulty of Crossing a Field, with a libretto by playwright Mac Wellman (Kronos Quartet, 2002).

Lang spoke to us in December about making music to complement the intense tragedy of Racine’s Phèdre.

THE LOS ANGELES TIMES HAS SAID ABOUT YOUR COMPOSITIONS: “THERE’S NO NAME FOR THIS KIND OF MUSIC.” HOW DO YOU FEEL ABOUT THAT STATEMENT?
I think there are some composers who wake up in the morning and say, “I really want it to be easy to know exactly what I do—to understand it without thinking about it, to know what radio station will play it, and what store will sell it, and what website will promote it.” If you tailor your music into the right box, all of those questions are settled for you. I think having a label on your work makes it easy for people to talk about you, to think about you,
Page from David Lang’s original score for Phèdre
to market you, to accept you or reject you. I’m not interested in that at all. I just want my music to be heard on its own terms. I don’t want it to be heard in conjunction with anyone else’s scene or anybody else’s ideas. If I thought I belonged in a box, in a particular category of music, the very next day I would wake up and try to get out of it. So I like the idea that my music keeps people guessing, that I have pieces that are very loud and obnoxious, and that I have pieces that are quiet and beautiful. People came up to me after the little match girl passion, my Pulitzer Prize piece, and said, “God, this is so strange for you. Your music is so obnoxious.” I like the idea that someone will be surprised. What’s interesting to me is that all the pieces are very thoughtful. They’re all made with the sense of getting some emotional life percolating down low. But knowing that much means knowing I’m not obligated to make them all sound alike, I’m not obligated to make them all with the same materials or the same instruments or aiming for the same venues. I don’t really want to make it that easy to define me.

WHAT INITIALLY INSPIRED YOU ABOUT PHÈDRE?
The characters. What I really like about these characters is that they’re emotional volcanoes. They’re sitting on this incredibly intense emotion; it doesn’t always come out, but it’s always there. The tension once the play starts is amazing. I thought that’s something that music can highlight very well. I enjoy showing that something that seems one way on the surface is actually something very different percolating down below.

WHAT WAS IT LIKE COMPOSING FOR A PLAY WRITTEN IN 17TH-CENTURY FRANCE, SET IN ANCIENT GREECE, AND PERFORMED IN NORTH AMERICA TODAY?
My life and love is to write opera. My real love is to think about characters and their motivations and to figure out how to make people who might be ciphers emotionally believable, at least to themselves. One of the things that I love doing in general, and what I loved doing with this play specifically, is looking at the characters and not imagining them as historical figures, but kind of selfishly projecting my own feelings onto them. Then I can imagine, if I’m in Theseus’s position, if I’m in Phèdre’s position: How do I feel? So I don’t really look at it as an opportunity to show something from the past, or an opportunity to set someone else’s vision free, but instead as my great opportunity to imagine myself in a different emotional universe, and to ask myself vaguely therapeutic questions about what my emotions are and how they relate to the characters. What I really like about writing music is that I get to spend a lot of time thinking about myself. The thing that’s great about plays with lots of different characters is that you get to see lots of different aspects of yourself, you get to think of lots of different ways of how you relate to them.
DOES EACH CHARACTER HAVE HIS OR HER OWN MUSICAL THEME?

There’s a basic harmonic world that they all share, but I did try to group general characters and emotions into different kinds of musical actions. There’s a certain kind of way that the cello chords work, a certain kind of slowness and tunefulness that’s associated with Phèdre; I change her music by speeding up or slowing down those chords, but the chords themselves don’t really change. There’s a way in which there’s not very much material; it’s just put into different environments. So you’ll hear something, and it will take you back into a different moment in the play, and it will subconsciously tie things together for you.

There’s only a little bit of music that is underscored. I hate underscoring, and I’ve known Carey for so long that she humors me. I think, if there’s going to be music, why can’t we just listen to the music? This play is so intense that it’s nice to have some moments to take a breath. It is really overwhelming, but I also think it’s meant to be, so you don’t want to break it up too much because it’s so taut.

AT THE END OF THE PLAY WE HEAR ONE LONG NOTE; COULD YOU EXPLAIN WHAT THAT NOTE IS SUPPOSED TO MEAN FOR THE AUDIENCE AND THE PLAY?

After such an intense play, it’s really necessary to get a sense that you have permission to sit and think about it. I don’t like music to tell you exactly what to feel and think. It’s possible with this play to construct music so there’s only one right way to think about it and at the end of the piece to have it all wrapped up in a bow, but I didn’t do that. What is important when you have something so powerful, so emotionally and psychologically problematic, is time to take a deep breath and to digest it. So I think with that note I don’t really want to tell people how to evaluate this experience—I just want to put them in a mood where they feel that it’s okay to sit and evaluate the experience of the play for themselves. It’s a time for extra deep breaths.

YOU’VE SAID, “WHEN I WRITE MUSIC . . . [IT IS] A VOTE FOR THE KIND OF CULTURE I WANT TO MAKE SURE SURVIVES.” HOW DOES THAT RELATE TO PHÈDRE?

Well, the people who come to see Phèdre are not the same people who watch reruns of Friends. It’s a question of what kind of messages you want to receive from the things you do with your spare time. Do you want to receive messages that massage you into an unthinking kind of submission? Or do you want to get messages in your spare time that make you think about your life not as your spare time, but as your main activity? That’s what Phèdre is. In a way everyone who reads this article has already voted for that. They’re saying that thinking deeply about people and their emotions, really thinking deeply about their own emotions, is a very necessary and unfortunately unusual part of our lives. So I would call that a vote.
CONNECTING THE DOTS
An Interview with Phèdre Designer Christina Poddubiuk

BY ELLEN CASSIDY

This production of Racine’s Phèdre was originally designed for the 260-seat Tom Patterson Theatre at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival, which houses a modified “thrust” stage—a runway-style performance space (inspired by ancient Greek amphitheatres and the open stages of the Elizabethans) that extends from the upstage area at the back of the theater directly into the audience, who are seated on three sides of the playing area. Before traveling to San Francisco, the production was reimagined for the 1,000-seat American Conservatory Theater’s proscenium stage, which functions as a “picture-box,” giving the audience one window onto the world of the play. We talked with designer Christina Poddubiuk, who has designed for Stratford for 12 seasons, from her home in Ontario about her original scenic and costume designs for Phèdre and the production’s transition to A.C.T.

How do you approach design?
I’m a very analytical person, and it tends to surprise people that I draw with a very conscious approach. I’m much more likely to tear something apart in a very analytical way, first of all. Then it’s like creating little pinpoints of information and going into that thought cloud and letting more free-associative information come to me. Then I join those little pinpoints together. For me, the pinpoints come from the text, and then I incorporate what I understand of the period, the

Phèdre (all costume sketches by Christina Poddubiuk)
history—it’s all those things that you pick up along the way. Design is just how you join the dots, making that transition from the information you have and then jumping into the pictures.

