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SOPHOCLES AND SHE *A Two-scene Fantasy*

RAIMUNDAS SAMULEVIČIUS

Translated by Skirmantė Makaitis

Among the young writers in Lithuania,* Raimundas Samulevičius (born in 1937) distinguishes himself as one who studied dramaturgy at the Gorky Institute of Literature in Moscow and one who works exclusively in the field of drama. He also is one of the few whose plays have attracted the attention of foreign audiences. Several of his plays (*If One Will Knock at the Door*, *The Echo*) have been already translated into Russian and have been performed in Russian theaters.

Samulevičius' literary career began with the production of his first play, *A Student Story* (*Studentiška novelė*), in 1964 at the theater of Kaunas. It deals with social and moral problems of student life. The second play, *Lost Among the Stars* (*Paklydęs tarp žvaigždžių*, 1965) also produced in Kaunas, depicts three young engineers who are in charge of building a gigantic chemical plant in the province. The hero is an idealistic, tenderhearted engineer who in his great concern for human beings succumbs to the schemes of sly opportunists. In the play *If one Will Knock at the Door* (*Jeigu pasibels*, 1967) Samulevičius analyzes the moral responsibility of a writer, showing how a passive and politically apathetic writer changes into a fearless freedom fighter against the Nazis. The question of the writer's dedication to his art is also presented in the play *Sophocles and She* (*Sofoklis ir ji*), published in the literary magazine *Pergalė* in 1968. His most mature play is *The Echo* (*Aidas*, 1969), successfully produced at the theaters of Klaipėda and Pernu. Presenting such themes as love, friendship, the indifference of man to his fellow man, and the ultimate meaning of life, Samulevičius vividly mirrors the lives of a cross-section of the intelligentsia of two generations, namely, that of the thirties and that of the forties. His more recent play, *The Mute* (*Nebylys*), a dramatization of J. Tumas-Vaižgantas' (1869-1933) short story of the same title at the theater of Klaipėda in 1970, drew mixed reactions. Nevertheless, it was generally agreed that Samulevičius showed himself capable of handling the dramatic form adequately and of discerning both the ennobling and the destructive forces of passion and love.

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CHARACTERS:

SOPHOCLES

SHE (also THE MURDERER)

FIRST ANCIENT

SECOND ANCIENT

THE INNKEEPER XANTHIUS

The action takes place in Greece in the fifth century B.C.

SCENE ONE

Sophocles' study. Piles of manuscripts. Beyond the window lies Greece, the kind of Greece one would imagine while reading a high school textbook in ancient history.

*A group of friends and enemies have gathered by Sophocles' bed. Their faces — masks — express sorrow.
A green light floods the room. Sophocles' friends and enemies' vanish. SHE enters.*

SHE. Good evening, Sophocles!

SOPHOCLES. Who are you?

SHE. I am I.

SOPHOCLES. So it's you? !

SHE. Yes.

SOPHOCLES. Oh, gods! Can it really be you?

SHE (*smiling*). You mortals imagine me to be old and ugly. Isn't that so? You see how Wrong you are? It's true I'm old. But not older than mankind. And as for beauty, well...

SOPHOCLES. You're amazingly beautiful.

SHE. No need for complements, Sophocles. Although, to be truthful, I rather like them. Thank you. I know I am beautiful. And it's perfectly understandable. After all, life is my sister, but she's a bit older. By a few seconds. Maybe she's somewhat more beautiful, but I'm not jealous. I'm more powerful. (*Pause*) Do you know what I came for, Sophocles? SOPHOCLES. Yes, I do.

SHE. I have to take you. But... I love you. Yes, truly! I love you. My love is different from human love. My love is more like respect, awe, esteem. There are many of you on earth. You don't know each other; mountains and oceans separate you. But I know all of you, every last one of you. And I chose you. You. Do you understand? Perhaps you noticed that no matter how full the theater was, there was always one empty place. Did you notice?

SOPHOCLES. Yes.

SHE. The sign at the box office said SOLD OUT, crowds of people called for the manager and tried to sneak in backstage, yet you always saw an empty seat. One empty place...

SOPHOCLES. Yes.

SHE. And do you remember that once the empty seat was next to you?

SOPHOCLES. I remember it well, it was at the premiere of *Antigone!* The seat was for my beloved, but she became ill... and her place was empty.

