

DRAMA *Works*

Plays Through Practice

ANTIGONE
by
SOPHOCLES

EXTRACT

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Extract

NOTE: Before beginning the work in the following pages, it is essential to have read the play through - either in class or just individually in preparation. At the very least, the story of the legend, which precedes this page, ought to be read. Much of the work is going to assume a knowledge of the story-line and of character.

Students will need to keep a careful record of all decisions made as they experiment with the options suggested in the following practical exercises.

THE OPENING OF THE PLAY AND THE FIRST DIALOGUE, ISMENE AND ANTIGONE

Note: Aristotle wrote about the theatre around the time of Sophocles. He admired this playwright above all. He wrote down certain rules which a playwright should follow, if they wanted to achieve the same kind of intensity as Sophocles, the Master. Among these were the three Unities:

Unity of Time = the action of the whole play should believably fit in to the audience's watching time.

Unity of Place, meant that there were no scene changes. Plays should be set in a neutral area [e.g. in front of a palace] where the lower characters [the Chorus, Messengers, Soldiers etc.] could believably meet with Kings and royalty.

Unity of Action meant that there should be no sub-plots, but a single story only. This lends to tragedy an enormous intensity, since there are no distractions from the inexorable playing out of the main characters' fates.

The play begins in the middle of things, as is the norm in Greek tragedy of this kind, which must take place, according to the Unity of Time, in a short period of time. Thus the whole play takes place in the short period between Antigone first hearing of Creon's ruling, to her disobedience, her capture, sentence and death.

The stage direction states simply that the two girls enter from the palace. Obeying the idea of Unity of Place, the whole play takes place in this same area, in front of the palace. This is a neutral area, allowing for entrances and exits into the town, outside the town walls and into the palace itself.

Given that the whole play is going to happen in a single setting, how can we ensure that it is interesting enough for a modern day audience? The full implications of setting will be discussed again at the end of the play, but I believe that it helps practical work if it takes place as far as possible within the idea of an environment. Now is the time, therefore, to start brainstorming ideas as to that environment.

What type of stage, too, would it be most suitable for? An open stage? An arena stage like the Greeks used themselves? I think, personally, that space is needed and that either of these two options would be the most suitable. As an exercise, however, you might want to see if the space you are used to - your school stage or studio space might serve the purpose and, if not, what changes you would like to make to it so that it does fulfil what you want.

You have already read the play, so as a whole group first brainstorm what are the main themes of the play and the events immediately before and during the play. Write these down as a list:

this will probably include the story line of the play; the fact that a battle has occurred immediately before the play; that the most obvious themes are the clash between government and the individual; strength and single-mindedness versus weakness and pettiness; the power of sacrifice and love. The fact that Antigone is a woman at a time when women were almost powerless might feature.

Next ask yourselves, which of these ideas have sufficient interest to excite a modern audience and director? Is there anything going on in the world now, or recently, that reminds you of any of the events in the play? Or might it be enough to be making some statement about dictators, as Creon is, in general?

This initial brainstorming is just to wake up the perception process. As a general rule, I would say that unless a particular situation is parallel or similar [perhaps unlikely] then making a more 'catch-all' statement might be better: such as emphasising the trappings of dictatorship - or a police state - through costume, set, etc. and allowing the audience to make their own links and references. Sometimes that is a richer way of proceeding, when making decisions. I wouldn't suggest making any such decisions yet, but just to think about the possibilities as you work your way through. One thing is for certain, it is a play that lends itself to this kind of approach - which is why it has remained popular over the centuries.

What did your brainstorming throw up otherwise? What might Thebes be like after a prolonged battle? How will it have affected the ordinary people? **Consider a set that makes an initial impact on an audience of the aftermath of war - the wounded, the mourning, the shocked, the dispossessed. What are the implications of this set-wise? - The outside of buildings pock-marked and scarred by battle; bloodstains; the litter of battle - abandoned weapons etc.**

Consider a setting in which the dictator Creon has an iron hand: pillars, a balcony for state 'showing of the ruler' to the people, a regimented feel to the whole thing. Perhaps banners and a clean but cold look to the colour of the 'stone'.

Keep your mind fairly open at present, until you are further into your study. Remember that ideas can be mixed too. One idea does not necessarily preclude another.

I think the base minimum is a raised level at the back of the stage and a large open space at the front. The back of the stage needs to show the frontage of a building, the palace, and it will give a further entrance or entrances from the back. This is the same 'base minimum' as the Greeks themselves would have had.

The additions, detail and colour you add to this will be a part of the interpretation you decide to put on the piece.

For your practical work on the play, build this raised platform at the back and indicate where at least a main entrance in the centre will be. If you have steps, place these in the centre too, though I expect in your finished setting steps that run the length of the raised area may be appropriate and will give you more levels on which to work. If you take a little time to do this whenever you work practically, you will begin to see where such details as further exits and entrances, are necessary and the practical needs of the set will grow in your minds, as it were, organically.

