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**It's True What They Said, "Tragedy is Dead":
Performance Analysis of *Antigone***
By Mayurakshi Sen

Abstract

A performance review of Ivo van Hove's *Antigone* performed 7 August 2015 at the Edinburgh International Festival.

It's True What They Said, "Tragedy is Dead":
Performance Analysis of *Antigone*
(as seen at the preview showing on 7th August at the Edinburgh International
Festival 2015)
By Mayurakshi Sen

I won't lie – one of the biggest draws about having a chance to attend the Theatre and Performance course at the Scottish Universities' International Summer School was the fact that I was getting the opportunity of a lifetime with regard to experiencing the theatrical nerve-centre of Scotland during the rare alignment of two of the world's most renowned festivals – the Edinburgh International Festival and the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. Indeed, I would've vibrated out of my skin if I were anymore enthusiastic. When I received the Theatre and Performance programme upon arrival though, the seemingly impossible happened so far as my anticipation regarding the course was concerned. I had known that we would get to see a few shows as part of the curriculum, but to be able to witness the Scottish premiere of Ivo van Hove's *Antigone* which has Juliette Binoche as the eponymous character? Let's just say that I smiled daftly at every new face I encountered that evening.

My fascination with the text of the play goes back to my first year of postgraduate studies when we poured over various translations of the Greek tragedy – starting from the definitive R. C. Jebb version to the more recent ones by Hugh Lloyd-Jones, David Grene, and Ruth Fainlight-Robert J. Littman. What had engaged me endlessly was the political relevance of the play with regard to the culture of protest which was, of course, made more interesting by the fact that several adaptations of the play as a protest parable had already been produced at Manipur, India during recent times in the context of regional autonomy versus national stability,

as well as the reclamation of agency by the Manipuri women against the exploitations of the Indian Army. Also, I had been interested in the commentaries of Hegel and Kierkegaard on the nature of this Sophoclean tragedy (dated around 441 BC). Needless to say, I was looking forward to the irresolvable ethical conundrum between the embodiments of two extremes – Antigone and Creon – being played out in King’s Theatre on the night of the show.

The stage set-up of the play was intriguing from the beginning with the narrow entry-way and the cumbersome downstage area with what looked like the furnishings of an office space. Also notable was the huge, circular opening in the projection screen at the back that, throughout the play, gave the impression of the movement of the sun over one fateful day – possibly a nod to the neoclassical notion of the unity of time with regard to the actions of a play. Juliette Binoche’s first appearance in her striking all-black modern day apparel further stoked my curiosity about finding out how they intended to present a streamlined, fatalistic tragedy consisting of relentlessly opposed binaries, in a contemporary period setting where, in truth, the inexorability of the pre-Christian force of “Necessity” remains all but extinct.

My fairly strong faith in the credibility of the production was soon dashed, however, as the play proved to be a shoddy amalgamation of contemporary innovation (such as the inexplicable blurry projections, the formal-wear donned by all of the cast except Binoche, the string music continually playing on a subsonic level), and Spartan symbolism (viz. the doubling up of the actors as both characters and members of the Chorus including the “resurrection” of Antigone herself at one point), that aimed and failed at recreating the heady urgency of a Greek tragedy. Anne Carson’s translation – though deliciously witty and irreverent at times, especially during the cheeky exchange between an exasperated Creon and

Obi Abili's hilarious Guard – fell short of capturing the gravity of the age-old, mutually incomprehensible conflict between the written laws of the *polis* authorised by the god of light (Zeus) and the unwritten but immutable laws of the *oikos* validated by the gods of the underworld – between the strict rationality of man and the prescient instinct of woman. This fascinatingly layered binary was a living concern for the ancient Greeks for whom life was measured in absolutes and one's personal conscience came in second to the compelling need to identify with the ever-present entity of one's country. Though Sophocles here has clearly marked Antigone as the preferred hero-figure, the ancient Greek audience would have definitely seen Creon as the one in the right. Coming back to the production at hand, the audience who were familiar with the text were, I suspect, particularly confounded by the haphazard selection of classical allusions that Carson's colloquial translation chose to keep while summarily dispensing with the others. This arbitrary tendency was singularly apparent in the physically improvised (and severely lacking) choral odes and the unsatisfactory Kommos between Antigone and the Chorus. The entire exercise came across as cripplingly indecisive in terms of committing to one of the two available approaches – classical poetry and contemporary repartee – and hence, ended up being a second-rate blend of both.

