

## *Antigone* discussions echo across the ages and across campus



**Rhea Chakraborty, a first-year student in the College of Arts and Sciences, questions faculty panelists during the Barton Hall discussion on Sophocles' *Antigone*, Aug. 24.** Robert Barker/University Photography

By Franklin Crawford

For a few dramatic moments on Sunday, Aug. 24, Barton Hall was the site of a 2,500 year old battle of the wills between Creon, the king of Thebes, and Antigone, daughter of Oedipus. The lyrical slugfest, televised live, was performed by Cornell theater department actors and set the stage for a more-tempered faculty panel discussion and audience dialogue on key aspects of Sophocles' *Antigone*.

The symposium was part of Cornell's third New Student Reading Project, an annual exercise encouraging intellectual and social rapport among entering freshmen and transfer students.

The staged reading followed introductory remarks from Provost Biddy Martin, opening a two-hour program simulcast throughout Tompkins County on Time Warner Cable Channel

10. Laurence Drozd, a resident professional teaching associate at Cornell, portrayed Creon, and theater arts major Colista Turner '05 played Antigone -- roles the two will perform in the Cornell theater department's production of *Antigone*, opening at the Schwartz Center for the Performing Arts Sept. 18.

Following the reading, Cornell faculty panelists David Feldshuh, who is directing the Schwartz Center theater production, Michelle Moody-Adams and Jeffrey Rusten addressed the audience of about 3,000 students, faculty and local residents.

Rusten, professor of classics, speculated on what the first Greek audience viewing *Antigone* might have expected, and he discussed Greek society, politics and the role of gender in the time of Sophocles. While providing historical background and context for the play, he reminded the audience that, daunting as its tragic contents may seem, *Antigone* does not require expertise in Greek literature to be grasped by a modern reader.

"Like much of Greek literature, the play's long life is due to its immediacy," Rusten said. "The confrontations of authority, age, power and gender against the resistance of subjugated peoples and individual convictions -- these are not things of the past. So it can be read quite easily without advanced historical or cultural context."

In his closing comments, Rusten urged students to interpret and develop their own personal views of what the play means. And, he added, that whether they had read it before or not, he hoped students found the play as "unexpected, as wrenching and perhaps as disturbing -- in other words, as tragic -- as its first audience probably did. ... The play stands on its own and it's up to you to explore it, so you take it from here."

Moody-Adams, professor of philosophy and director and of university's



**Provost Biddy Martin and Indira Singh, a freshman in the College of Human Ecology, discuss *Antigone* in their small group discussion outside of Goldwin Smith, Aug. 25.**

Ethics and Public Life Program, discussed the enduring relevance of *Antigone*. She asked audience members to question whether or not Antigone's civil disobedience and invocation of a higher divine law was morally superior or morally problematic. She referenced Martin Luther King's "Letter From a Birmingham Jail," a classic defense of civil disobedience, as an alternative to the way Antigone handled her defiance of Creon's authority.

*Photography*

"A crucial part of King's defense was his conviction that the civilly disobedient act must be carried out with underlying respect for the laws of the state," Moody-Adams said. "This is why King defended nonviolence, this is why he insisted that civilly disobedient citizens be prepared to go to jail for their civil disobedience. This stance, I think, allowed King to do what Antigone should perhaps have done. It allowed him to show that carrying out an act of civil disobedience might be compatible" with a recognition of "the moral weight of political obligation to the state."

Feldshuh, professor and artistic director of the Schwartz Center, provided the afternoon's comic relief, citing excerpts from papers written by fourth-graders on Greek culture and history. His favorite: "In the Olympics, the Greeks threw the java and hurled their biscuits."

Feldshuh's point was to help illustrate how knowledge can be limited and defined by inexperience and misperception. Breaking through those conceptual boundaries is one of the jobs of the artist, and it is often accomplished through storytelling.

"If we could ride a time machine back almost 2,500 years to Athens at dawn, we'd see almost 15,000 people seeing this play. The simplest question one would have to ask is 'why are they there'? I suspect the answer is they needed to be there. They lived in a world of fret and change not unlike our own. They needed to hear the story of Antigone because they appreciated, perhaps even more than we do, that stories have power.



They teach us to learn what, in a way, we already half-know."

Feldshuh went on to describe the process of directing, producing and staging *Antigone*. In the Cornell production, 13 masked student actors are shown against a post-apocalyptic backdrop, and music is central to the production. Feldshuh held aloft one of the masks, a distorted mutation of a human face inspired by Pablo Picasso's Cubist works.

Dozens of students lined up to ask questions following the presentations, among them first-year students in the College of Arts and Sciences Diana Taft, Jeron Jackson and Rhea Chakraborty.

Taft asked if much was known about the role of women in ancient Greece, Chakraborty questioned the nature of the kinship between Antigone and her sister Ismene, and Jackson wondered if Antigone's self-righteous acts also spurred the double suicides of Haemon and Eurydice.

The questions and the dialogue continued for another 45 minutes, and they resumed Monday during more than 235 small-group discussions held throughout campus.

**Professor David Feldshuh, left, joins fellow faculty panelists professors Michelle Moody-Adams and Jeffrey Rusten, during the discussion on Sophocles' *Antigone* in Barton Hall, Sunday, Aug. 24.** *Frank DiMeo/University Photography*

Nicholas Weals, a freshman physics major, said the reading project was a welcome and refreshing break from his usual studies. Weals was among about 20 students who attended a discussion in Goldwin Smith Hall co-led by President Jeffrey Lehman and Moody-Adams.

"I think it's a good opportunity for people who aren't going into English or the study of literature to experience something they may not have the time for" once their studies commence, Weals said.

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