The beginning is quite abrupt for modern tastes. Using the whole group, try a couple of other ideas for an opening to tell an audience something of the situation the characters are in, before the two sisters enter:

a] The battle has just ended. Some wounded or dead lie about and mourners are searching the dead, or cradling a loved one. The wounded whimper or call out. Aim for an atmosphere of despair, misery. Though the battle is not lost - there was no real way of winning or losing this particular fight - the fact is that the situation has been a kind of civil war, brother against brother, and though Polynices has used mainly foreign mercenaries to attack his home city, there will have been many too who joined him and supported him.

b.] You want to suggest this is a police state. There are dead and dying, the poor and dispossessed as in the last idea, but this time, Creon is bent on cleaning the place up and taking control as far and as quickly as possible. Therefore, soldiers are herding people away, taking away the dead, not allowing loitering, looking suspiciously and fiercely in the faces of those who litter the stage until the stage is empty of the ordinary people, whereupon the soldiers move into a close formation and exit with much sound of marching and fierce shouts from the officer.

c.] you start the whole thing with a movement section, showing the battle: try this with a maximum amount of sound and fury to open with, shocking the audience with sound, clash of weapons, shouts, cries, grunts and groans.... then move, on a cue such as the blare of a trumpet, into slow motion... ending up with massive slaughter, bodies all over the stage - but this shown dreamily, slow, with the sounds long drawn out and slowed too. Then you move into an opening like a]

to follow on.

d] similar to c] but the battle clears away during the slow motion section, leaving two figures alone, spotlit in the centre of a bleak space, fighting it out. When the stage has cleared of the others, these fighters [Eteocles and Polynices] go into normal speed, to emphasise the brutality of their fight. Both die - perhaps the falls into death in slow motion once again. The two bodies lie there, perhaps they have fallen in a close embrace, a mockery of their brotherly love, then soldiers come and clear one away leaving the other alone in the spotlight. The wind howls, dust blows.... I got a bit carried away there but you can see the sort of thing! There would have to be a slow fade to blackout before the opening of the play in this case, for the body to be removed.

Trying out all these ideas will have given you something to talk about and preference for the effectiveness of one or the other might suggest the way you want to go in your interpretation of the play.

The way Antigone enters and speaks her first lines will depend very much on the opening you have gone for. For instance, a stage filled with dead and wounded, etc. will call for her flitting sympathetically from group to group, bending here to offer a helping hand, there to comfort a mourner, etc. This makes sense of her opening lines, which are heavy with sorrow.

A stage which has been cleared by the officious soldiery of a police state will suggest an entry in which already Antigone is looking over her shoulder, acting like a member of an underground resistance group, trying not to attract too much attention.

Trying these alternatives out might help you differentiate between the two sisters too. Antigone is the strong one, the one who led her father round the land, blind and reviled. She is the one with convictions - and she is also the one who needs to be sympathetically viewed by the audience. There is affection between the two sisters, but we should be in no doubt who is the stronger of the two.

First of all, having tried out and discussed alternative openings to the play, try out the two alternative entrances I have suggested above. With the entrance that has Antigone moving sorrowfully around the wounded, try having Ismene:

**picking her way fastidiously, careful not to let her skirts get muddy or bloody
also sympathetic but very much second-string to Antigone, always a little behind her and less forthcoming in her active help
almost paralysed with distress, the kind who really is not any good in a crisis**

With the entrance in which they are living in a police state, have Ismene:

**being pulled reluctantly along by Antigone, who is trying to keep her from giving them both away by forcing her by stern looks and firm grip to keep quiet
just a follower - happy to go along with what Antigone suggests, but not able to promote ideas or action
almost paralysed by terror**

Approaching the opening like this will have opened your eyes up to possibilities. The nice thing about Greek tragedy is that so few stage directions are given that a modern director can have a lot of fun with the script. Having thought about the fact that there may be a number of ways of seeing, say, Ismene, read aloud in the group the whole of the opening dialogue up to the first entrance of the Chorus. Then answer the following questions, through discussion in the group. This will help clarify the situation for you:

What are the main points that Antigone makes as to why she will disobey
Creon's law?

What are the main reasons that Ismene gives for not helping Antigone?

If it were a brother of yours that was being treated in this way, how would you feel? Does that make you feel any different about the standpoint of

the two sisters?

In pairs, dramatise the main points that the two put forward, trying to make them as evenly balanced as you can. Despite this, does an impression of the two characters start to emerge?

If we look at the first interchange in detail now, by the end you may have come to a definite conclusion as to how you see the two sisters. Then you can go back and decide which entrance may be most appropriate, amongst other things.