SHE. It wasn't empty. That's just the way it seemed. I sat next to you.

SOPHOCLES. You? !

SHE. You fascinated me, Sophocles. I've learned your lines by heart:

*Number less are the world's wonders, but none
More wonderful than man; the storm-gray sea
Yields to his prows, the huge crests bear him high...*

SOPHOCLES.

*Words also, and thought as rapid as air,
He fashions to his good use; statecraft is his,
And his the skill that deflects the arrows of snow,
The spears of winter rain: from every wind
He has made himself secure...*

SHE. from *all but one*:
In the late wind of death he cannot stand.

SOPHOCLES. How can this be... Ninety years old and I long to live yet one more day!

SHE. I will help you.

SOPHOCLES. You? ! How can you help?

SHE. I will leave you on earth. Alive.

SOPHOCLES. You're joking!

SHE. I never joke. And when I laugh, you mortals tremble with fear! Was it not you who glorified the battle of Salamis? Do you remember how many Greeks and Persians died there? I do not joke, Sophocles. You will stay alive. But... Antigone will die, and Oedipus, Ismene, Creon, and Deianeira...

SOPHOCLES. But they... they're only... the fruit of my imagination!

SHE. Now they live, your Antigone, your Oedipus, your Ismene. Yours. And you will kill them. People won't even know that they existed. They'll forget them as if they'd never heard of them. They'll be gone. *BUT YOU WILL REMAIN ALIVE.*

SOPHOCLES. I will live?

SHE. Yes.

(Pause.)

SOPHOCLES. I agree to everything.

SHE. Don't hurry. Think about, it. *(Pause)* They will perish. Eternally. And you will be unable to create them again. You'll be powerless to do so. They will die and disappear like morning mist. Anouilh will not write his *Antigone*, the Bulgarians will not create *ANTIGONE 43*, and Peter Karvaš...

SOPHOCLES. Their age will give them other heroes, new names will appear. And besides, why should I care about people who will live some thousand years after me?

SHE. It is you, Sophocles, speaking thus?!

SOPHOCLES. I want to live. TO LIVE.

SHE. Antigone will never again call men to struggle against lies, oppression, and baseness... Antigone is a flower in the dismal underground. Antigone Joan of Arc — a grey clod of earth that grew wings... and the just Oedipus...

SOPHOCLES. I want to live!

SHE Very well. *(Pause)* I'm happy to be of service to you. I'm leaving now. Farewell!

SOPHOCLES. Good by!

SHE smiles and vanishes.

SOPHOCLES raises his head and looks around. The room is empty.

SOPHOCLES. Where are you?

(Silence. No one answers.)

Hey! Where are you? ! *(He rises and looks around him)*

(The lights are dimmed.)

SCENE TWO

An ancient wayside tavern.

Sheltered from the hot sun, two ancient theater-lovers are drinking wine at a table.

FIRST ANCIENT. I still say the introduction of the third actor is a cheap formalistic trick and nothing more!

SECOND ANCIENT. Why formalistic? Why? !

FIRST ANCIENT. For hundreds of years two actors and a chorus were considered sufficient, and now — why, they've gone and introduced a third one! What for?

SECOND ANCIENT. So that playwrights could bring more characters into play!

FIRST ANCIENT. So that actors would have more jobs! Unnecessary expenditures!

SECOND ANCIENT. Oh, ye gods! He equates art with commerce! Thrift, profit... How could I have been friends with you for so many years?

(The INNKEEPER approaches.)

INNKEEPER. Forgive me, gentlemen, for interrupting your undoubtedly serious discussion... But we've just received a shipment of a very unusual beverage. May I suggest that you try it?

FIRST ANCIENT. Well, now...

SECOND ANCIENT. Interesting...

INNKEEPER. Here is an advertisement for the drink.

(He hands them a slip of paper.)

FIRST ANCIENT *(reading)* Pernod...

SECOND ANCIENT. In French it's pronounced Perno.

FIRST ANCIENT. "Soothing, uniquely refreshing Pernod — sybor of vitality and *joie de vivre*. Pernod is taking it easy after work; it's an hour of peace when the day is done. Pernod is the atmosphere of a French cafe, whether it be on the *boulevards* or in the Boulogne woods, whether it be a small restaurant on the banks of the Marne or an arbor in the south, where the cool shade adds to the wonderful sensation one feels after a glass of ice-cold Pernod.. ."

