

**Polly Findlay is a British theatre director who won the JMK Award for Young Directors in 2007 and an Olivier in 2010. She directed a production of Sophocles' *Antigone* which was performed at the Olivier Theatre in summer 2012. *Antigone* was played by Jodie Whittaker, and Creon by Christopher Ecclestone. The translation used was by Don Taylor. Laura Swift acted as academic consultant to the production, and interviewed Polly shortly after the end of the run. The interview took place at the National Theatre.**

**The full illustrated version of this interview for *Practitioners' Voices in Classical Reception Studies* is available at <http://www.open.ac.uk/arts/research/pvcrs/2014/findlay>**

**LS:** I'm Laura Swift of the Open University's Classical Studies department and I'm here to talk to Polly Findlay of the National Theatre about her summer 2012 production of *Antigone*. To start with a general question, what do you see as the biggest challenges in staging Greek tragedy for a modern audience.

**PF:** I think the main challenge for us really was coming up with a way of making the chorus feel accessible, so it was a metaphor that made sense for a contemporary audience; I think that it's very easy to feel that it's an entity that alienates us from the form of those plays. I personally felt that when I go to see productions of Greek tragedies where you have a group of men all identically dressed who speak at the same time, it's a device that takes me out of the world of the emotions and away from the drive that I want to be happening. So in terms of the concept for the production, that tended to be where most of our energy ended up being focused. But speaking more generally, the process was about trying to find a way of grounding those huge themes and big characters and those arguments in a setting that made it feel immediately contemporary, clear, and driven. So it was about trying to put a clear pane of glass between us and Sophocles.

**LS:** And what were the big themes that you felt speak particularly today to an audience?

**PF:** I think what's really exciting about tackling it as a play – or indeed any Greek play – the joy of it and the gift from a director's point of view is that those plays are still what form our imaginative DNA. The stories in those plays form the building blocks of our imagination – you could take any Spielberg film and trace it right back. In a way, what's fabulous about the plays is how timeless they are, so *Antigone* felt like the great underdog movie; that piece of our imagination that is fired by wanting to root for an underdog in some way started with *Antigone*. That was the nice thing about it: a lot of it felt very immediately accessible. The thing that was harder was trying to feed in what our sense of obligations to the gods were, which is something that most people find difficult in putting on these plays. So when it came to the theme of the state versus the individual, the aspect of that which is to do with divine responsibility is harder to find a way of articulating.

**LS:** I'd definitely agree that the role of the gods can be something which for a modern audience is very hard to deal with. How did you conceptualise the way you wanted to bring religion in to the play without it becoming alienating?

**PF:** In the end we decided to play quite a straight bat. I suppose we felt that the theme that really could make sense to a modern audience now theatrically and in terms of creating an atmosphere is how thick the fear is in Creon's administration. The aspect of tension between state vs individual we could really get behind was what that sense of claustrophobia and fear might be, because we've got so many cultural references for that, particularly in the twentieth century. It's part of our immediate cultural baggage in terms of understanding what the mechanics of power might be. In the end it felt as though there were still enough political regimes using fear as currency in the world today that have a religious aspect – you don't have to think too hard to think of government regimes that use the idea of God as a means of establishing their authority, creating a sense of fear and claustrophobia, and a hierarchy. We felt that those images were things that we still saw in the news. So although it's not something that's current in our immediate political world, it's still enough part of the global currency that we ended up feeling that if we just say it, if we just say we are performing this action because we believe this is the divinely ordained thing to do, actually we will understand it.

**LS:** That brings out an interesting tension, because in the play Creon's authority is ultimately challenged by religious authority, in the figure of Tiresias, rather than it supporting his verdict as one might expect to happen in a religiously oppressive autocratic regime.

**PF:** Except in the beginning I guess he is absolutely convinced that what he's doing is right. One thing we talked about before we went into rehearsal which really hit home and felt useful was that, as an ancient Greek, part of what your religious responsibility would have been was to work out what the right thing to do was, the fact that there was a set of capricious individual gods, all of whom were involved in constructing a perverse and difficult moral maze for us to negotiate, and actually your job as a leader is to work out, against all the odds, what the religiously right thing to do would be. I do think that Creon is absolutely engaged in that process. I think he's aware that there are a lot of pitfalls, problems, moral dilemmas, and he feels that he's the person who's best equipped to think one step further than everybody else. So it's absolutely true that what happens at the end of the play is that he's got the religious imperative wrong, but I think what's interesting about him as a character, from an actor's point of view, is that he does seem to feel that he's emotionally engaged in that religious debate, and he's always saying 'I'm doing this for Zeus, I'm doing this because it's the right thing to do', and then it's a choice for the actor as to whether that's sophistry or whether he actually believes it.

