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CLASSICAL REVIVAL IN LOCKDOWN: A HYBRID RESPONSE TO SOPHOCLES' *ANTIGONE* WITH *ANTIGONENOW*

KARANTİNADA KLASİK CANLANIŞ: SOPHOCLES'İN ANTIGONE'SİNE ANTIGONENOW İLE HIBRİT BİR YANIT

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Abstract

It is hard to deny that the pleasure of theatre substantially lies in witnessing a performance in situ. It is equally impossible to eschew the role of digital means in rendering a theatre work accessible to far-away audiences. In the present world hit by Covid-19, theatre practitioners have resorted to digitalism as one solution to ensure theatre's survival. The University of California (UC) Davis Theatre and Dance Department's all-female cast *AntigoneNOW*, a hybrid adaptation of Sophocles' *Antigone*, is one of those enterprises that successfully reflected on and responded to the world's current state through digital means. Twelve culturally diverse female actors from different parts of the world filmed themselves with their phones, iPads, and computers; then all of the recordings brought together and edited by directors of the production. This online adaptation while exemplifying theatre in lockdown, offers insights into the nameless troubles across the globe and the common struggle of a variety of people in their faces.

Öz

Tiyatrodan alınan hazzın büyük oranda bir oyuna yerinde tanık olmaktan geçtiği su götürmez. Öte yandan, tiyatro eserinin uzaktaki seyirciye ulaşılabilir kılınmasında dijital araçların rolü de yadsınamaz. Covid-19'un vurduğu günümüz dünyasında tiyatro çalışanları da tiyatronun varlığını sürdürebilmesini sağlamanın bir yolu olarak dijitalizme başvurmaktadır. California Üniversitesi Davis Tiyatro ve Dans Bölümünün tamamı kadın oyunculardan oluşan ve Sophocles'in *Antigone*'sinin hibrit bir uyarlaması olan *AntigoneNOW* oyunu, mevcut durumu dijital yollarla başarılı bir şekilde irdeleyen ve cevaplayan girişimlerden biridir. Çevrimiçi sergilenen oyun dünyanın farklı köşelerinden ve çeşitli kültürlerden on iki kadın oyuncunun kendilerini telefonları, bilgisayarları ve iPadleri ile kaydettikleri videoların yönetmenler tarafından bir araya getirilip düzenlenmesiyle oluşturulmuştur. Uyarlama, karantina döneminde tiyatro hakkında fikir verirken dünyanın her bir köşesinde isimlendirilmeyen sorunlara ve

Key words: *AntigoneNOW*, Adaptation, Theatre and Covid-19, Lockdown theatre, Digitalism.

bunların karşısında çeşitli insanların ortak çabasına içgörüler önerir.

Anahtar kelimeler: *AntigoneNOW*, Uyarlama, Tiyatro ve Covid-19, Karantina Tiyatrosu, Dijitalizm.

Introduction

Beginning in early 2020, the world is currently passing through a grim milestone, with novel coronavirus having claimed thousands of lives. Quickly turning into a global pandemic, the unprecedented Covid-19 has had far-reaching consequences across the world, including economic, social, cultural, and political. Due to the incredible speed of the outbreak's spread, governments shut many public places down and encouraged self-isolation to reduce physical contact to minimum and thus avoid further contagions. As they gather people together in close proximity, theatre halls were one of those first public places to close and were, needless to say, one of the worst affected under these circumstances. Following theatre closures, thousands of performances were cancelled or indefinitely postponed overnight, depriving stages of audiences and leaving theatre makers, actors, and professionals destitute.

Although the virus rocked the theatre and performing arts hard both economically and psychologically, it has also steered their practitioners to explore new possibilities for survival. Owing to the quality of arts knowing no borders, some theatre practitioners knew how to discover novel ways of executing the art of theatre outside its physical frontiers. As a matter of fact, from 1990s on theatre had already started to move beyond the physical confines of theatre buildings by means of applied theatre practices. Applied theatre, an umbrella term for theatre practices variably known as prison theatre, theatre for development, theatre and education, and more, carried theatrical practices to places other than traditional stages such as prisons, schools, refugee camps (Thompson, 1996: 93). In the same fashion, as Robert Leach proffers, "[p]urpose-built theatre buildings came to seem increasingly limited by many in the twenty-first century, while the internet appeared to open almost infinite sites for a new digitised virtual theatre" (2019: 782), introducing radical changes to the stages. Amid the novel coronavirus, however, theatre-making has been taken to a whole new level. Whilst halting physical presence, the virus has withal catalysed digitalisation in every sphere of public life. Closure of theatres worldwide too resulted in a similar rush, bringing the centrality of medium into the limelight. The National Theatre, Shakespeare's Globe, Royal Shakespeare Company, and many others announced that they would be releasing recordings of their stage plays for a period of time online for free. Sharing archives have gone over well, especially with those who did not have chance to see productions abroad or in other cities beforehand. Nevertheless, the experience has been like having a picnic in a living room; one could merely feel full without savouring the picnic's quintessence. Even though digital archives as substitutes momentarily answered an urgent need, they have been ephemeral, far from the ultimate solution. Before long, the industry has had to introduce successive

