



MID-AMERICA THEATRE CONFERENCE KEYNOTE

Antigone: A Character for Our Times?

By Sandra L. Richards

First, let me thank the officers of the Mid-America Theatre Conference for the invitation to address you today. A special thank you to LaDonna Forsgren who, I suspect, may have initiated interest in my being here before you.

I have been teaching dramatic literature on the college level for a long time. Interestingly, during my last five years in the classroom—years spent on Northwestern’s campus in Qatar in the Middle East—I went back to my earliest graduate school training, teaching not in my areas of specialization but “Introduction to Drama” courses instead. Thus, in beginning to write this keynote, I reached for those introductory texts to find definitions of character, an entity so necessary and ubiquitous that many anthologies do not bother to define the term. But the late Oscar Brockett, who authored several editions of what has become the bible of theatre history, offers—some forty pages into his *The Essential Theatre*—this definition...of sorts: “Character is the primary material from which plots are created, because incidents are developed through the speech and behavior of dramatic personages.”¹ A vaguely defined entity, character nonetheless

¹ Oscar G. Brockett and Robert J. Ball, *The Essential Theatre*, Tenth Edition (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2009), 46.

produces a discernible effect. Easier to identify are the elements from which character develops, for Brockett follows this definition with the following:

Characterization is anything that delineates a person or differentiates that person from others. It operates on four levels:

Physical or biological...

Societal...

Psychological...

Moral... (46-47)

At the same time that I was trying to determine how I would tackle the topic of character, I was also watching the news and becoming more angry, perplexed, or frightened at each new assault on established programs, democratic traditions (admittedly more aspirational than actual for people of color in the United States), or basic moral values that President Trump and his enablers are executing. I was shaken by the ease with which some marched through the streets of an Old Confederacy city, chanting slogans affirming their Nazi lineage; at gunmen who shot down people doing their weekly shopping in Walmart, going to temple or Bible study; at the thought of school children now rehearsing active shooter scenarios, while others bully their schoolmates with taunts learned by watching and listening to their elders. I'm sure we each could add to this list; but I do not want to further animate our collective distress. Into this maelstrom came Antigone from Sophocles' 5th century Athens. She sat down and refused to leave. She acted much like what sociologist Avery Gordon in the revised edition of *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* analyzes as a ghost. Gordon writes:

...haunting [is] precisely the domain of turmoil and trouble, that moment (of however long duration) when things are not in their assigned places, when the cracks and rigging

are exposed, when the people who are meant to be invisible show up without any sign of leaving, when disturbed feelings cannot be put away, when something else, something different from before, seems like it must be done. It is this sociopolitical-psychological state to which haunting refers[red].²

Antigone seemed to promise that engaging her would allow me focus on some of the skills we learn in making theatre, skills that may also help us to survive—no, thrive—in these perilous times.

Thus, today I want to talk with you about Antigone, as she appears in Sophocles' play of the same name and in a late-twentieth century iteration, namely in *The Island*, a South African play devised by Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona. I will also refer briefly to *Tegonni, an African Antigone* written by Femi Osofisan of Nigeria, as indicative of some productive ways in which we might work through racial identities in the United States. As many of you undoubtedly know, Sophocles' play about a young woman who defies the state in order to bury her brother has a long history of re-appearing in Western dramatic literature: think Jean Anouilh's adaptation performed in Nazi-occupied France or Bertolt Brecht's *The Antigone of Sophocles* that premiered in 1948. But I have chosen these two African adaptations in large part because they multiply Antigone. Rather than drawing the lone individual who defies her society, these playwrights attribute resistance to several individuals who must work in concert. Further, they dramatize the cooperative labor that the theatre-making process itself demands, thereby offering us inspiration as to how our theatre-making skills can be deployed outside the confines of theatre.

² Avery F. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, Second Edition (University of Minnesota Press, 2008), xvi.

You likely recall that in Sophocles' play, the adult sons of Oedipus, namely Polyneices and Eteocles, pledge that each will rule Thebes in alternate years. But when it becomes clear that Eteocles does not intend to honor his promise, his brother enlists the help from the city of Argos to depose Eteocles. Both brothers fight to the death. Their uncle Creon, as inheritor of the Theban throne, decrees that Eteocles is to be given a hero's burial, while Polyneices is to be left as Antigone says, "unlamented, unburied, a delicious hoard for the watching birds to feast on!"³ She entreats her sister Ismene to defy the royal decree and help her bury their brother, but Ismene, cognizant of their weak position as women, is unwilling to disobey the law. Antigone does not attempt to reason with or entreat her sister. Rather she welcomes "the crime of holy reverence" (l.65); she vows she will not "dishonor the laws honoured by the gods" (ll.66-67). And when Creon directly demands an explanation for her defiance, Antigone counters with:

Nor did I think your human proclamation had sufficient power to
override the unwritten, unassailable laws of the gods. They live not just
yesterday and today, but forever,...If I now seem to you to have acted
foolishly, perhaps I am convicted of folly by a fool (ll.417-432).

Like Antigone, Creon is unrelenting in his position: Polyneices is a traitor, because he has sought outside help to reinforce his claim to the throne; Eteocles who died defending Thebes—and his own right to rule—should be given a state burial. The interest of the state should take precedence over familial obligations, for as Creon contends:

...I would never stay silent if I saw ruin threatening the safety of my citizens;
nor could I make a friend of a man who is hostile to this city. (ll.175-177)

³ Sophocles, *Antigone*, trans. David Franklin and John Harrison (Cambridge University Press, 2003), ll. 24, 25. All other quotations are from this text.

But this leader's devotion to the welfare of his people is quickly revealed as ego-centered when he quickly chastises the Chorus' suggestion of divine intervention. Creon orders:

Stop! Before your words fill me with anger, or you will prove yourself insane as well senile! What you say is intolerable,...(ll.258-259)

And:

No, all this time men in the city have been muttering against me in secret and resenting my rule; instead of keeping their necks under the yoke and accepting me, as they should, they toss their heads in rebellion....my guards have been bribed by these men to carry out this deed. Money! Nothing so evil has ever taken root in mankind....it schools, corrupts the minds of honest men to commit acts of shame;...(ll.266-273)

In Creon we hear the present day.

Were I in a classroom, the students and I would likely continue this discussion by applying Aristotle's *Poetics* or definition of tragedy; identifying the leading character's change of fortune, brought about by "some great error or tragic flaw"; the character's self-destructive actions taken in blindness, leading to results diametrically opposed to those that were intended; the audience's sense of pity and fear stemming from recognition that the character is "man like ourselves," and an eventual purging and restoration of balance in our emotions and understanding of the world in which we live.⁴ Certainly some classicists, philosophers like Hegel, and feminist scholars like Judith Butler have understood *The Antigone* as a clash between competing understandings of affiliation, recognition, and duty articulated on gendered lines: the character Antigone

⁴ Barbara F. McManus, "Outline of Aristotle's Theory of Tragedy in the *Poetics*," published November 1999, last accessed May 10, 2016, <https://www.cnr.edu/home/bmcmanus/poetics.html>.

understands kinship and its consequent responsibilities as rooted in the womb, while Creon understands it as anchored in the *polis* or the state, from which women were excluded.⁵

But today I am more interested in what many of us non-classicists *remember* about Antigone. We forget Antigone's centering of women as the ground upon which community is built, we forget a pride (*hubris*) that is quick to belittle and dismiss Ismene because Ismene's more pragmatic or hesitant stance does not align with Antigone's position. Seemingly, we understand the play as a testament to the brave individual, who despite his/her powerless position in society nonetheless rebels, demanding that the state honor a human dignity that precedes the organization of individuals into political collectivities. We forget so as to *remember*, as the writer Ralph Ellison asserts, "that which we would like to have been; or that which we hope to be."⁶