Consider Antigone's first speech. It seems to divide itself into two parts:

1. Antigone laments the curse that Oedipus brought down on everyone, by which she means the whole city and land of Thebes, but most particularly how this curse [his offence against the gods [hubris]] has made the two of them suffer.
2. The last straw - Creon's order.

Try the speech out in the following ways:

brusquely, at speed - she has lamented their fate often enough; she regrets it but does not want to dwell on it - she is in a hurry to get to the main point - Creon's decree.

looking around at the results of that misery - full of pity - also touching her sister with loving and rueful caresses, a shared moment; the order from Creon causing her to slump further - it is the last straw

full of tense anger, secretive because she doesn't want to be caught before she has done what she wants to do - burying Polyneices [Polynices in the other scripts; I have always known him as this latter spelling too]

In each of these cases, how would the words 'Brave Creon' [*The Commander*., Penguin line 9] [simply 'the king' in the Methuen student edition] be said:

dripping with venom?

sarcastic?

admiring?

Try them all out and decide which is the most likely.

Try Ismene's listening and response;

cautiously - she has heard Antigone's rants often and she is being careful - usually Antigone's rants lead straight onto a wild scheme

reluctantly - she didn't want to be lugged out here, she is cold and miserable and has had enough of this horrible war

afraid, tense, the words clipped and anxious, eager for news

sad, sodden with grief, she has cried so much that now she is drained

All of these interpretations might work [and more]. Go a little further into the scene before making a decision.

Antigone's description of Creon's decree is clear.

How would you describe the fate of Polyn[e]ices, left out 'for hungry birds of prey to swoop and feast/On his poor body' [*a lovely treasure for birds that scan the field and feast to their heart's content* Penguin 35/6] [*lying where he fell ... to stink in the open; till the kites and vultures...* Methuen Student ed. P 6.]?

Try it:

angry and bitter

heavy with sadness, full of love for her brother

full of disbelief - she is having trouble taking it in

Any of these might work.

'Our noble Creon' Line 31 [*good Creon, Penguin line 37*] ; **[What a great king/ Our Creon is, eh, sister?]** Methuen Student ed. - will be in much the same tone probably as your earlier decision.

Now look at: has decreed... 'To you, to me. To me!' line 32 [*'lays down for you and me - yes me, I tell you' ...Penguin line 38*] **'It's against us, you realise, and against me/ In particular that he has published this decree.'** Methuen Student ed.

Why does she consider it more of an insult to her than to Ismene - is the repetition of 'To me' because Ismene seems less moved than she is by the news? Or because she considers herself the one to be reckoned with - she looks down on Ismene as the weaker sister? **Discuss this with the group, and then decide on the tone:**

outraged pride

even more disbelief than before - the repetition emphasises it taking it in, feeling it on the tongue, slowly

The last two [**four in the case of the Methuen ed.**] lines of the speech are where she turns to Ismene and appeals to her. However you look at it they are faintly insulting to Ismene. In the Penguin version even more so, as the word 'coward' is used there.

Try it:

all in a rush, face close to Ismene's, hands on her shoulders or upper arms, making close eye contact, the words accompanied by little shakes of Ismene in her desperation to get through to her. This version will minimise the insult and just seeks to put Ismene on her mettle

moving away from Ismene, as if uncaring, but in fact very aware of her, even glancing at her to see the effect she is making, covertly, casually tossing the words over her shoulder

as if lashing her with the words, trying to shock her into action, but not really believing she will help - this version will be facing Ismene, but not so close as the first

Put the whole speech together now, pacing it carefully and using the choices you have made. The actual decree needs to come out clearly; it is the only chance the audience has to take it in. [A Greek audience was familiar with these stories and were far more in the know; you can't expect that kind of knowledge out of a modern audience.]

Ismene's reaction will of course depend on which of the above you have chosen and on the character of her that you are beginning to find:

the uncaring, pleasure-loving, wanting to keep safe at all costs Ismene, who was reluctant to come outside at all with this dotty sister of hers, would use her name or as the Oxford ed has it, the words 'poor sister' accompanied by a long-suffering sigh perhaps. This version will emphasise the 'I' of 'what can I do' [*'who am I... what good am I...'* Penguin]

The weak follower, who is soft-hearted but scared will be sympathetic and genuinely loving; her offer to help will be sincere, though she is too scared to go against the law

The practical Ismene would also be loving, but would take on a bit of the doubtfulness of the first version [emphasising the 'I'] because her sensible soul can see no solution. She is not cowardly, even if Antigone sees her as such - or goads her with that.

Try out the whole next interchange in all three ways, feeling what seems right to you.

What do you feel about Antigone here? She has something of the fanatic in her manner - but this must not be overplayed, or sympathy with an audience may be lost.

Ismene's long speech will work, whichever of the three interpretations of her you use. If playing the uncaring version, she would need to drop this attitude when describing the horrors of the deaths of their family. This could give a motivation for her being as she is: