

INTERVIEW WITH KEVIN McHUGH (CREON)

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' 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.

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.



Kevin McHugh in *Antigone*. Image: *Evening Press*, Saturday April 26 1986.

KG: Ó Briain's staging of Kennelly's *Antigone* was different from the other Irish productions of *Antigone* in several respects.

KM: We set out to present an objective production in a stylized way, in which the actor doesn't personalize the part but finds the elemental emotion of the character, anger, love, loyalty, obedience and in that way presents the story. I think that was sort of easier for me, in one sense, in that the character allowed for that: it was clear what his dilemmas were, what his emotions were. But for some of the other characters it wasn't as easy to find the relationship that didn't slip sometimes into the domestic, if you know what I mean. And, therefore, the production as a whole wasn't as sure-footed as it might have been, that would be my memory of it.

KG: So this is what you felt as an actor?

KM: Yes, I am also a director, so maybe I have an overlap of interest.

KG: What do you feel should have been a bit different?

KM: I think that the presentation of the story was personalized too much. I know audiences today crave the

naturalism of television and of most theatre, but I think if we had presented it in a more objective way the cohesion of the production would have been better.

KG: Was it too subjective, do you think?

KM: Well, it wasn't so subjective; I mean, I am just saying it verged on it, here and there.

KG: What makes a play subjective?

KM: I think the idea that you can approach the material from a personal point of view. Naturalistic plays are, of course best interpreted from the actors' point of view, in this way. In Greek tragedy obviously there are personal emotions and ideas, which you've got to bring to it, but you need to strip it down to something elemental and universal. The sisters in *Antigone* represent so much; they are not just sisters, they are like ambassadors of ideas and they have to speak, subsumed by those ideas and by the political spirit of the one and the revolutionary spirit of the other. If the dialogue is not interpreted through that then it does become a little domestic, a

squabble between sisters, I suppose.

KG: What about the role of Creon that you played? How do you feel about your role and what you were directed to do?

KM: I enjoyed it. I think there was a slight problem towards the end in what should have been the catharsis, a sort of primal scream, which is usually offstage. We had to walk down steps; the staging of it wasn't easy. Carrying in the bodies wasn't easy, because it was in the round in the Peacock Theatre. So, it didn't have that smoothness at the end and I found it difficult at the end to pull together the text and the depth of emotion I felt was required. But I enjoyed the stylized version and I feel that that is the way to present it, in a more abstract way. I think that the power of the play is in its ideas, the way you can reach into the intention of the play, which I think is lucrative

KG: Colm Ó Briain told me that there was golden colour on the faces like masks. I couldn't easily discern it during the play, I only noticed it after he told me.

KM: Yeah, there was a makeup design. Again, going with the objective production, it would have tended towards the heroic, rather than the *commedia dell'arte* style of characteristics, individual characteristics.

KG: What about the presentation of the Chorus?

KM: My feeling is that the Chorus is like a member of the audience, that he should bring them in and he should be informal. He is the one character, I think, who should be informal and should invite the audience to watch the tragedy, share it with them. In other words, while he is standing outside the production, he is also empathizing and pointing out and sympathizing with the dilemmas and the ideas and pointing them up. That, I think, is his function. He is the mediator between the players and the audience.

KG: What was the audience's response to the show? Can you remember?

KM: I only have a vague idea. They were different on different evenings. Sometimes they were gripped totally by the story and sometimes they wanted to feel the 'domestic

'element a lot more. They wanted to be brought into it rather than watch, they wanted to empathize with human situations. And I think that was partly our fault because of the fact, I think, that we didn't state our intention to have an objective production clearly enough at the very beginning – we didn't signal that at the very beginning.

KG: **Would you associate Kennelly's version of the play with what was happening in Ireland at that time? I mean, would you connect the popularity of *Antigone* in the early 1980s with the Troubles and what followed?**

KM: You could, but I don't think people got that message; I don't think the production was aimed at that. It was aimed more at the intellectual message, and although the play examines the politics of rebellion I don't think that our audiences related it to the Northern conflict although it did have the revolutionary political element and the law and order element - I think that was very strong in it.

KG: **In the text or in the performance?**

KM: In both. But I don't think it set out to actually mimic the North of

Ireland or anything like that. I think it was actually faithful to the original idea, which was equally about revolutionary thinking and the difficulty of governing with one idea but disallowing other ideas.

KG: **Would Irish audiences even now recall contemporary political and social situations when revisiting the *Antigone* myth?**

KM: That is what I was saying earlier. I think it had a resonance perhaps then, which it wouldn't have now. I think history has eroded a lot of the problems; democracy has eroded a lot of problems. Although it's still there when the state says you cannot believe in certain things and somebody else says "I don't agree with the State, I want to believe in something different, and my reasons are my own, a lot of people believe in me, and I am willing to fight for my ideas." Whenever you have that conflict, *Antigone* is relevant.