The Island

Now I would like to turn to a more recent adaptation—or perhaps, re-purposing would be a better word—of Sophocles' *Antigone*, namely *The Island*, devised by Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona of South Africa. As you may know, *The Island* centers on two prisoners, cellmates John and Winston who have been sentenced to hard labor on Robben Island, located off the coast of Cape Town, South Africa. After a day of back-breaking, meaningless work filling and emptying sand from holes that each man has been forced to dig under the watchful eyes of an ever-present but unseen guard, they return to their cell. There the more intellectual John harasses Winston into rehearsing their parts in Sophocles' *Antigone*, which will be acted at a prisoners' performance event, overseen by guards. Despite John's steady tutelage in narrating the Sophoclean plot, Winston cannot retain certain details. For example, he cannot remember

⁵ Patchen Markell, "Tragic Recognition: Action and Identity in Antigone and Aristotle," *Political Theory* 31.1 February 2003: 14.

⁶ Epigraph quoted in Joseph Roach, *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance* (Columbia University Press, 1996).

which brother has been given a state burial and which brother's body has been left to rot. He persists in stating that Antigone is not guilty. At one point he even claims that Antigone lays charges against the state, even though as John agrees, "Between you and me *in this cell*, (italics mine) we know she's Not Guilty." ⁷ Furthermore, Winston resists wearing the costume, a roughly fashioned wig and breasts. Even though John argues that the audience will *stop* laughing and listen to what is being said, Winston asserts when John has been summoned out of the cell:

I didn't walk with those men and burn my bloody passbook in front of the police station and have a magistrate send me here for life so that he can dress me up like a woman and make a bloody fool of me (63).

But in between flashes of harsh political realities, there are also flights of enacted imagination in which John or Winston take each other to the movies or "call" their neighborhood bar to chat with buddies and ask that messages be passed along to their wives and children. These meta-theatrical moments are both delightful and painful in that they demonstrate how performance can buoy the spirits or devolve into acknowledgement of near-devastating absence and desire.

In Scene Four, the day of performance has come. John, playing the role of King Creon, addresses the warden and guards sitting closest to the stage, with prisoners behind them, echoing the 1944 Anouilh production of *Antigone*, performed before Nazi officers and citizens of occupied France. Likening himself to a servant or nanny gazing adoringly on her fat, happy charge, as King Creon John reminds the people that their happiness is maintained by the law:

The law is no more or less than a shield in your faithful servant's hand to protect YOU! But even as a shield would be useless in one hand, to defend, without a sword in the other, to strike...so too the law has its edge. The penalty! (74)

⁷ Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona, *Statements* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1986), 53. All other citations are from this text.

Antigone, as played by Winston, is brought in. As in the Sophoclean original, she acknowledges that she has broken the law and asks “Who made the law forbidding the burial of my brother burial?” She continues even more pointedly,

Are you God?... What lay on the battlefield...belonged to God. You are only a man,
Creon. Even though there are laws made by men, so too are there others that come from
God (75).

Claiming that his hands are tied by the Law, Creon sentences Antigone to the island, where she will be given food and left to die. The island to which this Antigone is sentenced is, of course, Robben Island, where the fictional John and Winston are prisoners, and where in fact, many men—including Nelson Mandela— were sent to confinement. In character, Winston addresses the audience as “Brothers and Sisters of the Land” and accepts that she will go the island, “my everlasting prison, condemned alive to solitary death” (77). But going a step further, he rips off the wig and breasts and confronts his viewers with:

Gods of our Fathers! My Land! My Home!...I go now to my living death, because
I honoured those things to which honour belongs. (77)

Having dramatized the relevance of this fifth-century Greek play to the then present-day, apartheid South Africa, the two men finish taking off their costumes and come together, as in the beginning of this play, with hands and ankles shackled, running towards the beach where they will again shovel sand in and out of the same hole.

