

THE AUSTRALIAN

Sophocles's Antigone, a timeless tragedy

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Josh Price in the new adaptation of Antigone by Jane Montgomery Griffiths for Malthouse Theatre. Picture: Sarah Walker Source: Supplied

In May 2013, Greek tragedy was played out on the streets of Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Tamerlan Tsarnaev, one of the men accused of the Boston marathon bombing, lay unburied and unwept in a Worcester morgue, his corpse so “morally polluted”, as Daniel Mendelsohn wrote in The New Yorker, “that his own widow would not claim it, that no funeral director would touch it, that no cemetery would bury it”.

As a sign protesting against his burial threatened, "Bury this terrorist on US soil and we will unbury him."

For anyone acquainted with Greek tragedy, the resonances of this story echo profoundly. This is the dilemma at the heart of Sophocles's masterpiece Antigone: in a time of civil unrest, the state decrees that political laws must override the religious laws of decent burial, in a demonstration of moral relativism that pits state against individual over the rotting corpse of an unburied would-be terrorist. It is left to his sister, Antigone, to defy the state, burying her brother and incurring her own death as a result.

It is not for nothing that Antigone has proved the most widely performed of Greek tragedies. From the Congo to Finland, from Nazi-occupied France to the apartheid prisons of South Africa, from a German cemetery in Italy to the underground theatres of Egypt, the play has been performed as an act of defiance, of remembrance and, sometimes, of forgiveness. It has been translated, adapted, twisted and contorted to speak to the concerns of its audience with an urgency and immediacy that belies its 2500-year age. This is no museum piece; this is a play that screams to be heard.

For the ancient Athenians, Antigone was part of a religious festival and an engagement with participatory democracy.

The Dionysia was the city's main festival in honour of that most subversive of gods, Dionysus. It was an occasion not just of religious observance but of state ostentation. The sons of the fallen dead were paraded before their fathers' peers before taking an oath of military loyalty; the city's coffers were shown off before citizens and the foreigners whose (often unwilling) tribute helped to swell them; and the god was honoured by long days of tragedy in which the treasury of Greek myth was raided to enact every taboo, moral conundrum and ethical dilemma before the estimated audience of 15,000 Athenians.

Sometimes I hear students or even, heaven forbid, other theatre-makers dismiss Greek tragedy as too old, too staid, too boring to

have currency now. This attitude misunderstands the radical nature of the form. Athens invented theatre as a politically urgent form of enacted debate. So important was it that the state offered a wage to citizens to attend, and it was considered as worthwhile for wealthy citizens to fund a chorus as to deck out a warship. In our present climate of artistic uncertainty and government appropriation of arts funding, it is almost inconceivable that such public worth should be placed on theatre.

But that word, theatre, explains why Athenians considered drama so important: the Greek word theatron means the watching place, and by watching their world problematised through drama, in the communal space of the theatre of Dionysus where the audience not only watched the play but watched each other watching the play, the Athenians hoped to become better citizens.

The “pity and terror” the audience could feel through the enactment of tragedy went hand in hand with the rhetoric of justice and moral questioning.

Across the millennia, the fortunes of Greek drama have ebbed and flowed. Antigone, however, has stayed in the spotlight for the past two centuries. The political impasse at the heart of the drama has inspired philosophers from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel to Slavoj Zizek. The gender politics has drawn in theorists from Jacques Lacan to Judith Butler. The moral dilemma at its heart is ever perplexing and never reductive: both Antigone and Creon, her uncle who decrees the exposure of the corpse, are right and both are wrong. Their competing voices are the theatrical embodiment of the Hegelian dialectic.

Whereas philosophy analyses Antigone for answers, theatre - stages the play for questions. Theatre is a messy business, where bodies create the perceptual framework for understanding. The stage confounds the dialectic of debate into a much more rhizomatic system of meaning.

As translator of the new production of Antigone at Melbourne's Malthouse Theatre, I am acutely aware of the interplay between

the written and the embodied text. I am also aware of the pitfalls of fidelity and betrayal any translator must negotiate when dealing with such a canonical text. I have loved and studied Sophocles for more than 30 years, and the potential hubris of "adapting" Antigone has been ever present in my mind. As a classicist and theatremaker, my brief has been to find an equivalent, not just for the language of Sophocles's play but for the context of what the tragedy may mean.

And the context is extraordinarily current. As our politics reverberates with rhetorical buzzwords, political relativism and debates about terrorism, the environment, border security and equal rights, so Sophocles's text again and again shows us equivalent concerns millennia ago. From the chorus's "Ode to Man", which can be read as a manifesto for climate change deniers and the Greens, to Creon's insistence on his "captain's call", the text shocks with its resonances.

In this new translation, I have taken liberties. The gender politics so apparent in Sophocles have changed in my script: Creon's 5th century misogyny has a very different meaning in the 21st century.

The chorus also has morphed into something new: a theatrical form that tries to convey the sensations of the chorus while recognising that its civic function is now lost to us.

But at its core, this version is pure Sophocles. Working with visionary young director Adena Jacobs, the cast and creative team have tried to find an equivalence and an essence of the play. And we have all now fallen under the spell of Greek tragedy: its power, its provocation, its oddness and its beauty.

From the second-floor rehearsal room of the Malthouse Theatre, rich and strange sounds are emanating. Emily Milledge, playing Antigone, is singing ancient Greek. The rhythms drive and hang. The notes pierce like ice. The oddness of the vowel sounds sends a frisson down the spine. A 21-year-old woman on a rainy winter morning in Melbourne is singing words composed in the bright

9/24/2015 Sophocles's Antigone, a timeless tragedy | The Australian
light of an Athenian spring 2500 years ago.

Centuries collide in this moment, and a human hand stretches
across millennia.

This is no sentimental faux humanism: the genius of Greek
tragedy is its translation of the universals of grief and pain — of,
as Matthew Arnold would say, “the turbid ebb and flow/Of
human misery” — through stories that can be endlessly adapted
and translated to each generation's specific context.

These plays are as contemporary as they are ancient; they create
a frame for us to interrogate our own world.

Theatre may have lost its religious context, but in Antigone we
see it has not lost its political one.

Jane Montgomery Griffiths is director for the Centre for Theatre
and Performance at Monash University. Antigone is at
Malthouse Theatre from August 25 to September 13.

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