City of Wine – Introduction

by Brian Quirt

Playwright Ned Dickens has never stepped back from a question that demanded a good story to find the answer. And among the many many treasures of *City of Wine*, among its many tales of people and triumphs and tragedies, are a trove of great stories. Some of them you'll recognize from the myths you have heard in one form or another. Many of them are Ned's invention, or rather perhaps his projection of what we have received from the Greeks into what might have happened. That is, if we ask the best possible questions and never shy away from what the answers may tell us if we look closely, carefully, with humanity and humour and compassion and skepticism and desire and love.

City of Wine is a cycle of plays based at its heart on potent life-changing questions, an approach that also lives at the heart of Nightswimming and our approach to dramaturgy. Ned's commitment to asking great questions is among the many reasons we commissioned six of the nine plays and have committed 30 years of dramaturgical support to developing, nurturing and promoting Ned's cycle. Questions that demanded action and exploration and collaboration to truly understand and to then address. Questions that Ned asked of himself and of the stories he wanted to retell that pushed him more deeply into the landscape of mythology in order to write not about myths but about the people who populate them and why they do what they do, how they live together, how they lead one another, and what happens when leadership breaks down or betrays or thrives or needs the people to save it.

Questions such as –

- What happened in the moment when Oedipus and Jocasta, his eventual partner in marriage, first met? How did they fall in love and what was their love before disaster crushed the family and the city they loved and led?

- What new perspective is revealed when we look at the character of Creon not as a proto-dictator but as a leader faced with huge moral questions about what it is to lead and the costs it may have for one's city and one's own family?

- What steps take a person towards tyranny? How can we understand a tyrant like Laius not as an inevitability, but as a person with a long life, many influences and a pathway that is worth examining despite the terror with which he is ultimately associated?

– Would you give up immortality for love, and if so what might be the circumstances that would lead you to such a momentous decision? Harmonia is among the most important characters in *City of Wine*, and one of the least familiar yet her decision to love and commit to Cadmus in the first play of the cycle is astonishing. Ned needed to ask how she got to that decision and in doing so what the repercussions might be for the city that she then co-founded as a home for that love.

– What remains of a city when the city and its people are gone? What lifeforce resides in the stories we tell about ourselves, our past, our people, our city? Even as we know that there is no single accurate version of those stories, we are compelled to tell and retell, to remember and project our stories – or what we remember of them – into the future. But, as Ned and the characters of *Seven* so potently demand, what if we can't agree on the stories and what if there is no one left to tell them?

– Jocasta is best known for her agonies of discovery when Oedipus' actions and true ancestry are revealed – but what of the rest of her eventful life, Ned asked? She survived some of the worst moments of Theban history and went on to lead her city thoughtfully and powerfully, one of the many powerful women in this multi-generational story who stood up, took charge, improved the place she lived and loved, and battled against the powerfully patriarchal landscape in which she dwelt. By asking this question, Ned reveals to us a remarkable person, remarkable in her own right, not just for meeting Oedipus and mourning his later actions.

– Male, female, both? The trajectory of Tiresias, known mostly as the seer who helps unveil the truth of Oedipus' past, is so much more than a vital plot point in a horrific family saga. Ned asked what we didn't know about Tiresias – the youth's early life and loves, the pain and punishment meted out and survived, the impact of their transformations, and the cost of the insights which all of that led to – a person 'gifted' with prophecy, doomed to see it all but know that it was out of their control, and an individual, through the gift of Ned's imagination, restored to three dimensions, with a life, like a story, with a beginning, a middle and an end.

– And, perhaps most importantly, at least to me, Ned asked us as we worked together on this epic undertaking what it would mean to reconsider and fully bring to life the people of Thebes, the citizens of this city that are generally perceived in the stories we received from the distant past as passive and powerless commentators on the actions of the powerful. Are they not individuals with stories of their own, with contradictory opinions and beliefs who make mistakes and shape their city as much

as their leaders and fall in love and tell great stories of their own? That is a powerful question, and the answer of course is a resounding 'Yes'.

Ned's answer, of course, is much more than a simple 'Yes' – it is thirty years of imagining, writing, collaborating and creating to give life, new life, to the people of the city of Thebes. To acknowledge that the city, any city, is as much theirs, the people's, as that of the leaders who may be remembered longer than any individual citizen, but are no more important than the tavern keeper, or the cloth maker, or the one who sits at the end of the bar with a head full of stories.

These individuals are called the UnNamed within *City of Wine* because their names are never spoken aloud, much in the way that we seldom use the names of our closest friends when we talk with them. For most of us our names will never be recorded in ways that history acknowledges. But we are here, living the life of our city, and in *City of Wine* Ned has given them lives and stories and impact and hearts.

They are the soul of the city and are the true story tellers who ensure that the city, any city, lives on in the future.

— **Brian Quirt**
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