

INTERVIEW WITH COLM Ó BRIAIN (DIRECTOR)

Conducted by Katerina Gotsi

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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' at a time when issues such as the right to contraception and abortion caused deep divisions and an 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 an act of revolt against a male establishment.

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.



Poster for the 1986 *Antigone*, directed by Colm Ó Briain

KG: What is the first thing that comes to mind, regarding Brendan Kennelly's *Antigone* that you staged at the Abbey in 1986?

CO'B: It is very hard to remember after twenty years of a lot of activity, you know. I was very fortunate, I had a group of young actors, it was Anne Byrne and Pauline McLynn and Darragh Kelly; and then the seniors, I had Kevin McHugh and Dónall Farmer, you know, really fine actors. I was very fortunate in getting the cast that I wanted for that production. There was a lot of discussion. Because the production was, as I say, quite low key in that it was all about ideas, so I talked to the actors about the ideas that I found I wanted to bring out in Brendan Kennelly's script, the ideas that were there, the political ideas, you know. That's what I wanted, for the actors to be focused on creating a dynamic and a tension in

how they played, how they related to each other, because that's what politics is about. One of the strongest things I remember now is that I used my daughter to play the boy with a flute because she was so young and she looked like a little boy. So, that's the kind of image, because she had to be brought into the theatre every night.

KG: Did she enjoy it?

CO'B: Oh, yes, indeed.

KG: What was the influence for the set?

CO'B: I remember we used Cretan architecture to inspire the design. There were large pillars. The temple - I think it's in Crete - it's Knossos. So that was the kind of the style and, if I remember well, we used gold makeup - not masks as such, but there was a lot of gold to make the faces mask-like, without wearing masks.

KG: Was it intentional that you wanted to set it in a Greek background, because this

is maybe the only performance of all the Irish *Antigones*, where the set sort of alludes to Greek theatre?

CO'B: It was because the poetic style of Brendan Kennelly's script and the formality of it needed that kind of formal presentation.

KG: What about the costumes? The two sisters, Ismene and Antigone, were dressed in elegant, long dresses and small hats.

CO'B: But that was regal. There was a palace, so we had to create that notion that this didn't involve the common people, that this was at the centre of power. As I said, we were using Cretan sources to shape the style. It was basically a stylized production. It wasn't intended to be realistic in any sense and the style of acting was not realistic, so it was to create formality around the poetry and the way in which Kennelly had written the play.

KG: And there were, as far as I remember, stylized movements of the hands.

CO'B: Yes, everything was very deliberate, nothing was casual. It was not twentieth-century movement, it was taken from another time. I had seen, in the 60s, a production of Anouilh's play..

KG: Was it in Dublin?

CO'B: It was in Dublin, yes, which of course cast Antigone as a very strong and sympathetic heroine, but I shifted - in some of the reviews you may have seen it. In reading Brendan Kennelly's script, I felt that the role of Creon rather than being a villain needed to be more clearly understood - that in the mid-1980s, Ireland was very much in the grip of fundamentalist debate around issues like abortion and divorce, and they were all driven by the Catholic Church. Religious belief and behaviour driven by religious, deeply committed

religious people was a political issue. That is why I was showing greater sympathy for Creon as the political force trying to engage and keep the State intact in the face of what I would call a religious extremist, if you would represent Antigone in that way. So, I felt the formality of the way it was presented and how it appeared, and how I was asking the actors to play it was to reinforce that I wanted people to look at the issues that were being debated. I got letters which were deeply contrasting, people saying it was the most boring production they had ever seen and others who said it was the most exciting, it was the most wonderful production they had seen. So, it was not a production that a lot of people liked, opinion was divided in what I was trying to do.

KG: Is it a coincidence, you think, that in 1984

suddenly three writers, Tom Paulin in the North, Brendan Kennelly and Aidan Matthews, revisit Antigone, given the political and social background of the time?

CO'B: Well, it was all about the role of the Catholic Church, and there were lots of people... I mean files were stolen, government offices were invaded and files were taken from government offices. So, individuals were taking action against the State at the time.

