



# ANTIGONE

## RESOURCE EXTRA

**ANTIGONE**, Sophocles' powerful, shattering and relevant tragedy is in production at the Royal Exchange Theatre from Wednesday 15 October to Saturday 8 November 2008. When her brother is denied the dignity of a burial, Antigone refuses to bow to her ruler and prospective father-in-law and instead chooses to fight for all that she believes in.

### Notes from Director Greg Hersov

It is a few weeks before rehearsals for ANTIGONE are due to begin, and Director Greg Hersov is explaining his plans for the production to members of Theatre staff. "Greek tragedy is," he tells us, "a big undertaking". He explains that "there can be a tradition of Greek drama being performed in a very stage-y, static way – with actors performing very solemnly – almost as if declaring, 'look at me I'm doing proper acting'".



*Matti Houghton as Antigone. Photo by Jonathan Keenan*

Greg is determined that this production will not fall into that trap. For him, the challenge of staging Greek tragedy is "to understand the original form, and then to think, 'how do we do this now, how do we make this story relevant today?' "

Greg feels this story is entirely relevant, "the play was written 2,500 years ago but is, if anything, even more relevant in our contemporary world. For example, it was performed on Robben Island with Nelson Mandela playing Creon. It is a play about one woman's devotion to her brothers – the importance of blood, and her absolute conviction. It is about deciding whether or not you stand up to the government, and if so how? It is a play which asks "What do you believe in?" "

**WHY NOT:** search the press for modern versions of ANTIGONE? How many stories can you find about individuals standing up to a Government?

"Greek plays function on three levels" Greg continues. "The personal, the political and the religious. It is also important to remember that everyone who comes into this play is coming from a sense of war – a trauma of war. The play examines questions around how we should bury the dead, the claims the dead have on us and how we deal with the past. It is perhaps especially important today when we seem to have collective amnesia and live in a society where we frequently don't connect with one another."

**WHY NOT:** use the internet to search for images of ANTIGONE? For example, production photos or the covers of different versions of the script. You can even find images from early versions of ANTIGONE painted on Greek vases. From the still images what can you tell about the play and the various styles of performance?

## Notes on the Chorus

The Chorus is an essential part of Greek theatre – in fact the Chorus is where Greek theatre is thought to have begun. Greg Hersov explains, “Greek plays are believed to have developed from choric celebrations and festivities where crowds would sing and dance. From these celebrations, stories began to develop, told by a chorus of united voices”. Legend has it that someone stepped out from the group and did a speech on his own – becoming the first actor, or protagonist (according to the myth, that man was called Thespis which is where we get our expression ‘thespian’). Later, the stories developed to include 2 and then 3 protagonists, always with a Chorus remaining ‘behind’ them to support and comment upon the storytelling.

The role of a Greek Chorus is different in every play, In ANTIGONE the Chorus is described as ‘senators of Thebes’, old and powerful citizens of the city. They are very much on-lookers, observing and commenting on the action.

A traditional Greek Chorus would be made up of 12 or 15 men. In the Royal Exchange production of ANTIGONE there will be an ensemble of 9 performers all together. At various points, actors will transform from Chorus to protagonists in the story, marked by distinct costume changes.

**WHY NOT:** think about the modern equivalents of a Greek Chorus? Who commentates and observes in the modern world? Choose one news story to follow from multiple perspectives – collect articles from different newspapers, or letters to the editor, and see what different voices say. When are these voices different, and when do they come together?

It is important to bear in mind that in the play Thebes is recovering from a war. Through the Chorus Greg is interested in exploring who the authority figures are after a conflict. The Chorus in this production will not be senators but citizens, raising questions about who can speak for the community in the aftermath of war. So, the Chorus could be headteachers, activists, community leaders – individual voices which come together for the good of the City. Greg and Laurie Dennett, who is designing the production, looked at images of conflicts and survivors – images like the people coming out of the twin towers covered in dust and rubble – to find inspiration for the look of the Chorus.

As well as experimenting with the identity of the Chorus, there are issues about what they actually do on stage. It is impossible to know how the Greek Chorus actually performed – we think that they spoke together, sang some of their text and danced other parts, possibly accompanied by a flute-like instrument. The Chorus are not consistent throughout the play – they have what Greg describes as “a shifting emotional consciousness”. They are very different in their scenes with the protagonists to in the ‘choral odes.’ Greek plays are made up of seven scenes between characters and then seven choral odes, which in some way reflect or comment on the themes of the play. Greg explains, “in the odes the Chorus seem to take you into a kind of mythic, unconscious state”. The meanings of these choral odes are often oblique and difficult to pin down.

**WHY NOT:** look at the first choral ode in ANTIGONE which describes the end of the war? What images does it conjure? Draw the pictures which come into your mind as you read. Re-create your pictures on stage by making a freeze to represent each one, or create a piece of music or dance which you feel conjures its mood and meaning.

This production will observe the character/chorus structure, but will not perform the odes as written. This is because Greg believes that, in translation, the language is often impenetrable. In this production he will use dance and music to express the real meanings of the odes. For example, instead of an ode praising the God Eros, there will be a dance expressing his power.

