



*The Plague of the Working-Class: An Analytical Study in
Steven Berkoff's Greek*

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Abstract

The present study focuses on analyzing the play Greek (1980) by British playwright Steven Berkoff (1937-) from a Marxist point of view. Berkoff himself was a Marxist during the period in which he wrote Greek, so Marxist themes are prevalent in his plays. Berkoff used theater as a platform to highlight the worst problems of the society of London during the 1970's, and to show the kind of life that working-class people were living. Berkoff took the main plot points of the play from the ancient Greek play Oedipus Rex by Sophocles, but modernized the setting and themes to resonate with modern audiences. The play used typical tropes from ancient Greek tragedies like the tragic hero and a disease that plagues the people.

The play tackles the biggest social problems at that time from the point of view of Berkoff. Since he was a Marxist, he critiqued the capitalist system that the working-class were living in. Berkoff also critiqued the working-class for being divided and not united against the system that oppresses them. The study concentrates on analyzing the Marxist identity of the characters of the play, and how it relates to their daily lives.

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الملخص:

تركز الدراسة الحالية على تحليل مسرحية "إغريقي" (١٩٨٣) من تأليف الكاتب المسرحي (ستيفين بيركوف ١٩٣٧م) من وجهة نظر ماركسية. إذ أنه كان ماركسياً خلال المدة التي كتب فيها "إغريقي"، لذلك المواضيع الماركسية منتشرة في مسرحياته. أستخدم (بيركوف) المسرح كمنصة لتسليط الضوء على أسوأ مشاكل المجتمع في لندن خلال سبعينات القرن الماضي، ولإظهار نوع الحياة التي كانت تعيشها الطبقة العاملة. أستم (بيركوف) نقاط الحكمة الرئيسية من المسرحية الإغريقية القديمة "أوديب ملكا" لسوفوكليس، ولكن حدثت اعدادات المسرح والمواضيع لتتوافق مع الجماهير المعاصرة. تستخدم المسرحية كليشيه معتادة من تراجيديا إغريقية قديمة مثل البطل المأساوي ومرض الذي يفتك بالناس.

وتعالج المسرحية أكبر المشاكل الاجتماعية في ذلك الوقت من وجهة نظر (بيركوف). وإذ أنه كان ماركسياً، فقد أنتقد النظام الرأسمالي الذي كانت الطبقة العاملة تعيش فيه. وانتقد (بيركوف) الطبقة العاملة بسبب انقسامهم وعدم توحدهم ضد النظام الذي يضطهدهم. تركز الدراسة على تحليل الهوية الماركسية لشخصيات المسرحية، وكيف ترتبط هذه الهوية مع حياتهم اليومية.

Greek: The Modern Oedipus

Steven Berkoff wrote *Greek* in the late 1970's as part of his London plays. The overarching themes of the play, as they are with Berkoff's other London plays, discuss the hardships that the working-class face in the modern capitalistic society. Berkoff as a young Marxist sought to display these problems on the stage of the East End in London. *Greek* is a critique of the wealthy and the ruling class, and their treatment of the working-class, from the perspective of a working-class young man.

Greek is a poetic drama written by Berkoff. The play was first performed on 11 February 1980 in London. The play is set in London and it is composed of two acts, act one is made up of five scenes, and act two is made up of four scenes. There are ten characters in the play, four main characters and six minor ones. The main characters are Eddy, Dad, Wife, and Mum. The secondary characters are Doreen, Fortune-teller, Manager of Cafe, Sphinx, Waitress 1, and Waitress 2. It should be noted that 'Waitress 1' becomes 'Wife' in the second act. There is a chorus in the play, and just like in Berkoff's earlier play *East*, it does not have a dedicated group of chorus actors, instead, each time a chorus is sung the family comes together to sing it.

The play is an adaptation of the ancient Greek tragedy *Oedipus Rex* (1980) by Sophocles. *Greek* has a plot that is similar to *Oedipus Rex*, but the themes and settings were updated to fit the atmosphere of early 1980's London. One of the main plot points of *Oedipus Rex* is that the city of King Oedipus had been hit with a strong plague because of the corruption of the city; Berkoff saw that the same was happening in Britain:

In my eyes, Britain seemed to have become a gradually decaying island, preyed upon by the wandering hordes who saw no future for themselves in a society which had few

ideals or messages to offer them. The violence that streamed through the streets, like an all-pervading effluence, the hideous Saturday night fever as the pubs belched out their dreary occupants, the killing and maiming at public sports, plus the casual slaughtering of political opponents in Northern Ireland, bespoke a society in which an emotional plague had taken root. (1989, p. 141)