KG: Really?

CO'B: Yes, because it was a question: should we be a confessional state? Because the Catholic Church and the government in 1981 had made commitments to very right-wing Catholic agitators in relation to changing the law on abortion and giving unborn foetuses life rights. We have a written constitution in Ireland, and there was a movement to give the unborn foetus in the

mother's womb rights that were greater than the rights of the mother. And this debate was driven by a number of zealous right-wing Catholics with very deeply held beliefs. I don't know whether other productions were picking up on this resonance, but because I was sympathetic to Creon, who was trying to manage a situation, and because my own personal views were towards an inclusive and secular state rather than towards a confessional state, this was the perspective that I wanted to bring to my production. I am not sure that that was Brendan Kennelly's perspective, whether he had any particular contemporary analogy in place. I think he greatly admired Antigone.

KG: How did you decide to stage this play? Were you commissioned?

CO'B: I was invited, yes, the Abbey invited me to do this

production. They had already accepted the script from Brendan.

KG: So, the boundaries were clear: he wrote the script, you did the staging.

CO'B: I was offered the script, the Abbey had signed a contract with Brendan to put on a performance, a production of the script, and I was asked. They sent the script to me and asked me to direct it.

KG: Were you interested before in Greek drama, were you interested in *Antigone*?

CO'B: I did not have a particular interest in *Antigone*; as I said, twenty years earlier I had seen a production of the Anouilh version, so I was aware of that aspect of it. So, I started my career in the 60s as an actor and as a director but I moved into television and I moved into politics. In the 80s I was very much involved in politics.

KG: Your political views

remind me of Conor Cruise O'Brien's. What he also wrote is that he believed very strongly in Ismene because of her peaceful character; he sort of turned against Antigone finding her a bit radical and *the Riot Act*, Paulin's version, came as a response to Conor Cruise O'Brien. There was a whole debate - Conor Cruise O'Brien, I think, also liked Creon a bit more.

CO'B: Conor Cruise O'Brien's play *King Herod Explains* is a one man drama piece, in which King Herod, who was the King in Judea at the time of Jesus Christ, explains how a Jewish King had done deals with the Romans and is then out to slaughter innocent children because the Old Testament says that a new King of the Jews is coming. This is the political testament of a man who is reviled by history, and certainly reviled by the

Christian religion, and he was also the King who executed John the Baptist and gave the head of John the Baptist to his stepdaughter, Salome.. So, Conor Cruise O'Brien's only play is about a political figure, explaining his role at a time of religious ferment.

KG: Are there any figures, real life figures, any politicians, for example that would bear resemblances to Creon?

The only actual resemblance that I had was not with a politician that I was comparing Creon with; it was the Russian composer Shostakovich and how he was terrorized by Stalin in Soviet Russia. I used Shostakovich's fifth symphony as the music before the production. So, what I was using was contemporary Russian classical music as the introductory music before a very stylized production.

KG: Was it before the performance started? Because in the recording I could only hear some sounds, some tunes playing very discreetly during the performance.

CO'B: I didn't incorporate this in the play but I was using this music, the symphony of Shostakovich, which has been subtitled 'A Soviet Artist's Response to Justified Criticism'. But Stalin was, you know, a tyrant and a murderer, a mass murderer, and terrorized the Russian people between 1920 and 1950, so the State then had assumed a very arbitrary role. So, the artist and the State was the issue for Shostakovich and Stalin. And so, what I was using was a parallel, a twentieth-century parallel of how people of belief engage with the State. Now, I wasn't equating Creon with Stalin nor Antigone with Shostakovich, but I was saying that where arbitrary

power comes up against strong belief, you have to say that the strong belief that Russian composer Shostakovich had was not in a political system but in his own ability, in his own talent as an artist and that is what sustained him in that situation - just like Antigone is sustained and does not buckle because of her belief. It wasn't agitprop theatre. If you're dealing with political issues it's multi-layered, you cannot say that Creon is the villain and Antigone is the heroine, because there is much to admire in Creon and there is much to admire in Antigone and there is much to criticize in Antigone and there is much to criticize in Creon. So, my production was not didactic; I was trying to raise these issues for reflection, rather than be driven by a particular perspective, particularly since it was in Ireland during the 1980s.

