

Marcus Romer is a director, actor and playwright. He has directed a wide variety of award winning productions in a range of theatre venues, nationally and internationally. He adapted the screenplay for *The Knife That Killed Me* from the novel by Anthony McGowan and co-directed the film with Kit Monkman. The film has just been released by Universal Pictures. For the past 19 years Marcus has been Artistic Director of the Pilot Theatre company which is based in York. In 2014/15 he directed the Pilot Theatre version of Sophocles' *Antigone*. The text was adapted as a contemporary street drama by the playwright Roy Williams. The production premiered at the Derby Theatre and then toured throughout the regions and to London.

In this interview, recorded on Wednesday 11 March 2015 at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East, Chrissy Combes spoke to Marcus about the production.

An illustrated version of this interview is available on the *Practitioners' Voices in Classical Reception Studies* website: www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/pvcrs/2015/romer

CC. I'm talking today at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East to Marcus Romer, who is the Artistic Director of Pilot Theatre. The Pilot Theatre company has been doing a national tour of Sophocles' *Antigone*, so that is going to be the subject of our discussion today. Marcus, thank you very much for talking to me today.

MR. You're very welcome, Chrissy, I'm looking forward to it.

CC. Thank you. In terms of Pilot Theatre, I wonder if you could just tell me to begin with a little bit about its history and a little bit about its aims.

MR. Certainly. Pilot Theatre is a national touring organisation for the Arts Council. We've been regularly funded since 2001. We tour nationally. We're based at York Theatre Royal and we have been touring nationally since 1981. The company was originally set up by students at the University of Leeds through Bretton Hall college. It was set up by students back in '81. I haven't been there all that time! But I came in and I worked as an actor and I've been the director and I've been working with the company for a number of years in terms of the projects we've been making. Primarily we're funded by the Arts Council to deliver new work for new audiences and by the nature of that, it often means for young people. For our young people, sometimes our work is unsuitable for age 13 and under. So, we tend to say that we're aiming it at Year 9 and 10 up but we don't have an upper limit. So, whilst in old terms it would be called a young people's company, we actually tour new work and we work in partnership. And we've co-produced every single piece of work since 1997 with other venues nationally, we have a network of venues with whom we work. So *Antigone* was co-produced with the Theatre Royal, Stratford East and Derby Theatre.

CC. Roy Williams has radically altered the original text of *Antigone*, hasn't he? He has shifted the action from in front of the royal palace of Thebes to a 21st century street. The characters' names have been changed, with Antigone becoming Tig, Creon becoming Creo, and so on. And Creon (or Creo) is no longer the king of Thebes, he is a feared gangland boss. If you think about Greek tragedy, it has a modern relevance inasmuch as it can have quite a bearing on contemporary issues. With this production of Sophocles' *Antigone*, I think it goes further than that because Roy Williams has taken the play right into gangster land, hasn't he, into a kind of urban street land?

MR. I know that if Roy were here he would say that we haven't taken it into gangster land as such. What we have done is to set it in a contemporary other world. For us, the world is still Thebes, it's still our version of that. This is the third project I've made with Roy. I've known him for about 20 years and we have made three projects together. And Roy and I aim to tell stories that are relevant for now. Where we've set it, we've set it in a gang, in a club, in that space, but to all intents and purposes, this is still a kind of kingdom, it's kind of another space where there's the kingpin, so

Creon is the leader of that particular group of people, and he has his own supporters, his own army around him. For us, Roy wanted to make a version of *The Wire* meets *Game of Thrones*. And *The Wire*, again, with its own language and its own specificity, set in Baltimore – we wanted to do our version of that. And *The Wire* has an incredible back story, all the characters have a really big back story. And for us, as well, Sophocles was writing the box sets of his day. People knew all the myths and they would go along and see the next episode in a story. They knew the back story about Antigone's parents, the horror of the Oedipus myth. Ancient audiences would have been coming to the first production of *Antigone* knowing the back story, knowing the characters and the situation. So you could look on this play as Season Three of the Theban plays (although I know they weren't originally written by Sophocles in chronological order). But if you think of it like that for this Netflix generation, then looking at something like *The Wire* which has a number of seasons over a period of time, which spans people's epic stories and generations, then we are not a million miles away from our intention of wanting to recreate this story with the back story that exists for our audiences now.

