



# Oedipus el Rey

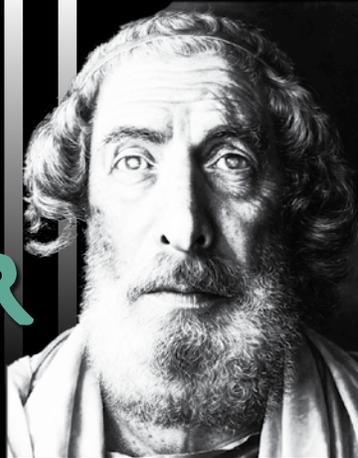
BY **LUIS ALFARO** DIRECTED BY **KEVIN MORIARTY**  
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One of the oldest stories in Western culture, the **Oedipus myth** tells the story of a young man whose excessive hubris (pride or arrogance) brings about the fate he so desperately tries to escape.

Abandoned at birth by his parents King Laius and Queen Jocasta (who themselves are trying to escape their fate at the hands of their son), Oedipus is adopted by a neighboring king and queen. Young Oedipus grows up never knowing they are not his own flesh and blood, so when he hears the Oracle's prediction for his life—that he will kill his father and marry his mother—he is determined to outwit fate and spare the parents he knows and loves. He leaves them and begins his travels. Along the way he quarrels with a man and kills him (the man turns out to have been King Laius). Oedipus then faces the Sphinx and defeats her, saving the city of Thebes from her wrath and winning the hand of the widowed queen Jocasta in the process. Years later, when the kingdom is rocked by plagues in retribution for King Laius' death, the arrogant Oedipus vows to punish the perpetrator. Those around him discover the tragedy—that Oedipus is, in fact, the murderer of King Laius and, moreover, he murdered his own father, married his own mother and fathered children with her. Though his advisors and Jocasta (who has also realized the truth) beg him not to go on with his search, he does, bringing about a tragic ending.

The most well-known version of the Oedipus story comes to us from Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*. Poet and playwright **Luis Alfaro** has reframed Sophocles' timeless Greek tragedy, setting it in the vicious world of L.A.'s gangs, barrios and prisons. In doing so, he asks audiences to once again grapple with notions of fate versus free will.

# FROM HOMER



The story of Oedipus has been around for thousands of years and comes from multiple sources.

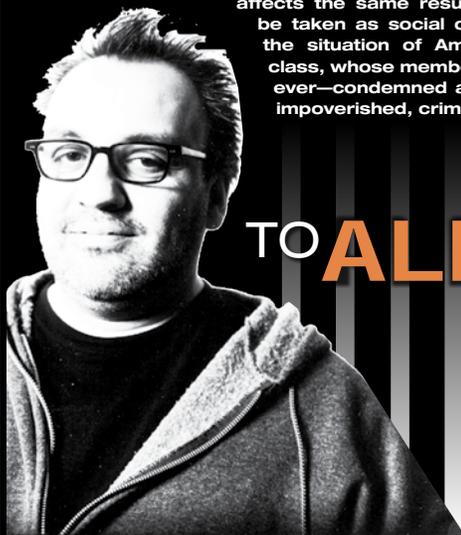
One of the earliest references to the myth comes from the Greek poet, Homer, in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. There is a passing reference in his work, *The Odyssey*, in which the hero, Odysseus, travels to the underworld and meets the spirit of Oedipus' mother who has killed herself upon learning she married her son. In this version, there is no tragic ending for Oedipus and he continues to rule Thebes after the truth comes out.

Some 250 years later in 467 B.C., the Greek playwright Aeschylus picks up the Oedipus myth in his trilogy, sometimes referred to as *Oedipodea*, which took first prize in the Dionysia festival. The only remaining play from the trilogy is *Seven Against Thebes* which tells of Oedipus' two sons battling over the kingdom after their father has been exiled. Their story ends in tragedy, too.

The Greek playwright Sophocles delves into the Oedipus story with his trilogy of Theban plays: *Antigone* (441 BC), *Oedipus the King* (430 B.C.) and *Oedipus at Colonus* (406-405 B.C.). In *Oedipus the King* (also known by the Latin title *Oedipus Rex*), we see Oedipus' downfall leading to his exile from Thebes. *Oedipus at Colonus* covers the period when Oedipus, along with his daughter Antigone, wanders blindly in exile before dying, and the play *Antigone* tells the tragic end of Oedipus' daughter.