WHAT INITIALLY INTRIGUED YOU ABOUT PHÈDRE?
What intrigued me is that it’s a Greek tragedy, interpreted by a French playwright of the 17th century. This isn’t a period of dramatic literature that I’ve seen produced very often, and I’d certainly never worked on a French classical period production. Initially, [director] Carey [Perloff] led me to the idea that this wasn’t going to be a period-specific production, that hers was more of a psychological interpretation than an architectural one. So I tried to respond to what she said on an abstract level. I arrived at Stratford with something very sculptural, which seemed to appeal to Carey because it had a feminine slant to it. It was a very spontaneous idea that seemed to work right off the bat.

WHAT ARE SOME OF THE CONCEPTS THAT WENT INTO THE INITIAL SCENIC DESIGN FOR THE STRATFORD PERFORMANCES?
In Phèdre, there’s that strong sense of inevitability, of not having a choice, that the course of events is not under your control. That’s where the idea of a force of nature came into the design. The white cascade in the design you could say is a cloud, you could say is a waterfall, you could say is a tidal wave. For the floor design I went with a grid, kind of a checkerboard: it refers to a courtyard, but it also is a reflection of the sky. Everything had to be very minimal, because at the theater in Stratford, two-thirds of your audience is looking at audience [on the other side of the stage], and not even one—
third of the audience is looking at the upstage wall. It makes any kind of scenery more or less impossible. You have to rely on a floor design. You can't put anything higher than five feet on the stage without obscuring sightlines. Even in the staging, if you line up two actors directly, the view of the second person is going to be blocked for someone in the audience, which is why you have to keep moving people around. So you find these vectors that are kind of related to aisles . . . it sounds really mechanical, but it's something you have to do in that space. The Stratford Festival is famous for not doing much scenery at all, but putting the actor out there onstage surrounded by the embrace of the audience. In the case of Phèdre, I think that stems naturally from the play, because the language is so heightened. Each choice is very potent.

**HOW DID YOU APPROACH THE TRANSITION FROM STRATFORD'S THRUST STAGE TO A.C.T.'S PROSCENIUM?**

I began by looking at the dynamics of entrances and exits, knowing that Carey would want to keep a lot of that happening; she wouldn't want to lose the value of what she had established in Stratford in terms of staging, which was very grand and formal. So we retained this feeling of a long runway, which she uses to great advantage, and generally you're dealing with the same places for actors to go. For a lot of them the space may be abstract, but there is a need to say that there's a forest, there's a prison, there's a courtyard.

There’s a great benefit in going through the whole process to completion, and then looking at what it could be if I could do it differently. I got to listen to Carey talk about the play for six or eight weeks, instead of just having one short meeting, which is what normally happens. When you have the actors before you as you’re running
through a technical rehearsal, other possibilities just materialize in front of you. I didn't want to recreate what we had done at Stratford; one reason is because that design was very three dimensional and very voluminous. It wouldn't be as interesting if it were viewed against a picture box. So I was much more interested in turning it into flatter panels than creating something very dimensional.

**WHAT CHARACTERIZES THE A.C.T. SET DESIGN FOR YOU?**

I went to see the production again [in Stratford], and, as I was listening to the music and the words, an eerie quality became really interesting. I came up with a different idea about imagery. It’s more internalized. The idea of blood vessels, of pumping blood, of aneurisms, really struck me. There’s so much about blood and passion in the play. I realized how beautiful that pattern could be interpreted sculpturally. I kept the mesh fabric, shadow, light, and volume from the Stratford design, but I began to see them in panels rather than in three dimensions. It was already kind of there in the Stratford design, because the armature that we built the drapery on was snakey sculptural metal tubing.

The meaning of the panels is open to interpretation. There are other ways of looking at them besides blood vessels. They look treelike. They also evoke threads or yarn, and that’s interesting if you want to go into the story of Phèdre’s sister, Ariadne, who helped Theseus escape from the Minotaur’s labyrinth with a ball of enchanted string. As the rehearsal process went on, I would scribble down things that Carey talked about, and the threads came up, and it struck a chord with me.

**RIGHT** Theseus

**OPPOSITE** Photos of set models for *Phèdre* at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival (top) and the American Conservatory Theater (bottom), by Christina Poddubiuk
YOU ALSO DESIGNED THE COSTUMES FOR PHÈDRE. WHAT WAS THE CONCEPT BEHIND THEM, AND DID THEY CHANGE AT ALL FOR THE A.C.T. PRODUCTION?
The costumes are 17th century in concept, although very unornamented. They rely on silhouette more than detail. What I found interesting was to exoticize somewhat the costumes for Oenone and Panope, and the jewelry for Phèdre—again, within an approach of limited ornamentation. I sometimes describe the clothes as “the French court basking in the Mediterranean sun.”

The costumes worn at A.C.T. will be the same as those at Stratford, although some alterations for new cast members may be necessary, and some odd replacement bits for things that don’t come along on the tour. Carey has mentioned using layers of clothing differently, perhaps, which will only affect what I’ve heard called the “doff and don” [mid-performance costume changes].
IN HER ELEMENT
An Interview with Phèdre Actor Seana McKenna

BY SHELLEY CARTER

Saint Joan, Stella DuBois, Medea, Antigone, Hedda Gabler, Maggie the Cat, Lady Macbeth, Juliet, Eliza, Portia, Viola, Cordelia: What do these names have in common? In addition to being a veritable catalogue of the greatest female roles in the theatrical canon, they are all characters that have been played by esteemed Canadian theater artist Seana McKenna. McKenna celebrates 30 years as an award-winning actor, having performed in more than 100 productions across Canada and the United States and 18 seasons with the Stratford Shakespeare Festival. Between the close of the Stratford run of Phèdre and her arrival in San Francisco, McKenna spoke to us about the challenge of performing emotional repression and the fundamental truths of ancient stories.

WAS PHÈDRE A ROLE YOU’VE BEEN INTERESTED IN PLAYING?
Yes. I had seen two productions of Phèdre, one with Trish [Patricia] Conolly at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival in the ’90s and one with Nancy Palk at Soulpepper Theatre Company. So I was quite familiar with the play and I hoped, eventually, one day it might come my way, but one never knows about these things.