KG; What difference did it

make?

CO'B: Well, because Ireland in the 1980s was divided, terribly divided. We had a national debt that was greater than that of Poland, so the country was on its knees economically and rather than dealing with economic issues, it was about religious issues and the role of the Church in our governance, in our laws and whether this country was going to be ruled by the beliefs of the Catholic Church or whether there was room for any other opinion. And even families were divided on the abortion issue. I remember, I have two daughters, and at that time they would have been eight and nine or nine and ten, but before they knew the facts of life, before they were asking questions about sex, they were asking questions about abortion. That was the public debate everywhere. So, this was everywhere in the country. We were not a united

country, we were a very, very divided country, with lots of issues, lots of tension around. And because the majority of Catholics were pressing their point of view on all of the political parties, I felt these issues needed a poet and there he was - Brendan Kennelly - who is also a practicing Catholic himself, he has very strong Catholic beliefs as an individual - was addressing these issues from a poet's perspective. His language is unemotional. I felt I didn't want an emotional production, I wanted a cerebral production. So, the design and the style of acting and the atmosphere of the production had that, perhaps, coldness. Those who wanted to come to an emotional experience in the theatre were disappointed.

KG: **Is this why you think some people loved it and some people didn't like it at all?**

C'OB: Yes. Yes.

KG: It had to do with what they expected?

C'OB: Well, I mean, the letters came from diverse, different groups of people, but I remember I received a letter from a professor of Greek in Trinity College who wrote that it was the best performance of a Greek play that he had ever seen. Now, I took that as a compliment that I had been able to address my own contemporary issues with respect of course to theatre and its origins in Greece and in Greek culture, and to respect those and also have a resonance for an expert in Greek language and Greek culture. He was one of the people who wrote to me saying how much he'd admired the play, how he admired my production of it.

KG: What do you think has changed, because there are differences in the treatment of the characters

in different Irish productions of *Antigone*: in the 1984 productions, the writers have a personal perspective and they are more radical but in the productions between 1999 and 2004 I think the writers are a bit more conservative. So, I was wondering, what does this have to do with, given everything you said?

CO'B: It couldn't be more conservative than it was in the mid 1980s. We were trying to break out. The radicals were all conservatives, and they were radical in order to preserve the society and religious belief, and there were liberals who wanted to open the debate and to be more inclusive, so that the Irish society would not be bounded by one set of religious beliefs. There should be room for varying religious beliefs within Ireland. But [the liberals] were in a minority. The

majority was prevailing and, of course, also the situation in the North was continuing, where Catholics and Protestants were blowing each other up and shooting each other.

KG: To what extent did things change towards the end of the twentieth century?

CO'B: Well, things changed in Ireland in the 1990s in that we changed from being a poor country with a huge national debt to being now, I think, the sixteenth wealthiest country in the world. There were subsequent cases heard by the courts over abortion where the liberal interpretation of the law reasserted itself in the early 1990s. Abortion issues came before the courts and the courts' decisions were more open minded, rather than being driven by the views that prevailed in the 1980s, so the judges were more radical and less conservative than the rest of society. So,

Ireland grew between the 1980s and the 1990s economically and in openness. In the 1990s we became multicultural: we were a single white society in the 1980s, but that started to change in the 1990s. Also, there was the peace movement. Peace began to become a political reality in Northern Ireland, so the changes in Ireland over the past 20 years are huge in every sense.

KG: Given the fact that from 1984 until 1999 there was no *Antigone*, I'm just wondering, is it because *Antigone* is needed only when there is an upheaval?