shows or otherwise would face an existential crisis. To this end, theatre companies and professionals have had been compelled by the current times to reflect on and even reshape the future of theatre with novel perspectives.

A number of responses to the challenges the theatre industry has faced were introduced using new and established technologies of mediation. In Britain, for example, Brian Lonsdale, who makes a living from acting, founded Coronavirus Theatre Club (CTC) with some fellow actors (Dowd, "Why I Created", 2020). An online platform for writers, actors and directors, CTC has allowed professionals to submit their work digitally to be rehearsed and streamed online. Lockdown Theatre Festival has been another positive response to the virus (Carvel, "How Live Theatre", 2020). Created by actor Bertie Carvel, LTF enabled productions of four plays across the UK that had to close early due to the virus. This online festival, aired on BBC radio as a part of BBC Arts' *Culture in Quarantine Initiative*, enabled actors to use innovative technological solutions. The plays were recorded in isolation with sterilised home studio kits and presented to large audiences via radio and internet. In Turkey, too, many theatrical events were moved to digital spaces. Istanbul Foundation for Culture and Arts' (IKSV) 24th Istanbul Theatre Festival one of those that held on digital platforms. From interactive performances and live recordings of plays to solo performances and aural dramas various events were presented to an audience of thousands. Many ensuing individual or collective initiatives, likewise, have been introduced to keep the theatre industry alive all around the world.

AntigoneNOW in Lockdown as a Hybrid Adaptation

UC Davis Department of Theatre and Dance's production of *AntigoneNOW*, an adaptation of classical Greek tragedy *Antigone*, is another recent creative and positive response. Praised by Hegel as "the most magnificent and satisfying work of art of its kind" (Hegel, 1975: 1217-8), *Antigone* was penned by Sophocles on or about 451 BC, or nearly 2500 years before the production's date. The play still finds present expression onstage across the world, and its themes resonate as strongly today as in ancient Greece. Besides encompassing aesthetics of Greek tradition, *Antigone* has hitherto extended far beyond the discipline of classics and inspired new readings and interpretations in politics, psychoanalysis, and feminist and post-colonial theories, not to mention performance and theatre studies. Apart from theoretical insights, the play has gained an iconic place in theatrical pantheon lending itself to various productions. Thanks to feminist scholars' particular interest in women's place in antiquity (1), it has enjoyed a renewed prominence on stage in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Examples include: *Antigone Project: A Play in Five Parts* (2004), presenting a kaleidoscopic take on Sophocles' play written by five female playwrights, directed by five female directors, and bringing five different possibilities into the classical story; *Antigone: Now* (2018), a physical theatre version exploring relationships in the context of war, dysfunctional families, and nationalism produced by Menagerie Theatre Company and Cambridge Junction; and Rebecca Davis Dance Company's *Antigone* (2004), narrating Antigone's tragic plight with universal language of dance by combining classical with modern aesthetics.

AntigoneNOW likewise adds a new perspective to countless modern interpretations of the timeless play *Antigone* through a hybrid adaptation. Co-directed by Margaret Laurena Kemp and Sinéad Rushe, the production features a culturally diverse ensemble of twelve female actors from the UK, USA, Singapore, Japan, and Chile who are students or alumnae of UC Davis and each of whom plays the title character. When the novel coronavirus outbreak made a proper staging impossible, Margaret Laurena Kemp explains: "I was moved to consider how we could allow this moment in history to positively impact our learning community and our intended production of *Antigone*" (as cited in 'AntigoneNOW', 2020). Later on, Margaret and Sinéad decided to create an online multimedia remake. In lieu of usual rehearsals, each individual cast member filmed herself in seclusion with a phone, iPad, or camera, of which the recordings were later edited and brought into a collective creation by directors to be presented to audiences online for the first time on 23 May 2020.