WHAT WERE YOUR FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF THE CHARACTER?
That it is extremely challenging. I think Phèdre is surprising. People have preconceptions about what a Greek tragic heroine is. I think what’s surprising is that she’s an antiheroine, in the sense that she’s not rewarded for speaking the truth to Hippolytus. Her honesty brings punishment, shame, and remorse. Then, she allows Oenone to lie for her. Phèdre is not the woman of action in this play; that woman is Oenone. It’s unlike other Greek tragedy. For example, Medea explodes from grief and rage; Phèdre implodes from shame, guilt, and sorrow. We expect her to be the center of the play, and she is, but in a very different way.
Also, this play is not essentially Greek. It’s a classical French piece. I’ve done Greek plays: I’ve done Medea, I’ve done Andromache in *Trojan Women*, I’ve done Antigone in Anouilh’s *Antigone* (another French interpretation of a classic Greek character), and the playwright takes these characters and sees them through his world view. This is very much a French Catholic play of the period. Phèdre’s mode of being is, “I feel this. It is bad to feel this. I am punished. Or, I punish myself.” She is repressed. I know people who were watching the play who said they just wanted to rip me out of my corset. It’s restrained, because you’re not “supposed” to feel these things. It’s not, “Oh, let it all hang out and express your passion and you’ll be rewarded for it.” Not in this particular world.

**DO YOU THINK THIS IS MORE CHALLENGING TO PERFORM THAN A GREEK TRAGEDY?**

Yes! Medea was much more fun—in the sense that Medea behaves like a classical Greek male hero and avenges herself on her enemies and is a woman of action. She orchestrates the plot and the action in that play. Phèdre is much more passive; she lets things happen around her. The one thing she *does* is speak the truth. She confesses her love to Hippolytus and that becomes her undoing.

**PHÈDRE ALMOST SOUNDS LIKE A CHARACTER OUT OF CHEKHOV, IN THAT SHE CAN’T TAKE ACTION IN HER OWN LIFE.**

But it’s not Chekhov, either. There are moments where it could be considered Chekhovian, but it still has the flame of French passion. Phèdre is suffering, but she speaks a lot about her suffering when she finally confesses to Oenone. In fact, she opens the floodgates after having been silenced for so many years. Once she is encouraged to reveal her secrets, once she takes that step, she crosses a line from which she never returns. She’s in freefall after that.

This piece is unlike anything else I’ve done. The challenges are extraordinary. It’s not something we’re used to seeing. But it does have the qualities of the Greek plot line, and because of that these stories touch chords in us that we’re not even aware of. They are ancient stories that are almost in our genetic makeup. They reach way, way back and they express fundamental truths.

**HOW DO YOU GROUND YOURSELF IN THE HISTORICAL PERIOD? DO YOU DO A LOT OF RESEARCH IN PREPARING FOR THE ROLE?**

What’s odd about the piece is that it’s an ancient story, but it was written in the 17th century. And then there’s the fact that it’s a new translation, which is very spare and
quite contemporary. So we’re looking at this story through three different frames. We have different worlds colliding. And I think [translator/adaptor] Timberlake [Wertenbaker] liked that. So, to do research on one period wasn’t really going to help. You had to come at this from a point of human honesty. You have to be truthful to the sensibilities of a woman who has been carrying a secret, confesses it, and all hell breaks loose. Once you confess something, you think you’re allowed to confess it—it’s in the air—it exists. And you begin to see a glimmer of hope because it’s out there.

I don’t think you can approach any of these mythical characters, these larger-than-life characters, from the outside, because it’s distilled. These emotions are essential. They’re primal. What Racine heaps onto it is the guilt, shame, remorse, and self-flagellation. I think that’s what many women identify with. They identify with the shame of yearning for something they’re not supposed to have.

Also, there’s the familial relationship. With the Greeks, it’s all in the family. There’s the father/son relationship, which is huge. There’s Oenone and Phèdre, which is like mother and child. There’s Hippolytus and his new love, Aricie, who should be daughter-in-law to Theseus, but she’s from the wrong family. She’s an enemy. Father’s not listening to son; son wants to live up to father’s expectations; wife’s trying to please husband, even if that means remaining silent. So, you have these familial relationships, which are eternal and which haven’t changed much over the course of the centuries.

**DO YOU THINK THAT BEING A WIFE AND A MOTHER INFLUENCES YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF THESE CHARACTERS?**

Yes. It makes me do the work in the rehearsal hall because I have no time at home! I mean, we all use our life experience, but I don’t think I was less qualified to play moth-
ers and wives before I was a mother and a wife. It’s called acting. I’ve never killed a king, I’ve never murdered children, I’ve never ridden on the streetcar named Desire. But I have played these women. You don’t have to be these people to play them. In fact, sometimes if you are that person, you might find it difficult to play them, because you think you have to act, and you don’t. I think acting is really about empathy. I think that’s what the theater’s about, really. You empathize with the people onstage. I empathize with my character. And you just extend your empathy as far as it needs to go. That’s kind of what we do, as actors. We put ourselves in other people’s shoes.

**HOW DID YOU FIND THE PHYSICAL LIFE FOR THE CHARACTER?**

Well, I’m corseted and heeled to the nines, so the only parts available to move are arms and legs! But I’m doing things one would not normally do in a corset—I’m on the ground, I’m kneeling, I’m on my back—things that you just wouldn’t do. I think you just have to be fully present. That includes heart, mind, body, soul. You’re trying to stitch all of those things together. I think the need in Phèdre is so great that it can’t help but come out through the pores of the body, even if she’s constricted by corsets and convention and her own fears.
DO YOU THINK THE PRODUCTION WILL CHANGE WHEN YOU BRING IT TO SAN FRANCISCO?
I think it has to change. For one thing, it’s not on a long thrust [stage] anymore, it’s on a proscenium. It’s going to have to change because of that, just physically with blocking. It’s going to change because we have two new cast members [Mairin Lee and Sophia Holman, both third-year students in the A.C.T. Master of Fine Arts Program, who play Ismène and Panope, respectively]. It’s going to change because we’ve all been away from it. But, I’ve always found that when I come back to do a piece the second or third time, it’s richer. Because you’ve gone so far in one exploration. You know you have survived. You did it for a run.

The difference from the beginning of a run to the end of a run is usually huge. So now you’re jumping off from the last time you did it in performance to re-explore it in rehearsal, but you can’t take away from the fact that you’ve had a performance. You know how an audience has responded. You know where there’s going to be a certain response. You go further now. And it’ll be a different theater, which will be exciting. And a different audience. And audiences give back so much. They are your playing partners, as well as the actors onstage. It doesn’t mean you pander to them, it doesn’t mean you condescend to them, it means you share with them. So a new audience means that we may only have two new people onstage, but we’ve got a whole lot of other new people sitting out there. That’s the thrill of live theater.

YOU BEGAN WITH THE STRATFORD SHAKESPEARE FESTIVAL IN 1982. WHAT IS IT LIKE TO HAVE THAT KIND OF HISTORY WITH A COMPANY?
Well, that’s the wonderful thing about having a company—having a shorthand with people you’ve known for years. There’s a certain ease in working with them. That’s not to say you’re complacent, but you don’t have to spend time getting to know each other—you know who you’re working with. And you develop wonderful relationships with these people. But at Stratford, there’s turnover, you lose people. Some people are gone the next year. Or, they’re gone for four years and then they come back. I’ve been working for 30 years and I’ve spent 18 years at Stratford, but I spent a good time away from there, too, which I also think is healthy because you gain a new perspective. Sometimes you leave home and come back with more confidence and a sense of who you are.