CO'B: We had thirty years of upheaval. This country has been in upheaval and now we are dealing with having come right through the situation. We had the optimism of the 1960s, and then the difficulties of the 1970s with the oil crisis and a number of religious issues

again here and then the 1980s where this country was divided right down the middle on social issues and religious issues. I'm repeating this, I mean, it's impossible for you to imagine how awful things were for people who were not of the majority belief, and that majority belief as sustained by the Catholic Church, by the Irish Catholic Church. The Church is now weak, in the 1980s the Catholic Church was strong, very strong and since then there have been lots of scandals in the Church. The Pope came to Ireland in 1979, John Paul, the first time a Pope had ever been to Ireland. So, this was the atmosphere of the 1980s. We have had scandals - not only in the Church. There have been scandals in political parties, there have been scandals in the banks, there have been scandals in local authorities with politicians.

In every sector, Ireland now is totally different. At the same time, the women's liberation movement was sweeping the world and it had come to Ireland, and it became stronger and so women's roles were also being articulated politically. And, of course then, Antigone being a very strong feminist figure and Ismene much more pragmatic and trying to engage with the system, there were lots of resonances in it. I never saw, I mean I can't imagine at the centre of any political debate that there was a debate about Antigone, so theatre had not penetrated the public imagination to such an extent that the debate was around the play.

KG: No, I just think that probably it followed, not that it preceded life, but it followed what happened. Theatre sort of reflects

what happens in a society and when writers write something, they want to make a point about what happens around them.

C'OB: Well, I am not quite sure that Brendan Kennelly had any political point.

KG: **No, Brendan Kennelly no, but Paulin had...**

C'OB: Tom Paulin was always political because of his Field Day involvement.

KG: **Brendan Kennelly's is the least political version, I think.**

CO'B: Yes, he was taken by the interplay of the characters and the issues - that is what attracted Kennelly, who subsequently did *Medea* and *Trojan Women*. So, at the production that was in the Abbey any political reading was mine, as the director.

KG: **Have you watched any other performances of Greek drama?**

CO'B: No.

KG: **Recently they've become**

quite popular, though.

C'OB: Well, that may have to do with a lack of imagination in contemporary drama. The issues are not coming forward in contemporary writing and therefore there is always a harking to the past. I find that that is what people describe as 'museum theatre', that is, theatre taken out of the museum vaults because they have no other ideas.

KG: **The way you put it is not very encouraging for contemporary theatre.**

C'OB: Exactly. But I mean the impetuses within theatre making are very different; they come from writers, they come from an artistic director, they come from perhaps an actor, who wants to play a particular role and that can influence the choice of a play. Fiona Shaw, for example - many plays have been done because she is a vehicle for a role.

KG: **Now that so much time has passed after your**

production, how do you feel about it? What do you think would have been different? Would you do it again?

C'OB: I have never done a production a second time.

KG: Would you do it now if somebody asked you to? Do you find that there is any interest in this myth anymore? If you hadn't done it then, would you do it now?

C'OB: Well, I don't like repeating myself. If I got it wrong the first time, I have no wish to go back and correct it. If I got it right the first time, I

have no wish to do it again.

So, I have never repeated myself in that regard. I mean, other directors take the same play and do several productions of it with different actors, at different times. I have never been in that situation.

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ARTS AND STUDIES

COLM O'BRIAIN filled in "theatre producer" as his occupation on the census form but concedes that description is hardly more precise than any other. "Drifting is the only word to describe what I'm doing at the moment which has any accuracy to it. I have no commitments and I don't know how long that will go on for."

Yet since his eight-year spell at the Arts Council and his rather shorter stint as General Secretary of the Labour Party, O'Brian has maintained an almost excessively active profile. He directed the Gate's Beckett show, "I'll Go On", for the Theatre Festival (it goes on in Paris this weekend), finished presenting a series of "Slants" for RTE last month and is now directing a new version of "Antigone" at the Peacock.

He points out that he's been responding to offers, not "initiating. In a way I'm now back into the impermanence and lack of definition that was the case when I started out 18 years ago." In fact his tenure at the Arts Council might be seen as hiatus in a career that has patterned itself on change and variation and stretches from an involvement in the first incarnation of the Project Arts Centre, to freelance directing in theatres all around the country, to 14 months in the Abbey as Head of Training and Director of Productions.