CC. Those audiences have been in a number of venues on this tour, haven't they?

MR. Yes, we have been to Nottingham, Derby, York Theatre Royal, Newcastle, Winchester, Watford, here at Stratford East, several other theatres. We play large venues up and down the country. In terms of design, we have pillars, six columns, and an apron space. It is a very impressive set, designed by Joanna Scotcher. Obviously, it can't always work as an apron stage when we are playing in certain proscenium arch spaces, but ideally it's six columns and an open playing space for the actors. So we recognise the roots of where this is coming from, how it was originally staged, but also we want to emphasise the universality of the story. When we were making the piece the story of Michael Brown from Ferguson, the young man whose dead body was left on the streets in the sun for four hours, not being touched by his family, was very much in our minds around the original story that we are telling about Creon (Creo), the ruler, forbidding the burial of one of Antigone's brothers.

CC. That horrific story about Michael Brown is very relevant, isn't it?

MR. Oh yes. There is a significant link to Sophocles' political themes and the moral issue of failing to honour the dead. We don't have to look very far for that contemporary relevance where an incident happens, a big incident that's a flashpoint within a community, where basic human needs are not attended to, and a body is left there for a number of hours while people photograph it. And we use technology in this production, people using their phone cameras and using their digital technologies. We kind of bring it into play around who is watching us and we loosely try to tie in the gods with the people who are looking and observing. That's our aim with the phone cameras and the CCTV footage we project into the space.

CC. Yes, Antigone's forbidden act of covering her brother's corpse is captured by a soldier on his smartphone and the production establishes a world of surveillance, with camera observers. So, it is indicated in your production that to some extent, the religious elements, the gods, are people monitoring, watching what's going on through the cameras?

MR. We are all being watched, all the time, and who is watching the watchers and who is controlling who is watching who and who filters out what is watched and who is judging what happens when the things that are being observed are being seen by unseen eyes.....and so for us the idea of that was quite useful in terms of the placing of the world in which we're telling the story, of giving that all seeing eye. As I say we're making this for the Netflix generation. We don't have an interval, we go straight through as a 90 minutes, it's like the pilot episode of *Game of Thrones* or whatever. We are not pandering to that but we are recognising where drama now fits in to the cultural climate for the people who come to see the work we are making in a theatre as old as this. And we are looking for those contemporary cultural reference points that might allow people to feel a connectivity to a story that is two and a half thousand years old. That's our role as a theatre company, to find those points.

CC. Does Roy Williams come into the rehearsal space with you?

MR. Roy and I work very closely. We did a talk last night for some artists here and he said our relationship was like a distant marriage or partnership. With regard to the dramaturgical work, I work with Roy on the drafts. And Roy was in rehearsal with us for three weeks. So the thing was constantly evolving, and before we opened at Stratford we did another week's re-rehearsal and some rewrites and edits. Theatre is an evolving process. We respond back to the way that things have been working audience wise, and we've made some changes, some nips and tucks. You've got to keep adding your own things and developing it. We still made some changes this last week. It's a living, breathing beast, a piece of theatre, it lives and breathes with the audience, breathing the same air in that auditorium.

CC. And do the actors give an input?

MR. Always. We did a post show discussion (actually on line now) with Bonnie Greer, and she was bringing out some of the really interesting things that the cast were able to bring in terms of their personal experience of the stories they know and the things that they have witnessed and the experiences of their lives. And at Pilot what we have is a collaborative process. The actors don't change the lines which have been written but they give an authenticity of experience, and of ear and rhythm. There is street poetry in this play and Roy captures that so well. And our actors bring authenticity to it, there is a cadence and a fluidity in the way their voices manipulate that text. For us that is really interesting and key to discovering how we can feel that we are able to use language in a way that can connect with audiences for whom this might be their first theatre experience.