Stratford has been great for me. And I have had the great fortune of working with my husband [director Miles Potter] there several times. Yes, that’s been a great part of Stratford for me.
WHEN YOU FIRST BEGAN, DID YOU KNOW YOU WANTED TO BUILD A FUTURE WITH THIS COMPANY?

No, I think a career is what you have behind you. I never thought of the trajectory ahead. I did whatever interested or excited me at the moment, what I felt I needed to do at that particular time. If I had done nothing but tragedies, I might go and do Born Yesterday. I didn’t want to get slotted into the “weeping ingénue.” So, I have always taken it year by year.

HOW DO YOU CHOOSE YOUR PROJECTS OUTSIDE OF STRATFORD?

Well, usually people come to me with projects they’re interested in, or Miles and I will try to get a project done. It’s usually about where you are in your life and what you feel is going to challenge you and what you’ve been dying to do. I don’t really feel much character hunger anymore. I’ve played a lot. I now am interested in projects, in who I’m working with, and what does the project entail. That’s what’s exciting to me—the alchemy that’s created in a rehearsal hall. So, I really kind of take it year by year. That’s the one great thing about being a freelance artist. Yes, there is no security, but the power you have is to say, “No, thank you.” There’s always something exciting. Also, I like to travel, which is good, because I’ve traveled everywhere. It’s harder now, with a family, because I don’t want to be away from home as much or as long. So if something is ten weeks away from home, I might say, “Hmm, I don’t think I can do that.” So you have to keep juggling.

YOU’VE WORKED IN FILM AND TELEVISION. WHAT KEEPS YOU CONTINUALLY RETURNING TO THEATER?

I think it’s the immediate gratification. I know when I’m onstage that I’ve shared an evening or an afternoon with the people in that room. I think the theater reminds us all that we are not alone. There may be one person in the audience who says, “I’ve been there, I’ve done that, I’ve felt that”; you have let them know that someone else has felt that or been through that. It’s one of the last secular communal gatherings we have that is live, that is about sharing ideas and stories and talking about who we are, as a species. And acknowledging that we share this planet for the same time and a very short time. It’s live. It’s lifelike. It’s not larger than life, like in the movies; it’s not smaller than life, like on a TV screen. It’s life-size. People always say, “Why don’t you do more film and television?” That’s like asking a painter, “Why don’t you sculpt?” They are distinct entities. I admire people who can do television and film, but I think: I breathe on the stage. That’s where I live. That’s my element.
AT THE MERCY OF HIS PASSIONS
The World of Racine

BY MICHAEL PALLER

Although Racine probably would have been a great poet and playwright in any age, the theater that he wrote for in mid-17th century Paris could not have been more perfect for a man of his background, sensibility, and gifts. That background included rigorous religious training with an emphasis on guilt and repression; his highly developed sensibility was attuned to ever-changing, charged fluctuations of emotions under the pressure of desire; and among his gifts was the ability to transcribe those fluctuations into poetry that was at once delicate and detailed in its nuance and powerful, like a fist to the gut, in its impact.

By the age of nine, Racine, who was orphaned at four and raised by his maternal grandparents, found himself in the care of a group of Jansenist hermits near the monastery of Port-Royal des Champs, outside Paris.

The Jansenists practiced an austere form of Catholicism and believed, like the Lutherans, that human nature had been ruined by the Fall. Unlike Lutheranism, which suggested that only a born elite could be saved at Judgment Day, the Jansenists believed that salvation might come to those who chose to follow the path of righteousness. This suggested, according to the scholar Martin Turnell, that a properly attentive conscience was at least as important as obedience to an exterior authority. Still, Jansenism was, Turnell writes, “in essentials a pessimistic doctrine which placed man at the mercy of his passions.”
Racine grew up to be a man of great and varied passions, and the facts suggest that more often than not in life he managed to persuade a doubting conscience to look the other way. He owed his first theatrical success to Molière, who had been one of his earliest supporters and had given the first performances of the younger playwright’s work. This didn’t stop Racine, however, from transferring the rights of his second play, *Alexander the Great*, from Molière’s company to the one at Paris’s most significant public theater, the Hôtel de Bourgogne, after Molière’s production had already opened. His peers considered this to be an unprecedented breach of etiquette, but Molière’s company was more adept at comedy than tragedy, and Racine was certain that the tragedians at the Hôtel de Bourgogne would give him a better production. At the same time that he took his play out from under Molière, he also stole the great comedian’s leading lady, Mlle. DuParc (who also happened to be Racine’s mistress): she joined the company at the Hôtel de Bourgogne and played the lead in Racine’s next play, *Andromaque*. This also raised eyebrows, but Racine was serenely indifferent to popular opinion. When Mlle. De Parc suddenly died a year later, it was rumored that he had poisoned her to make way for Mlle. Champeslé, another mistress and leading lady. Whatever the truth, the Parisian theater was a notorious nest of schemers, plotters, betrayers, and liars, and in this regard Racine didn’t exactly stick out from the crowd, except for the high degree of skill and single-mindedness with which he practiced these extratheatrical arts. His love life, too, was complicated and crowded: when Madame de Sévigné, the famous letter-writer and salon figure, saw his final play, *Athalie*, she wrote, “Racine has surpassed himself; he loves God as he used to love his mistresses.”

He also had a passion for advancement. Although as a young man he chose the theater over the law and the church, as he grew older he realized that playwriting was no profession for a respectable man (when Molière died, the Church at first refused to bury him in holy ground, partly because he was the author of *Tartuffe*, but partly because it acknowledged the professional theater only as a place for prostitutes and thieves). He wrote *Phèdre* in 1676 at the height of his powers and then abruptly retired, married, and had children. Repairing an old rift with the Jansenists, who had disapproved of his life in the theater, he re-embraced the somber religion of his youth. In short order, he was named official historian to Louis XIV and joined the orbit of the elect around the Sun King.

Such large, messy passions as Racine’s do not by themselves art make. The theater that Racine found when he first turned to playwriting in 1663 provided him with the means to transform them. That theater was one in transition, just the sort that affords the most elbow room for genius, which, by definition, cannot be labeled or put in a box. There were many reasons for this evolution of theatrical style and form. One was the new importance in the social life of the court and city of women, and their increased attendance at the
theater (and in the theater: actresses were coming into their own at about this time, as well). Theatergoing in general was becoming more respectable, and Louis XIII’s powerful councilor, Cardinal Richelieu, became its chief patron as he sought to extend French power both politically and culturally. This changing audience demanded a different, more elevated and refined tone to their entertainment.

