

Greek tragedy recast around American presidency

by W. Fred Crow

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Tabard Theatre Company is entertaining a modern rewrite of a 2,400-year-old Greek tragedy with their presentation of "Antigone (in the Oval Office)." Adapted and directed by Ana-Catrina Buchser from an Ian C. Johnston take on the Sophocles work, the theme of the world premiere is about politics without being political. The play displays unyielding human resolve without losing its humanity, and generously demonstrates that human nature hasn't changed in almost two and a half millennia.

The play has been reset in modern times and the players recast around the American presidency. "Antigone (in the Oval Office)" begins with the transfer of power. Vice President Creon takes the oath of office and assumes the top spot. Immediately there is a crisis. Two brothers, Eteocles and Polynices, are opposing colonels; one loyal to the administration, the other in insurrection. Polynices believes he should be president and attempts a coup. During the defense of the White House both brothers die. President Creon claims Eteocles to be a hero of the state and to be accorded such mourning demonstration befitting a hero. He also declares Polynices a traitor and condemns his body to be left rotting, unburied, and in disgrace.

Their sister, Antigone, believing the right of the individual supersedes the mandate of the government, willingly faces the penalty of the law and Creon's wrath to tend her brother's burial arrangements. She is caught in the act of preparing and burying Polynices. She stands accused before President Creon, whose pride does not allow him to relent, though his son, Haemon pleads he pardon Antigone, to whom he's engaged. Haemon warns his father of the possible loss of life were the penalty not repealed. Creon doesn't back down and Haemon and Antigone commit suicide. The president's wife, stricken with grief over the death of her son also dies leaving Creon to lament and repent of his own implacable and pride-filled position. Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely, so said Lord Acton in 1887. None in position are immune from the pain of wielding such power abusively.

For me, the events as scribed by Sophocles, were based on a totalitarian dictatorship and don't completely transfer to today's White House environment. The American president is bound by constituted law and cannot make arbitrary decrees and enforce capricious penalties. But putting that aside, "Antigone" is an intriguing venture into character, morality, and power without falling into politics.

Antigone (An-tig-o-ne), played by Fiona Lawson, was the activist of her day. She was self-contained and filled with family fervor unafraid of people in position. Lawson claimed the right level of fight and compassion and composition. She was helped nicely by Beth Covey as Ismene, her sister.

Dirk Leatherman (President Creon) had the air, the appearance, and the rapport of being leader of the land. He commanded honor and respect. And as president, Leatherman held himself aloof from his entourage, letting few into the inner circle to provide interference or influence. In the center of that inner circle was Jeff Swan, as Chief of Staff. Swan was everything a Staffer had to be; conscious of what the president says, how he says it, the impact of what is heard, and how to handle the results.

Andrew Ceglio presented a strong and impassioned Haemon. His angst over losing his beloved Antigone could be felt, the sadness over giving his own life touchable. The entire ensemble was well cast, each providing solid support for one another and presented a solid drama, smooth and complete in performance.

An interesting point to note, four years after writing "Antigone," author Sophocles was appointed a general to lead a military expedition against Samos Island, possibly due to the nature of his play, being void of political propaganda or partisan interests. Abuse of power isn't the story; rather, it's about character and characters. This play can be presented any time in history.

"Antigone (in the Oval Office)" begins the eighth season for the Tabard Theatre Company. And with their first play, and after many years of itinerancy, they now have a home. Tabard has become resident operator of the Theater on San Pedro Square.

"Antigone (in the Oval Office)" presented by the Tabard Theatre Company, plays through Nov. 1. The stage is located at The Theater on San Pedro Square, 29 N. San Pedro St., San Jose. For box office and reservation information, call 679-2330.