**LS:** And what choices did you and Christopher Ecclestone make in terms of how the role of Creon should be played?

**PF:** We both felt it would be boring to play him as an out-and-out villain, and what seemed fascinating was the idea of the internal struggle that's happening with him. When you start

reading Greek plays you think ‘the one thing I mustn’t do is to start applying a Stanislavskian model to them, because they weren’t written with that in mind’. But when you start unpacking it, you start thinking ‘there’s no way I can rehearse that except by taking that originally Russian idea of saying ‘the back story is important, the baggage that I’m bringing to the table is what’s going to motivate me to do the things that I do in the course of the play’’. All those ‘what did I have for breakfast’ type questions that you’d think shouldn’t make sense in a context like this, we found really did. So it was useful for us to say ‘this is a guy who’s been hanging around the household for a long time, who’s been very close to the centre of power but never been able to exercise it; he feels himself to be one of the autochthonous people of Thebes, feels himself to have a level of ownership over the place, and an identification with it, and secretly he might think Oedipus didn’t have such a strong claim’. And all those things felt like very useful fuel to explain psychologically why he is so impassioned, so driven, so convinced that he is the person that Thebes needed, and that he could pull it out of the appalling mess that other people had got it into over the last thirty years.

**LS:** That brings up the idea of working with actors who are used to a much more naturalistic and psychological form of drama? Did they find it difficult to engage with a text which is much more stylised?

**PF:** I think what we were really trying to do was to make it feel as psychological and as real as possible. Obviously there are moments, particularly in the choral sections, where you have to “lift”, you have to come out of anything resembling a naturalistic world, and that was part of the solution that we wanted to find for the chorus. But generally speaking I was surprised by how robust the play was in terms of taking a psychological, motivation-driven, more-or-less naturalistic approach. That was what was exciting about the rehearsal process. So it felt important to us that we made the chorus a set of individually motivated people, always speaking on their own, never speaking chorally, so that the moments where they were moving together, the ‘lift’ moments, were movement-based rather than psychically brain-to-mouth based.

**LS:** What you did with the chorus was interesting from that perspective, because although in the programme each individual chorus-member was given their own particular role, there was still a lot of choral movement and it felt quite choreographed.

**PF:** We wanted to really emphasise that difference between them as a collective machine, and their jobs in the office, what they are doing. In Don Taylor’s translation they’re described as ‘senators’, and we gave them all slightly different roles in Creon’s administration. We wanted to define the difference between who they were (as a janitor, as the attorney general, as a communications officer) and how they work together in those choral sections to run the office, so we could see them both as individuals and as machine. In the machine section we wanted to heighten the tension so it felt like a dance; as well as being individual cogs they were all coming together to make this contraption.

**LS:** I suppose that fits with how in the original text you have the chorus as the citizen body, and so in an office setting they're the machinery of the office and of the state.

**PF:** They seem quite a fascinating chorus. Just reading it on the page, there is such an ambiguity there, so it felt like quite a logical thing to split them up into individual voices. There's such an uncertainty: there's that brilliant bit where just after Haemon and Creon have given their first set of speeches, and the chorus say 'there's a lot of sense in everything that young man has said, as indeed there was in everything that you said too'. In our production those lines were given to two different people, so that it feels as though the chorus are having a tiff with each other. It always gets a great laugh, but it feels as though there's something really honest about that.

**LS:** I was interested in the element of humour, because certainly the night I saw it there was quite a lot of laughter. Was that something you were deliberately aiming for?

**PF:** Well it feels like a play where if there is a laugh you want to try to get it, because there isn't intrinsically a lot of comic potential! Having said that, it wasn't something that we were consciously going for, but moments like that were a pleasant surprise, where the humour arose very cleanly from what was happening in the text. I think also that for a modern audience, a lot of the lines about people's attitudes to women and what their place should be seems so ridiculous that you get a different kind of laughter. But generally speaking, it felt like most of the humour arose from the tensions that drive the play.

**LS:** Perhaps much of that humour is the type that arises from tension and awkwardness rather than because people think that what's happening is funny. You could say it's a way that the audience responds to something they feel emotionally uncomfortable about, rather than that it's a comic moment *per se*.

**PF:** Yes, it's a sort of release.

**LS:** Going back to the themes of the play, something that's often said is that the issue of burial can be difficult for a modern audience to engage with. How did you find working with the actors on that?

