


DOMMAR®

Phaedra

By Frank McGuiness

After Racine



Study Guide

Written by Sophie Watkiss

Edited by Hannah Clifford

This programme has been made possible by the
generous support of Universal Consolidated Group

Contents

Section 1. Cast List & Creative Team

**Section 2. PHAEDRA by Frank McGuinness after Racine:
'back story'**

Characters

Background: Phaedra and Theseus in legend

Synopsis

Versions of the myth in dramatic form

Section 3. The conventions of writing and staging tragedy

Racine and the rules of Classical French Tragedy

A new version of a classical text

Creative choices: the play's language

Section 4. Ideas for further discussion, practical work and reading

Cast List & Creative Team

Cast:

Linda Bassett	Oenon
Sean Champion	Theramenes
Michael Feast	Theseus
Clare Higgins	Phaedra
Lucy-Anne Holmes	Ismene
Ben Meyjes	Hippolytus
Marcella Plunkett	Aricia
Janet Whiteside	Panope

Creative Team:

Director	Tom Cairns
Set Designer	Tom Cairns
Costume Designer	Amy Roberts
Lighting Designer	Bruno Poet
Sound Designer	Christopher Shutt
Video Designer	Lorna Heavey

PHAEDRA by Frank McGuinness after Racine: the 'back story'

Characters

Theseus	King of Athens, son of Ageus
Phaedra	Wife of Theseus, daughter of Minos and Pasiphae
Hippolytus	Son of Theseus and Antiope, Queen of the Amazons
Aricia	Princess of the royal blood of Athens
Oenon	Nurse and confidante of Phaedra
Theramenes	Teacher of Hippolytus
Ismene	Confidante of Aricia
Panope	Servant to Phaedra



Background: Phaedra and Theseus in legend

Most of the characters in the play, particularly **Theseus** and **Phaedra**, have a complex 'back story' in terms of what has happened to them before the play starts. A knowledge of this is particularly important to the actors playing these roles. So here is their story so far:

Theseus's heritage

Theseus's father, **Ageus**, was the eldest of four brothers and succeeded as King of Athens. **Pallas** was the next brother in line. The longer **Ageus** took to create an heir, the keener **Pallas** became to steal his throne. **Aethra**, Princess of Troezen, eventually bore **Ageus** a son, **Theseus**. On the same day that **Theseus** was conceived, **Aethra** waded into the sea and was ravaged by **Neptune**, God of the Ocean, making **Theseus** the son of **Neptune** as well. **Theseus** was brought up in Troezen by his mother but eventually left to join his human father in Athens.

The making of the Minotaur

During this period, **Minos** was King of Crete and married to **Pasiphae**. **Neptune** once gave **Minos** a beautiful white bull to sacrifice in his name but **Minos** refused to kill such a wonderful animal. As punishment, **Neptune** ordered **Venus**, Goddess of Love, to make **Minos's** wife **Pasiphae** fall in love with the bull. Her love for the bull became so powerful that she eventually consummated the relationship and bore the **Minotaur** (half man, half bull) who would only eat human flesh. **Minos** hid the **Minotaur** in a specially designed labyrinth, a place from which no man could return.

Theseus's vow and his journey to Crete

When **Theseus** arrived in Athens he found the city in sombre mood. A peace treaty between Athens and the powerful Cretans required Athens to send seven young men and seven young women to be devoured by the **Minotaur** each year. **Theseus** immediately vowed to stop this vile tradition and volunteered to be one of the seven young men to set sail for Crete.

Every year, out of respect for those that were about to be sacrificed, the boat to Crete used black sails. **Ageus** was distraught at the thought of his son being killed during this impossible task. **Theseus** calmed him by promising to fly white sails on his return so that **Ageus** would know the outcome as soon as possible.

Theseus seduces Ariadne, sister to Phaedra, slays the Minotaur and loses his father

On arriving in Crete, **Theseus** seduced **Ariadne**, the daughter of **Minos** and sister to **Phaedra**. **Ariadne** gave **Theseus** a sword and a ball of string which he used as a trail to re-trace his steps out of the labyrinth after he had slayed the **Minotaur**. He escaped from Crete with the smitten **Ariadne** in tow but he eventually abandoned her on the island of Naxos. It was said that **Theseus** shed **Ariadne** so

quickly because he had already fallen in love with her younger sister, **Phaedra**. On his return to Athens, **Theseus** forgot to hoist the white sail so **Ageus**, seeing the black sails of the ship and assuming failure, threw himself from the cliffs. **Theseus** was triumphant in killing the **Minotaur** but lost his father.

Theseus becomes King

After **Ageus**'s suicide, **Pallas** and his 49 sons immediately challenged **Theseus** for the throne of Athens but **Theseus** defeated them in battle, becoming King. **Aricia**, **Pallas**'s only daughter, was spared by **Theseus**. However, she was imprisoned and forbidden to have children.

The birth of Hippolytus

After finding stability in his own kingdom, **Theseus** developed a reputation as a philanderer. One of his early endeavours was to capture **Antiope**, Queen of the Amazons (an all female warrior tribe), with whom he had a son, **Hippolytus**. **Antiope**'s abduction triggered a savage war during which she was killed.

