

Irish playwright + UCSD director = Greek tragedy with new resonance

By Lonnie Burstein Hewitt 4:27 p.m. Nov. 11, 2014



Antigone and Creon are played by Zakiya Markland and Toby Onwumere. — *Maurice Hewitt*

Antigone is the daughter of Oedipus, King of Thebes (yes, THAT Oedipus), and the niece of Creon, the new ruler. Her two brothers are dead, having killed each other battling for control of the kingdom. One was buried as a hero; the other's body is lying in the street, reviled as an enemy of the state. Creon has forbidden his burial, and declared anyone who tries to bury him guilty of treason, which is punishable by death.

Antigone defies Creon's law, buries her brother, and dies for it, but Creon does not live happily ever after. It's a classic Greek tragedy, written by Sophocles, more than 2,500 years ago.

In 2004, Nobel Prize winner Seamus Heaney, hailed for "his works of lyrical beauty and ethical depth, which exalt the living past," re-visioned the play, giving it an Irish accent and a contemporary American setting. "Burial at Thebes" premiered at the Abbey Theater in Dublin, and was subsequently turned into an opera.

La Jolla Light

Fast forward to 2014, and UC San Diego's Theater Department, where Sarah Wansley, a candidate for an MFA in directing, is presenting her version of Heaney's play, set in a mythic land somewhere between ancient Thebes and Washington D.C. For the past year, she has been working on the project, which involves a cast of 22, elaborate sets and costumes, digital projections and live music, and runs Nov. 12-22. The themes is an ancient one — the conflict between divine law and the laws of man — but the spin is modern: in a post 9/11 world of drones, chemical warfare and ubiquitous media, what impossible moral decisions do we ask our leaders to make? And how would we choose between what is right and what is legal, between our country and our family, between taking a stand or settling for compromise? "I was drawn to the play at a time when Obama was dealing with rumors of chemical weapons in Syria," Wansley said. "I was interested in exploring the problem of moral choices. Heaney set the play in his time, the Bush era; we're moving it up a decade, but we've made very few changes in the text."

In Wansley's Obama-era "Burial," the Chorus has become the Press Corps, and she's added a street-singer, who acts as a witness to events and strums out his songs on a lyre, a suitably ancient-Greek instrument. There's even an actual river onstage. "This is the biggest production I've ever done and it's very exciting," Wansley said. "It certainly speaks to some of the issues we're facing right now."