In her *Theory of Adaptation* (2006), Linda Hutcheon views adaptation as "a form of intertextuality" and proffers "we experience adaptations (as adaptations) as palimpsests through our memory of other works that resonate through repetition with variation" (Hutcheon, 2006: 8). The familiar backstory of *AntigoneNOW*, using the same lines like each new adaptation, primarily re-inscribes the outlasting conflict between Creon and Antigone. Repeating the original narration, Antigone's brothers kill each other, and by Uncle Creon's decree, younger brother Eteokles is buried as a soldier with full honours while Polyneices is denied any burial due to waging war against his home country and his brother. Antigone, in these premises, tries to bury her brother even though it's against now-king Creon's law. Notwithstanding the imprints of the original play this new adaptation spices up familiar ideas and sets forth a novel insight into the story as well as the world around by exploring new interventions and interpretations. And as its title suggests, the play places today's Antigone(s) into the limelight.

To begin with, the production eliminates all characters of the original story but Antigone who is played by many women yet acting and speaking in unison, reminding the viewer of a traditional chorus of ancient dramatic works. Though Greek chorus has long receded from view, modern stage has experimented with new interpretations of it. The polyphony of twelve bereft women in *AntigoneNOW* too in a way evokes and substitutes for a traditional Greek chorus while adding a new perspective to it by comprising it of central character who is many in number. Throughout the whole performance, Antigones, each at their own house in lockdown in different corners of the world, exhibit a collective endeavour to achieve a legitimate goal which is banned by an arbitrary decision. The women act somewhat individually but also together as various phrases uttered by different actors such as "I will bury him myself" (Kemp and Rushe, 2020: 06:16) (2), "it's a test you're facing" (7:20), "I am doing what has to be done" (8:32), and "there is nothing wrong burying a brother" (7:50) echo and create a polyphony of voices. This chorus of Antigones is thus taken on by the actors, narrators, or commentators now and then as would be expected of Greek choruses. This way they show what's individual is in fact communal, and vice versa.

In a Zoom conference following the premiere of *AntigoneNOW*, Rushe names this chorus as a "chorus of lament" ("*AntigoneNOW* Screening and Discussion", 2020: 26:00) because the ever-present grief permeates into every single action and being of Antigones, and the parts of the performance alike. While they run, speak, wash, or sit, each manifestation of the titular character is seen in a state of elegy due to loss of a brother and rough justice. "Elegiac quality is most pronounced in modern choruses" (2013: 3), Billings, Budelmann and Macintosh argue in their work on ancient and modern choruses. The whole production embeds a ritual of keening as Antigones assume the position of mourner. Their performing a choreography of coordinated physical movements like a chorus (Kemp and Rushe, 2020: 02:20; 13:38), too occasionally enables articulation of a pervasive sense of mourning, as well as provides a reminder of mourning dances by Greek forebears. Hence, the play, from beginning to end, becomes an expression of grief and lament of a loss, and the chorus created by twelve Antigones, becomes a chorus of mourning.

No matter how much Antigones takes on the role of mourner, their part as a chorus cannot be delimited in this way as "choruses, ancient and modern, have a striking tendency to focus conceptions of political, artistic, and social existence, and thus serve as media for exploring similarity as well as difference, and for tracing continuity and rupture alike" (Billings et all. 2013: 2). Antigones' chief purpose of burying a brother, which also determines the conflict, highlights social and political considerations where a group of women simultaneously emphasize the idea of similarity and difference. Even though the acts, words, names, and aims of the women are common, they are completely disparate in many points. Each of them lives, speaks, thinks, suffers, and takes action differently. Thereupon the hybridity of the chorus comes to the forefront as a distinguishing emblem which likewise adds to the message that the play aims to communicate; that is, the variety of the problems' names, and yet the community of the victims and the experience. No matter how different they look they are the same; on the other hand, no matter how much similarity they possess they are different.

From early *Antigone* criticisms on, Antigone is seen as a liminal figure standing against oppression and male order, representing kinship, women, and the domestic sphere. Thanks to being a rebel woman at such a time when "silence is a woman's glory" (Aristotle, 2000: 1260b: 28-31), hence women were expected to be submissive, she has become feminist icon of defiance through various contemporary performances, some of which have been mentioned above. In *AntigoneNOW*, whilst she becomes the representative of one of two opposing poles anew, the conflict and her struggle become more ubiquitous and elude precise interpretations. For example, even though each Antigone keens and tries to bury a brother, there is neither a visible corpse to bury nor any specific opposing authority throughout the production. In the mere first minutes of *AntigoneNOW*, one of the Antigones informs the viewer about her brothers' doom and Kreon's decree (Kemp and Rushe, 2020: 01:18) and tells the audience that she will lay him to rest (Kemp and Rushe, 2020: 6:16) just like in the original play. In the course of the events, however, this verbal act and its aim are successfully resolve into symbols whose meanings differ from one Antigone to another, from one audience to the other as well. Thus, hybridity of the Antigones and amorphous trouble repudiate the idea of

confining the experience to a certain nationality or problem; rather, they validate a universal quality and endorse raising questions about countless troubles that any individual in any part of the universe has to solve standing against various forms of oppression.

