



Fall Ritual

by Jeffrey Rusten

Two years ago, when David Feldshuh, artistic director of Cornell's Schwartz Center for Performing Arts, asked me to suggest a classical Greek play for possible production there, I knew just what to answer: Aristophanes' *Birds*. What he had in mind, however, was a tragedy, and later I heard he was thinking of staging another excellent choice, Euripides' *Bacchae*.

The fates, or rather the provost's office, had other things in store.

In spring 2003, with the invasion of Iraq looming and antiwar protests in full swing, Cornell Vice Provost Isaac Kramnick announced that the deans of the colleges and the provost had selected Sophocles' *Antigone* for the First-Year Student Reading Project the following fall. And Feldshuh agreed to stage *Antigone* as the first play of the Center's 2003-04 season.

Under the First-Year Student Reading Project, all Cornell first-year students are assigned to read the same book over the summer, and discuss it with faculty at the end of their orientation week. Many schools do something similar, but at Cornell the book is one of the few intellectual universals for an entering class of more than 3,000 in seven different colleges. Given such a diverse population, the decision is never easy.

I had mixed feelings about the choice of *Antigone*, which is the story of a girl who defies her king, Creon, to bury her fallen brother, the rebel leader Polyneices. Antigone pays for her defiance with her life, and in the process destroys Creon personally and brings down his rule. The play has become an ideologist's dream, never failing to generate debate over the misuse of authority based on power, gender, age, and the legitimacy of defiance no matter what the consequences. Antigone's resistance, its motives, and its effects have been commandeered by philosophers, psychoanalysts, and feminists to support an astonishing variety of views. In the 1940s, the play was adapted by Jean Anouilh and Bertold Brecht to question or ennoble resistance to Nazism; in the 1970s, by Athol Fugard to protest apartheid. George Steiner devoted an entire book, *Antigones*, to the

most far-flung versions of the story in text, stage, and film.

These days, however, *Antigone* is much less performed than, for example, the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus or the plays of Euripides; a debate between two entrenched positions is not necessarily good theater. Its canonical status and the volumes of criticism it has generated can be intimidating, and Antigone's faith in the religious laws of ancient Greece can make a modern audience wonder whether the play has anything to say today.

In fact, the story was a radically new one in its day. The traditional myth, known in plays by Sophocles' predecessor Aeschylus, held that the "Seven Against Thebes," the warriors recruited by Polyneices to reconquer his home of Thebes, were so wicked that after their defeat all of their bodies were cast out, unburied. It was up to Athens, led by Theseus, to besiege Thebes on behalf of the relatives of the fallen, demand

their bodies, and give them burial in Athenian soil, where their tomb was still pointed out in antiquity. In *Antigone*, burial is still the issue, but now just for the Theban traitor; and Antigone's defiance, her age, and especially her gender (which so shocks Creon) are a stunning Sophoclean innovation. As Helene Foley has pointed out (*Female Acts in Greek Tragedy*), a woman was not legally or morally a responsible agent in ancient Athens; a young female resistor in real-life Athens would never have been accused or executed, much less be able to bring down a king, although her close male relatives (precisely what Antigone, of course, lacks) might have been.

This was the background I contributed as a classicist to the various discussions of *Antigone* in the first weeks of the semester. There were many forums: from the Ithaca High School to a local retirement home, from the eight students in my own Cornell session to the 3,000 in the field house the day before. Especially urgent questions came from the two groups under most pressure to interpret the play: teachers and cast members. In the orientation session for faculty (many from subjects

Teiresias (Godfrey Simmons, Jr.) foretells to Creon (Laurence Drozd) the death of his son.
Photo by Andrew Gillis, Cascadilla Photography.





Haemon (Tony Hogrebe '04) and Antigone in death, holding their masks from life. Photo by Andrew Gillis, Cascadia Photography

like electrical engineering, plant breeding, or veterinary medicine), there were questions such as, What do these choral songs mean? Why had we chosen to have the new students read a play in which three people commit suicide? What if the students simply said, as the son of one faculty member had, that this play was “dumb?” The actors, reading through their parts in early rehearsals, were curious about other things: Who is this brother of Haemon that his mother says died earlier? What happens to Ismene?

The most persistent question, and the reason for the whole project, was the play’s meaning today. In addition to a special Cornell edition of *Antigone*, First-Year Reading Project materials included Martin Luther King’s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, an essay by George Eliot, and quotations from critical or political comments on the meaning of Antigone’s resistance. Comments from students and faculty ranged from unqualified admiration for Antigone to finding her insufferable. Sympathy for Creon was rare. At the public forum, ethics professor Michelle Moody-Adams presented a contrarian view. We are so conditioned to distrust government that Antigone’s rightness seems unquestionable (it takes someone choosing the state over family, like the brother of the Unabomber, to make us uneasy), and so we need to be especially attentive to what may be not righteous, but self-righteous, about her. Readiness to die for a cause has had a bad name since September 11, and even earlier than that: twenty-five years ago, after the German terrorist Ulrike Meinhof hanged herself in her cell, the film *Germany in Autumn* fictionalized a TV network canceling a production of *Antigone* to forestall the parallel.

Even without being staged, the choice of *Antigone* would have been a success. Among other things it was, as students pointed out, the shortest first-year reading yet assigned. However, the production of the play was anything but an epilogue. From the outset, Director David Feldshuh had the ambitious aim of reinventing the play as spectacle by embracing the formal constraints of Greek tragedy—masks, music, choral song, and dance, as in ancient Athens—but all contemporary. Even the translation would be new. Since he didn’t know Greek, he asked me for suggestions and I reviewed the

results, but the method was his own. He worked through the commentary on the Greek text by Mark Griffith, and read closely eleven different translations, following the advice of Douglas Parker on translating Aristophanes, “learn everything possible about a passage, then forge the original and remake it in English poetry.” Sophocles’ choral songs are notoriously full of perplexing allusions, and here Feldshuh took the greatest freedom. The dialogue, on the other hand, omitted none of the verbal pyrotechnics of Sophoclean speeches—he was famous for his arguments—and they were even expanded then on occasion. The exchanges sometimes reflected Shakespearean cadences and even specific phrases, though not archaic or allusive.

The translation was finished and the actors chosen in May, but rehearsals could not begin until the students returned in August. Over the summer, mask maker and movement coach Norm Johnson of Ithaca College used casts of the actors’ faces to fashion masks inspired by native American totems, Balinese puppets, even cubist portraits. Composer Andrew Waggoner of Syracuse University wrote choral music for the new translation. In late August the actors returned, with four weeks to put it all together.

Feldshuh’s adaptation was set not as protest against a war in progress, but (truer to the text) in a postwar Thebes—Antigone’s actions prolong a conflict that Creon determines to mark as closed. The action begins with explosions. The city walls are gouged by bombs; the costumes, modeled on photos of Afghan refugees, are tattered western jackets worn with baggy pants.

The masks, which were worn from the first day of rehearsal, set an otherworldly tone. Many of the first movement exercises centered on presenting the masks, which in turn affected the whole approach to the acting. Movements were not quotidian. Ismene and Antigone are found on the floor at the opening, which is where Creon crouches at the end. The behavior of Creon was most striking: his resonant voice was initially confident, his movements angular and stiff; later his oversized, demonic red mask combined with writhing and wincing to give him the look of a tiger or a Minotaur, a captured animal.

The singing of the chorus sometimes broke into the action suddenly, sometimes accompanied it; the first song, “Wonder Is Man,” was a celebration; the final one, “Bless Us, Dionysus,” was frantic. The fourth song and its mythological parallels were spoken directly to Antigone by the chorus leader. Antigone sang throughout, and the finest musical moment was the clear, confident sadness in her *a capella* self-lament. By contrast Creon’s closing song (his only singing in the play) was anguished and quavering.

But the text was foremost, and movement and music became increasingly harmonious with the words and implied action. On stage right was a pile of stones, which Creon brandished recalling the public stoning threatened in his decree; stage left was the hearth flame for the ritual of the dead, to which Antigone was drawn. Speeches were punctuated by explosions, softened by background flute or oboe. The chorus held tall staffs, which they used to cage characters that Creon attacked, or to separate them during the Sophoclean *stichomythia*, the rapid quarreling exchanges between Antigone and Ismene, Creon and Haemon.

The action is never a static debate, but proceeds with increasing speed to a train-wreck of wills in conflict and intentions thwarted. Antigone wants to steal away her brother’s body but Ismene is afraid to help, so she must resort to a handful of earth, a mere gesture (thus her later fury at her sister). Creon, for all his stubborn rage, re-thinks repeatedly in private, first sparing Ismene, then changing Antigone’s punishment to hedge his bets. Teiresias delivers a terrifying message with a mixture of mockery and pity. Haemon rushes off to rescue Antigone and go into exile, but arrives too late. Creon does the same: he is told by the chorus to go to her first (before burying Polyneices), yet does so second, by which time Antigone, not knowing two people are coming to save her, has just killed herself.

The speech of the messenger, an unbroken narrative in the original, was partly distributed among the characters whose words he quotes, so that Antigone and Haemon can appear together as lovers, and Creon can enact his own agony at his son’s death.

The death of Antigone kills Haemon: the death of Haemon kills his mother. Antigone, who would not herself have died for a spouse or child, causes Creon to lose his spouse and child. His loyalty to the city has cost him his family, and despite Antigone’s claim, he cannot get another.

As Creon laments, he is stripped of his regalia by the ever-present chorus leader, whose anger now reveals him to be Creon’s evil genius. The chorus brings out Ismene and places the royal purple on her. The action stops, the actors remove their masks, and Creon and the chorus whisper the closing warning: “Don’t wait for pain to give you wisdom; don’t wait for age to make you wise.”

The staging was a complete surprise to those who had read the play, and a great success with reviewers and audiences. The Kiplinger Theatre at the Schwartz Center sold out both weeks of performances, and Dan Booth of Cornell Television Services recorded and edited a video version, which will be aired with interviews on WSKG TV this winter.

For me, the project has brought me to read *Antigone* not as predictably didactic, big-issue propaganda, but as a story as wrenching and as disturbing—in other words, as tragic— as its first audience perhaps found it.

David Feldshuh, who at the forum compared each new play to a blind date, told me that directing his first Greek play has been “tough, tough, tough.” He showed, though, how the formal constraints of Greek theater can be opportunities, and that despite all its cultural and ideological weight, *Antigone* was meant for the stage. Perhaps now I can talk him into a production of Aristophanes’ *Birds* after all (is the Ornithology Lab interested?). But probably not just yet.

Jeffrey Rusten is currently chair of the Cornell Department of Classics and director of graduate studies in theatre. Among his publications are commentaries on Sophocles’ Oedipus Tyrannos and Thucydides: Book II, and a translation of Theophrastus’ Characters for the Loeb Classical Library.