The old theater had been a vigorous Baroque enterprise, with plays like those of the Elizabethans: plays with multiple plot lines ranging across time and space and multiple tones (going from comedy to tragedy from one scene to the next), written in a self-consciously theatrical style, often stuffed with violence and death displayed in full view of the audience. By the mid 1600s, the style coming into vogue was Neoclassicism, which replaced the Medieval taste for multiplicity and verbal and visual bombast with the newer Renaissance emphasis on unity and intellectual examination: a play that takes place in one location in real time with a single tone, either tragic or comic. Neoclassicism also insisted that plays be written in five acts, in verse, and had a subject matter that was relatively

"The Death of Hippolyte," by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema (1836–1912); 1860, oil on canvas (The Bridgeman Art Library International, private collection)
intellectual, disciplined, and in good taste. That last is important: everything had to be treated with the proper amount of decorum, no extremes of emotion, and certainly no onstage physical violence. This would be a theater that emphasized, in the words of theater historian William D. Howarth, “rational debate, analytical soliloquy, and the vigorous exchange of points of view.” *Phèdre* is certainly no analytical debate, and in it emotions may seem extreme and reason sometimes hard to come by. The point is that the overexuberant emotionalism of the Baroque theater was now subject to a strict, formal control, one that seemed to suit Racine’s temperament and talent.

All the Neoclassical rules, unbearable restrictions to any of our living playwrights, served him well. If he was unwilling or unable to bridle his passions in his life, he found in the Neoclassical theater exactly the right form in which to contain them. In his plays, he could, by controlling passions, give them shape, scope, power, and meaning. He could make from the messy emotions of his life, art.

Indeed, Racine wanted everyone to know how ruthlessly he dealt with Phèdre’s passions. In his preface to the published edition he wrote, “No play of mine so celebrates virtue as this one does. The least faults are here severely punished. The mere thought of crime is seen with as much horror as the crime itself... the passions are here represented only to show all the disorder which they bring about; and vice is everywhere painted in colors which make one know and hate its deformity.” He recounts how in *Hippolytus*, Euripides’ version of the story, it is the queen who accuses the prince of attacking her: he found this action to be “too base and foul to put into the mouth of a princess”; better it belong to a lowly servant. So in *Phèdre*, the idea becomes Oenone’s. When he considered translating Aristotle’s *Poetics*, which inspired the rules of Neoclassicism, he wrote that tragedy, in arousing the passions of fear and pity, should “remove from them whatever they have of the excessive and the vicious and bring them back to a moderated condition and conformable to reason.”

It certainly was one of his gifts to be able to show a character being overwhelmed by a terrible passion, such as Phèdre is for her stepson, without bloodying the stage literally or figuratively. “The more art is controlled, limited, worked over, the more it is free,” Igor Stravinsky wrote. This was certainly true of Racine, who had to make his unruly passions fit the rigorous constraints of, first, verse, and then the decorous behavior and language expected by his audience. By containing so much emotion and passion in a tightly controlled form, he created a theater of great tension and then great release.
A MORE HUMAN TRAGEDY
How Racine’s Phèdre Compares to Its Sources

BY DAN RUBIN

Indeed, Phèdre is neither entirely guilty, nor entirely innocent.

—Jean Racine, “Preface to Phèdre”

The story of Phèdre’s illicit passion was hardly new when Racine decided to write his adaptation in 1677. The French playwright took his subject from Euripides’ Hippolytus and was influenced by Seneca’s Phaedra, Virgil’s Aeneid, and Plutarch’s Life of Theseus. Racine attempted to remain faithful to the essentials of the Phaedra myth, but he was not without his own agenda. He wanted to create a more nuanced understanding of this tragic woman and, as he writes in his preface to the play, “to render her a little less odious than she is in the tragedies of the ancients,” which depict her with too “base and evil” a disposition.

Interestingly, Euripides was encouraged to do much the same when his first attempt at dramatizing the Phaedra myth proved a disappointment. Often referred to as Hippolytus Veiled, the first version of the play met with dissatisfaction from ancient theatergoers. Aristophanes of Byzantium notes that Euripides’ second play, simply called Hippolytus, “corrects” the problems of the first. What the problems were, it is hard to say: unfortunately only fragments of Hippolytus Veiled exist, and most theories about the first play rest on interpretations of the second. The play’s title comes from an image in the play of Hippolytus covering his head in shame, but it is unclear whether the young man is embarrassed by his stepmother’s actions or his own. Some scholars argue that the original version failed because it was too risqué for public modesty; Phaedra’s lust was too brazen and her deception too blatant. Others, however, argue that it is more likely that the play was, in fact, too politically charged. They hypothesize that in the earlier play Phaedra pressures Hippolytus to overthrow his father, marry her, and take the Athenian hero’s legendary crown. Regardless, Hippolytus is the sanitized version.

Hippolytus, which debuted in 428 B.C.E., takes place in Troezen (Racine’s Trézène), a city across the Saronic Gulf from Athens, on a stage that sits between two statues: on one side, a likeness of Aphrodite (known to the Romans as Venus), the goddess of love and passion; on the other side, one of Artemis (Diana), the chaste goddess of the hunt. The involvement of the two goddesses in the story is immediate. Aphrodite opens the play
seething over Hippolytus’s devotion to her sister and his outspoken misogyny. She suggests that Phaedra will become a casualty of her vengeance: “I am determined to make my enemy [Hippolytus] pay a penalty great enough to satisfy me—her [Phaedra’s] catastrophe is a secondary consideration.” Phaedra suffers the unbearable burden of loving a man she cannot have, all the while striving to maintain her dignity. She is on the verge of committing suicide (to preserve her as-yet-unsullied reputation), when her nurse intercedes by announcing her mistress’s affection to Hippolytus. He is disgusted by the revelation. Although he swears secrecy, Phaedra laments, “By telling of my sad plight she [the nurse] has destroyed me. It was a friend’s act but not a noble one to try to cure my sickness.”

Euripides’ Phaedra resolves once again to die. Yet, before her final act, she decides, “Through my death I shall bring calamity on another, too—to make him learn not to feed his arrogance on my tragedy. He and I shall share together in this sickness, and that will prove his lesson in virtue.” In writing, she accuses Hippolytus of rape, attaching the damning tablet to her wrist before she hangs herself. Theseus returns from abroad, discovers his wife dead, and curses his son. Poseidon (also known as Neptune) sends a monstrous bull from the sea, which throws Hippolytus’s horses into a deadly frenzy. In the final scene of Euripides’ play, Artemis herself appears and exonerates her most faithful servant: “You, son of old Aegeus [i.e., Theseus], take your boy in your arms and clasp him tight. It was in all innocence that you destroyed him, and it is natural that men should fall into error when the gods dispense things thus.”