The ubiquitous references *AntigoneNOW* communicate attest to what Mieke Bal terms *travelling concepts*. Bal claims concepts are not "firmly established univocal" (Bal, 2002: 11) but dynamic and can "travel - between disciplines, between historical periods, and between geographically dispersed academic communities" (24). As the concepts travel, their meanings differ from one point to another, developing a meaning of their own. The corpse, which is not seen but whose presence is pervasive throughout, and its burial travel through twelve Antigones' lives, regions and cultures, turning into a deictic symbol. During the travel, dead body successfully symbolises anything that any individual Antigone is suffering from and fighting for. This idea of travel manifests in *AntigoneNOW*'s cast and creative team's online discussion. In it, director Kemp states that for her, the body is "the capitalists" and "its decomposing is the poisoning of humanity" ("*AntigoneNOW* Screening and Discussion", 2020: 51:46). For one of the Antigones, Veronica Diaz Muniz, Antigone's burying a brother stands for the "people of Chile struggling against dictatorship" ("*AntigoneNOW* Screening and Discussion", 2020: 42:34). Still for another Antigone, Regina Gutierrez, Antigone and her problem can be equated with the struggle of Colombian Indigenous women, who are subjected to violence. ("*AntigoneNOW* Screening and Discussion", 2020: 29:41) For Kemp and for many Americans, fighting against and trying to bury stinking capitalism within its epicentre as urgent needs are symbolised with Antigone and her attempt; whereas for a citizen of Chile, embodied with Antigone's struggle are the ongoing political crisis as a result of brutal dictatorship's legacy of inequalities and ensuing protests and conflicts. Yet for a witness of marginalized women's suffering in Colombia, Antigone is one of these women. These subjective remarks and interpretations show that Antigone and her struggle travel among the lives and regions of each speaker.

As the play facilitates a discussion about various problems based in a common story, it also allows its audiences to have their own interpretations. Notwithstanding the possibility that Antigone can be regarded as a ubiquitous reference to any individual regardless of gender, either from the original reference point or the gender of the actors in this production, or even in light of the intensity of the gender-based problems, it is still the case that Antigone may become more like an embodiment of any women's struggle obstructed by various ideological, social, or political apparatus in Turkey. Especially on days when there are unsettlingly grievous rises in both the number of novel coronavirus cases and femicides. The digital memorial counting the number of murders of women across the country reports that 157 women have already been killed as a result of male violence in the first half of the 2020 (3). As stress, loss of jobs, and isolation as a result of pandemic exacerbate the risk of domestic violence against women worldwide, they have also led to a spike in reports of female murders in Turkey. Furthermore, discussions about Turkey's possible withdrawal from the Istanbul Convention due to misconceptions and misinterpretations induced outrage and feelings of despair among women, especially those who think that refusal to re-ratify the Convention may generate

more suffering for women. Against that backdrop, Antigone becomes a woman trying to survive and overcome male dominance and violence, whilst a bunch of Antigones remind of women from each corner of the country who, regardless of their social, educational, religious, or racial background, are united through their struggle on the streets or in social media to make sure convention stays in effect against strong oppositions. Twelve different Antigones in *AntigoneNOW*, in this respect, may also be envisioned as a manifestation of this very solidarity, a "solidarity of the shaken" (Patočka, 1996: 134-5) to borrow from Jan Patočka.

Solidarity, which counteracts the possibility of suffering alone, is a key factor in overcoming oppression and accomplishing a goal. While Antigones draw attention to its significance with their collective endeavour, they furthermore demand the support of the viewer. Collaborative calls for this such as "help me!" (Kemp and Rushe, 2020: 6:10) and "help me to lift my brother's body" (6:37) appeal for action and support, a support that can also be given by witnessing. Witnessing, which necessitates more than mere watching, involves *emphatic sharing* (Kaplan, 2005: 37) that helps a victim or a fighter not to feel alone and to be stronger. It in turn creates a web of solidarity and "produces community" (Kaplan, 2005: 23). *AntigoneNOW* enables this community by inviting its audience as witness to oppression and injustice, as well as notifying them that no matter what can be their struggle against, they should keep trying.