The Island, devised by Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona, premiered in 1973 at a small club in Cape Town, South Africa, under the Afrikaans title *The Hodoshe Team*.⁸ Appearing at a time when white-black collaborations were forbidden under apartheid laws, and

⁸ Astrid Van Weyenberg, *The Politics of Adaptation: Contemporary African Drama and Greek Tragedy* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013), 9.

scripts were unwritten so as to evade censorship and imprisonment, the devised play had been inspired by the experiences of another actor. Norman Ntshinga had been arrested for petty offenses and sent to Robben Island, where he—like Winston and John in the fictional *The Island*—had entertained fellow-prisoners by acting out parts of an *Antigone* he had been rehearsing before his arrest.⁹ In one sense the play is a make-believe that surreptitiously functions as an historical document of the lives of black men under apartheid. In choosing a Western classic, the actors can claim that they are *attempting* to act like good colonial subjects, imitating the customs of their masters with no political intent intended. But their performance also remembers, as Ellison asserts, who they hope to be/ who they want to remain, namely “Brothers and Sisters of the Land” asserting their human dignity.

The meta-theatrical quality of *The Island* also allows me to remember how performance brings together people with disparate perspectives and skills in search of a common goal. The theatre-making process equips us with skills and strategies for coping and prospering in the present moment. If we remain with the example of *The Island*, we have three principals: two black men, namely actors John Kani and Winston Nshona, and one white man, director Athol Fugard, who are congregating even though apartheid law forbids such interactions. Were their activities to be discovered, they would face different consequences, articulated in accordance with the strict segregation of apartheid. Those restrictions did not evaporate when these men entered the rehearsal room. I suspect that at times, they had to be negotiated or set to one side as the men concentrated on what they wanted to share, the vision they wanted to bring to life onstage. In fact, when they first toured overseas, Kani and Ntshona apparently were given passports that identified them as Fugard’s servants. I recall that an early publication of the play

⁹ Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr., *The Athenian Sun in an African Sky: Modern African Adaptations of Classical Greek Tragedy* (Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2002), 195.

attributed authorship to Fugard alone, but the 2013 TCG publication *Statements* indicates that *The Island* and *Sizwe Baansi Is Dead*, the companion piece that toured the United States at the same time, are *devised* by the three men, while the third play in this volume, *Statements after an Arrest under the Immorality Act*, attributes authorship to Fugard alone.

If I might introduce another play to emphasize my point: Femi Osofisan wrote *Tegonni, An African Antigone* in the mid-1990s; it premiered on the Emory University campus in 1994. In Osofisan's remembering there is a fifth-century Greek Antigone who, through an indigenous construction of time and the magic of theatre, directly interacts with Tegonni, a Yoruba princess living in a Nigeria under British colonial rule. The play utilizes an interracial cast that enables Osofisan to meet the challenge—as I remember it in conversations with him—of the Theatre Department's difficulties in attracting black actors into its acting classes. But it also allows Osofisan and the production to challenge American audiences around when and how to read race: When does race matter? When does it not—and what conditions allow it not to signify?

The casting also poses challenges for the actors and director: What assumptions has the cast unwittingly learned and now rehearse vis a vis Africa and black people, wherever they may reside? How does Tegonni's scripted intent to marry a British colonial officer articulate with race relations on campus? In other words, the rehearsal room becomes an arena in which real, yet unspoken personal, social, and historical investments are likely to play out. How do the director, the actors, and the stage manager confront those realities and retain their commitment to the production? What about the designers, publicists, shop people or administrators who in my limited directorial experience often seem much farther removed from the creative processes at play in the rehearsal room? Might their work on a play like *The Island* or *Tegonni, an African Antigone* impact how they hire or staff their units? Might their work on such a play school them

in how to honor these “new” people and perspectives? How might we as directors, dramaturgs, or actors encourage—if need be—such considerations?