The gods are not as helpful (or harmful) in Seneca’s Phaedra, written during the first century a.d.; no deities appear in this Roman play. Because of the play’s unforgiving tone, some believe this adaptation adheres closer to Hippolytus Veiled than to Hippolytus. In the absence of the gods, the characters are no longer victims of divine whim, and the human shortcomings—which Seneca is not shy to display—are completely their own. While Phaedra enters Euripides’ extant play ill from Aphrodite’s curse (to the extent that servants carry her in on a bed), she enters Seneca’s rendition with a much more vigorous temperament. She mocks her unfaithful husband—“Away: that is how Theseus / Observes his wedding vows”—and has taken up hunting to be nearer to her stepson. Hippolytus’s hatred for women no longer has the excuse of pious devotion: “Women . . . I dread, I shun, I loathe them. / I choose—whether by reason, rage, or instinct— / I choose to hate them,” he declares. And, rather than a glorified hero, Seneca’s King Theseus is defined by shameless philandering and cruelty.

In Phaedra, though she knows how Hippolytus feels about the female sex, Phaedra vows to follow him wherever he might run, clearly unconcerned about exposing her desire. Hippolytus’s universal distaste for women could even benefit her pursuit: “The less I’ll fear
a rival, ” the queen muses. Her confidence, however, quickly wanes (as does her health), and she employs her nurse to convince Hippolytus of the value of love. In stark contrast to the Euripides, however, it is Phaedra herself who finally pronounces her love to the young prince. She is responsible for her own tragedy. Once the “evil is exposed,” however, it is the nurse (and not Phaedra) who determines that they must falsely accuse Hippolytus to protect the queen. Rather than leaving an accusatory suicide note, Phaedra is alive when she deceives her recently arrived husband; likewise, she is alive (though not long for this life) when she admits to her crime and clears her stepson’s name.

Just as Seneca honored the grittier and guiltier characterizations possibly depicted in Hippolytus Veiled, Racine, knowingly or not, returned to that first text’s politically dangerous themes. Though secondary to the love triangle, in Racine’s Phèdre (originally titled Phèdre et Hippolyte) the question of who is to inherit the Athenian throne is essential to the play. Hippolytus is the eldest son of Theseus, but his mother was a foreigner, and, worse, an
Amazon. Perhaps the public would be more comfortable with Phèdre's son, who descends not only from the royal blood of Athens but also of Crete (a recent ally of Athens). To complicate matters—of the heart as well as the state—Racine introduces a new character to the Phaedra myth: Aricie. In the world of the play, Aricie is Theseus's cousin, the daughter of Pallas, Theseus's Athenian uncle. She, therefore, boasts the closest blood ties to the ancestral rulers of Athens. She is also, more importantly, Hippolytus's love interest and the rival Phèdre never before had to fear.

Though she does not appear in Hippolytus or Phaedra, Aricie does have a classical antecedent. In Virgil's Aeneid, the poet tells us that, after Hippolytus dies, Aesculapius (god of medicine) revives him at the urging of Diana and transports him to Italy. There he marries a woman named Aricia, and the two play the slightest of footnotes in the history of the Roman empire. Their relationship in Phèdre, of course, is anything but peripheral. For the first time Hippolytus can love, and what a blow to the queen it is that he loves not her.

Racine championed the humanity of his characters without, as he says, “losing anything of the ornaments of the fable.” This is even found in the story of Theseus’s absence, for which the playwright consulted Plutarch’s Life of Theseus. In earlier versions of the tale, Theseus is away because he has journeyed to the underworld, where, Seneca tells us, he languished for four years until being rescued by Hercules. To retain the beauty of this imagery, Racine has his characters circulate the story of this fanciful voyage as gossip; in Racine’s world, however, Theseus was on an impressive but unspectacular journey to abduct the unhappy wife of the king of Epirus. It is the rumor of Theseus’s descent to Hades, however, that makes possible Phèdre’s declaration of love, which, Racine writes, “she would never have dared make so long as she believed that her husband was alive.”

Racine gives his characters personalities with which we can empathize. In Seneca’s Phaedra, the extremism of their lust and vehemence makes them all monsters to a certain degree. They make for a fine diversion. Racine, however, was interested not in diversion, but in instruction. He writes of his masterpiece: “The weaknesses of love are shown as true weaknesses . . . and vice is everywhere depicted in colors which make the deformity recognized and hated.” In Euripides’ Hippolytus, it is the wrath of the gods we should fear. In Racine’s Phèdre, we should fear our own emotions lest they make us victims of our own frailty.

PHÈDRE
A Legacy of Disastrous Love

BY KATIE MAY

Venus wants this accursed bloodline to end:
I die the last—and the most tormented.

—Phèdre, Phèdre

Phèdre’s incestuous love for her stepson, Hippolytus, is the final episode of a saga of meddling gods that spans three generations of women in Phèdre’s family. From Jupiter’s seduction of her grandmother Europa, to Venus’s misuse of Phèdre to exact revenge on Hippolytus for his worship of the chaste Diana, Phèdre’s family history carries with it a legacy of manipulation by vengeful deities, playing out a repeating theme of love and loss.

Born to King Minos and his wife, Pasiphaë, Phèdre was a princess of Crete. Minos was the son of Jupiter and the mortal woman Europa, with whom Jupiter fell in love from afar. He appeared to her in the form of a gentle bull, and when she climbed on his back, he spirited her away to Crete, where he fathered three sons with her. But Jupiter was a god, and a married one at that, so eventually Europa married Asterius, the reigning king of Crete. When the union proved childless, Asterius adopted Europa’s sons by Jupiter—Minos and his brothers—as heirs. Upon Asterius’s death, Minos proclaimed himself the most worthy of assuming the throne of Crete, boasting that the gods would answer whatever prayers he sent them. To prove himself, he dedicated an altar
to Neptune and prayed for a bull to emerge from the sea. Neptune obliged with the loveliest white bull anyone had ever seen. Dazzled by its beauty, Minos kept it in his own herd and sacrificed an inferior bull to Neptune in its stead. Having proved his boast, Minos secured the throne of Crete and married Pasiphaë.

Affronted by Minos’s refusal to sacrifice the white bull, however, Neptune avenged himself by causing Pasiphaë to fall madly in love with the beautiful bovine. In some accounts, it was Venus who afflicted Pasiphaë with passion for the bull as part of an ongoing vendetta against Pasiphaë’s father, Helios, the all-seeing sun god, who had witnessed Venus’s affair with Mars (god of war) and tattled to her husband, Vulcan. One way or the other, Pasiphaë’s lustful affliction was an instrument of revenge on the men in her life, a destiny Phèdre unfortunately shared.

Desperate for satisfaction, Pasiphaë begged Daedalus, a famous craftsman, to assist her. Daedalus acquiesced and built Pasiphaë a hollow wooden cow into which she could slip herself. He installed it in the meadow where Minos’s bull grazed. The white bull took to the false cow, and in time Pasiphaë gave birth to the Minotaur, a half-man/half-bull monstrosity. Twenty-seven years later, Theseus, prince of Athens, arrived to destroy the beast. Phèdre’s sister, Ariadne, fell in love with Theseus immediately, and she begged Daedalus to reveal the secret of the labyrinth he had built to imprison the Minotaur. He gave Ariadne a magical thread and instructed her to have Theseus unwind it as he entered the maze so that he could find his way to the Minotaur and back out again. Thanks to her assistance, Theseus killed the Minotaur, escaped the labyrinth, and set sail for Athens with Ariadne in tow.

Their romance was short-lived, however, as on the way to Athens they went ashore on an island, either Naxos or Cyprus. There are conflicting stories of what happened next. Some say that Theseus abandoned Ariadne while she slept on the shore. In other versions (more favorable to Theseus), the party went ashore because Ariadne was seasick. When Theseus left her resting to oversee work on the ship, a violent wind carried him out to sea and prevented his return. Some say Ariadne died. Others say she married the god Bacchus.

It was not until much later—after many adventures and the birth of his son Hippolytus to the Amazon Antiope—that Theseus married Phèdre, an alliance designed by Phèdre’s brother Deucalion to achieve a lasting peace between Athens and Crete. Unfortunately, it was not a peaceful marriage for Phèdre. A spiteful Venus, enraged by Hippolytus’s deliberate chastity, afflicted Phèdre with overpowering love for her stepson. Suffering a fate tragically like her mother’s, Phèdre was abused by an angry deity as an instrument of revenge.
**THESEUS**
The Athenian Hero

BY ELLEN CASSIDY

Theseus is the bastard son of Aegeus, king of Athens, and Aethra, princess of Trézène. He was raised by his maternal grandfather, King Pitheus, who silenced rumors about the boy’s parentage by suggesting he was the son of the sea god, Neptune. Before returning to Athens from Trézène, Aegeus instructed Aethra that if a son were born out of their union she should only send him to Athens once he could retrieve Aegeus’s sword and sandals from beneath a large rock at the Altar of Strong Zeus. When Theseus came of age, he moved the rock with little effort and retrieved the sword and sandals. He then began the perilous overland trek to Athens.

During the journey, Theseus set out to rid the land of the brigands he encountered on his path. According to Greek legend, he meted out justice according to the maxim: as one does to the helpless, so Theseus does to him. He is said to have dispatched Sinus, who killed his victims by rending them between two pine trees, in the same manner. Then came Sciron, who tricked travelers into washing his feet in order to kick them over the edge of a cliff; he soon fell to his death off the same cliff at Theseus’s hands. Cercyon the Arcadian, who challenged passers-by to friendly wrestling matches and then crushed them to death, died when Theseus smashed his skull against the ground. Finally, Theseus came across Sinus’s father, Polypemon, who would offer a night’s lodging to weary travelers, and then cut or stretch their limbs to fit the bed; Theseus destroyed him in the same fashion.
When Theseus reached Athens, Aegeus’s wife, the infamous Medea, recognized him and attempted to poison him. Aegeus prevented the crime when he recognized the sword his son carried and embraced Theseus as his son and heir. This enraged Pallas, Aegeus’s brother, who considered Theseus’s claim to be illegitimate and had expected the Athenian throne to go to one of his many sons, the Pallantidae. Pallas plotted a coup, but Theseus quashed the uprising by executing all of his sons, sparing only their sister, Aricie.

After the Pallantidae had been quelled, Theseus went in pursuit of the bloodthirsty white bull that was ravaging the plain of Attica (a region comprised of 12 small territories surrounding the Saronic Gulf, which includes Athens and Trézène). He captured the bull and sacrificed it at the Acropolis for all of Athens to see. The son of Cretan King Minos, Androgeus, had already fallen victim to the bull while visiting Aegeus in Athens, and Minos had exacted revenge on the Athenians by requiring that 14 young Athenians be sent to the labyrinth in Crete every nine years to be sacrificed to the Minotaur, the monstrous half-man/half-bull son of Crete’s Queen Pasiphaë. Theseus offered to be one of the victims, but privately promised his father that he would slay the Minotaur and hoist his ship’s white sail upon his return from Crete to signal his success.

By the time Theseus arrived in Crete, his heroic reputation had been established, and the young princess Ariadne instantly became enamored of him. She offered to help Theseus escape the labyrinth if he would agree to marry her, which he readily did. Ariadne gave Theseus a ball of thread she had obtained from the labyrinth’s architect, Daedalus, as a way of demarcating his winding path through the maze. Using this, Theseus was able to kill the Minotaur and navigate his way to freedom. He and Ariadne left for Athens, but some days into the voyage Ariadne came to be marooned on the island of Naxos. Theseus continued on to Athens. Whether out of grief over the loss of Ariadne or elation at reaching Athens, he forgot to hoist the white sail. When the heartbroken Aegeus saw the customary black sail, he cast himself into the sea, believing his son to be dead, and Theseus became the new king of Athens.

King Theseus immediately began a series of legendary political reforms. He established a commonwealth, unifying Attica’s 12 provinces into one state, with Athens as its capital. His city became the epicenter of justice, equality, and the rule of law in the ancient world. Even foreigners who felt they had been wronged in international conflicts would go to Athens for support, for it was well known that Theseus would never let a victim of injustice go unaided.

Despite his political success, however, Theseus still lusted after adventure. He sailed on the Argo with Hercules and Jason on the quest for the Golden Fleece and participated in the infamous Calydonian Hunt for the wild boar that was ravaging the countryside. Some
traditions have him traveling to the underworld, where he was trapped until Hercules rescued him. His adventurism also extended to his love life. He kidnapped the famed beauty Helen when she was still very young, only to be foiled by her brothers, Castor and Pollux. Theseus struck up a romantic liaison with the Amazon Antiope, who fought at his side during the Amazonian siege of Attica and bore him a son, Hippolytus. Antiope, who had lived with Theseus as his unofficial wife for several years, did not take it well when Theseus later entered into a political alliance with Crete and married Phèdre, the sister of his former lover Ariadne. In fact, Antiope entered the wedding fully armed and threatened to execute the guests, forcing Theseus to kill her.

At Phèdre’s request Theseus exiled Hippolytus to Trézène, where the youth was adopted by his great-grandfather Pitheus. Theseus and Phèdre had a son (some traditions say two) before he departed from Athens to help his friend Peirithous rescue the queen of Epirus from her husband. He left Phèdre in Trézène with Hippolytus during his absence, and his wife’s proximity to her handsome stepson led to devastating results.

Eventually, Theseus is said to have been killed by an ally of a rival family, and the legendary hero’s bones were enshrined in Athens.
HIPPOLYTUS AND ARICIE
Love's Victory

BY SHELLEY CARTER

Hippolytus is the bastard son of King Theseus of Athens. There is some disagreement as to the story of his mother. Some sources (including those to which Racine subscribed) call her Antiope, while others refer to her as Hippolyta. In some traditions, Antiope and Hippolyta were actually sisters, and in others Antiope was a queen. Despite the mystery surrounding the character, there is one aspect that is ubiquitous: she was an Amazon, one of that foreign tribe of fierce female warriors who did not allow men into their society except for the loveless purposes of reproduction. They only kept female babies and either killed or gave away their sons. Hippolytus was nonetheless spared.