As the production closes, Antigone is seen digging soil while a song in foreign language plays in the background. Not limited to the ending, music, a chief element of Greek theatre, pervades this whole production, accompanying Antigone's struggle and grief. No matter how much familiar concepts spice up various interpretations, music becomes an agent unifying actors and audiences at common emotions despite their differences. As a notable example for the universality of music, in the Turkish film *Gönül Yarası* (*Lovelorn*; 2005) directed by Yavuz Turgul, an idealist teacher Nazım (Şener Şen) turns to Istanbul after serving in a distant Anatolian village and meets a nightclub singer Dünya (Meltem Cumbul), who is troubled by her abusive ex-husband. In an iconic as well as a touching scene, Nazım takes Dünya to a türkü bar where she starts crying to a Kurdish song. The conversation is as follows:

"Nazım: *Do you know Kurdish?*

Dünya: *(Crying) No.*

Nazım: *Why are you crying then?*

Dünya: *(Still crying) Do you need to know Kurdish to cry to this song!"* (Turgul, 2005: 01:28:07-01:28:18) (4)

The song, which is about loss and grief, is like an elegy though there are not many words communicating it. The undertone and the melody successfully convey the emotions leading a listener to feel the sense of grief. A paragon for the universal language, music, with its efficacy in communicating feelings, so too becomes an integral constituent of *AntigoneNOW*. The song, is like an elegy though there are not many words communicating it. The undertone and the melody successfully convey the emotions

leading a listener to feel the sense of grief. The song chosen for the production of *AntigoneNOW* is an ethnic Mapuche lullaby, named *Canción para dormer a un niño* (5). The lyrics concern scaring away the foxes, considered to be symbol of nightmares and evil spirits, in order to protect a beloved one. It softly accompanies Antigone as she is digging up earth to cover and secure her brother by laying him for eternal rest. Even though no words of the song are understood by people who do not know the language, it still deeply creates feelings of loss and pain while building the listeners' empathy.

Conclusion

"Adaptation inevitably affirms the canonical power of the original", (2018: 191) Eleftheria Ioannidou asserts in her introduction to a chapter on the contemporary adaptations of Greek plays. *AntigoneNOW*, likewise, with a novel hybrid adaptation, adds to the indisputable quality of Sophocles' play anew, and renders up-to-date interpretations possible. Using an ancient tragedy as scaffold, the production locates itself at the intersection of ancient and contemporary. Co-directors Margaret Laurena Kemp and Sinéad Rushe, with their creative team, reread, reimagine, adapt Antigone story and appropriate it to a world grappling with Covid-19 through an online production. In casting twelve Antigones from various nationalities who cannot leave their houses due to the virus, the online production enables continuity of theatre by bringing its agents together and offers novel insights into the Antigone story.

Introducing injunctions like wearing a mask, keeping social distance, and mandating lockdowns, novel coronavirus has affected millions on the same level regardless of their gender, age, nationality or religion; on the other hand, it has created various difficulties for different people. Let alone digital means the creative team utilised, the ensemble of diverse female actors across the globe with the same name and same struggle in *AntigoneNOW* successfully reflect on the current circumstances. Not boiling any character or issue down to specifics, yet reflecting the community of struggle and variety of experiences through its chorus, the production creates a critical distance between the audience and the story, and invites them to have their own interpretations. This way, each action and problem become travelling concepts, hence their meanings change from Antigone to Antigone, viewer to viewer.

Embracing the original play's universality, the adaptation highlights ever-present conflicts and oppressed individuals. It brings together various people who are united at a common struggle against injustice and makes them heard with a polyphony of voices. Raising awareness about the ongoing issues people are grappling with all over the world, *AntigoneNOW* also provides a field for solidarity among people who are going through similar difficulties through witnessing. Moreover, it keeps the audience's capacity for judgement active through creating a critical distance by situating the action on an ancient story and avoiding precise depictions, endowing them with the opportunity to respond to happenings in their own environments.

Final Notes

(1) Among others see Helene P. Foley, Female Acts in Greek Tragedy (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Sarah B. Pomeroy, Goddesses, Whores, Wives and Slaves (New

York: Schocken Books, 1995); Sue Ellen Case, "Classic Drag: the Greek Creation of Female Parts", Theatre Journal (37(3), 1985).

(2) Further citation to the production will be given by the name of the directors, date and the time in production video.

(3) Anıt Sayaç, Retrieved on 30 July 2020 from http://anitsayac.com/ Only a week later, on 5 July 2020, the number has risen to 205.

(4) A video of the scene and the song can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y9BLvACGZtY

(5) Canción para dormer a un niño sung by Beatriz Pichi Malen can be found at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CcC3utL5aoc

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