CC. I know there's an extensive schools programme running in conjunction with this production. And it is very interesting that you should say that about initial theatre experiences. I came to see this show (I loved this show) here at Stratford East, in this wonderful, iconic theatre, which was great. And I was right on the end in the stalls, sitting next to a teacher who had a big group of children there. And they were from Kelmscott school in Walthamstow. And the school had managed to get some funding from *Classics for All* to teach Latin in years 7 and 8, so these were year 7 and 8 children. And the school also does Latin in year 7 as a kind of extra-curricular group. And the school gets support and training as well from the East End Classics Centre. And these kids were coming to the classics, to this Greek tragedy for the first time, and they were so excited beforehand I was wondering 'Oh goodness, what's going to happen when the lights go down?' But they were completely rapt in what happened on stage. If one of your aims is to reach out to young people, you are certainly doing that.

MR. Well, thank you, that's really good feedback. It is our aim to reach out and to try to change preconceptions where people might think 'Well, that story is two and half thousand years old, it's a Greek tragedy, what does it have to do with me?' We try to present something in such a way that allows those people to understand the relationships between families. So much of this play is about warring families. And whether you are arguing with your peers, your partner, your friends, whether it's with your extended family or your parents or absent parents – those things, for all of us, have got a connection. Of course, the stakes are raised in this play. The language is heightened and the world is heightened. This takes it beyond purely a domestic level. But we try to make it work for those young audiences, for whom coming to a place like this, the Theatre Royal at Stratford East, might be their first experience of theatre. We want to make it sure that it's a lasting experience and one they want to repeat.

CC. Roy Williams' text is, of course, a clever adaptation of the Sophocles' play. Would you hope that the young audience members go on to look at the original play or watch a production of it?

MR. I would be happy for them to take it whatever way they want, it's all great. All of this is an entry point into another world or landscape. Our mission is to engage and enthrall and unlock creativity. We give them the jumping off point.

CC. The audience clearly engaged with Savannah Gordon–Liburd as Antigone. Her performance had such conviction, she brought out Antigone’s strength and integrity and grief. And the young audience also related strongly to the character of Haemon (Eamon in this version). Roy Williams has built up the character and made the love story between Haemon and Antigone more prominent, hasn’t he?

MR. Yes, Gamba Cole, who played Eamon, is a fine young actor. This is only his second acting job. I saw him here at Stratford East in Roy’s play, *Kingston 14*. He is an absolute talent. But they all are. And working with those young performers is an absolute privilege as you begin to see their talent emerge. And also, for the actors, this world of Sophocles’ play is new. We have had some criticism that this isn’t *Romeo and Juliet*, that of course Sophocles would never have put Haemon and Antigone together onstage, he didn’t show them together, he didn’t show their deaths. It wasn’t in the original. For us, we say ‘that’s fine’ but these people, these characters, would actually have met in the back story, they would have known and loved each other deeply. And for us, we make that DNA connection, we put a universal love story – the love of two young people - onstage.

CC. It’s a very tender and very touching relationship that worked really well. And, also, as you say, you don’t see their deaths in the original *Antigone*, you don’t see any deaths, but seeing the deaths in this production was startling, quite shocking. Were they meant to run into the road?

MR. Well, the idea was that they jumped into the road from a height, they jumped off and were hit by a truck. It was their joint pact. We brought out the continual metaphor of the covering of the bodies. Of course, Antigone does it first, she does it twice. Then we have Creon cover his son with his jacket. Covering the bodies – the thing that he has forbidden Antigone to do. It is Antigone’s story but it’s also Creon’s story as well. And he covers the bodies and he has a moment where his realisation is that he’s lost everything and he’s got to live with that. So, we took some liberties in order to draw those things together that were important to us.

CC. Did you build any more roles?

MR. Yes we built the role of Eurydice, Creon’s wife. (Roy called her Eunice and the role was played by Doreene Blackstock). The tragedy, to us, is about the whole family. So we built her role as a mother but also as a matriarch within the structure of that family, making her quite dominant over Haemon, quite constrictive of him. She has, of course, lost another son in the war, so rather than leaving the character’s appearance as just falling at the end of the play, as in the original, in rehearsal we built up a back story based on grief and fear and making her immensely protective of Haemon within the action of the play –. All our improvisatory work around the text allowed these characters to be unlocked a little more perhaps for a contemporary audience.

CC. Creon (Creo), the gangland leader and nightclub owner, played by Mark Monero, was immensely menacing onstage. And the actor conveyed the tension in his arguments with Antigone, but also with his son. Again, you felt the great clash of wills in that scene with Haemon (Eamon).

MR. Yes, Mark’s was a very powerful performance. And Sophocles and Roy himself writes those arguments really well. It’s all about the relationship between father and son, the relationship between parents and children. Roy also puts in a scene, an argument, between Antigone and Haemon’s mother, which takes place in the cellar. We see the tensions between the generations. Because we have all experienced that, whether we are parents, whether we are children, wherever we are in our stage of life. And I know Roy does this incredibly well. He gives you those ‘hook in’ moments.

CC. Your chorus aren’t the old men of Thebes, are they?

MR. No, they are the soldiers and defenders of Creon. There are three of them – Oliver Wilson, Lloyd Thomas and Sean Sagar. And they multi role. Oliver also plays Tyrese, the original Tiresias, who in our production is an old gangster as well as the blind soothsayer. The soldiers have a hierarchical

thing between the three of them because one moves on, and the others then move up, there's a male hierarchy, the patriarchal lines are made clear.

CC. The soldiers also bring humour to this dark underworld with lines such as '*We is Thebes. We is crew. We is fam.*' Roy Williams has such an ear, hasn't he, for this kind of street language. And often, in contrast, the urban language is quite unsettling and dangerous in the impact it has on the audience. A very startling moment was the reference to Antigone as 'an inbred' – which of course, she is, isn't she? One doesn't want to think too much about her parentage. And the direct nature of the text really brought home the context of her parentage, not just for the young people in the audience, but for the whole audience, I think.

MR. And I like to think that when Sophocles was writing the play – and, of course, he was the director as well – that points like this were always meant to be emphasised, communicated to the ancient audience in the two way process of theatre. I always think that the directness of that language, or the communication, wanting to get into the heart and the underbelly of the audience, is key to the director/dramaturg/writer/theatrical process craft. I'm not a classicist, I'm not wholly about those things, but I'm really passionate about story and narrative and connection. And the thing about these stories, why they have endured and sustained, is because they are so strong. And that's what I'm drawn to, good stories really well told.

CC. Technically, this was a very impressive production. I know that you are a regular speaker and presenter on the use of technology in the arts. And you have a continuous sound track of electronic music playing during *Antigone*. Again, is this to appeal to younger audiences?

MR. The continual soundscape is a deliberate mechanism in our work. We call this hermetically sealing that world. The soundscape gives a sense of unease, a sense that this is not just a domestic space, there is something there that is at a higher level. It is about heightening an emotional landscape and a physical space. So, those things are helping to complete the sense of the world we are evoking.

CC. You bring technical aspects, multi media into Antigone's death as well. In the original text, Antigone is taken away to an underground cave to be starved to death - and we do not see her suicide. Whereas in the Pilot Theatre production we see a shocking image of Antigone in what appears to be an underground cage. During her final scene where she laments her fate, there is an image of her projected large onto the stage.

MR. Yes, we give an impression of Antigone being in the deepest, darkest hole. It was done with a small camera, throwing a projection onto the set. It allowed us to show Antigone as being completely isolated within the structure of the set.

CC. A final question, Marcus. Sophocles' original text begins with the appearance of Antigone and her sister, Ismene. In your production, it is Creon who appears onstage first, as an old man, a lonely, dishevelled figure. Why did you do make that change?

MR. We wanted Creon to begin and end the play. We put this in as a framing device. Under the flyover which is where the space is, where his son and his niece died – that is his place of torment, and every night he goes back there and he is forced to relive those memories because that is his tragedy, that is his penance. He is now a broken man on his own and he goes back to this place as a place of pilgrimage, it is where the bodies once lay. He brings flowers, and that is the only bit of colour on the set, two red flowers. The palette of colours in the lighting is all blue and dark and grey, and the red is the only vibrant colour, just at the beginning and at the end. We wanted to show him as continually living through the torment, plagued by the ghosts that haunt him because of what he has done.

CC. Thematically, it was a very effective ending – and beginning. Marcus, thank you very much for talking to me so freely and with such passion about this production and about the aims of Pilot Theatre.

MR. Chrissy, thank you. It has been a pleasure talking to you and thank you very much for your time.