Perhaps this made him a natural to present the media show "Slants". He has worked in

CHARLES HUNTER talks to COLM O'BRIAIN, former Arts Council Director, former Labour Party Secretary, television presenter and a gifted theatre director now directing a new translation of 'Antigone' at the Peacock.

JACK OF ALL TRADES

around, or even in spite of, the media in his time. "When I was asked I wouldn't have been my first choice for that kind of job," he says, "but obviously I had a view, perhaps slightly jaundiced in some instances. The media feast so much on the shortcomings of the rest of us that it was enjoyable to turn it round and look at the shortcomings of the media. Not quite a retribution, but..."

He feels that the nature of the programme meant that it usually raised issues without having the opportunity to examine them in depth, a consequence of wanting a programme that consciously avoided being too academic. He was particularly interested in one show which looked at the presentation of history on television and how it is often pretending to be objective when actually highly partisan.

Isn't "Antigone" about different ways of claiming recent history? "Well, it's generally seen as a political play carrying a very particular message, I think that is true. Nevertheless versions and adaptations of it have sought to

put the politics of it right in the foreground. The original Sophocles is much more concerned with the dilemmas of the individuals grappling with the issues, and I think that's the sort of spirit Brendan Kennelly has in his approach to it."

He describes Brendan Kennelly's "Antigone" as "a text" in the same way as Yeats's "text" of "Oedipus at Colonus". "It's not a version as we've come to know them — in a contemporary setting with a relevant political message for today. He's gone back to the Greek to draw out the universal relevance."

Thus the story of the ruler Creon, who punishes Antigone for burying the disgraced corpse of her rebel brother, should be a more emotional experience in this production. O'Brian rejects the usual notion of the play as a fable about tyranny. "I don't see that as what Sophocles intended or as something the text can carry. It is about the problem of government. J. K. Galbraith said that the business of government was rarely anything other than a choice between the disastrous and the unpalatable. Basically, that's the position Creon finds himself in."

Plato defined the law as the ultimate safeguard of liberty. That's basically the position of Creon, a highly refined and civilised thing, a secular view of society. Antigone takes a particularly strong spiritual view to which she gives her total commitment. There are no shades of compromise. She has no responsibilities other than to herself. In a number of modern versions she is made out to be the triumph or sacrifice of conscience and the individual against the incursion of the state. I think its political message is much more potent if you take it the other way round; the pressures that idealism adds to an already fragmented society."

The production will try to achieve "a tension of the inevitable. It isn't uncertainty, but the certainty in the evolution of tragedy, how something beyond people's control makes them chose the worst possible scenarios for themselves." He felt immediately that Kennelly's text was "a leap back into the original. Therefore there was a

need to try for some sort of formal Greek approach. We're not trying to turn the Peacock into Epidaurus, but I hope we achieve something of the style and approach a play of this kind did receive and to use it to heighten the emotion and the tension."

The presence of three actors who have worked mainly with the Rough Magic company can be ascribed to O'Brian's desire for the sense of an age gap in the play between the old Creon and his venerable advisors, and Antigone, "not a mature young woman, but a girl with all the certainty of a view of the world untroubled by having to make decisions. After a civil war you've lost a whole generation." He has also developed the feminist theme he sees in the original Sophocles. "Creon refuses to buckle to a woman."

He was allowed to go outside the Abbey to find performers in the necessary age group and he's very pleased with the company he's got. He sees the younger companies around now as "very close to the material, because they are very close to the process. The institution hasn't intervened. The Abbey should be in a position to draw on young actors. But if it sucks them in it could suffocate them." That's from a man in no danger of suffocation himself.

"Antigone" opens at the Peacock on Monday, April 23, with previews on April 22, 24, 25 and 26.



Anne Byrne, who plays the title role in "Antigone" at the Peacock.

Review of the 1986 *Antigone* in the *Irish Times*.