**WHY NOT:** explore how to speak as a chorus? Choose one of the choral odes from ANTIGONE. In a group read it aloud one line a time with a new reader taking over at the end of each line. Discuss the meaning of the ode, and the images it conjures. Read through the ode again. This time one person begins reading aloud but with each new line, another member of the group joins in, so eventually the whole group is reading aloud in unison. Which way did the ode work best? Did several voices sound better than one? Are there points when you feel you should speak together and points where the voices should separate?

## Notes on the design of ANTIGONE

For the Royal Exchange production of ANTIGONE, Greg Hersov will be working with Designer Laurie Dennett to create the world of the play. There is a long history of Greek drama at this theatre, and Greg believes that is because the principles behind Greek theatre chime in with the principles behind the Royal Exchange. He explains, "The Greeks saw drama as a part of how you lived; a Theatre was a place where people came together to share in seeing a story which helps us understand who we are."



Matti Houghton as Antigone & Alexandra Mathie as a Chorus member. Photo by Jonathan Keenan

The Royal Exchange Theatre was specifically designed so that the Theatre module would hang suspended in a larger space. As well as giving theatre makers the possibility of using the outside as well as the inside of Theatre, this design reflected the belief of both the Greeks and the founding Directors that we are not alone, that 'the Gods' are always present, watching. In keeping with this, the current production of ANTIGONE makes use of both the interior and exterior of the Theatre space.

There is a sense in the play that if you do something to the land, the land will do something back to you – that the Earth is a living thing. For this production, Laurie has used a burnt red colour scheme to create a post-apocalyptic world. It is a cracked, fissured landscape. This was inspired in part by Columbian sculptor, Doris Salcedo's 'crack' exhibition in the floor of Tate Modern. In this production, the fissure in the ground not only suggests the charred city, but relates to Antigone's invoking of the Gods from below. The stage also features a large funeral pyre which still smokes and is both an altar and an image of destruction.

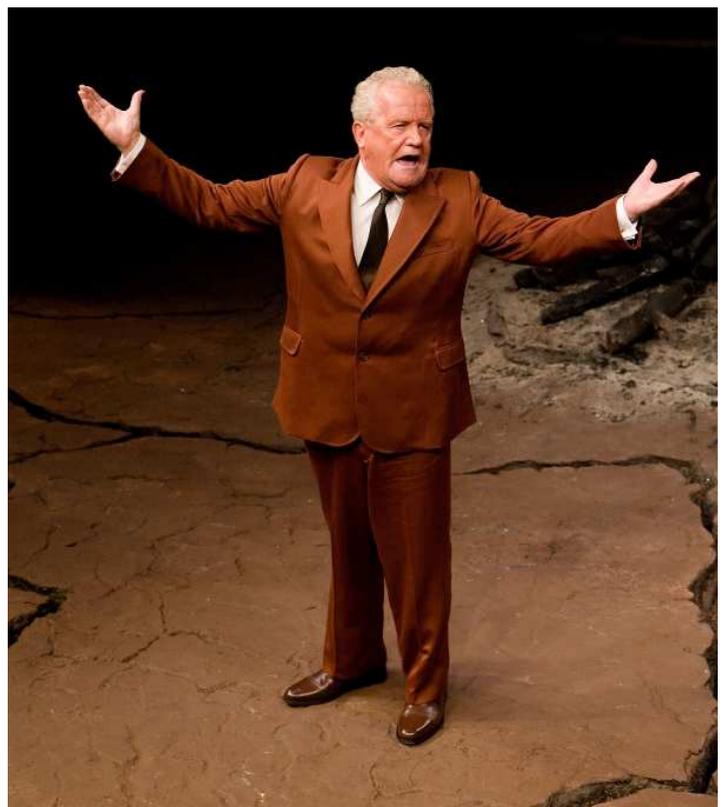
**WHY NOT:** Research the work of sculptor, Doris Salcedo to find images of her extraordinary installation, *Shibboleth*, at the Tate Modern?

It is important to the play that Thebes has just come out of an enormous conflict – this is very much a war-torn city. For inspiration, Greg and Laurie looked at lots of images of conflict. They felt from looking at these images that there was a sense that all wars are in some way the same. As such, this production is not set in any one specific geographical place or time.

**WHY NOT:** collect images of a leader at a time of war? Find a way to arrange the images so that they tell the story of the conflict through his or her appearances. For example, do they look more tired and worn as the conflict progresses?

The costumes too have a modern feel, but are not specific. In the same way that images revealed the similarities between all conflicts, they also showed a kind of uniform in the arenas of war. Greg explains, "There is a sense that a world leader is a man in a suit." In Creon's case by the end of the play that suit is bloodstained.

**WHY NOT:** look for images of modern conflicts? The news agency Reuters, and Magnum Photos, are good places to start. Use fragments from various images to create a collage entitled, 'the war-torn city'. From your images, do you feel, like Greg Hersov and Laurie Dennett, that all conflicts are in some ways the same?