Berkoff thought that society around him was deteriorating, and people were losing the ability to communicate with each other. Instead, all they do is watch television like it is their life support, and they would not even make an effort to form meaningful relationships between them. Berkoff considered all this as a sign of illness:

We were the world's greatest video watchers, since we had lost the ability to speak to each other. We sat like zombies, strangled in our attempts to communicate, feeding off the flickering tube like patients wired to support systems. (1989, p. 141)

In the original Greek tragedy, King Oedipus believed that in order to cleanse his city from the plague, he must kill the Sphinx, which he identified as the source of all evil. In *Greek*, Eddy, the main character, wanted to do the same to restore life to its natural affirming state:

Oedipus found a city in the grip of a plague and sought to rid the city of its evil centre represented by the Sphinx. Eddy seeks to reaffirm his beliefs and inculcate a new order of things with his vision and life affirming energy. (1989, p. 141)

Oedipus Rex was written in the typical style of Greek tragedy as the plot usually deals with the troubles of noble-born characters who have a fatal flaw that would lead to their demise (Easterling, 1997, p. 17). This is where the similarities between *Oedipus Rex* and *Greek* end. Berkoff's adaptation is set in modern London and tells the story of working-class characters, and the main character does not have a fatal flaw, only normal human flaws. *Greek* is quite similar to *East* in its atmosphere and setting. Like *East*, the stage setting of *Greek* is made up of a kitchen table and four chairs. What those chairs and table represent can change depending on the scene:

They can be everything one wants them to be from the platform for the SPHINX to the café. They also function as the train; the environment which suggests EDDY's humble origins becoming his expensive and elaborate home in Act Two. The table and chairs merely define spaces and act as an anchor or base for the actors to spring from. All other artifacts are mimed or suggested. (Berkoff, 1989, p. 144)

The story of the play follows Eddy, a working-class young man who lives in a neighborhood that is filled with crime and violence in London. In the first Act, Eddy despises his living conditions and wishes to leave his home in search of identity. His parents, named Mum and Dad in the play, recall a time when they went to a gypsy fortune-teller who told them that a son would kill his father and marry his mother. Dad feared that Eddy would do this so he encouraged him to leave his home. Eddy finds a diner with two waitresses; he gets into an argument with the first waitress because of

the bad service. The manager, to whom the waitress is married, comes out and starts to curse Eddy for his behavior. Eddy and the manager exchange blows in words which results in the death of the manager.

The waitress is shocked that her husband died because of words and becomes crestfallen. Eddy calms the waitress with his sweet demeanor and convinces her to marry him. In Act two, Eddy becomes the manager of the diner and transforms it into a respectable establishment, and earns wealth from running it. He marries the waitress and is now simply named 'Wife' in the play. Eddy invites Mum and Dad to show them that he is doing well and to have dinner with them.

However, despite his success he still feels that the plague did not go away and that he must know why it is still there. His wife informs him that there is a sphinx bringing a curse upon the land. The sphinx is a symbol of evil; she kills men and terrorizes everybody. Although the sphinx is a fictional creature, Berkoff gives her she/her pronouns, and when she speaks, she speaks fiercely in defense of women and attacks men. Her primary motivation for killing men is because she sees them as the source of all evil, and thinks that they do nothing while women give birth and start a new life. The sphinx usually gives a riddle before killing somebody, but she refused to give a riddle to Eddy when he approached and refused to kill him too. Eventually, Eddy convinced her to give him a riddle, if he does not answer the sphinx kills him, if he does, he kills it. Much to the surprise of the sphinx, Eddy answered the riddle and beheaded her thus ridding the land of the source of evil.

Later during dinner, Dad reveals that Eddy is not his biological son and that he found him in a box in the gutters of London. Wife says that she lost her baby a long time ago in the same place that Dad described. Eddy realizes that his wife is his mother, and as a result Wife becomes shocked by this revelation and loses her consciousness. The fortune-teller's prophecy is fulfilled, but unlike the play *Oedipus Rex*, Eddy decides that he is not going to blind himself, instead, he is going to continue his life normally with his wife.