KG: **Do you think that there is space for more *Antigones* in the near future?**

KM: I don't know how they would reframe it, I don't know, I think there is space for developing a way of doing Greek theatre that could

reach all audiences, not Irish audiences but, generally speaking, English-speaking audiences. For instance, I think *Antigone* would have great relevance in America at the moment, where you have divided ideologies there and if you could make it relevant to an American audience, I think very quickly they would understand the tragedy of divisions, why Creon has to do what he has to do, why she has to do what she has to do... And of course in all powerful states where the leader's word is law. Jean Anouilh wrote his version during the Second World War.

KG: How do you feel about Creon? Sometimes he's depicted as the cruel leader.

KM: Yes, he's the man who has to make decisions. And I felt his inability, if you like, to put into practice some sort of system, which would allow for dissent without destroying his own power. In a sense, he was a weak leader in that he couldn't allow for dissent, that he had to be absolute at all times, he had to be obeyed at all times. That, to me, is a sign of weakness rather than a sign of strength and therefore his

political analysis failed, as it does in all dictators.

KG: Creon is usually the tyrant.

KM: I say he's a weak man, not a strong man.

KG: Do you believe in politicizing texts?

KM: Oh, no. Politicize productions yes, interpret the text in a way that expresses what you wish to convey, yes, but the text itself doesn't need politicizing. Changing the text to make it more available to an audience sometimes can reduce its power because it gives it relative values, it gives it arguable values rather than the clarity that creates the tragedy. If you change the text to fit any particular circumstance then you invite the audience to disagree with you. Write your own play, like Anouilh. When characters in Greek tragedy speak in an absolute way, "I will go now and I will kill myself", is the final confrontation of ideas. As I say, there are some societies today where that could happen and I have no doubt that the play would represent a powerful critique of those countries, but to transpose it to a modern Western society,

would not ring quite true. When I spoke earlier about the US I did not mean changing the play but merely to show the audience the conflict between rule by diktat and the spirit that opposes it. In other words absolute positions, taken to their extremes, lead to tragedy.

KG: Do you feel that it should be put in more abstract terms?

KM: Well, Greek tragedy is in its own terms an abstraction, because it is about ideas. At least I feel the play is about ideas. Therefore, ideas being abstract, you can find a way of presenting those clearly and sharply and relevantly to your audience. Sometimes if you, as I say, make it too particular, you reduce the sharpness of that presentation.

KG: Is Greek theatre popular with audiences today? I mean, there are lots of stagings of Greek plays, but how popular are they?

KM: Not really popular. They become events, there was a famous *Oedipus* in the Abbey, which was directed by Michael Cacoyannis, a Greek director, and his production was fascinating. It was a terrific production, the theatre was

packed. But basically because of the way it was unusually staged, for me it did not achieve the full catharsis, but even so the audience packed into it.

KG: It was probably something new for them as well.

KM: It was, yes. It was an event.

KG: Now I think there are more and more new productions and stagings almost every year, so it is not something new.

KM: I don't know how well they do, these productions. I haven't seen any of them. I think most Greek tragedies are political in nature and that they are inviting the audience to examine the construction of the society by looking at the tragedy that political and moral dilemmas deliver. *The Trojan Women*, for example: what you do with your prisoners, is this the way to treat people? The play invites the audience to confirm a moral judgment or a political judgment on that. That's why I think, to some degree, the French *Antigone* during the war produced that level of attention.

KG: Recalling that show now, would

you consider it a successful rendering of *Antigone*?

KM: Well, it was a production that tried to make its way in a difficult theatrical tradition. It wasn't going to achieve everything we set out to achieve. But I think we made a number of steps in the right direction to achieve what we did. But not everything, because I think you need a body of actors to understand and agree on the principles by which you are going to operate. I don't think we had that. The idea of a totally objective production in this country is quite unusual and doesn't sit easily with actors.

KG: Do you think that the problem lay mostly with the actors, then?

KM: I would locate it in the combination of the actors. You see, you are doing the play within the ambience of a company, which has a tradition of naturalism. And the whole basis of their training and ideology is naturalism. And, I think, placing a new concept, if you like, within that

was a difficulty. Because people naturally drift it towards being "this is me doing my part", "me related to my sister", "me related to...", "here I am, I'm the wife". People related to doing that, they could do it very easily. Indeed, they are often praised for doing it. So, it didn't quite sit on very firm foundations.

KG: Do you think there is better training now? Do the actors receive better training now than they had then?

KM: Yes, I don't really know. I've seen other productions, which require exactly the same style of acting. And, as some of Brecht requires that style of acting. Some actors were very happy within that, very good within that and I would like to see them get together, all the good ones - not exactly the good ones, all those who have a passion for that - to get together and put on a major Greek play. Just get them all together.