Phaedra becomes Theseus's Queen

Years after **Theseus** first laid eyes on **Phaedra**, he revisited Crete and took her as his bride. **Phaedra** was the only woman passionate enough to tame the great lover and she bore him two sons, **Demophon** and **Akamas**.

When PHAEDRA begins, **Theseus** has been absent for six months. Unbeknown to his people, he left with an old friend to capture the wife of Hades, King of the Underworld, a place from which it is impossible to return. The Cretan-born Queen **Phaedra** and the imprisoned **Aricia** of Athenian royal blood have been put under the protection of **Hippolytus** in Troezen, to where **Phaedra** banished him years previously.

In the absence of the King there are four contenders to the throne: **Phaedra**'s two young sons by **Theseus**; their half brother **Hippolytus**, who is older and more experienced but has unpopular Amazonian heritage; and **Aricia**, whose blood line is the strongest. This is the tense political landscape into which the play opens.

? Did you know . . .

Late fifth century BC Athens was a very democratic state, which considered the more archaic Crete as their enemy. Crete was stamped by the mark of the bull: a great, exotic, foreign principality with a beast at its heart. To them, Phaedra was from a cursed race.



Synopsis

The play is set in Troezen. The action takes place in a single day: the day that **Phaedra** breaks her silence and confesses her love for her stepson **Hippolytus**.

Frank McGuiness has divided the action of the play into five acts, as illustrated below. For the purposes of this synopsis, the acts have been sub-divided into scenes as they would have been by Racine. Following the conventions of Classical French theatre, a new scene starts every time a character enters or leaves the stage.

Act I

Act 1, scene i

Hippolytus is anxious as to the whereabouts of his father, **Theseus**, slayer of the **Minotaur** and King of Athens, and is eager to leave 'this place' to look for him and get away from his stepmother, **Theseus's** second wife, **Phaedra**. **Hippolytus's** teacher, **Theramenes**, believes **Theseus** is lost and that they will never see him again. He also believes that **Hippolytus** has nothing to fear from **Phaedra**, the 'cruel stepmother' who wants rid of him, because she is dying. **Hippolytus** confides in **Theramenes** that he is in love with **Aricia**, princess of the true royal house of Athens, but that their union is forbidden by **Theseus** as her family, who he has slain, were his enemy.

Act 1, scene ii

Oenon, nurse and confidante to **Phaedra**, enters. She reports that her mistress is dying and that she doesn't know the cause. **Hippolytus** and **Theramenes** exit.

Act 1, scene iii

Phaedra enters in great distress. **Oenon** tells her that it is the secrets that she, **Phaedra**, is keeping that are ripping her apart. **Oenon** admonishes **Phaedra** for her cruelty in not confiding in her, the most loyal of her servants who has given everything up for her. **Phaedra** at last breaks her silence: **Venus**, the Goddess of Love, hates her and has cruelly made her fall 'in agony, in love' with her own stepson, **Hippolytus**. **Phaedra** has done all she can to harden her heart to hate **Hippolytus**, acting towards him like the cruel stepmother, but her guilt and desire are eating away at her and she wishes to die.

Act 1, scene iv

Panope, **Phaedra's** servant, enters, bringing news of **Theseus's** death and division in Athens over who should now rule: **Phaedra's** son, **Hippolytus** or **Aricia**. She also brings news that **Hippolytus** is preparing to leave.

Act 1, scene v

Left on her own with **Phaedra**, **Oenon** advises **Phaedra** that her fate has now changed: **Theseus's** death has cleared her. Loving **Hippolytus** is now less of a danger; she can see him without chastising herself. **Phaedra** hears her advice and says she will act on it.

Act II

Act II, scene i

Aricia is told by **Ismene**, her confidante, that **Theseus** is dead and that this has changed **Hippolytus**'s situation; he has requested to see **Aricia**.

Act II, scene i

Hippolytus enters and declares his love for **Aricia**.

Act II, scene ii

Theramenes enters: **Phaedra** wishes to see **Hippolytus**; **Aricia** urges **Hippolytus** to grant **Phaedra**'s request. **Aricia** and **Ismene** leave.

Act II, scene iii

Hippolytus tells **Theramenes** to have everything ready for their departure; as soon as the meeting is over he wants to leave as quickly as possible. **Theramenes** leaves.

Act II, scene iv

Phaedra declares her love to **Hippolytus**. She asks him to punish her for this 'pernicious love'; she is his **Minotaur** whom he must slay. She offers her heart for him to pierce with his sword; she then attempts to grab the sword to kill herself with it. **Oenon** intervenes, alerting her that someone is approaching and leads **Phaedra** away.

Act II, scene v

Theramenes enters. **Hippolytus** urges him that they must leave. **Theramenes** announces that the people of Athens have decided that **Phaedra**'s son is to be king. There is a rumour that **Theseus** is still alive.

Act III

Act III, scene i

Phaedra is discovered in a state of distress; she has spoken too much and is 'riddled with shame.' She grasps at one more attempt to woo **Hippolytus** to her: she will give him the Athenian crown. She commands **Oenon** to take this offer to him.

Act III, scene ii

Phaedra, left alone, admonishes **Venus** for her cruelty.

Act III, scene iii

Oenon returns sooner than **Phaedra** anticipated. **Theseus** is not dead. He has arrived back. **Phaedra** chastises **Oenon** for her earlier advice to declare her love

to **Hippolytus**. She will now die dishonoured. **Oenon** wants to save **Phaedra** and suggests **Phaedra** accuses **Hippolytus** of what he accuses her of. **Theseus** is sure to believe **Phaedra** and **Hippolytus** will only suffer the 'light' punishment of being sent into exile. **Phaedra** sees **Hippolytus** approaching, her damnation in his dark eyes. She acquiesces and tells **Oenon** to do what she wants.

Act III, scene iv

Theseus, **Hippolytus** and **Theramenes** enter. **Theseus** rejoices at the luck that has brought him back to **Phaedra**. But **Phaedra** rejects his welcome, saying that she has to hide herself away from him. She leaves with **Oenon**.

Act III, scene v

Hippolytus declares his wish to leave. **Theseus** is distressed at his family's response to his return, and infuriated by **Hippolytus**'s ensuing silence, leaves.

Act III, scene vi

Hippolytus, left in soliloquy, convinces himself of his innocence and resolves to tell **Theseus** of his love for **Aricia**.

Act IV

Act IV, scene i

The scene opens with **Theseus** and **Oenon** already in discussion. It becomes evident that she has accused **Hippolytus** of making advances to **Phaedra**. **Oenon** seeks permission to leave, citing the reason that the queen needs her.

Act IV, scene ii

Hippolytus enters. **Theseus** curses him as a traitor and calls upon **Neptune** to avenge him, abandoning **Hippolytus** to **Neptune**'s anger. **Hippolytus** is 'stupified into silence' by **Phaedra**'s accusations. **Hippolytus** defends himself by declaring his real love, **Aricia**. **Theseus** reads this confession as a trick and banishes him.

Act IV, scene iii

Theseus, left alone, continues to address words to the now banished and absent **Hippolytus** in a mixture of grief and rage.

Act IV, scene iv

Phaedra enters. She begs **Theseus** to be lenient in his punishment of **Hippolytus**. **Theseus** says that it is **Neptune** who will avenge her and that **Hippolytus** has insulted her with lies, by maintaining that it is **Aricia** whom he loves. **Theseus** leaves for **Neptune**'s alters.

Act IV, scene v

Left alone, **Phaedra** admits that she came here to tell **Theseus** the truth, but the news that **Hippolytus** loves **Aricia** kept her 'silent' and 'safe'.

Act IV, scene vi

Oenon enters. **Phaedra** fills her in on her discovery of a rival. She is overwhelmed by jealousy and despair. **Oenon** tries to reason with **Phaedra**; she's made a mistake and must live with it. **Phaedra** now turns on **Oenon**, blaming her previous advice, to speak to **Hippolytus** of her feelings, putting into place his impending fate at the hands of **Neptune**. She orders **Oenon** out of her sight, wishing her to die alone before departing.

Act IV, scene vii

Oenon, left alone, expresses her sense of betrayal and questions the Gods as to her fate.



Act V

Act V, scene i

Hippolytus begs **Aricia** to marry him and flee with him into his exile. She agrees. As the king approaches, she begs **Hippolytus** to leave and send a faithful guide to lead her to him.

Act V, scene ii

Theseus enters. There is an altercation between him and **Aricia** as she defends **Hippolytus**'s character. She leaves him with a riddle: not all the monsters that have fallen at his feet were destroyed – one lives, and **Hippolytus**'s respect for his father forbids her to say who it is. She leaves vowing not to break the silence.

Act V, scene iii

Theseus is left alone, alarmed by what **Aricia** has said.

Act V, scene iv

Panope enters, reporting **Oenon**'s break from **Phaedra** and **Oenon**'s subsequent suicide. Her death has brought **Phaedra** no peace. Panope urges **Theseus** to see **Phaedra** and to try and help her.

Act V, scene v

Once more alone, **Theseus** muses over **Oenon**'s death and **Phaedra**'s wish to die. He believes he has been lied to and wants **Hippolytus** to return so that he can hear him defend himself. He calls on **Neptune** not to answer his prayers to kill **Hippolytus**.

Act V, scene vi

Theramenes enters in tears.

Hippolytus is dead, mauled to death by a sea monster conjured up by **Neptune**. He has come to pass on **Hippolytus**'s last request to his father, to treat **Aricia** gently.

Act V, scene vii

Phaedra and **Panope** enter. In his grief, **Theseus** wants to banish himself from the 'whole wide world'. **Phaedra** declares that she must break the silence: **Hippolytus** was innocent. She begs **Theseus** to listen to her; she has little time left, having taken poison. She reveals the truth to **Theseus** as she dies on stage.



Observation point

When you see the Donmar's production of PHAEDRA, consider how:

- The entrances of characters are denoted
- The start of each new act is indicated

Versions of the myth in dramatic form

The ancient Greek tragedian Euripides was the first dramatist to shape the myth into dramatic form in *Hippolytus*, 429 BC. As the title suggests, Hippolytus is the central focus in the play; the closing moments are all about the dying Hippolytus and his father. The Roman playwright, Seneca, revisited the story and his play, *Phaedra*, highlights the relationship between Hippolytus and Phaedra. The classical French dramatist, Racine, shifted the focus to Phaedra in his version of the myth. It is this version of the play that Frank McGuinness has taken as the foundation of his play, *Phaedra*.

Euripides bookends his play with the appearance of the gods, therefore demonstrating how his characters are dancing a pattern already woven for them by the gods. Phaedra is seen as a woman wanting to do the right thing, but impeded by a cursed family history. Seneca rids the story of the gods, which makes it a piece about morals. He lays his emphasis on moral desires and the need to control our emotions. He shows us a Phaedra who follows her desires, which was against the Roman philosophy. Racine, writing against the cultural backdrop of the formality of Versailles, the French Court, makes it clear that Phaedra knows she is a monster who cannot have control over her emotions; she *asks* to be killed. In this respect it could be seen to be a very Catholic play, knowing and struggling with your sin. Racine also brings back the influence of the gods, Venus and Neptune are very much evident through the words of the characters.

In his 21st century version of Racine's *Phaedra*, Frank McGuinness shows us a story that examines the family, particularly step relationships. All of the relationships we are shown are the cause of tension.

Listed below are the main events that each dramatic version of the play are preoccupied with.

***Hippolytus*, Euripides, 429 BC.** Euripides focuses on the story of the revenge of Aphrodite, goddess of love, on Hippolytus for neglecting her in favour of Artemis, goddess of chastity. Phaedra falls in love with Hippolytus while Theseus is away, and her nurse, Oenon, reveals her feelings to him. He rejects her advances and Phaedra hangs herself, leaving a note for Theseus denouncing Hippolytus for seducing her. Theseus banishes Hippolytus and calls upon Neptune to punish him, which he does, sending a monstrous bull from the sea to terrify Hippolytus' horses and drag him to his death. Theseus then learns the truth from Artemis and is forgiven by his son as he lies dying.

***Phaedra*, Seneca, c. AD 50.** In the play, it is Phaedra who reveals her love to Hippolytus, seizes his sword, which he drops after threatening to kill her, and produces it as evidence when she accuses him of assault. When Hippolytus has died his violent death as a result of his father's curse, Phaedra confesses her guilt, committing suicide in despair. Neptune is the only god to now have a role in the story, which Seneca has made a drama about human passion.



Phedre, Racine, 1677. The traditionally celibate Hippolyte (Hippolytus) of Greek mythology is given a young lover, the invented character of Aricie (Aricia), daughter of the true blood line of Athens, whose brothers and father have been killed by Theseus, who now occupies the throne. Phedre's (Phaedra's) anguished love for Hippolyte has been inflicted on her by **Venus** and is exacerbated by intense jealousy when she learns of his love for Aricie. She does not accuse Hippolyte of rape herself, but acquiesces in **Oenone's** desire to do so. Filled with remorse, she takes a lethal poison, only to be utterly consumed in her sense of guilt on learning of Hippolyte's death by the sea monster, dying in despair and self-loathing.

? Did you know . . .

When Racine's play was first staged, in Paris, it bore the title *Hippolytus and Phaedra*. It was only ten years later, for the 1687 edition of his play, that Racine dropped Hippolytus from the title, perhaps emphasising the prominence he wished to give to his female protagonist.



Discussion Point

When you see the Donmar's production of PHAEDRA, is there one character who becomes the main focus of the dramatic action for you, or are the characters' stories of equal dramatic weight?

? Did you know . . .

The playwright Sarah Kane (1973-1999) wrote *Phaedra's Love*, a version of Seneca's *Phaedra*, after having read the original only once. She chose not to look at Euripides' or Racine's versions until after she had finished her own. She 'wanted to keep the classical concerns of Greek theatre – love, hate, death, revenge, suicide – but use a completely urban poetry.'¹

The conventions of writing and staging tragedy

Racine and the rules of Classical French Tragedy

Aristotle and the Three Unities

Aristotle was the earliest critic to analyse tragedy in a systematic way. He believed that to be effective tragedy must demonstrate the three unities: the unity of action, unity of time and unity of place. You can find a detailed description of all the rules Aristotle applied to tragedy set down in his *Poetics*.²

French dramatists of the 17th century further developed these rules and applied them to their own work. The rules were, generally, as follows:

French tragedy **could not**

- portray contemporary events
- criticise society
- be written in prose
- have more nor less than five acts
- offend public taste
- portray any class of society except the aristocracy
- cover a period of time greater than twenty-four hours
- change location
- have a complicated plot
- end happily
- be written in any verse-form except the twelve-syllable alexandrine line
- permit its characters to change, develop, or grow older in the course of the play
- show any scene of violence
- show any direct action
- use any but the simplest props
- change sets.

The dramatist **could**:

- portray human emotion.



Discussion Point

To what extent is Frank McGuinness's version of Racine's *Phaedra* true to the rules of 17th century French drama?

The theoretical basis for French tragedy was the Aristotelian doctrine of imitatio: a work of art must, as Shakespeare's Hamlet says, "hold . . . the mirror up to nature." This idea was similar to representational concepts of painting, which assumed that the artist looked at nature and then reproduced what he saw. Of course, the point of view from which he looked at nature was rigorously controlled. There are, for example, no peasants in Racine's tragedies, no middle-class people, no objects of everyday life, no sentimental scenes in which people hold hands or kiss. The aristocratic imagination knew in advance what the observation of nature was meant to be. Nature was meant to be seen as nearly as possible as it would appear to Louis XIV from a window of the Louvre or Versailles: a landscape designed by Le Notre, peopled with the lords and ladies of the Court. The sphere of tragedy was noble and no vulgar mixing of the genres was to be tolerated.

Observation point

In what way does Tom Cairns show the production's acknowledgement of the doctrine of 'imitatio' in his design for Phaedra?

A new version of a classical text

Frank McGuinness finds it 'extremely liberating' to work on classical texts:

'If people ask me 'are you working on a play of your own at the moment or somebody else's?' I always reply, 'Everything I write is my own'...If you take a comparison between a painter, such as Francis Bacon, he goes and looks at a famous painting and he does versions of it - or Picasso, looking at an impressionist painting and going and doing four variances on it. You're nurturing your own creative ambitions, your own achievements, and you're challenging yourself by looking at these people who absolutely know what they are doing - and you learn from them. That's incredibly important for a writer - you learn from doing these big demanding plays. The directors, designers and actors that I really respect have all to some extent steeped themselves in these big plays as well, and I want to meet them, if you like, on an equal footing. The only way to truly know these writers is to do what I'm doing - to get absolutely into their way of thinking and imagining and try to write a play for your time in your language'.

Frank McGuinness³

Did you know . . .

Frank McGuinness first read Racine's Phaedra in French when he was a 19-year-old student.

It took McGuinness six months to write **Phaedra**. As he worked, he had the voice of Clare Higgins in his head as he was writing **Phaedra**'s part. This is hardly surprising: Higgins played the title role in McGuinness's version of Euripides's HECUBA staged at the Donmar in autumn 2004. According to McGuinness, Higgins has a 'fearless approach to the work' and, like **Phaedra**, 'has the gift to be able think and feel at the same time.'⁴

Creative Choices: the play's language

Racine's tragedies are written in the verse form preferred by French playwrights (and writers of heroic and epic poetry) of the period: the rhymed Alexandrine (i.e. a couplet that rhymes, with a norm of twelve syllables to each line, often including a pause in the rhythm, called the *caesura*, roughly in the middle of the verse line).

When creating a new version of a classical text, a writer has to make certain creative choices about how they will write their play. For McGuinness, the most challenging aspect of writing PHAEDRA after the example of Racine was to achieve the necessary spareness of the writing. This was a big linguistic demand.

'It has to be as spare as possible, because it's telling an enormous elemental story and the language reflects that. You can't start embroidering, you can't start throwing in metaphors; you can't start using very obscure classical references if it is going to work with a contemporary audience because we just don't know what they mean.'

Frank McGuinness⁵

'Frank McGuinness...updates the vocabulary and eliminates the rhyming couplets to give a more contemporary sense, while maintaining the grandeur and beauty of the original language.'

Nicholas Hammond⁶

The play in rehearsal

'You can't do the Greeks unless you are very brave. You have to fling yourself into it at the highest level right from the very start and make big mistakes. It creates its own energy. It feeds off itself. The passions! They are huge. You have to work with the energy.'

Clare Higgins on playing Phaedra⁷

An interview with Hamish Pirie, Assistant Director for Phaedra

Q In Euripides' dramatic telling of the myth, Hippolytus is the central focus in the play. Seneca revisited the story and his play, Phaedra, highlights the relationship between Hippolytus and Phaedra. Racine shifts the focus to Phaedra in his dramatic version of the myth. During rehearsals for Frank McGuinness' version, what discoveries did you make about the focus he chose to accentuate?

A It became clear that Frank had aimed to capture the emotional essentials of the play. It felt he wanted the raw bones and emotional truth to be most prevalent and he felt strongly about not letting them get lost in rhythms, excess language and place names.

Q Structurally, the play is broken down into 5 Acts. Was it broken down into further units for rehearsal?

A In Racines' original the five acts are broken down by scene breaks. Frank removed these in order to assist the flow of the piece. However there are several natural breaks within each act when characters exit and new characters come on. The play is almost made up of several duologues or two hander scenes, so it is easy to work out which bit to rehearse when.

Q Phaedra has come to love Hippolytus long before the action of the play begins, and this passion has, from the very beginning, been accompanied by strong feelings of guilt. How did Clare Higgins prepare for this intensity of internal emotion right at the beginning of the action?

A Firstly we must remember Claire is an actress of great experience and so will have her own method of tapping into her emotional centre.

However, right from the start she discovered that Phaedra's love for Hippolytus was a different kind of love, as it was a curse from Venus. This is explained in her act one scene with Oenon. Claire's interpretation lead her to develop a more rabid form of love. In the play it is mentioned that previously Phaedra's mother and sister have been struck by the anger of Venus. Her mother Pasiphae was made to fall in love with a bull and Ariadne her sister was left stranded on the island of Naxos due to her love for Theseus. Phaedra is aware

of this risk and that she will be punished most severely should she surrender to her desires. The love she has for Hippolytus is almost like a disease; she doesn't want it, but she can't rid it from her mind. Unfortunately for her it happened on the day she married Theseus Hippolytus' father. It really does echo a mental illness for Phaedra; she often talks about being 'mad' with love. She genuinely doesn't want to be in love with Hippolytus.

Q Why has the Donmar chosen to stage PHAEDRA at this moment in time? What does the play say to a Donmar audience in the twenty first century?

A The exciting thing about this play is that throughout the explorations of Euripides, Racine and now Frank McGuinness, the same human beings are feeling the same things: love, jealousy, forbidden love, friendship, loyalty. As I mentioned earlier, Frank was keen to expose all these violent and demanding emotions. Also, the relevance and pertinence of the issues still astounds me: there are lines about the difficulties of a second marriage and step-mothers, divorce and second families, and these are all things that we consider to be modern issues!

Also, when I watch audiences react to this play, I find they seem to relish having this disaster played out before them. As the audience witness the nightmare, they become both subjectively and objectively involved in the piece in a similar way to the original Greek audiences.

Q How did Tom Cairns initially present his ideas for the production and its design to the cast?

A On the first day of rehearsal, he presented a model box and talked through the space. The rest happened organically throughout the rehearsal period. Tom works in a very exciting visual way so that the actors get brought into that world and feel like a part of his vision.

As Tom comes originally from a design background his thought process is very visual and so he was continuously sharing these images with the cast (such as the opening of the piece with the fire burning slowly throughout). Tom also emphasised the use of the sword and the significance of that almost solitary prop throughout. On a practical side, he was able to cut large design elements in the middle of rehearsal if was obstructive to the performers.

Q What were the main themes and issues which emerged during rehearsals and how were they accentuated in performance?

A The great thing is that all the characters bring their own issues to the piece and each one contributes to the contorted mess that is the end.

In the same breath of love is guilt in this piece. Phaedra is truly destroyed by the guilt of her passion: this became clear the more we worked on it, as did the fact that Phaedra was initially trying to do the right thing. Tom was keen that Phaedra not be seen as a demon from word go, and wanted to ensure that the production didn't start with shouting and screaming as often a Greek tragedy does.

The relationship between queen and servant is a huge part of this play, explored with Phaedra and Oenon. In rehearsal we were constantly asking

who was controlling which situation. Though Oenon is the servant, it cannot be taken for granted the power she can hold over her lady. And of course, this relationship of power, as with all the relationships in the play, is complicated by love. Linda really discovered in Oenon a love for Phaedra that is beyond duty (this is sometimes shown in a lingering kiss in the production).

The issues of father and son relationships take hold of the play late on between Hippolytus and Theseus, with Hippolytus feeling inadequate against his father. Ben Meyjes who plays Hippolytus was particularly interested in the way this runs throughout the play.

Following in your father's footsteps is a huge issue in the piece. From the first scene of the play we are given countless heroic and philandering tales building Theseus' status. Hippolytus is a trained warrior and great hunter but he has done nothing in comparison to his father, who is described in history as the greatest of all Greek heroes. In the play Hippolytus even begs to be allowed to go and kill monsters and madmen (last scene act 3) in order to be worthy to be his son. His fear of being in love with Aricia is all down to the risk of upsetting his father. Phaedra is only so close to him because his father has sent her there to be under his protection. Hippolytus seems trapped by his father's actions and reputation.

Q The production is credited with a sound designer and with music. What are the differences between these roles?

A The composers are responsible for actually composing and creating the music that you hear in the production. The sound designer is responsible for creating all the sound effects that you hear throughout the play. Sound designers work more technically. Firstly they need to record or source the sound, then they work very closely with the equipment to create the soundscape of the piece. The aim is to create a soundscape for the play that will give the best textures for the piece in question and the most complete sound for the audience. From the beginning of the project both composer and sound designer will work very closely, and in some cases the jobs are done by the same person. Often the composer is a classical musician or the sound designer is more technical than musical. Even if only a composer is credited there will also be some one who has facilitated the sound within the piece even if it is only one bird song.

Q Frank McGuinness has said that you learn from doing these big demanding plays. The directors, designers and actors that he all really respects have all to some extent steeped themselves in these big plays as well. What have the cast and creative team of PHAEDRA learnt from this production?

A Firstly to trust the piece and the words of the author. There was a risk early on of the cast trying to work too hard in making the point their character is trying to make. In modern life we are not used to problems that have such high stakes (not many people suffer the threat of war as a consequence of being attracted to someone!). Often the magnitude of the issues lead companies to offer slightly too grand a performance and lose the explorative journey of the piece.



Again, the creative team had to trust the piece and enable an audience direct access to it. They had to ensure that the production elements would not detract from the story. As an audience has to work a little to penetrate the language so must we create a platform for that to happen.

Phaedra: preparing the role for performance

“Racine really is capable of going into the very darkest recesses of the human heart and he hears what is happening. I don’t think anybody else has the courage to do it with such power. There is no hiding place for Racine: you are right in there from the word go. He spares you nothing. I love that intensity and that discipline. It is a rigorous intellectual and emotional examination of what it is to be human.”

Frank McGuinness⁸

As stated by Frank McGuinness above, there is ‘no hiding place’ in Racine, and this is particularly true for the character of Phaedra. Listed below is the type of detailed factual information an actress needs to familiarise herself with when preparing to play the role:

- Phaedra has come to love Hippolytus long before the action of the play begins, and this passion has, from the very beginning, been accompanied by strong feelings of guilt. When we first meet her, these feelings of guilt manifest themselves in a wish to die. When the play opens, her love and guilt remain her secret: she has been silent, communicating her passions to no one. In Act 1, her silence is broken and she confesses her passions to Oenon, her nurse and confidante.
- Phaedra’s second confession is vital to the action of the play. She only makes this far more difficult confession as she believes Theseus is now dead, thus legitimising her love for his son. In this confession, she communicates her own guilty self-condemnation. An aggravated sense of shame follows. Phaedra’s sense of guilt has already reached an unbearable level for her internally; it is now increased by her public confession of it.
- The news that Theseus is still alive and soon to return changes the situation for Phaedra and intensifies her remorse.
- Phaedra intends to tell Theseus the truth, but, at the last minute remains silent, stunned by the discovery of Hippolytus’s love for Aricia. A new emotion, jealousy, is now aroused in her, impeding her impulse for justice and honesty.
- Throughout the action of the play, Phaedra’s secret becomes progressively public, until, by the end of the play, all the characters know of it. The silence has been broken by speech and knowledge has replaced their ignorance.
- The Phaedra who is first presented to the audience is resisting the passion that is the work of destiny or the gods. This resistance is an affirmation of her moral superiority to it. This part of her character shows itself throughout the play, each time she is required to give a judgement or to act in



accordance with moral principles. Phaedra's moral standing fully manifests itself in her confession to Theseus, where she takes ownership of the guilt that has been wrongly placed on Hippolytus; her suicide is her self-inflicted punishment for her wrongdoing.

- Phaedra needs a moral backbone if she is to obtain the sympathy of an audience and become a true 'tragic' heroine. But her morality is flawed: she does commit the crimes that lead to her death and she does accept the moral responsibility for the death of Hippolytus. To make the wrongdoing of an otherwise moral person work dramatically, Racine uses two devices: he presents us with a Phaedra who is reduced to a state of physical and spiritual fatigue, who is no longer in control of her reason and her actions;

he also introduces the character and intervention of Oenon. When Phaedra resolves to die when she discovers that Theseus is still alive, it is Oenon who puts the argument of the false accusation to Phaedra in her troubled and perplexed state of mind. Phaedra agrees to the false accusation.

? Did you know . . .

The legend of Phaedra was a myth charged with overtones of bestiality. Phaedra, the daughter of Pasiphae, was condemned by a heredity that was impure. Her mother, who fell in love with a bull, gave birth to the Minotaur; a creature half bull and half man, which Theseus slew when he came to Crete. Moreover Phaedra's father, Minos, King of Crete, was the son of Europa, who also loved a bull. But this bull was none other than Zeus, King of the Gods in disguise, who brought Europa to Crete on his back. Symbolically Phaedra's passion for Hippolytus, unnatural in the eyes of the 17th century, stands for the corruption of the flesh and is reminiscent of her mother's passion for an animal. The suggestion is clear that Phaedra's passion was similarly corrupt.

'It is entirely appropriate that Racine changed his title to 'Phaedra', for she is the play's emotional centre and perhaps Racine's most complex creation. Her perception of herself as victim of the gods permeates the play, from her first scene ('I am losing my mind. The gods rob it') to her last ('Heaven lit a putrid flame in my heart'). Descended from the sun which acts as a perpetual reminder of lost glory, and half-sister of the minotaur (half-bull, half-man), recalling the animality of carnal passion, Phaedra is haunted by a feeling of guilt not so much for what sins she might have committed than for what she is. Like many of Racine's heroes and heroines, she is deeply ambiguous, 'neither completely guilty nor completely innocent', as Racine tells us in the preface.'

Nicholas Hammond⁹



Practical Exercise

The speech below is taken from the second act of the play, just after Phaedra's revelation of love to Hippolytus. Read through the speech and answer the questions below.

Phaedra

You heard me perfectly.
You could not mistake my meaning.
You'll see Phaedra in all her fury.
Don't think I smile sweet on my love.
I am no innocent party.
This is mad – it is poisonous –
This weakness has wrecked my reason.
The gods take vengeance on me.
They hate me more than you hate me.
They are my witness, they lit the fire –
Deadly fire destroying my blood.
The same gods dance on my heart.
They make mock of weak mortals.
Can you recall what once happened?
I did not flee you – I banished you.
I asked only for your hatred –
Useless, pointless, what did I gain?
You hated me more – I did not love you less.
As you bled, you were more beautiful.
Had you allowed your eyes to look at me –
They would convince you this is correct.
What am I saying – why shame myself?
Do you think I enjoy this confession?
I fear for my son – I daren't betray him.
I pray to you, please don't hate him.
My feeble heart is too full of love.
A hero gave life to you – honour him –
Punish me for this pernicious love –
Rid the earth of this ridiculous creature.
Finish this monster who means you harm.
The widow of Theseus woos his son –
I am your Minotaur – you must slay me.
Here is my heart where your hand must strike –
Hit – do you believe it's not worth a blow?
Does your heart deny me so sweet a death?
You won't lift your hand – then send me your sword.
Give.

Phaedra. Act II.

- What point is Phaedra making in the speech?
- What do you notice about the language and how it is formatted on the page by the writer?
- In groups of three, two actors to play Phaedra and Hippolytus and a director, experiment with staging the scene. Consider the following points:
- What stage directions are implicit in the speech? What physical action do they require? What are the challenges for the actors playing Hippolytus and Oenon?