Eddy goes through this journey because he feels frustrated with his life as a

Working-class young man. He encountered all sorts of thugs and criminals and considered society to be plagued and is now ill. The play explores themes of love, violence, power, and fate. All themes intertwined to give an image of the society and atmosphere of the play. In this aspect, *Greek* is similar to *East* in that it portrays the environment that they live in as grimy, unstable, and violent. People in *Greek* are alcoholics prone to committing crimes:

EDDY: So, I was spawned in Tufnell Park that's no more than a stone's throw from the Angel / a monkey's fart from Tottenham or a bolt of phlegm from Stamford Hill / it's a cesspit, right ... a scum-hole dense with the drabs who prop up corner pubs, the kind of pub where ye old arse-holes assemble... hate everything under thirty that walks

and fall asleep in front of the telly... so they'd gather in the pubs, usually a smelly corner pub. (1989, p. 145)

Eddy's frustration with life comes from the fact that he is poor, and seems to be imprisoned in this lower class area that he found himself in. Berkoff presented his Marxist ideas in the oppression faced by working-class people through the eyes of the youth living under those conditions.

Greek also works as a commentary on the political divide in Britain between the lower and upper classes of society. The lower classes seem to be living in their own world separated by walls built by rich people and politicians. As scholar Michelle Aslett wrote in her thesis titled 'Plague, Pestilence & Pollution : Berkoff's Collision With Aeschylus and Sophocles': "Indeed, Steven Berkoff's reworkings of both Aeschylus' Agamemnon and Sophocles' Oedipus Rex reflect an unsettled and divided British context in the throes of ideological upheaval during the 1970's and early 1980's." (Aslett, 2004, p. 1)

While the ruling class were busy with politics and with taking Britain to war in the early 1980's, the lower class were packed into dirty pubs and were committing crimes in filthy alleyways. This divide made Eddy seek out a different path, away from the crime-ridden place that he was living in. Berkoff symbolized this toxic mindset of the people who surround Eddy by the plague, as Aslett continued: "Allegorical themes of plague and pestilence in Berkoff's plays suggest images of humanity in the thrall of forces assumed to be beyond its control" (Aslett, 2004, p. 1).

In the original *Oedipus Rex*, there was a literal plague working in the story as a theme about the corruption of people, while in *Greek*, the plague is more metaphorical to display the psyche of the people and how Eddy sees them. The people who are living in these conditions appear to be unaware of how horrible their situation is, the youth seem to be more conscious of their surroundings as they are not desensitized to it yet. As Eddy observed:

EDDY: The stink of the pub rises and the OAPs sit in the corner staring out into the dreams they never had with a drip of snot hanging off the ends of their noses and try to make a pint last four hours. (Berkoff, 1989, p. 141) in block quotation and Speech taken from the play the full stop is placed before the documentation

Eddy hates these pubs in his area, as well as the people who frequent them, because he sees them as poor people who spend whatever little that they have on drinking. He is dejected by their mindlessness to their reality and desperately desires to change his life. This ties into the theme of fate and destiny in the play. Eddy was born in this environment and he is still young so he does not have a choice in changing it. What he does instead is that he frequents wine because he sees them as upper scale and cleaner than the pubs around him: "EDDY: We got wine bars now, handsome. That's much

better – sit down, a half bottle of chateau or Bollinger, some pête and salad by a chick who looks as if she’s been fresh frozen” (Berkoff, 1989, p. 146).

Eddy noticed that even the people who visit establishments that are perceived as higher class are cleaner and better dressed, further emphasizing the divide between classes in society. Thus, one could see that Eddy shares a similar approach to classism as with Les from *East*. The difference is that Les is unable to converse with women who are of higher status than him, while Eddy does not seem to have the barrier, probably due to the fact that Eddy does not actually belong there because he is adopted.

The world that the working-class are living in is polluted. It is polluted literally by the smog, trash, and the filthiness of the streets, and it is polluted figuratively by the moral corruption of the elite who separate themselves from poor people and the corruption of the lower classes themselves. Scholar Michelle Aslett wrote:

‘Pollution’ in this essay will refer to an unpleasant or unhealthy corruption of the physical environment produced largely by human beings, including more immediate, as well as gradual, irreversible and ultimately devastating forms of corruption. More importantly, pollution refers to the inheritance of a curse, whereby a character is ‘polluted’ by the inevitability of his or her moral fortune. (2004, p. 7)

As a Marxist playwright during his time, Berkoff employed this technique of creating an oppressive atmosphere that is filled with dread and a sense of being trapped with the frustration of certain characters to change their environment. Elements of physical and allegorical pollution fill this play and give it its distinguished atmosphere. Even though the characters are not pure or innocent, the audience can sympathize with them in their desire to escape. The characters’ energy gives them hope that they might succeed in their attempts. But more often than they end up unsuccessful because they are fated to it. All those elements, coupled with the confrontational language and themes of violence, sexuality, and class struggle, come together to create the recognizable ‘Berkovian’ aesthetic (Cross, 2004, p. 66).