**PF:** That was definitely something I was concerned about when I knew I was going to be doing the play, because for us the stakes aren't quite as high as they would be if you genuinely believed that your brother's immortal soul was going to have to wander the earth in perpetuity if you didn't bury him. But rather like with the issue of the gods, I think that we all understand and have an intrinsic and primitive relationship to the issue of how we should deal with the dead. Even now, without a wholesale belief in the soul, the idea of your brother remaining unburied still carries enough weight and is repellent enough to provide a catalysing force for somebody to behave in the way that she does. But we felt that the lack of burial was unbearable, but that it was a catalyst rather than the only motivating factor. So rather in the same way that we were trying to unpack Creon in a psychologically three-dimensional way, we also applied the same logic to Antigone. When you think about the childhood she had, about the story of her going into exile with Oedipus, what the change in her status must have

been, what Creon's relationship might have been to her in the past, there was enough psychological gas in the tank to need one trigger. That trigger itself made absolute sense, but it didn't feel like it was the only thing that she was reacting to.

**LS:** I guess that leads us onto Haemon. I've always found it an interesting moment when Haemon claims that everyone else in Thebes supports Antigone and thinks that Creon's decree is unreasonable. But this raises the question of whether we're meant to take that at face value, or is it just him saying what he thinks is going to be a rhetorically effective way to win Creon over. How did you interpret Haemon's character?

**PF:** We were helped by the setting that we chose to give the play. We set the play in an underground continuance-of-government facility, which basically means a bunker. In America there are 62 of them, and we have them here too, like the cabinet war rooms. They're facilities that mean in an emergency you can ship the government underground and keep running the country from a place of security with skeleton personnel. It felt to us like that was useful for *Antigone*, because the story comes after that of Oedipus, particularly as post-Freudians, and so it has to be about repression. If Sophocles' *Oedipus* is a play about unearthing a primal and horrific crime, *Antigone* inevitably becomes a play about repressing that knowledge and about neurosis. In burying Antigone alive, Creon's literally pushing the problem underground, trying to sweep things under the carpet. And starting in a bunker felt like the right principle for this repressing and pushing things underground. The theatrical vocabulary of the production was very much about neurosis and paranoia; we were borrowing a lot of ideas related to East Germany, which was one of the cultural injections we wanted to give it. The whole bunker was filled with paraphernalia of spying, eavesdropping and surveillance, and several of the chorus members are engaged in listening to bugs and tapping each other. This wasn't something that you might notice on an individual basis, but we wanted the production to feel like everybody was spying on each other and there were moles on the inside. So when Haemon says 'by the way, Dad, everyone else – and I know this – thinks you're a lunatic', it felt in this context like a calculated way of finding Creon's weak spots. So we felt that while there very possibly was a sense of outrage among the Thebans, Haemon was certainly taking that and using it to his advantage.

**LS:** Picking up on the setting: given that you decided to set the play in a very modern context, how relevant did that make it for you to think about the original context?

**PF:** Well that's always the challenge of putting on any play that has that kind of production history. I suppose what felt important to us was to try to identify the gesture that Sophocles was making and try and replicate that, rather than the production conditions. So it felt to us that the gesture was about taking these two people and using the tension between them to engender a political thriller. That's what the play feels like to me. So what we tried to do was to think about what the atmosphere in the theatre might have been originally. At the same time, I think you'd be daft not to at least take into consideration what the mechanics of that production might have been. So up-stage double doors felt like something it would be nuts not to have, because it gives us a very clean way for Creon to own the stage. When we were building the offices we made sure the big one with the central door was Creon's, so we could

keep that sense of the palace entrance. So we haven't completely chucked those things out, but the emphasis was on trying to find something modern in it. Given that there's already a gap between the time the play is set and Sophocles' own time, and he is trying to bridge that gap, it felt like that gives us licence to do something different in terms of the period it was set in. So there's always this anachronistic gap built into tragedy, and that gives modern directors fodder to work with different time periods.

**LS:** Certainly I noticed that the set did look very much as though it was inspired by the original layout of a Greek theatre, with an *orchestra*, and entrances from the two sides and the back. I was wondering to what extent that was a deliberate echo, and to what extent it's shaped by the layout of the Olivier theatre itself.

**PF:** I think it's a bit of both. The Olivier was inspired by the design of Epidauros anyway, and so we were fortunate because the mechanics were on our side.

**LS:** A final question: do you see yourself directing Greek drama again in the future?

**PF:** Absolutely, I'd really love to. It's really rare that you have the opportunity to tackle something where the stakes are so high, and that's what I think is the most exciting thing about working on Greek drama. When you work on new writing, the note that you're always giving is 'raise the stakes - why is this a play, what's interesting about this?' and that's never the case with Greek plays. And as I say, there's something intravenous about them – they are the building blocks of our imagination, and being able to get in the ground level has felt like a complete privilege.