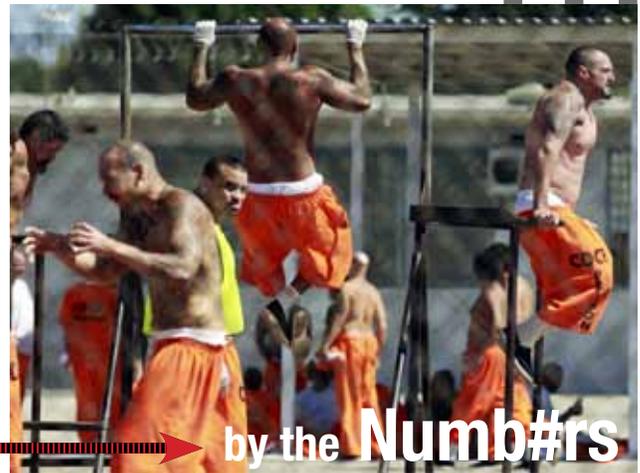
In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Oedipus story once again gained attention when psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud coined the phrase "Oedipus Complex" to mean when a child unconsciously wants to have sex with the parent of the opposite sex. Freud believed this was a passing phase for most children with only a few reaching adulthood and exhibiting lingering signs of being fixated with a parent.

More recently, in 2010, Luis Alfaro premiered his play, *Oedipus el Rey*, a Chicano retelling of *Oedipus the King*. This story of Oedipus is set against the backdrop of L.A. gangs, violence and the omnipresent prison system that is so hard to break free from once one becomes a part of it. Whereas the Ancient Greeks saw invisible gods controlling the destiny of human lives, Alfaro replaces the Greek gods with a prison culture that affects the same result. *Oedipus el Rey* can be taken as social commentary, illustrating the situation of America's growing lower class, whose members are—now more than ever—condemned at birth to fulfill an ugly, impoverished, criminalized destiny.



# TO ALFARO

## INCARCERATION



### by the Numb#rs

Luis Alfaro's *Oedipus el Rey* brings up questions about the nature of our prison system, recidivism and breaking the cycle of violence. The following are statistics to consider:

- ◆ As of 2013, the United States has the highest recorded rate of incarceration in the world with **716 prisoners per 100,000 of the population**. By comparison, Cuba imprisons **510 per 100,000**, Russia imprisons **475 per 100,000**, Iran imprisons **284 per 100,000**, England imprisons **148 per 100,000** and Switzerland imprisons **82 per 100,000**.
- ◆ According to The Sentencing Project, a U.S. nonprofit that compiles data on incarceration, the United States currently incarcerates **2.2 million people**. Combining the number of people in prison and jail with those under parole or probation supervision, **1 in every 31 adults**, or **3.2% of the population** is under some form of correctional control.
- ◆ California, where *Oedipus el Rey* takes place, has a prison population of **134,211**. That's **351 prisoners for every 100,000** of the population. California jails and prisons are also some of the most overcrowded. North Kern State Prison, where the play begins, has **4,171 inmates** which is **170%** of its designed capacity.
- ◆ According to the U.S. Bureau of Justice, African Americans make up **39.4%** of the prison population, but only make up **13%** of population of the country. Hispanics make up **20.6%** of the prison population and **16.3%** of population of the country.
- ◆ Most prisoners, when released, will end up incarcerated again. Nationally, **53%** of arrested males are re-incarcerated. In California where the play takes place, **7 out of 10 prisoners (or 70%)** will return to jail **within 3 years** of release. California has the highest rate of recidivism in the country.
- ◆ Texas ranks **#4** behind Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama in the number of individuals held in prisons relative to the population. Texas has a prison population of **157,900**. That's **601 prisoners per every 100,000** of the population.

Figures courtesy of the International Centre for Prison Studies, a nonpartisan organization which compiles statistics from **222 countries and territories**.

For more information on incarceration and recidivism, please visit:  
<http://www.prisonstudies.org>  
<http://www.sentencingproject.org/template/index.cfm>  
<http://www.naacp.org/pages/criminal-justice-fact-sheet>

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