Berkoff criticized the ruling class and their corruption and unwillingness to fix the system that they created. At the same time, he criticized the working-class for their inner division and refusal to act as a collective:

Indeed, Steven Berkoff’s social critiques provide a largely negative depiction of leadership and the oppression of the working classes. ‘Power’ is presented as a corruptive force, infecting those who endure oppressive and unstable political systems. Equally, the playwright comments upon the apathy of a divided working class and his perception of their unwillingness to better their collective situation. (Aslett, 2004, p. 8)

In the world of *Greek*, the working-class are divided by their politics. Though the playwright does have sympathy for them, since he grew up in an immigrant working-class family, he still criticizes them for harboring right wing views. For example, the character of Dad here, as is with the character of Dad in *East*, seems to be an admirer

of Adolf Hitler: 'send the darkies back to the jungle' and 'Hitler got the trains running on time'... you got a lot of Nazi lovers among the British down and out (Berkoff, 1989, p. 147).

The situation is similar with Dad from *East* who was nostalgic for the days of Oswald Mosley. Berkoff depicts characters who admire fascist leaders from history because he is Jewish himself. In the third collection of his plays titled *Steven Berkoff Plays 3*, he published a play titled *Ritual in Blood*, the characters in that play are also working-class and hate Jewish people. Berkoff originally saw himself as a victim because he is Jewish, but gradually as he became more successful, he became more aggressive: "Berkoff had projected himself as a 'Jewish victim'. As he became more and more successful however the 'victim' subject position yielded to the aggressive 'hard man' strategy" (Cross, 2004, p. 48). Berkoff's transformation into a 'hard man' is fitting because of the way he portrays violence and fights in the East End, where people, mostly men, start violent fights all the time.

Cultural materialism plays an important role in the play. One of the main plot points of the play, Eddy changes from a lower class young man into a middle class adult. This transformation is seen as Eddy's greatest achievement, and it is something that he himself is very proud of. The whole point of him inviting Mum and Dad to dinner was to show them that he is doing well for himself. The diner itself is a symbol for Eddy's material success. As soon as he becomes manager of the diner, he instantly changes it from a drab and dirty place into a well-lit and clean establishment. Aslett wrote on Berkoff's mix of classical Greek plays and cultural materialism:

Underlying much Marxist thought and those theories associated with cultural study is the basic assumption that a capitalist society is a hierarchically divided society. Social or class based divisions and the idea of a fractured society are common themes within Berkoff's texts, highlighting the impossibility of revolution against dominant ideologies whilst the cultural disparities between subcultures remain irreconcilable. (Aslett, 2004, p. 10)

It is also the reason that Berkoff uses a cockney accent in verse. He employs the Shakespearean iambic pentameter to write his poetic drama but keeps the London cockney slang to keep the connection to the working-class and real life language used outside of the theater (O'Connor, 1989).

The family unit is a major theme in *Greek*. Here, the family is highly irregular because the son is adopted and he does not know it. Mum and Dad found him in a dirty alleyway, but they still call him, and do consider him, son. In the scene where Mum and Dad go to a gypsy fortune-teller, the parents ask the fortune-teller about their future:

DAD: When you were a nipper / we went to a gypsy, a fortune teller... so in we went / the gypsy asks 'have I a son?' 'I have' I says, I mean who don't have a son? His face meanwhile staring into the ball / his eyes all popping... his face gets all contorted and

twisted and he says / he sees a violent death for this son's father / do what! but I'm his dad... 'and I see' he says, 'something worse than death / and that's a bunk-up with his mum'. (Berkoff, 1989, p. 148)

Here the fortune-teller tells Dad that Eddy will murder him and marry Mum. Dad knows that Eddy is not his actual son, but thinks of him as such. This scene sees the disintegration of the family. The son leaves home and faces the crime ridden world of the under classes. According to Marx and Engels, the family unit is a tool of the capitalistic hierarchy and its job is to keep each class in its place. Wealthy children would inherit wealth as well as the values of their family and class. This would make the children grow up to be content and conformist adults and they would ensure that the established order remains as it is. (Nickerson, 2022)

Things would work a little differently for the middle and working class families. With those, the family functions as a 'unit of consumption' that is predicated on the idea of 'false needs'. Those false needs are created by a capitalist system in order to keep the lower classes busy with consuming things they do not actually need. The false needs are shown in the play through the frustration of Eddy because he knows that the people around him do not actually need to drink everyday and frequent low-quality and dangerous pub, but he cannot change his immediate environment, and so he has to leave (Nickerson, 2022):

