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When Sappho Meets Sophocles in a California Hot Tub

By [CHARLES ISHERWOOD](#)

The hand of fate reaches all the way into a steaming hot tub filled with cranky women in "Oedipus at Palm Springs," the brave, funny and quite lovable new production from the Five Lesbian Brothers at New York Theater Workshop.

A seriocomic lesbian soap opera that suddenly darkens into something stranger, the play marks a surprising departure for this durable troupe of writer-performers, who first appeared under their oxymoronic collective name back in 1989. This is their fifth full-length project, the first in seven years and a far cry from the loopy exercises in scalpel-sharp satire they once favored, in plays like "Brave Smiles," a spoof of cultural images of lesbians, and "The Secretaries," about a pack of homicidal office workers.

"Oedipus at Palm Springs" seems, at first, to be a surprisingly tame play, a strictly naturalistic comedy about problems of love and sex, marriage and motherhood in the 21st century. That these issues are being grappled with exclusively by women who love women does, of course, give the proceedings a stamp of newness.

And admirers who fear that the Five Lesbian Brothers have lost their edge will be gratified to know that the ribald jokes, flagrant nudity and voluptuous doses of sexual play in "Oedipus at Palm Springs" would certainly raise high the hackles of any self-respecting homophobe. Among the funniest moments: Lisa Kron's character, Con, frustrated at her partner's sexual indifference, finding furtive solo satisfaction in the hot tub.

But there are more courageous gambits in store here, too. The play's title is not a gag; it's a literal description. This Sapphic sex comedy is also a modern variant on Sophocles' totemic tragedy. Given that titular clue, you may see the big revelation coming early on, but it is still a provocative, disturbing twist. That it is presented with probing sensitivity and not an absurdist wink suggests a desire on the part of these artists to forgo another romp in the familiar pastures of zany comedy to aim at something more complex. Richly funny as it is, "Oedipus at Palm Springs" is also a serious inquiry into the unforeseen extremities of despair that can attend the search for a pure and lasting love.

The play takes place at a lesbian resort in the title city, presided over by Joni (Babs Davy), a blind caretaker blessed, wouldn't you know, with a deeper vision, and given to portentous pronouncements deriving therefrom. ("Time passes. Some things fall away. Others take their place.")

The only guests this weekend are two couples enjoying a reunion. In addition to reaffirming their friendship with Prin (Dominique Dibbell) and her younger girlfriend, Terri (Peg Healey), Con and Fran (Maureen Angelos) are getting a weekend away from their 3-year-old boy. Con is hoping, in fact insisting, that Fran's break from full-time motherhood will reignite the long-dimmed spark in their sexual relationship. "We've been in couples counseling for six years," she says, trying and failing to keep the hectoring tone from her voice. "We've been in sex counseling since last November. You need to figure out how to give me some sex."

That other bugaboo of relationships of all stripes - commitment - is the issue disguised by the steamy embraces of Prin and Terri. Prin is known to jump ship just when intimacy becomes too intense. This could be particularly damaging to Terri, an adopted child who has recently embarked, somewhat ambivalently, on a search for her birth mother.

Over a weekend filled with margaritas, golf and trips to the outlet mall, with the occasional odd encounter with the tie-dyed and feathered mystic Joni, the women seek to resolve their turmoil, freely venting their anxieties and dispensing unwanted advice when the tequila begins to flow.

Given the collective nature of its authorship (the text is credited to all the performers but Ms. Davy), the play is surprisingly smooth and skillfully developed, taking gentle comic jabs at a variety of soft and hard targets, from the absurdities of pop-psych therapeutics to the relative merits of maintaining strictly defined sex roles in lesbian relationships.

The dialogue can be plodding or flat in its delineation of character, and the play is sometimes heavy-handed in its use of recurring motifs. But the director, Leigh Silverman, who was also at the helm for Ms. Kron's "Well," glides past the few dead spots or awkward transitions with ease, drawing on these actresses' infectious rapport.

The performances are always appealing, even when they are not as polished or three-dimensional as you might hope. Ms. Kron, the most seasoned actress of the bunch, is never less than adorable as the sex-starved but still optimistic Con, and Ms. Davy is a deadpan delight as the play's New Age Teiresias. To their immense credit, Ms. Dibbell and Ms. Healey do painful justice to the rawly emotional scene that concludes the play.

And, collectively, these five women fill the stage with a quirky, lived-in humanity that brings its own rewards. Technique is of secondary interest when the performers are so naturally in tune with their material, their collaborators and, one suspects, themselves. It is this unusual gift that allows "Oedipus" to remain affecting and amusing - and reach a measure of painful truth, too - even when it delves into dramatically and emotionally troublesome territory.

Oedipus at Palm Springs

By Maureen Angelos, Dominique Dibbell, Peg Healey and Lisa Kron. Directed by Leigh Silverman; sets by David Korins; costumes by Miranda Hoffman; lighting by Mary Louise Geiger; original music/sound design by John Gromada; production stage management, Martha Donaldson; assistant stage management, Antonia Gianino. Presented by New York Theater Workshop. At 79 East Fourth Street, East Village; (212) 239-6200. Through Aug. 28. Running time: 1 hour 40 minutes.

WITH: The Five Lesbian Brothers: Babs Davy (Joni), Lisa Kron (Con), Maureen Angelos (Fran), Dominique Dibbell (Prin) and Peg Healey (Terri).