Binoche's Antigone – though appropriately defiant and steadfast – failed to capture the character's compulsion – her genetically cursed endogamous obsession – that made Antigone embody the essence of an inflexible tragic hero who had willingly married Death as she literally felt that she did not belong in the surface-world of light, love, and laughter (not when the majority of her family – especially its male members by whom she defined herself – were dead). But what I appreciated was Binoche's stoic and restrained rendition of Antigone's lament, which has

often been called out as the uncharacteristically capitulating monologue in the trajectory of an otherwise unflinching Antigone. On the other hand though, her cameo as the Messenger who informs the audience of the horrifying demise of Haemon and Antigone appeared to me to be a transparent bid at extending her stage-presence. This was especially required as, in spite of being the hero of the play, Antigone is only referred to in the third person after she is banished in the original text. Patrick O’Kane’s Creon – whom I had taken to be the leader of the Irish mob at first glance (now, wouldn’t that have made a much more sensible premise?) – impressed with his consistently soft-spoken delivery, his brooding, hulking presence which considerably dwarfed the narrow entrance each time he stepped into a scene, and his believable fluctuations between cold, casual authority and sporadic bursts of vulnerable passion. The ensemble cast almost constantly resembled their ancient choric counterpart as they arranged themselves along the downstage area in a series of awkwardly flat tableaux. However, among them, Kirsty Bushell made a singular impact with her refreshingly radical interpretation of the docile, regretful character of Ismene. Her Ismene came across as a headstrong, opinionated, and often righteously indignant individual who, in almost every way, is as dominant as Antigone. Particularly memorable was her sincerely evocative ode to Dionysus – the god of revelry and madness – which, barring the unnecessarily spectacle-drenched “reawakening” of Antigone, served, to my mind, as the high-point of the play.

Another notable element was the uninhibited physicality displayed in Creon’s interactions with both Haemon and Tiresias. This directorial choice was both innovative and necessary in order to cut through the visual tedium of witnessing the otherwise slow, seemingly interminable blocking and delivery. Indeed, each and every scene in the play was drawn

out to improbable lengths in what was possibly an intentional ploy to magnify its proceedings (Antigone's rituals over Polynices's body and Eurydice's breakdown over the news of Haemon's desperate suicide being cases in point). I did find the ending sequence with Creon being pitilessly abandoned without any half-hearted attempt at placating him on the part of the Chorus quite fitting. It aptly reflected the defining characteristic of the Chorus as embodying the lowest common denominator of the populace who continually alter their personal allegiances to suit the contemporary political/religious/cultural climate. Nevertheless, the sudden incursions of an urban office-space and the pumping bass line of Velvet Underground's "Heroin" at the very end appeared to me to be wildly incongruous in the sombre context. And the final nail on the already quite stoutly made coffin fell when they tried to round up the proceedings with a digitised epilogue on the screen showing Creon covering the face of a deceased Antigone. Honestly, after losing both his son and his wife in one fell swoop, and essentially being stripped of all his professional credibility, and mental and emotional sanity, I doubt Creon was at all bothered to concern himself with the condition of Antigone's body (unless, it was the director's intention to signify that Creon has learned his lesson after his unwise enterprise of what was essentially an attempt to bring the realm of the underworld under the jurisdiction of a single, mortal king and is now more respectful toward the dues of the dead – which, if true, had been executed in a seriously juvenile manner).

Lastly, I find it interesting that Ivo van Hove's last successful production – Arthur Miller's *A View from the Bridge* – was notable for its radically minimalist approach with no regard for any and all naturalistic trappings. In fact, the entire action was conceived to play out intensively on a small rectangular space, not unlike the action in *Antigone*, so as to reach the unadorned magnitude of a Greek tragedy. It is relevant here to

note that Jan Versweyveld – the set designer of *Antigone* – was also the person behind the experimental, lit up rectangular strip in *A View from the Bridge*. It is truly ironic, therefore, that while attempting to recreate a once-tried-and-tested (and very much appreciated) formula, this production falls way off the mark, despite being an actual and consistently relevant Greek tragedy.