Eddy:... Now no more will I escape to my little domain ... hearing the sounds of Hughie phlegm in the next room through the snot-encrusted walls. So all in a flash these thoughts slinked like maggots through my bonce as I waved my goodbyes to the fast diminishing figures of my mum and dad. (Berkoff, 1989, p. 151)

The way Berkoff adapted Sophocles to the modern stage is no coincidence. In his rewriting, he tried to make them as anti-capitalist as possible, and imbue the adaptations with his Marxist philosophy. As Aslett wrote: "As a committed socialist, Berkoff rewrites Aeschylus and Sophocles in order to expose their potential socialist meanings" (Aslett, 2004, p. 17). The dissolving family unit and the disease that the working-class allowed to spread among them. This plague made the working-class divided and apathetic, and to kill the source of this illness and evil is the only way to solve their predicament (2004, p. 17).

The image of the city being filthy and plagued is mentioned throughout the whole play:

DAD: The City sits in a heap of shit.

MUM: Of uncollected garbage everywhere. (1989, p. 152)

Berkoff puts the blame to a large part on the government of Margaret Thatcher, who was the British Prime Minister from 1979 to 1990, to whom he refers to in the play as 'Maggot Scratcher', who he believes to be the cause of polluting society with repression, violence, and hatred:

DAD: The country's in a state of plague / while parties of all shades battle for power to sort the shit from the shinola / the Marxists and the Workers' party call for violence to put an end to violence. (1989, p. 152)

The character of Dad here serves to reinforce Berkoff's belief that the working-class are divided because of their reluctance to embrace Marxism. The lower classes are busy with their infighting, the ruling class will stay in power and inherit their generational wealth, and leave the bare minimum to poor people to keep them from revolting. Eddy did not want to participate in this debate, instead, he wanted to elevate his social standing and improve the environment around him. He made a sarcastic comment on the people who admire people of higher standing than them:

EDDY:... the place was on alert ... the sturdy chiselled chins, fresh shaved, of our fine and brave John English ready to defend the Queen and all her minions who represent all that is fine in this drab of grey / this septic isle. (1989, p. 156)

Berkoff is mocking the people who feel patriotic to the point where they would die in a war for their government. The description 'septic isle' is another reference that Britain is afflicted with an illness that is manifested in the streets and everyday life of normal people. But after saying that, Eddy starts singing 'Rule Britannia', a patriotic British song, which can be seen as hypocritical because he was just mocking patriotism.

When Eddy leaves his home, he witnessed the conditions under which the people are living, and recognized the evidence of this plague, even in the diner that he would renovate later:

(*Chorus of airport sounds and noises*)... I saw myself as king of the western world / but since I needed some refreshment for my trials ahead, I ventured into this little café / everywhere I looked ... I witnessed this evidence ... of the British plague. (1989, p. 15)

The constant references to the plague, pubs, degeneracy, and violence are part of the blocks that built the world of *Greek*. Berkoff used the original story of Oedipus and brought it to England. He saw these as signs of a 'decaying island': "full of riots, filth, decay, bombings, football mania, mobs at the palace gate, plague madness and post-pub depression" (Berkoff, 1992, p. 139). Eddy sought out to cure the disease and cleanse the streets from the filth and crime. He was successful in his endeavor but only after gaining material wealth. After he took over the diner, the situation of the city started to improve:

EDDY: Ten years have come and gone... I made the city golden era time / the dopes just died away when faced with real octane high-power juice / the con men that have tricked you all the while with substitute and fishy watery soup / went out of business

and people starved for nourishment brain-food and guts just flocked to us. (Berkoff, 1989, p. 165)

Eddy becomes the breath of fresh air that the city needed. Not only did the diner become cleaner and more welcoming to customers, but the customers themselves became better people. They are no longer criminals, thieves, and drug addicts, but are now proper citizens who want to eat good nourishing food. The way Eddy changed the world makes it seem as though he changed the whole class of the people who live in that neighborhood. Eddy understands that the diseases that afflict the country are mostly caused by wealth inequality, class struggle, and the lost identity of common working-class people:

EDDY: cut a throat or two metaphoric of course and shown how what this world doth crave is power, class and form with a dab of genius now and then. We cured the plague by giving inspiration to our plates / came rich by giving more and taking less. (1989, p. 166)

While other characters may acknowledge that their living conditions are bad, Eddy is the only character in the play that acts in order to change that. In the quote above, he expressed Marxist ideals of eliminating capitalist greed, and at the same time curing the plague. He also said that he became rich in this way, although this wealth may be more metaphorical. Later, Eddy in his speech said:

EDDY: ...we'll get them back to work, no fear though they may die of shock upon the way / we'll drag them out of pubs, their fingers still gripping on the bar they know so well, like babies reluctant to part with mother's tit / it's us that has to do it / rid the world of half-assed bastards clinging to their dark domain and keeping talent out by filling the entrances with their swollen carcasses and sagging mediocrity. (1989, p. 166)

Again, Eddy suggests a way to heal the divide between the working-class and that is by putting them to work together, and have them stop either committing crimes or wasting time at pubs. Berkoff here is making his Marxism manifest in Eddy, as the latter functions as a mouthpiece for Berkoff.

Despite Eddy's protests against the working-class' compliance with the system and his desire to cure the plague at the end of the play he says "What a foul thing I have done, I am the rotten plague" (2014, *Greek* Act two; scene 4). He comes to this realization after finding out that his wife is actually his biological mother, and that he murdered a man, who is his biological father. When Eddy finds that out, he says "dearest wife and now my mum, it seems, this lady was the very one whose baby you snatched" (2014, *Greek* Act two; scene 4). The ending for *Greek* is different from that of *Oedipus Rex*, when Oedipus found out what he had done, he blinded himself and left his home to wander endlessly. While when Eddy found out what he had done, he said:

EDDY: do we cause each other pain, do we kill each other, do we maim and kill, do we inflict vicious wounds on each other? We only love so it doesn't matter mother,

mother it doesn't matter. Why should I tear my eyes out Greek style, why should you hang yourself / have you seen a child from a mother and son / no. Have I? No. Then how do we know that it's bad / should I be so mortified? Who me. With my nails and fingers plunge in and scoop out those warm and tender balls of jelly quivering dipped in blood. Oedipus how could you have done it. (1989, p. 183)

Oedipus refused to accept his destiny so he did what he could to stop himself from living it. Eddy, on the other hand, embraced his fate and continued his life in the same manner as before. Oedipus received pity and empathy from the audience because he was doomed to something that he did not choose and he blinded himself instead of accepting his reality. Berkoff's *Greek*, abandoned the morality of *Oedipus Rex*, as Scholar Melissa Green wrote: "Eddy does not receive the pity that Oedipus may from audiences. *Greek* also does not teach a moral lesson as learned from *Oedipus Rex*, instead it abandons all use of morality in the play." (Green, 2003)

Regardless, the ending ties in perfectly with the Marxist thought on the family unit. The family disintegrated near the end of Act one, and it did not heal by the end of the play. Eddy is not excused for his actions, but he is the 'hero' that Berkoff had put on the stage.

Language and words are very important in the play. Language has always been the focus for Berkoff, as he said in an interview that "you could be *demolished* with words, and you had to fight back with words" (The Financial Times, 1991). In *East*, the case was more figurative, here it is literal. Words in *Greek* can cause death, and can be the deciding factor between who is powerful and who is not. Perhaps the scene where this is most obvious is when Eddy kills the manager by using words. The language of the character was used as a sword that they wielded in order to win a duel:

MANAGER: Bite swallow suck pull

EDDY: More smash and more power

MANAGER: Weaker and weaker

EDDY: Stronger and stronger

MANAGER: Weak

EDDY: Power

MANAGER: Dying

EDDY: Victor

MANAGER: That's it

EDDY: Tada.

WAITRESS: You killed him / I never realized words can kill. (Berkoff, 1989, pp.159-160)

Here language worked as a bludgeon that is used to serve a purpose. And that purpose is to commit murder. Aslett wrote: “Berkoff manages to change the 'intended purpose' of words as he gives them the physical qualities capable of destruction.” (2004, p. 41). Berkoff’s use of language falls in line with his philosophy that in the streets words are used as weapons, so people use them in an unhinged way to defend themselves and attack. Berkoff brought this type of uncontrolled language to the theater and exaggerated to fit his plots where the words are literal weapons. Professor Pau Gilabert Barberà wrote in *Greek by Steven Berkoff (1980): The Risky Transformation of Sophocles' Oedipus Rex into a Love Story*: “He opted for the use of an unrestrained language in which «words could kill»” (2013, p. 11).