SECOND ANCIENT. "The word Pernod cannot be said without evoking pleasant memories. Pernod is laughter, songs, the tinkle of ice in a glass, a funny story from Marseilles, love of life and relaxation. ..."

(As they read, SOPHOCLES comes into the tavern yard and sits down at a free table.)

SECOND ANCIENT. It sounds good... *(To the -INNKEEPER)* Bring us two glasses, my good man!

INNKEEPER. Right away! *(Approaches SOPHOCLES)* And what will you have, sir?

SOPHOCLES. A glass of wine.

INNKEEPER. Right away. *(Leaves)*

FIRST ANCIENT. Now back to our discussion. I still maintain that...

SECOND ANCIENT. You maintain that the third actor is unnecessary...

FIRST ANCIENT. That's right.

SECOND ANCIENT. And I maintain that he's essential.

FIRST ANCIENT. That only proves your complete ignorance of the dramatic arts. Keep in mind that... *(Suddenly an idea strikes him)* But who introduced the third actor?

SECOND ANCIENT. The third?

FIRST ANCIENT. Who introduced the third one?

(The SECOND ANCIENT is silent.)

You don't know? SECOND ANCIENT. The second actor was introduced by Aeschylus. This enabled...

FIRST ANCIENT. I'm asking about the third actor.

SECOND ANCIENT. I don't remember. I don't know. I hope you're satisfied!

FIRST ANCIENT. So you don't know?

SECOND ANCIENT. And you?

FIRST ANCIENT. If I knew I wouldn't ask!

SOPHOCLES. I did!

(Both ANCIENTS look at him.)

FIRST ANCIENT. You?

SECOND ANCIENT. Forgive me, but who are you?

SOPHOCLES. Sophocles.

(The ANCIENTS look at each other in amazement.)

FIRST ANCIENT. Sophocles?

SECOND ANCIENT. Sophocles...

SOPHOCLES. Don't tell me my name means nothing to you!

FIRST ANCIENT. What can it possible mean?

SECOND ANCIENT. Yes, why should we know you?

(The INNKEEPER returns.)

FIRST ANCIENT *(to the INNKEEPER)*. You know everybody around here, Xanthius. Have you ever heard of a... Sophocles?

INNKEEPER. Sophocles? Sophocles... Isn't he the bum who drank like a fish here last week and then didn't have the money to pay for it? *(Sets down the goblets)*

FIRST ANCIENT. Is he the one?

INNKEEPER. Of course not! I've never seen this old gentleman before. *(Sets down a goblet of wine before SOPHOCLES)* Here you are, sir. Drink to your health.

SECOND ANCIENT. I remember. My son studied mathematics with a Sophocles! He was a bad teacher. To this day the child can neither add nor subtract. .. But that Sophocles can't be over forty. ..

FIRST ANCIENT. And I've never heard of a Sophocles.

SOPHOCLES. Then perhaps you've never been in a theater?

FIRST ANCIENT. We?! My dear sir, we have not missed a single production! We know the tragedies of Aeschylus by heart!

SECOND ANCIENT. And we don't like to brag, but we know Euripides and Aristophanes personally.

SOPHOCLES. And Sophocles... means nothing to you?

FIRST ANCIENT. Absolutely nothing.

SOPHOCLES. And *Antigone*, *Oedipus Rex*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*? My great trilogy?

SECOND ANCIENT. Poor idiot...

FIRST ANCIENT. Let's avoid getting into an argument with him.

SOPHOCLES. What are you whispering?

FIRST ANCIENT. We are trying to remember who you are, sir, but unfortunately...

SOPHOCLES. Oedipus, Antigone, Electra, Ismene, Creon..

SECOND ANCIENT. These names are known to us from mythology, but what does that have to do with you?

SOPHOCLES. *Or do you think my children,
Born as they were born, would be sweet to my eyes?
Ah never, never! Nor this town with its high walls,
Nor the holy images of the gods.*

*For I,
Thrice miserable! — Oedipus, noblest of all the line*

*Of Kadmos, have condemned myself to enjoy
These things no more...
Have condemned myself...*

How does *the* rest of it go? I can't remember. The lines get all mixed up... (*Laughs guiltily*)

INNKEEPER. Maybe, old man, you've been mixed up for quite a while, eh?

SOPHOCLES. How dare you speak like that?! (*Jumps up*)

INNKEEPER. Calm down, old man, calm down!

SOPHOCLES. I am Sophocles!

INNKEEPER. And I am the innkeeper Xanthius!

SOPHOCLES. I am Sophocles!

INNKEEPER. And I repeat, I am Xanthius!

SECOND ANCIENT. Relax, Xanthius! Don't pay attention to him. You can see the old man's a bit mixed up.

FIRST ANCIENT. He's senile. It's simple and natural. He can't be less than a hundred.

SOPHOCLES. Ninety, you idiot!

FIRST ANCIENT. Well I was close!

SOPHOCLES. Oh, how I'd like to lay a stick across your ribs! Fools, halfwits!

SECOND ANCIENT. Maybe we should call a doctor.

FIRST ANCIENT. Or maybe the guards.

SECOND ANCIENT. Let them take him to a hospital.

INNKEEPER. An insane asylum!

FIRST ANCIENT. Jail!

SECOND ANCIENT. Leaving him free might be dangerous. We'll watch him. Run, Xanthius, call somebody!

INNKEEPER. Right away, right away! (*Runs out*)

(SOPHOCLES slumps in his chair. The hired MURDERER comes in and sits down next to SOPHOCLES.)

FIRST ANCIENT (to *the MURDERER*)... Be careful, friend!

SECOND ANCIENT. That old man is a lunatic!

FIRST ANCIENT. That's why he's dangerous.

MURDERER. You warn me? Strange men! I'm afraid of nothing. I'm a murderer, for hire. I can hang, stab, shoot, poison and leave no trace. If you have a superfluous friend or an enemy, we can soon come to an agreement. The price is not beyond your means. What? (*Laughs*) Are you afraid? Surprised? Oh, how your faces have dropped! Don't be afraid! I'm an honest man. My job's like any other job, and I try to be conscientious and orderly about it! Just now I'm hungry. Where's the innkeeper?

SECOND ANCIENT. He ran off. To get the guards or...

MURDERER (*quietly, to SOPHOCLES*). Well, now, my dear Sophocles... They'll soon drag you off to a jail or insane asylum. Later they'll let you go. You'll wander down dusty streets and dirt roads and hordes of children will follow you, throwing rocks and bones, calling you crazy, like van Gogh. Then you'll be arrested for vagrancy and sentenced to hard labor...

SOPHOCLES. Oh, gods! Why such suffering?!

MURDERER. You killed gently Antigone, just Oedipus, serious Creon, to save yourself. You are a murderer, Sophocles!

SOPHOCLES. I?!

MURDERER. Who else?

SOPHOCLES. But...

MURDERER. Don't try to justify yourself! I know you men can find thousands of reasons to justify your deeds: there was no other way, you were forced, you were tortured... And for a few extra days you betray Antigones and Oedipuses! That's the way it was before your time, and that's the way it will be after you. That's the way it will be forever!

SOPHOCLES (jumps up). You're wrong!

(The MURDERER laughs.)

Kill me!

MURDERER. Do you have any money?

SOPHOCLES. No... I barely had enough for the glass of wine.

MURDERER. You want me to work for free?

SOPHOCLES. Is it so hard to kill a ninety-year-old man?

MURDERER. No. But a job's a job. *(More gently)* Never mind, old man. I'm kind-hearted. Here's some poison. Never mind that it says "headache powder." I prepared it for a certain... So here, pour it in your wine, stir it. When you drink it, you'll fall asleep. For eternity.

SOPHOCLES. Thank you, my good man. *(Pours the poison into his cup)* Thank you. *(Raises the goblet to his lips)*

(A green light floods the tavern. The MURDERER takes off his mask and SOPHOCLES recognizes HER.)

SOPHOCLES. So it's you?!

SHE. Me.

SOPHOCLES. And when I finish the goblet, they'll be reborn? Antigone, Oedipus, Creon?

SHE. They'll be alive. Believe me. I know how to keep my word. They'll travel on earth from age to age, from country to country, from person to person. Oedipus will see with his unseeing eyes and follow Antigone. ...

SOPHOCLES. *(raises the goblet)* To your health!

(SHE smiles pleasantly.)

(The lights are dimmed.)

* For a general introduction to Lithuanian drama under the Soviets see B. Vaškešis, "Contemporary Lithuanian Drama," *Lituanus*, Pall 1967, p. 5 f.f.