“Phaedra is a woman who is possessed by this passion for a younger man. It takes total control of her existence. She can see nothing but this love. It is a study of what happens when you surrender yourself to this emotion,”

Frank McGuinness¹⁰

‘...this concentration on language does not mean, as critics of Racinian tragedy have so often tried to argue, that his plays have no visual interest. On the contrary, the lack of overtly violent action onstage gives those moments of physical movement an added theatrical power and sense of danger, such as when Phaedra begs Hippolytus to kill her, taking his sword from him.’

Nicholas Hammond¹¹

Ideas for further discussion, practical work and reading

1. Consider the theme of “reason versus passion” in the play, examining it in terms of every major character in the drama: Phaedra, Theseus, Oenon, Hippolytus and Aricia. How is the theme communicated in performance?
2. Define the literary term confidant/confidante and discuss the dramatic function of the confidant/confidante in PHAEDRA. What are the parallels between the confidante Oenon and her relationship with Phaedra and the confidant Theramenes and his relationship with Hippolytus in the Donmar’s production of PHAEDRA?
3. Discuss the results of Phaedra’s passion on Oenone, Theseus, Aricia, Hippolytus, and herself.
4. To what extent does the Donmar’s production of PHAEDRA show Phaedra as a fundamentally virtuous person resisting the desperation of the abyss?
5. How does Tom Cairns’s direction arouse the ‘fear and pity’ required of classical drama in his audience? Refer specifically to Phaedra’s revelation scene to Hippolytus, Theseus’s explosive banishment of Hippolytus and Phaedra’s final denouncement of Oenon.
6. Although Hippolytus feels the larger shadow of his heroic father, in what ways do you believe the son to “outshine” his father (use examples from the production in your response)?
7. How does costume design in PHAEDRA link the ancient Greek origins of the myth with the present day?
8. On the surface, Aricia and Phaedra are parallel characters, two women in love with the same man. Explain how they are actually antithetical, ie, the exact opposite to each other. How is this communicated in the Donmar’s production of the play?

? Did you know . . .

Racine chose to create an entirely new character, Aricia, in his version of the play. He makes use of a passing reference to Aricia in Virgil’s *Aenied* to justify her existence on both page and stage.¹²

Further reading

Hippolytus, Euripides in *Three Plays*, Philip Vellacott, (trans), Penguin, 2005.

Phaedra's Love, Sarah Kane in *Sarah Kane: Complete Plays*, Methuen, 2001.

Euripides Hecuba, Frank McGuinness, Faber & Faber, 2004.

Phedre, Racine in *Three Plays*, Wordsworth Classics of World Literature, 2000.

Phaedra, Seneca in *Four Tragedies & Octavia*, Ernest Fairchild Watling, (trans), Penguin, 1974.

Bibliography

Edward James and Gillian Jondorf, *Landmarks of world literature. Racine: Phedre*, Cambridge University Press, 1994.

David Maskell, *Racine: A Theatrical Reading*, Clarendon Press, 1991.

Donna Rosenberg & Sorelle Baker, *Mythology and You*, National Text Book Company. 1986.

Alexs Sierz, *In-Yer-Face Theatre*, Faber & Faber 2001.

Bernard Weinberg, *The Art of Jean Racine*, University of Chicago Press, 1969.

Footnotes

1 Quoted in *In Yer Face Theatre*, Aleks Sierz, p. 109, Faber and Faber, London, 2000.

2 *Poetics*, Aristotle, trans Malcolm Heath, Penguin Classics, 1996.

3 Frank McGuinness interviewed by the author during rehearsals for the Donmar's production of HECUBA, September 2004.

4 'Obsession translated into', Charlotte Cripps, *The Independent*, 5 April 2006.

5 Frank McGuinness interviewed by the author, *ibid*.

6 Programme notes, PHAEDRA, Nicholas Hammond, Donmar 2006.

7 'I hope it's not my turn to fail', Lyn Gardner interview with Clare Higgins, *The Guardian*, 10.04.06.

8 Quoted from 'Obsession translated into', Charlotte Cripps, *ibid*.

9 Programme notes, PHAEDRA, Nicholas Hammond, Donmar 2006.

10 Quoted from 'Obsession translated into', Charlotte Cripps, *ibid*.

11 Programme notes, PHAEDRA, Nicholas Hammond, Donmar 2006.

12 *ibid*.

About the Donmar Warehouse –

a special insight into the theatre

The Donmar Warehouse is an intimate (not for profit) 251 seat theatre located in the heart of London's West End. The theatre attracts almost 100,000 people to its productions a year. Since 1992, under the Artistic Direction of Michael Grandage and his predecessor, Sam Mendes, the theatre has presented some of London's most memorable theatrical experiences as well as garnered critical acclaim at home and abroad. With a diverse artistic policy that includes new writing, contemporary reappraising of European classics, British and American drama and music theatre, the Donmar has created a reputation for artistic excellence over the last 12 years and has won 25 Olivier Awards, 12 Critics' Circle Awards, 10 Evening Standard Awards and 10 Tony Awards for Broadway transfers.

For more information about the Donmar's Education Activities, please contact:

Development Department,
Donmar Warehouse,
41 Earlham Street,
London WC2H 9LX.

T: 020 7845 5815,
F: 020 7240 4878,
E: friends@donmarwarehouse.com.