

## INTERVIEW WITH ANNE BYRNE (ANTIGONE)

*Conducted by Katerina Gotsi*

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Ann Byrne as Antigone in Brendan Kennelly's new text at the Peacock.

### Enter the tragic Antigone

ANTIGONE, Brendan Kennelly's new text of the classic Greek tragedy by Sophocles, has its first night on Monday, after four previews this week.

Directed by Eoin O Briain, with set and costumes by Bronwen Casson, it will have Ann Byrne in the title role. In the surrounding cast are Maire O'Neill, Eileen Colgan, Pauline McLynn, Kevin McHugh, Donall Farmer, Micheal O Briain John Olohan, Sean Campion, Donagh Deeney, MacDara O Fatharta and

*The leading Irish poet, Brendan Kennelly, wrote his Antigone in 1984 as a gift for his daughter. This was his first rewriting of a Greek tragedy and was followed shortly after by Euripides' Medea (1988) and The Trojan Women (1993).*

*Kennelly significantly expands the gender discourse of Sophocles' tragedy at a time when issues such as the right to contraception and abortion caused deep divisions and unprecedented social upheaval in Irish society. Antigone's reaction to Creon's decision to leave the body of her dead brother unburied becomes in Kennelly's version an act of revolt against a male establishment that lacks imagination, endorses cruelty, rejects whatever deviates from the norm, seeks power and money and dismisses love as unimportant.*

*Kennelly's play was staged in 1986 at the Peacock Theatre, Dublin, directed by Colm Ó Briain, with Anne Byrne and Kevin McHugh in the leading roles.*

Anne Byrne plays Antigone. Image: *Evening Herald*, 26 April 1986.

**KG: The role of Antigone was the first important role in your career, wasn't it?**

**AB:** It was the first time I had been asked to perform at our National Theatre, so in that sense, yes it was. However, I had been working in the theatre for a few years by then with *Rough Magic*, an independent company, of which I was a founding member. It was performed on the Peacock theatre stage, which is a sister theatre to the Abbey. This was the first time I had had an opportunity to work with more experienced, established actors, some of whom had been working with the Abbey for many years. It was an important step for me, as it was a different theatrical environment.

**KG: How would you describe the rehearsal period? Relaxing, stimulating...?**

**AB:** Rehearsals were really stimulating, in that things were discussed - everything was discussed. And ideas were thrown around and it was very

interesting and I particularly loved all that, because one of my favourite elements of the rehearsal process is the freedom to discuss anything that feeds into that process. I love all of that cross-referencing and reading about the historical and political contexts of any text. The play's director, Colm Ó Briain, is an extremely intelligent and well-read man, and he brought an academic sensitivity to the production. The atmosphere of the rehearsals was very free and easy and open to ideas. Having said this, Colm also had a very strong vision of how he wanted the play to look and sound, so we were always working toward that vision. For example, he wanted the individual performances to appear masked, as they would have been in the original Greek style, even though the actors would not have been wearing masks, and the movement was not to be naturalistic.

**KG:** How did you find Ó Briain's stylized staging? How was it acting it out?

**AB:** I didn't find it very difficult, but I suppose all I had known was a very naturalistic style, so it was a welcome challenge. I also was used to building my character very slowly and carefully, so that I would not miss a vital key to the character. Stylized staging means you have to find a means of expressing yourself physically, which may feel unnatural to you, but still will be truthful.

**KG:** Was it easy to do that?

**AB:** Yes, at first it felt really uncomfortable and constraining. If you are used to moving and gesturing in a particular way, then opening yourself to a different form of expression can be difficult. It is a bit like learning a new language. At first you keep wanting to say what you want to say in your first language, but then as your second one builds, you have a bigger vocabulary to express yourself with and it is exciting to be able to use that. I tend to hold myself quite still

onstage and believe that can be quite a powerful position – still – but energized and intense, so the style actually suited my acting method.

**KG:** I noticed, too, that you almost didn't move at all, and I actually saw it as an allusion to the fact that Antigone stays immovable, firm in what she believes up until the end.

**AB:** Yes. Even though she is in great distress throughout the course of the play, she does not appear hysterical or physically agitated. She needs to present an immovable force, intellectually and emotionally, to counter the power of the state. The minimal movement helps her conserve her energies. I think that was deliberate. The fact that she is not moving is the physical manifestation of her mental determination and resolve. She is not going to move until she is physically moved by the soldiers.

**KG:** I can't really remember what the soldiers looked like.

**AB:** The soldiers were dressed in quite a classical style. Short, pleated skirts, in a heavy cream fabric with gold panels. The top, I think, included some sort of breastplate. The soldier who leads Antigone away at the end wore a spectacular headdress, a bit like a bird's nest, but I'm not certain if it had any particular significance. I remember that the younger actors also wore fake tan, which may have been a first in conventional theatre and quite unusual for Irish men, even actors, at the time.

**KG:** I haven't seen any of these details in the recording; unfortunately this is an old show and the recording is quite poor. There is also a serious problem with the colours that seem to have faded.

**AB:** There would be an extra light over the camera, usually because they're very crude recordings. I don't think they are kept for any other reason

than, if the show is ever done again, that they have some sort of record of it. I've seen film versions of productions that I've been involved in, many productions that we'd videotaped - they really do not adequately reflect the show at all. They are purely a record of the production. The colours used in the production were quite earthy. There were panels of gold on a brown background. And there was bronze in it as well. Antigone wore a shawl and there was one sleeve in it and the rest was like a wrap, like a cloak. And that was kind of a fairly rough fabric with brown on the outside of it. And the makeup, which I don't think you can really see on the tape, was gold and bronze, especially to highlight the eyes and lips.

**KG:** Was it on everyone's face?

**AB:** All the women. The men slightly less so and the older men not at all; although I can't quite remember. The younger ones amongst us, certainly myself and Ismene, had. It was meant to look like a mask. So,

instead of having the Greek masks, we had makeup on and it was quite heavy, because, you know, naturalistic makeup was coming into the theatre, so to use this was quite unusual. Because it was like a sort of gold leaf and it was quite heavy and took quite a bit getting it off, when you finished. I wore a very long wig with braids in it, and a fabric piece which was twisted and braided and sat on top of the wig, like all in one piece.

**KG: Why was Antigone dressed in black and Ismene in white?**

**AB:** It's not black, it's a brown. It's an earthy brown, like a peaty brown, as I remember it; but there was a warm cut, there was warm sort of like orange going through it and it was a woven fabric, it wasn't like a solid colour. I think it was shot through with orange. The effect of this colour running through was to give life and movement to the fabric.

**KG: In most *Antigones* I've watched, Ismene is more elegantly dressed, and she's more feminine than Antigone. Antigone is the rebel and..**

**AB:** ...and they make her quite rough. I think in *The Riot Act*, isn't she like a tomboy?

**KG: I think so, yes. Have you watched that production?**

**AB:** Oh, yes. *The Riot Act* was, like all of Field Day's work, of course, influenced by its position geographically and politically. So, there would always be references to the Northern conflict and it was written in northern idiom. I remember I liked it - it was very earnest. And, again, it would have been quite simply done and it would have been done in northern accents and very much in their vernacular, written by Tom Paulin, a northern poet.

**KG: What do you see as the main difference between the Field Day and the Ó Briain productions?**

**AB:** The *Riot Act*, like many productions of *Antigone*, was very fighty, very busy, very angry from the off, you know, and there was nowhere to go from there emotionally. That's a choice you make and Paulin certainly sustained it - it was very moving at the end. We, on the other hand, had a very low-key production. And I would build slowly from here and only use the anger when I had to. Because of the type of actress I am, I personally feel that if I came on stage furious, shouting, I would have nowhere to go next. That would have been exhausting for the audience and the production didn't lend itself to that. It was a very thoughtful production and because it was written by a poet, Brendan Kennelly, or the adaptation is by him, quite a lot of it was very poetic, it flowed very poetically. So you had to be careful that you didn't choke the words by coming out all guns blazing and you know you had to serve the words and the argument, the

various arguments, and let the anger come out when the anger came out.

**KG:** **Was Brendan Kennelly around during the rehearsals?**

**AB:** Yes, he was there. He was very encouraging and generous. If lines were causing difficulty, I remember he was quite open to changing things. Obviously, there is a limit to what he was willing to change. Everything he wrote had a reason and logic, so too much change could have bent the original out of shape.

**KG:** **Was he happy with the result?**

**AB:** I think he was, yes. I think he enjoyed seeing his words come to life on stage.

**KG:** **What do you think about the recurring translations of Greek plays?**

**AB:** I think it very much depends on how they are reimagined and performed. I'm sceptical about some of the translations, or adaptations.

**KG:** **Why do you think that is?**

**AB:** Well, it probably has something to do with the constant need in theatre for change. The need to make each new production of a Greek tragedy relevant to society and to the world today. The emotions and intentions and actions of human beings are always constant, it's just the historical context that changes.

**KG:** **What do you think is the problem?**

**AB:** The problem could be that we don't trust that the original text and setting will carry forward to a modern audience. History changes language, politics, society... so that the world of the original Greek drama looks like a foreign country to us. But at the heart of it all is conflict between people, i.e. Antigone and Creon, and the emotions that that conflict gives rise to, are the same in every century. We might use different language and wear different clothes and exist in a very different physical world, but our emotions will lead us into similar conflicts. For me, too

much re-interpretation and need for relevance, makes it seem like you trust neither text to deliver, nor audience to follow.

**KG:** **Why not? You think it doesn't work?**

**AB:** For me it doesn't work if it feels like something is being forced. And a lot of modern interpretations do work. Again, the Field Day one was very exciting and felt very true to the original ideas.

**KG:** **Would a simpler staging be more effective, do you think?**

**AB:** Yes, I think so. I know this is a phrase that is done to death, but, 'less is more', sometimes is still a useful marker. You can swamp the essence of the play by overdesigning all the aspects of it, so that the actual text is hard to both hear and see with all the busy-ness that is going on. Very often, a pared down production will bring you closer to the heart of what the playwright wants you to hear.

**KG:** So, the question is: audiences are reluctant to watch Greek tragedy, but directors still want to do it. There must be a reason for it. Why does a director need to rewrite a Greek tragedy rather than staging another play?

**AB:** Well that's a very good question. I think it's because the plays are very strong and powerful stories. The story of Antigone is hugely powerful. This is a young girl, fatherless and motherless, kind of alone in the world, under the protection of the one person who's to protect her, and he punishes her for doing the most natural thing in the world, i.e. bury the body of her brother. And that in itself would make you cry. Thinking about leaving your brother on the outskirts of town, in unconsecrated ground, as it were. It's unnatural, it goes against everything we feel about burying our dead. It is dishonouring to the dead. But he, in turn, has

dishonoured the state, so the King's obliged, in order to retain public order, to say "no, he will not be buried within the city walls". To bury the dead by yourself is a hugely emotional sort of thing to think about - you couldn't possibly leave a loved one. So, I could understand why you would want to do it. And Antigone's struggle against the state is something we can all empathise with and understand, so the story never gets old and will always have power. These powerful emotions are mirrored in all the tragedies, not only the Greek ones, but in Shakespeare and the Jacobean tragedies too. I suppose, everything we know about tragedy comes from the Greek, and we always want to return to it.