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Burial at Thebes at UCSD Theater & Dance Image by Jim Carmody

Gods don't take sides

By [Jeff Smith](#), [Nov. 17, 2014](#)

UCSD Theatre & Dance's well-done *Burial at Thebes* pits daughter against father against media.

Sophocles' *Antigone* begins with the unthinkable: two brothers kill each other in battle before the gates of Thebes. Their father, Oedipus, prayed they would die this way. Eteocles fought to continue ruling the city; older brother, Polynices, for his right to rule every other year.



As a show of power, newly crowned King Creon declares that Eteocles be buried with full honors. And Polynices, the traitor, have no “ceremonial whatsoever” — not even a handful of dust sprinkled over his corpse.

Creon says the edict will create “solidarity” in his fractured city-state. But the Greek gods don't take sides. Every human being must receive an honorable burial — even if it's just a handful of

dust.

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In effect, Creon's law defies the "higher law" of the gods or, in Seamus Heaney's excellent translation, a "human right."

In the classic case of civil disobedience, Antigone deliberately breaks the local law in favor of "the rule of life." She does it openly and accepts the consequences. "The right observance put me in the wrong," she says, "But all Creon can see is a crazy girl/He must get rid of."

Heaney's translation, done three years after 9/11, has relevance for days on end. How does a ruler earn the respect, and the trust, of the people? How can a ruler go gravely wrong?

One of Creon's first moves is an example of the latter: he orders the media to take his side "from now on/As agents of the law." Disagree and die.

In UCSD's modern-dress production, director Sarah Wansley turns the story into a media event. On-site reporters and hand-held cameras trail after Antigone and Creon, whose faces appear on large screens. Bo Tindell's lighting forces the eye to the subjects being interviewed, and leaves the rest of the stage in an expressive darkness. In what I hope is a directorial touch, the reporters often recite lines like automatons — which works, since their questions are so lob-pitch formulaic. Other opening night performances were also on the stiff side, however.

Toby Onwumere played Creon like a "bucket list," dream role. He was fully invested in each moment and crafted a sweeping arc from the King's initial bang to his final whimper. After pushing too hard in her first scene, Zakiya Iman Markland settled in and created a more intriguing Antigone than usual. She was fiery-adamant, but kind of liked the media attention, even played to the camera after she donned a prison-like, orange jump suit.

In an inspired directorial touch a woman, Tesiana Elie, plays Tiresias, the blind prophet of Thebes — and beautifully. Legend had it Tiresias was transformed into a woman for seven years.

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Tiresias was downstage, on Lily Bartenstein's blasted-out set, for much of the time. And, like a Greek chorus of one, Tommy Crawford strolled through the rubble, strumming a guitar and singing tough commentaries on the events — music, by the way, that deserves a life after this well-done show.