Similarly, how do we in the classroom, places of worship, or even among family members acknowledge our real differences and investments? How do we in the face of such honest acknowledgement persist in identifying perspectives or objectives that we share? Again, I propose that our previous experiences working with the divas who want to occupy the entire space, with the shy ones, and with the previously disparaged folk, who are tentatively moving towards a bigger sense of themselves and their possibilities in the world, equip us to meet such challenges.

I want to close with a talisman of sorts for our journey ahead. It is woven from lyrics and a poem taken from my study of African American culture and of memory, in which the Holocaust looms large. The first is “Run, Little Chillun”:

Run little chillun, run
Cause de devil is loose in the lan’
Run little chillun
Oh, run on down to de Jerdon River

And:

First they came for the socialists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a trade unionist.

Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—

Because I was not a Jew.

Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.¹⁰

The Jordan river is often figured as a site of deliverance in the imagination of the enslaved. The poem, a version of which is inscribed in the Holocaust Museum in Washington DC, reminds us that our humanity is dependent on the well-being of others. Just as opening night or the entire run may not be a success, we have to do the work. We have the skills.

Postscript

Some ten weeks have elapsed between the time I offered this keynote and when I sat down to make minor revisions. In the interim, in the United States, there have been some 1.5 million confirmed cases of COVID19 and nearly 90,000 deaths.¹¹ By the time you read this essay, those numbers are likely to have climbed considerably higher. Now armed citizens march on state capitals or parade before tattoo parlors demanding that the “lockdown” be lifted, businesses opened, and life return to normal. Seemingly for them, individual interests supersede collective good. Clearly, the stakes of disagreeing with others have grown much higher; the patch of common ground has disappeared under the weight of social hysteria and lack of principled, political leadership.

But we must remember that we are not the first generation to experience very dark days. We can reach into the repertoires of our various faith traditions, we can recall genocides survived, we can share memories of family members, who in ways large or small, were our heroes. Our theatre training, though shot through with different perspectives, disagreements or vanity, has also prepared us to produce collective moments of beauty and grace. Life-sustaining

¹⁰ Quoted in *Holocaust Encyclopedia*, s.v. “Martin Niemöller: ‘First they came for the Socialists...,’” United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, last modified March 30, 2012, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/martin-niemoller-first-they-came-for-the-socialists>.

¹¹ Google search for the COVID-19 death toll in the United States, accessed May 16, 2020, <https://www.google.com/search?q=current+death+toll+covid+19+in+us>.

moments. Like the egotistical, troublesome, yet brave Antigone, we can be the “lil chillun” helping our nation to “run on.”

Bibliography

- Brockett, Oscar G., and Robert J. Ball. *The Essential Theatre*, 10th ed. Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2009.
- Fughard, Athol, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona. *Statements*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1986.
- Gordon, Avery F. *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, 2nd ed. University of Minnesota Press, 2008.
- Holocaust Encyclopedia*, s.v. "Martin Niemöller: 'First they came for the Socialists...'" United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, last modified March 30, 2012, <https://encyclopedia.ushmm.org/content/en/article/martin-niemoeller-first-they-came-for-the-socialists>.
- Markell, Patchen, "Tragic Recognition: Action and Identity in Antigone and Aristotle." *Political Theory* 31, no. 1 (February 2003): 6-38.
- McManus, Barbara F. "Outline of Aristotle's Theory of Tragedy in the Poetics," Published November 1999. Last accessed May 10, 2016. <https://www.cnr.edu/home/bmcmanus/poetics.html>.
- Osofisan, Femi. *Tegonni, An African Antigone*. Ibadan: Opon Ifa, 1999.
- Roach, Joseph. *Cities of the Dead: Circum-Atlantic Performance*. Columbia University Press, 1996.
- Sophocles, *Antigone*. Translated by David Franklin and John Harrison. Cambridge University Press, 2003.
- Van Weyenberg, Astrid. *The Politics of Adaptation: Contemporary African Drama and Greek Tragedy*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2013.
- Wetmore, Jr., Kevin J. *The Athenian Sun in an African Sky: Modern African Adaptations of Classical Greek Tragedy*. Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2002.