Ian Redford as Creon. Photo by Jonathan Keenan

As part of our occasional series of articles from teachers, illuminating aspects of texts that are frequently used in schools, this piece is written and produced by Peter Carroll (Drama Practitioner and Head of Drama at Wardle High School & Performing Arts College, Rochdale)

## Staging Theatre in Ancient Greece

The Festival of Dionysus was an important and spectacular event that was planned with military precision and well in advance of its spring schedule. All such major public expenses were subject to special taxes called 'liturgies' – something that the wealthiest families of Athens could not avoid. The choice was simple: either you support a warship for a year or pay for a play.

The City Magistrate would carefully select three wealthy patrons for the arts, called Choregoi. This honour came with a hefty price tag; as these specially selected citizens were required to fully fund the performance. This involved providing the cash for every overhead connected to the event – including training, housing and feeding the twelve to fifteen strong chorus and actors.

Another vital aspect of the Choregoi's involvement was to hire a competent chorus director. If a play then went on to win the competition, one would have to raid one's savings even further - for a ceremony to honour the God Dionysus for his benevolence. Drachmas and minae, the currency of the day, flowed from the Choregoi's purse like water.

Each writer would present four works: three tragedies and a satyr. Narratives were expected to offer a disciplined structure that reflected the unities of place, time and action i.e. it was set in one location, over the passage of one day, with no digression of 'action' – each section contributing powerfully to the plot and driving the story forward.

A prologue would be delivered by one or more of the actors at the start of the play. This would inform the audience of key background information concerning the narrative, 'set the scene' and gain their interest. The chorus would then enter via two aisles or pathways called Parodoi. These aisles were not exclusively for the use of the chorus; some of the actors would also use them – conventionally, those depicting characters who were returning from abroad or representing 'messengers', for example.

Each of the parodoi would lead into a large circular space known as the Orchestra. This was a ground level area that facilitated the chorus' animated response to the actors. As they came along the parodoi and into the orchestra the chorus would perform an entrance song, called a Parados. The chorus originally consisted of twelve enthusiastic amateurs with a penchant for singing - and they were specially trained for the competition. This number was later raised, by Sophocles, to fifteen. He also added a third actor. The leader of the chorus interacted with the characters in the play.

As these aisles or parodoi were additionally used by the public to enter and exit the theatre, their use by members of the chorus during the performance symbolised them being 'of and from the people'. This symbolism was further emphasised by the ground level position of the chorus.

Religious connections within this amazing world of theatre were never distanced and an altar (thymele) would often be placed at the orchestra's centre. The Athenian Theatre of Dionysus had an orchestra that was approximately eighteen metres in diameter.

Facing the audience was a large rectangular structure. Initially, this was little more than a cloth tent but was later made out of wood or stone. Its design included doors and windows and it was often painted to look like a temple or other setting, to facilitate a sense of location for the audience. This was known as the 'skene'. The intricate paintings on the skene became the forerunner of modern set design and scenery construction. The skene also provided a useful backstage area for actors to change costume and prepare for their second or third role. Masks were additionally used to facilitate an actor's change of role and create clear distinctions in a character's age, gender, social status and personality.

In front of the skene was a raised platform called the proskene. The actors – not the chorus – would make use of this acting area; and also position themselves on the several steps that led up to the doors of the skene. This was the early infancy of the modern proscenium stage.

Wooden cranes, called Mechane, were used to physically raise or move actors on and off the stage – particularly those portraying Gods. Its ropes and pulleys would creak slowly as actors were even lifted onto a flat area on the top of the skene. Such great elevation could be used, for example, to depict status, power and to hint at divinity.

The play was divided into several 'episodes' or scenes. At the end of each episode, the actors would leave the stage for a Stasimon – a song or ode delivered by members of the chorus. This would often reflect on the moral and ethical dilemmas facing the characters in the action that preceded it, and encourage the audience to digest and analyse events.

Somewhat at odds with our preconceptions of Ancient Greece, there were strict codes of conduct as to what could and could not be shown at the theatre – which was regarded as a holy place. Although the emotional intensity of characters' lives was so vividly portrayed, the actual act of physical violence on stage was deemed unacceptable. To compensate for this restriction, a wooden cart, known as an ekkyklēma, would be hidden behind scenery and pushed out through the doors of the skene to display, for example, the body of a lover spurned or the bloodied victim of a cruel and callous murder.

Following several alternations between Episodes and Stasima, there would be a final scene, known as the Exodus. After airing words of wisdom and insight into the tragic lives portrayed within the play, and offering points for later audience discussion on the meaning of life itself, the chorus would then make their final exit from the orchestra – again, via the parodoi.

Such emotionally charged drama was a powerfully cathartic or 'emotionally cleansing' experience for its audience - who were, without doubt, whisked through the most challenging, yet enticing, of journeys.

**WHY NOT:** think about the ways which Sophocles plays with the rigid structure of Greek tragedy? For example, he introduces an additional character, Eurydice, in the final scene of the play – this is a radical departure from the norm. What effect does it have?