The murder scene is significant on many levels. Here Eddy murdered a man using words only, as the story would unfold, this man would turn out to be his dad, thus fulfilling the prophecy that he would kill his father. On another level, Eddy killed a man who is of a higher social standing than him and would proceed to take his place. Eddy literally broke through the layers of a materialist society to achieve success. Words are used as means of violence on a physical level, as Aslett wrote: “In the treatment of bodily functions, disease, physical violence, frailty and lust, the language is geared to activating the physical sense”. (2004, p. 21)

Another example of language being used as a weapon to gain power is Eddy’s confrontation of the sphinx. Both have a long discussion until the sphinx gives Eddy a riddle, and this riddle would decide who lives and who dies. When Eddy solves the riddle, he wins the battle of words between the two:

SPHINX: You bastard, you’ve used trickery to find out the riddle.

EDDY: No, just reason. All right, sorry to have to do this, I was growing quite fond of you.

SPHINX: I don’t care anymore / to tell the truth I was getting bored with scaring everyone to death and being a sphinx / OK cut it off and get it over with. (He cuts off her head.). (1989, p. 171)

Eddy won and rid the land of evil, he used words to elevate himself on the social ladder and rid Britain of the plague. The importance of language is just as great as the importance of visuals. In terms of visuals, the setting of the stage is very simple. On it are only five chairs and a table, and in the background is a white curtain used as a reference to the classical plays of ancient Greece. Berkoff did this intentionally to keep the focus on the characters and the words that they say:

Where visual spectacle, political satire and social comment would seem to be key elements of Berkoff’s performance mode, here verbal and visual interpretation of the

written text enables the notions of pestilence, plague and pollution to be intensified within a particular performance. (2004, p. 57)

Even though Berkoff kept the stage setting simple, it worked with language as elements complementing each other to create the Berkovian aesthetic. The simplicity of the stage gives way to the aggressiveness of the language, which allows the characters to express themselves clearly. As Aslett wrote: “Both words and visuals are inseparable components of Berkoff’s theatre, incorporating the expressive potential of the body with his often aggressive and stylized use of language in an attempt to offer a greater degree of verity.” (Aslett, 2004, p. 39)

Berkoff used language to demonstrate the plague in both the literal and metaphorical senses. Literally, the plague is the filth and disease in the streets, where rats thrive as vessels of germs and viruses. Metaphorically, it is about the plague that the working class are afflicted with. The play is written in verse because it is a poetic drama, but the language that the characters use is the common language of working-class people. Berkoff’s use of authentic argot made him a polarizing figure in the world of theater, as Green wrote: “His violent and often crude language and plot matter kept him off West End stages, yet made him a hero of London’s Fringe scene” (Green, 2003).

The language takes the center of the stage, as it is used as a powerful tool that characters use to express their frustration with their daily life. Together with Berkoff’s focus on pushing the limits of the physical performances of the actors, the audience receives a well-communicated message from the stage to them. Aslett wrote: “Indeed, the relationship between language and Berkoff’s ‘full’ aesthetic is a complicated one, as the central importance of words for any playwright must be balanced by his desire to tap into the communicative power of the body” (2004, p. 40). This balance made the main character Eddy fleshed out, and a decent example of a lost and directionless working-class young man who uses his words to speak his mind.

Berkoff’s language is a distinguishing feature of his plays, and it is why these plays can be categorized as part of the ‘in-yer-face’ theater. Berkoff wrote the play in such a way for it to be a rebellion against the hierarchy of society, and against the system, the division of people into classes, and against the dominant politics of Britain in the 70’s and 80’s. As Aslett pointed out: “Berkoff is effectively staging a protest against the repressive aspects of social institutions such as the family, language, religion, the political system, the education system and the media.” (2004, p. 10)

The constraints and rules are tools used by the ruling class to dominate the lower classes. Berkoff saw it fit that in order for the lower classes to self-actualize, they must break these chains and free themselves. Aslett wrote: “Owing to the role language and other meaning-making systems play in perpetuating social and cultural domination within a particular society, a transgressive theatre such as Berkoff’s must find a way to overcome these constraints” (2004, p. 40). Eddy managed to break through the constraints of his environment and society, and change the crime and plague-filled

streets into livable spaces with good food and fresh air. By doing this, he equalized the classes and gave the working class a chance to create a better and more egalitarian environment for themselves. Aristotle defined the tragic hero in his famous work *Poetics*. In the book he described the tragic hero in a tragic play:

There remains, then, for our choice, the character between these extremes— that of a person neither eminently virtuous or just, nor yet involved in misfortune by deliberate vice or villainy, but by some error of human frailty: and this person should also be some one of high fame, and flourishing prosperity. For example, Oedipus, Thyestes, or other illustrious men of such families. (Twining and Hamilton, 1851, p. 24)

Oedipus is everything that Eddy is not. Eddy does not come from a noble family that is wealthy, famous, and prominent. On the contrary, he comes from a poor working-class family that is not respected by society. Oedipus is the perfect Aristotelian tragic hero because he is high born and he is not involved in corruption or vice, Eddy, again, is the opposite because he does engage in deliberate vice and villainy. *Greek* Brought the protagonist from the upper classes to the streets to suffer the plague with common people. As author Allison Forsyth writes: “Berkoff domesticates and urbanizes the source text through setting, characterization and language to invite us not only to reassess it through modern eyes but also to consider the effects of the intratext for the present and for our present reception to the source text” (Forsyth, 2002, p.175).

The fatal flaw must be a present characteristic in the tragic hero. This fatal flaw is usually the ‘error of human frailty’ mentioned above. The error of Oedipus is that he is ignorant of his real identity. As professor Peter T. Struck puts it: “Oedipus fits this precisely, for his basic flaw is his lack of knowledge about his own identity.” (Struck, 2000). While Eddy is ignorant of his own history, it does not change the fact that his real parents are also working-class and not from the ruling class. When adapting *Oedipus Rex*, Berkoff transformed the protagonist from a noble young man to working-class street smart Eddy. The latter does not have an identity crisis. He knows exactly who he is and desires to change his life.

Berkoff did not make his protagonist into a tragic hero, but he made somebody who seeks to destroy the order established by the ruling class and give back to the working-class. The trope of the noble-born hero who is struck by calamity is turned on its head with Eddy who even eventually accepts his fate instead of blinding himself and becoming a poor wanderer. Berkoff as a Marxist playwright subverts classical tropes to make it fit with his beliefs. Eddy did not become rich out of greed, but like he said he “came rich by giving more and taking less”. As Forsyth wrote on Berkoff’s rewrite of *Oedipus Rex*:

Even though the rewrite does not appear to present Eddy as a tragic hero, it does structurally and thematically allude to the tragic fate of his predecessor, Oedipus, dramaturgically compelling the audience to address and confront the ‘tragic’ for today. (2002, p.179)

As with the original play, fate and fortune are important themes in *Greek*. Eddy's fate was set before the play even began. He was born in a dirty alley, and then was snatched by Mum and Dad. Eddy did not have a choice in being born to the lower classes of society, so he has to manage in the world he was brought into. Berkoff's small cast of characters allowed him to be creative with the structure of the play, for example, when Dad went to the gypsy fortune-teller, on the stage the fortune-teller role was played by the same actor who plays Eddy, which fits in with the rest of the events. This is because at the end *Oedipus Rex*, after Oedipus blinds himself, he becomes a wanderer who travels Greece and tells the people their fortune. That plot point became a clever reference to the original. With the progress of the plot, the characters do not actually know that Eddy married his biological mother until near the end. But they did foreshadow it several times:

WAITRESS: I'll never find another like him.

EDDY: Yes you will.

WAITRESS: Where?

EDDY: Look no further mam than this / your spirits won me. (1989, p. 160)

The dysfunctional family, tackling the blight of the working-class, a critique of the ruling class are all attributes typical of a play with Marxist themes. Berkoff uses all those themes in his plays to showcase the massive inequality that the working-class people have to deal with in their everyday life. Although Eddy did not know that the waitress was his biological mother, he still stayed with her after realizing the truth. The plague of their society is their moral decay, as well as their blindness to it.

Conclusion

Greek combined several different aspects of Marxism in its themes. From the life of crime and poverty that is plaguing the working class, to the alienation of the working class and the alienation between the people themselves, to the role of women in the modern capitalist society of London. Berkoff was very deliberate in including all these themes to deliver a harsh critique of the world that the real working-class were living in just outside the theater. All the characters seemed to be complacent with their living conditions but Eddy chose to revolt against the system and seeks solutions to the predicaments of their lives. The characters reflect different aspects of what Berkoff wanted to convey about the Marxist identity: Eddy is a revolutionary, Dad is a right-wing working-class man, and Mum is a typical housewife who fulfilled her homely duties. The family structure in the play is the type of structure that Marxists like Berkoff criticized because they believed that it contributed to perpetuating the system that

oppressed the working-class. He manifested this belief in Eddy who revolted against everything around him and worked to improve life in East London.

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