Antiope was unique in that she fell in love with Theseus. Some stories tell how she broke ranks to fight at his side when the Amazons unsuccessfully tried to invade Attica. Unfortunately, Theseus couldn't or wouldn't marry her. To establish an alliance between Crete and Attica, Theseus married Phèdre. He was then compelled to kill Antiope when she made a scene at the wedding festivities: she entered fully armed and threatened to slaughter the wedding guests.

In Racine's Phèdre, Hippolytus's aversion to love is credited in part to his Amazonian heritage. This is certainly how Hippolytus sees it. When his tutor asks him if he is in love, he scoffs, “How can you say such things? / You've seen into my heart since I was born. / How can a heart so proud, full of contempt, / suddenly betray its fiber, its beat? / My Amazon mother fed me on milk / laced with that pride which surprises you so.” Of course, we find out Hippolytus is, in fact, in love: with Aricie.

Aricie is the last of the noble line of Pallas, Theseus's uncle. When Aegeus named Theseus his successor to the Athenian throne, the sons of Pallas (the Pallantidae) threatened a coup. Theseus executed them all. He spared Aricie's life, but made it illegal for her to wed and have children. Thus Hippolytus's love for Aricie (and hers for him) is condemned by law, just as Phèdre's love for her stepson is condemned by social stricture.

After the wedding between Theseus and Phèdre, Theseus (at Phèdre's insistence) dispatched Hippolytus to Trézène to be watched over by Pitheus, Hippolytus's great-grandfather. Living in Trézène, Hippolytus was protected from Phèdre's desire for him, as well as from his own for Aricie, so long as both women remained in Athens. Trézène, more remote than Athens, was also the perfect haven for a devotee of Diana, goddess of the hunt, such as Hippolytus; its location provided endless
opportunities for sport and exercise. Through his relationship with Pitheus, Hippolytus is the undisputed heir to the throne of Trézène. With the barbarian blood of an Amazon running through his veins, however, his claim to the Athenian throne is much more dubious.
THE GODS OF PHÈDRE

VENUS
Venus is the goddess of love and laughter (both sweet and mocking). She beguiles gods and humans alike and has the ability to steal the wits of even the most wise. In Homer’s Iliad—in which she is known by her Greek name, Aphrodite—she is the daughter of the god Zeus (Jupiter) and the Titan Dione. In later poems she is said to have sprung from the sea after Saturn (ruler of the first generation of Titans) overthrew his father, Caelus, by cutting off his genitals and throwing them into the sea. From the resulting sea foam, Venus arose. (Aphrodite literally means “the foam risen.”) Greeks and Romans wrote similarly about the goddess of love as the embodiment of joy and, alternately, of malice. In some traditions she is the wife of the lame god of the forge, Vulcan, whom Jupiter forced her to marry because he feared her beauty would spark jealous rivalries among the other gods. She nevertheless took a number of lovers, including, most famously, Mars, god of war. In many versions of the Phèdre myth, it is the love goddess’s anger at Hippolytus’s unshakable devotion to her chaste sister, Diana (known to the Greeks as Artemis), that is the catalyst for Phèdre’s fateful desire for her stepson.

DIANA
Diana is the Roman goddess associated with the moon, hunting and hunters, and the forest. Her Greek equivalent is Artemis, who was the daughter of Zeus (Jupiter) and Leto (a daughter of Titans) and the twin sister of Apollo. When she was three years old, her father asked her what presents she would like. Diana answered, “Pray give me eternal virginity.” He granted her wish, not that she needed his help. When the river god Alpheius pursued her, she was able to trick him, and he was forced to give up. When Actaeon, a famous Theban hero, observed the goddess bathing, she transformed him into a stag and encouraged his own dogs to eat him alive. She demands the same chastity from her priestesses. When Jupiter seduced Callisto, Diana changed her pregnant disciple into a bear and had the rest of her company hunt the beast.

NEPTUNE
Neptune is second in primacy only to his brother Jupiter. After Neptune, Jupiter, and their brother Pluto overthrew their father, Saturn, and the rest of the Titans, they drew lots to determine their shares of the universe. Neptune drew the sea, a crucial entity for the Greeks. The Greeks knew the god as a contemptuous character who was quick to
instigate disputes with mortals and deities alike. Neptune is the master of earthquakes, storms, and sea monsters, and typically sends these calamities as punishments for deeds done against him. Some traditions claim he sired Theseus with the mortal Aethra, the princess of Trézène, and promised his son the fulfillment of three prayers. Racine, however, disconnecting Theseus from his divine parentage, explains that Neptune granted Theseus a single wish because the hero had cleansed the god’s shores of thieves and murderers.

HELIOS
Son of the Titan Hyperion, Helios is the sun itself, brother to Selene, the moon, and Eos, the dawn. Every day he drives his fiery chariot from his palace in the East, flying across the sky, to his equally magnificent palace in the West. Although Helios sees everything that happens on earth from his vantage point in the sky, he is not known as the most observant deity, as Odysseus’s men successfully filched his sacred cattle. Helios’s son Phaëthon took his chariot and, driving it erratically, severely upset the natural temperature of the earth. According to Homer, Ovid, and Seneca, Helios earned Venus’s eternal enmity when he found her in bed with the god of war and told her smithy husband, Vulcan, about it. Venus swore vengeance on Helios and his descendants, including Pasiphaë, whom he fathered with the ocean nymph Perse, and eventually Phèdre.

JUPITER
Jupiter (Zeus to the Greeks) is the ruler of the gods. Wielding his mighty thunderbolt, he joined with his brothers, Pluto and Neptune, to overthrow their father, Saturn, king of the Titans. Upon their victory, Jupiter became the god of the sky and the earth and held more power than all of the other gods combined. Jupiter famously had numerous trysts with both mortal and immortal women. In order to achieve his lascivious ends without alerting his wife, Juno (Hera), he would frequently masquerade as an animal. This was the case when he fathered King Minos of Crete with Europa, a Phoenician descendant of Io. Jupiter took the form of a bull and hid in the herds of Europa’s father. Gradually she noticed him and caressed him and eventually mounted him. Jupiter trotted down the shore until he entered the sea and stole Europa away to Crete, where she became queen and gave birth to Minos.
QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

1. How does the formality of Racine’s language interplay with the passions of his characters?
2. There are many unseen forces in Phèdre—the gods, a complicated political landscape, and a strict social etiquette. How does this production illustrate these forces at work?
3. How does the use of contemporary music in this production affect or inform your theatrical experience?
4. Do you sympathize with Phèdre’s plight? Why or why not?
5. Who is ultimately to blame for Hippolytus’s death?
6. Phèdre’s final lines are, “Death at last withdraws the light from my eyes / and returns the day I soiled to purity.” What does she mean? Does any good come from her death?

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION