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Photo: Alexander Iziliaev.

The City Breathes Together

by Julius Ferraro

A short, brutal-looking sword hangs over the head of Thebes as we enter the auditorium at The Wilma Theatre. Beneath the sword, on a plinth stands a man (Paolo Musio), lit from each side so a shadow slices him down his center. His hands in his jacket pockets, neck and shoulders crooked back slightly, he looks like a mafioso giving an ultimatum.

His body is an instrument, a muscular tuba blowing through a tiny mouthpiece. Above the rigid body his lips run incessantly, mouthing sharp, unvoiced words. His chest inflates and deflates with his breath. As the performance begins and the room dims, we hear the sound rumbling out of him, a mad babble.

Theodoros Terzopoulos, artistic director of Attis Theatre in Delphi for the last 30 years and director/designer of this production, is not interested in a ramp-up. As his devastated chorus of Thebans march onstage, they breathe as one. They inhale, their mask-like faces paralyzed in horror, then let out a long laugh in unison. They breathe, laugh. Breathe, laugh. As the laugh reaches the top of its crescendo, it turns into a sob, then descends.

Nothing is more alien to the recent Philadelphia stage than the unrestrained wail of a widowed Creon or the soap-operatic death of Haemon at Antigone's feet. Our suffering is often ironic, peppered with humor, or intellectual, not black and white, like this, fleshy and human. But *Antigone* is a collaboration between The Wilma Theatre and Attis, performed together by actors from Philadelphia and Greece, and star Philly performers like Ross Beschler, Sarah Gliko, and Ed Swidey look at home on stage with frequent Terzopoulos collaborators Musio, Stathis Grapsas, and Antonis Miriagos.

Terzopoulos' *Antigone* is about the effects of war on a people, beginning at the point of exhaustion, with a populace worn to the nub.

Polynices' revolt against his brother Eteocles has left the people and the royalty decimated. Creon, who is now king, proclaims that anyone who tries to bury Polynices' body is a traitor to the city, while Antigone, sister of the dead rivals, is determined to fulfill the will of the gods and bury him. A disgusted chorus raves at Creon's inflexibility, barking the names of the dead and crying "LOST!"

Antigone (Jennifer Kidwell) and Ismene (Sarah Gliko) crawl toward one another. Kidwell, with her mohawk and tensed, bare arms, looks more ready to go to war than the exhausted chorus of soldiers. The two women inhale in unison, and speak in strained howls as Antigone shares her plan to bury Polynices. To move closer or further away from one another, they drop onto their bellies, then thrust their bodies forward on tense arms—militaristic lizards.

They link hands and roll slowly across the ground, each facing the opposite direction. As they inhale together, Antigone sharply raises her shoulders and Ismene tenses her torso up into an arch. They exhale softly to the ground. They roll with another breath, then repeat the motion in the inverse.

Creon's (Miriagos) long hair is slicked back, an old man wishing to appear young. He practically dances his commandments, jabbing the air joyfully, with a decadence that sets him distinctly apart from his much more militant niece Antigone. When he discovers Antigone's treason, he expresses his horror—and fear—like an enraged goose doing a lonely tango, shuffling sharply forward then stopping, then backwards a single long step, then forward several small paces. He folds his shoulders in and wraps his wrists around one another, trussed up by his own decree.

Creon spends the second half of the play carrying a massive cube which both protects and effaces him. He can barely look over the top of it, and every motion is twisted by the need to balance with this unwieldy thing. He carries it through the suicides of Antigone, his son, and his wife. His own death he accomplishes by sinking gradually to the ground.

The sword continues to hang in its place, suggesting that nothing has been accomplished, that, as the final line insists, "Mortals cannot escape a destiny of suffering."

Theodoros Terzopoulos, *Antigone*, The Wilma Theatre, October 7-November 8, www.wilmatheater.org/production/antigone.

By Julius Ferraro
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