Theaterrezension

Antigone by Sophokles* and
A View from the Bridge by Arthur Miller†

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This production of Antigone was sold out for months before its opening at the Barbican, due to the casting of Juliette Binoche in the title role. She is an actor who has a reputation of not being afraid to experiment with different forms of theatre as well as taking on productions in a language other than her native French. As a result, her decision to work with the Belgian director Ivo Van Hove has meant that critical expectations for this production were high. Inevitably, since such a recognisable actress was cast, this was not going to be a masked production.

The translation is by Anne Carson, a Canadian poet and Classicist. Her familiarity and confidence with the Greek theatrical form is clearly demonstrated in her play text which is accessible for an audience who may be unfamiliar with the form and structure of Greek theatre. Kate Kellaway, commenting on this translation in The Observer, is extremely complimentary about the work describing Carson as “innovative” and identifying that “the language moves between sombre and jocular” and as a result of this “is highly wrought and conversational”.¹ Praise for her work was also forthcoming from The Guardian as Charlotte Higgins calls the piece a “deft and elegant new translation [which] promises to be one of the real pleasures of the show.”²

In her Note from the Translator, which accompanies the published version of the play text, Carson acknowledges that there are concepts which are central to ancient Greek thought and society which create difficulties when an attempt is made to render them into modern English. It is this idea of ‘untranslatability’ which she uses to raise the inherent problems contained within the concept of ‘piety’, around which the actions of Antigone are centred. This is a theme which in the modern world is difficult enough to

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encapsulate as an action and which, in the context of *Antigone*, with the distance between the modern and the ancient Greek world is almost unsurmountable. Yet, throughout the course of the play *Antigone* is adamant that her action to bury her brother is an “act of perfect piety” which she was “caught in”\(^3\). Carson goes on to reason that *Antigone* is placed at a difficult impasse, for;

Surely piety is not a criminal act in which one is “caught”? Surely piety is a good thing? Surely the community which outlaws piety is a community that has tipped over the edge into nonsense?\(^4\)

In exploring this question Carson goes right to the heart of the play. In stating that she has been ‘caught in the act of perfect piety’ *Antigone* has used “standard rhetorical procedure in Greek but sounds over determined in English”.\(^5\) She is raising a concept which in English is a reasonable proposition and a positive action for an individual to undertake; piety is a laudable act which is rational and therefore does not need to be explained. Being caught undertaking a pious action should therefore reflect well within the wider society on the person undertaking the act. Yet, those familiar with the play know that this is not the case, far from it. Carson discusses this problem further and traces it back to the “two cognates for the same word (noun and verb)” which are used in close proximity within this speech by Sophokles; *eusebia* and *sebizo*. These two terms “refer to the awe that radiates from gods to humans and is given back in worship”.\(^6\) Here piety is an action expected from a human in order to balance out the actions of the gods. It is not an optional investment in good works to be counted against an individual’s future

\(^{5}\) Sophokles (2015) line 943 and p. 5.
reception by the gods, as it might be in a Christian text, but is a driving need in an individual where an action is needed in order to avoid repercussions from the gods and avert accusations related to *hubris*. Piety is therefore a fearful action and if it is fulfilled then the fear should be removed. The pious individual should be free from any negative backlash which the gods may consider meting out to the impious. They are safe. This is why Carson’s Antigone on the page is struggling with the paradox that she has been faced with. If you undertake a pious action then you should not be actively punished for it. In the city of Thebes ruled by Kreon this bending of the rules, to punish someone who is undertaking a socially correct but politically unsanctioned act, is not only unfair but will result in her taking her life. Antigone has undertaken the correct action, yet she is being driven out by society. As a result of this once the bonds of family are severed in a very public manner she can see no reason for continuing. She has no role, no status and no worth within society. The piety which guides her and gives her life meaning has no value in the wider *polis*. This is why she is eventually driven to hang herself in the cave. Ironically this occurs just as her future husband, Haimon, has decided to reintegrate her back into society by (re)claiming her as his bride.

The translation is the strongest part of this production, giving the cast a really solid base upon which to ground their performance. Unfortunately, the cast have not really risen to the challenge. They come across as detached from the text and, whilst acting in a naturalistic way, miss the emotional punctuation which Carson provides within the traditional structure of Classical Greek drama. Binoche comes over not as a tragic figure, but as one who is inflexible and cannot be admired by an audience. As Kellaway observes about her performance “what becomes quickly clear is that celebrity status is not the same as tragic stature. Binoche’s shrill Antigone is a diminished figure, more hysteric than heroine – there is much screeching and high-pitched shouting and only intermittent
There is no fear when she embarks on her decision to bury her brother. Her piety seems to stem from personal motivation against the state rather than a desire to ensure that the correct rites are undertaken for her unburied brother. There is a complete lack of an emotional journey for Antigone, as she realises that she has no place in the world. This was further compounded as she was lost in a large set with amplified voices and a generic backdrop of slow motion footage comprising of blurred city streets and unidentifiable people which, as Paul Taylor of *The Independent* points out, “sap[s] this endlessly relevant play of its raw urgency.” As a result there was a lack of catharsis for the audience, there was no space left for them to feel that there must be some way to save Antigone, and that she was worthy of this due to her piety. At 1 hour and 40 minutes with no interval, it seemed a very long evening.

The role which was most successfully conveyed and did elicit some feelings of sympathy was, surprisingly, that of Creon. He is often presented as an inflexible tyrant. Yet, Patrick O’Kane managed to convey a measured statesmanlike quality which clearly demonstrated that he was undoubtedly thinking of the greater good of the *polis*; “if a man puts family or friends ahead of fatherland / I count him absolutely *good for nothing*”. He can see no other way to reinstate normality, after a traumatic attack on his city, other than clearly sending out the message to all, regardless of status or family, that if you are not for the city then you are against it. A naturalistic acting style was used which allowed him to interact with his son Haimon, played by Samuel Edward-Cook, and indicate through hugs and significant looks that, whilst he may overtly state his position to a wider audience of the *polis* his love for his son was strong. Higgins praises the fact that in this relationship between family and state Carson has offered a subtlety in her translation which offers more “complex readings” to the viewer than the average. Here there is no absolute “binary interaction” between “state authoritarianism, represented by Creon, (*sic*) versus personal resistance, embodied by Antigone”.

Tragically, whilst family do appear to count for something to Creon in the wider world which exists outside of politics, in the aftermath of the battle for the control of Thebes, the need for strong leadership outweighs all other considerations. The inevitable result of this is that family will be destroyed. In choosing to cast Haimon as a more mature character rather than a love-struck teen much more pathos was given to his final decision to take his life when faced with the death of his betrothed. It also added additional poignancy to the fact that his mother, Eurydike, also being older was never going to be able to present Creon with a new son and heir. In being inflexible and principled Creon had brought about the downfall and total destruction of his family. This naturalistic acting style adopted by the production also continued into the work of the chorus which utilised Ismene, Haimon,

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Teiresias and Eurydike. This doubling meant that the voice of the community was tinged with the agendas of the individual. There was a fluid movement of line delivery where speakers slipped in and out of delivering generic choral views of the action and then shifted to become a specific named character. This technique worked particularly well with Ismeme who vacillates between yearning to join Antigone and wanting to stay safe and adhere to Kreon’s edict of non-burial, at times she slipped back into the chorus in an attempt at anonymity. The performance from Kathryn Pogson as Eurydike and one of the chorus was also very strong. Her allocation of a significant amount of choral dialogue was an extremely positive move which helped to re-anchor the production at points where it had come adrift and the meaning and presentation were suffering from low key amplified delivery.

The structure of the set gave distinct echoes of the traditional Greek skênê, with a small lower acting area in front of the raised portion which the chorus utilised in order to bring themselves closer to the audience. Often sitting on the edge of the skênê they also walked along the lower edge of the acting area bringing the audience into their confidence when delivering the choral odes. The significance of this structure was however spoiled by the front edge of the raised skênê area being populated with a design statement of leather sofas, a sink and book shelves and filing cabinets. This Ikea set dressing, and later the washing of mugs by Ismene / the chorus in the sink, served to trivialise the statements of the chorus and make them appear banal. There was no room for a society here who had anything significant to say. The choral odes were reduced to sofa chats and group discussion rather than punctuation of bigger events and social comment. As a result the whole play came over as an exercise in stoicism with little humanity, energy or fight. Kreon decreed, Antigone disobeyed, Antigone died. Wind effects, back projection and moody black and white footage of an Antigone rehearsing her death could not lift it above this rather disappointing plateau.

After witnessing this cold and unsatisfying Antigone I was therefore incredibly surprised on seeing the director, Ivo Van Hove’s, other current production in London to find that I was seeing a performance which was more Greek than Greek...

A View from the Bridge by Arthur Miller succeeded in all the ways Antigone failed. The image of retribution, which the play closes with, creates a cathartic feeling and leaves the viewer with a feeling that here was a blood feud which, now it had begun, would take generations to play out and perhaps never would. Miller had originally structured the play as a one act presentation in 1955 when it was performed together with Memory of Two Mondays. However, he revisited it a year later and reworked it into a two act play with the input of Peter Brook. Andrew Dickson identifies that the “two act prose version [is] –more rounded and deliberate, less obviously indebted to Greek tragedy”.

\[\text{[11 Dickson (2015) 19.]}\]
However, the debt which the play owes to the Greek structure and characterisation is still obvious in its evocation of a family where the patriarch, Eddie Carbone, is flawed. His blinkered actions and hubristic attitude will have to be broken or will serve to break him. Miller states that when he was exploring the construction of the play he saw it as a probe into the mysterious world of their [the Carbone family’s] incestuous feelings and denial, leading to a murder-suicide.\textsuperscript{12}

Mark Strong plays Carbone, an Italian-American man working on the docks unloading ships. His family live in the Brooklyn slums, the view you get from the Brooklyn Bridge when you are passing over rather than through the area. The place that a respectable commuter doesn’t wish to visit. He and his wife, Beatrice, are childless and raise Beatrice’s niece, Catherine, as their own. The relationship between Eddie and his niece is a subtle portrayal of a love between the two of them which is seen as unhealthy by those outside of the relationship. Yet, until Beatrice raise the fact to Catherine that she is getting too old to throw herself into Eddie’s arms and kiss him as she does, Catherine has no idea that this relationship is anything other than as it should be. The performance of Catherine, by Phoebe Fox, has the emotion which Binoche’s portrayal of Antigone lacked. Fox conveys the pain of realisation that she must grow up and leave Eddie behind, finding a man whom she can marry. The raw grief once she does move on and finds the sensitive Rodolpho a relative on her mother’s side, who proposes to her, is touching and worrying at the same time. There is the recognition there that Eddie will not relinquish his hold over Catherine to grant her the freedom which is essential so that Eddie can retake his role as husband to Beatrice.

The anger which Eddie focuses on Catherine’s fiancé increases as he continually goads Rodolpho with accusations of effeminacy. Eventually, Eddie cannot restrain his contempt for the man and, in an aggressively homophobic act in front of witnesses, Eddie kisses him. As Rodolpho is present in the family as a guest and, in keeping with ideas of Greek guest friendship has a supposedly unassailable status, this attack is beyond any other insult Eddie could have visited upon him. It is inevitable that retribution will be meted out to Eddie as a result of this action since Rodolpho, and his brother Marco, are from Sicily, an area which still believes in blood feuds as a way to reinstate family honour. From this moment onwards it is only a matter of time before Eddie pays for his action. Catherine is inevitably torn, whilst she is in theory the bridge between the two sides of the family who should heal the rift via her marriage, she is indirectly responsible for creating it. In this way the view from the bridge is also Catherine’s vantage point of an event which she is central to but has no control over.

Charlotte Higgins, from \textit{The Guardian}, identifies the strength of the production as stemming from the fact that “it is clear that Eddie knows he is right. The Sicilians know

\textsuperscript{12} Miller (2015) 20.
they are right. There isn’t this sense of the play having been agreed on.”\textsuperscript{13} The inevitability of the destruction which Catherine’s relationship with Rodolpho will put into motion is highlighted through the role of Alfieri, played by Michael Gould. He is a solicitor who advises Eddie and can see the whole unhealthy familial mess from an outsider’s perspective. It is clear to him that Eddie’s jealousy towards Rodolpho will destroy the family. Gould’s chorus-like conveyance of these facts to the audience are put forward in such a matter of fact way that, whilst the audience can in no way blame him for the information, he undoubtedly fulfils a Cassandra like role. He can see what those inside of the events have no hope of becoming privy to in a way which will enable them to save themselves.

The final moments of the play are therefore cathartic in a wholly satisfying manner, which the actions of Antigone were not. In A View from the Bridge the stripped back set, a white void with none of the usual baggage seen in a production of kitchen table and solid furniture served to throw the humanity of the participants and their actions into sharp relief. Their motivations and emotions are painfully raw and close to the surface which results in a production which is compelling and inclusive for an audience. The final decision to bathe the cast in blood cascading from the ceiling was a bold one which could have come over as a tricksy motif, yet had completely the opposite effect. It served to mould the individual figures surrounding and overwhelming Eddie Carbone, as he was stabbed by Marco, into a bloody amorphous whole, which could not be separated. The holding of this tableau as it became drenched with red was mesmerising as the wider significance of the stabbing became apparent. This was not a one off act but one which would stain all present for all time.

Antigone in contrast had no point where a cathartic moment was telegraphed to the audience. Here there was no moment to feel that a monumental event had occurred which would stain the future. I suspect in part that the problem with this muted Antigone stemmed from the emotional baggage which seems to have informed the production and affected members of the cast and creative team. According to Binoche and Van Hove they were influenced by two real life events which shocked their native France and Holland. The first was the Charlie Hebdo terrorist attack and the subsequent “burials of the Paris terrorists, interred in unmarked graves” whilst the second was the fact that Van Hove was personally affected by the Malaysian Airline flight, shot down over the Ukraine in 2014, which killed a close colleague.\textsuperscript{14} The overt link to the body of Polyneikes being denied burial is obviously a raw topic as Van Hove equates it to his friend

“just lying somewhere in a field . . . for over a week, in summer, in sun, rotting.

The Dutch did something beautiful which Antigone does here. After two weeks

\textsuperscript{13} Higgins (2015) on-line.
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they brought the bodies to Eindhoven. There was a hearse for everybody, and they were driven through the whole country. The highways were lined with people. It was a huge showing of humanity: that you show respect to the dead. For me it suddenly became totally real.”

Whilst in no way one wants to belittle this grief at such personal and emotional occurrences, the events cited have not served to create a bridge to convey meaning to the audience. The wider significance of a violent death and its repercussions on society and those left behind have not been successfully conveyed to the audience. Binoche touches on why this may not be possible in this production as she identifies that her portrayal of Antigone draws on her relationship with the gods and death.

“Somehow she [Antigone] already has an inside contact, as if she is already living with the dead, has a strong relationship with the gods. For her there is no boundary: the visible and invisible worlds are almost the same.”

It is this exclusive relationship which serves as a barrier between the audience and the events of Antigone. The tacking on at the end of the blaring soundtrack of Heroine from Velvet Underground serves only to ensure that the audience are awake to applaud. Luckily for those based in London, Anne Carson is currently working on a translation of The Bakkhai which will be produced in London by the Classic Stage Company. We look forward to seeing this in summer of 2015.

Bibliography:

ABOUT THE AUTHOR  Julie Ackroyd obtained her B.A. (Hons.) in mixed English and Humanities with the Open University in England; she then continued to study with them completing an M.A. in Classical Studies. Having won the Open University Travel Bursary she represented the University, in Epidaurus, at the first conference organised by the Archive of Performance of Greek and Roman Drama run by Oxford University, whilst there she presented a paper on “The Use of Butoh in the Peter Hall production of Bacchae for the National Theatre, London.”

In 2007 Julie was selected to be part of the judging committee for the Society of London Theatres Olivier Awards 2008 in London. As part of the play panel she viewed seventy eight shows over nine months in order to find and commend the best casts and creative teams working in London theatre.

She was recently awarded her Ph. D. by Birkbeck College, University of London for a thesis on ‘The Recruitment and Training of the Child Actor on the London Stage c.1600’ and is now an Honorary Associate of the Open University Classics Department.

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure 1: Ivo van Hove, Antigone, Obi Abili, Juliette Binoche, and Patrick O’Kane (From Left to Right) © Jan Versweyveld.
Figure 2: Ivo van Hove, Antigone, Juliette Binoche and Samuel Edward-Cook © Jan Versweyveld.