

Political Tragedy

Sophocles' ancient characters and themes are given new relevance in Tabard's updated 'Antigone'

TABARD THEATRE COMPANY'S *Antigone (in the Oval Office)* is an ambitious and earnest, if not always lucid, modern take on Sophocles' fifth-century B.C.E. play about tyrants and power politics. As election 2008 draws near, *Antigone* raises important questions about the role of individual idealism, pride and extremism in

government, and what it means to be a true hero. Opening its eighth season with an updated version of a Greek tragedy is an interesting choice for the company. Known for having a more song-and-dance-oriented palette, Tabard's new permanent home at the Theater on San Pedro Square seems to have given the troupe a shot of dramatic confidence.

Antigone (in the Oval Office), adapted by Ana-Catrina Buchser (from an idea by Cathy Spielberger Cassetta), uses a new translation by Ian Johnston. Johnston's interpretation of the Greek tragedy is conveyed in a straightforward, nonpoetic modern English. This version is set in the Oval Office of the United States instead of in Thebes. The spirited Antigone is one of the four offspring of the infamously unfortunate Oedipus and his wife/mom Jocasta. Antigone's brothers, Polynices and Eteocles, both colonels in the U.S. Marines, have just killed each other in a battle over Washington, D.C. After the battle, Antigone's godfather, President Creon, has decreed that Polynices' dead body must be left to decompose on the battlefield, denied a proper burial because of his attempted military coup on the White House. After talking to her dithering sister, Ismene, Antigone makes up her mind to go against the law and bury her brother's body properly. As in the Greek version, she plays dearly for this decision. For Antigone, her act is not a protest of an unfair law. It's all about ethics. She never doubts that she is serving God (as opposed to Zeus in the classical version) by trying to honor her brother, even in death.

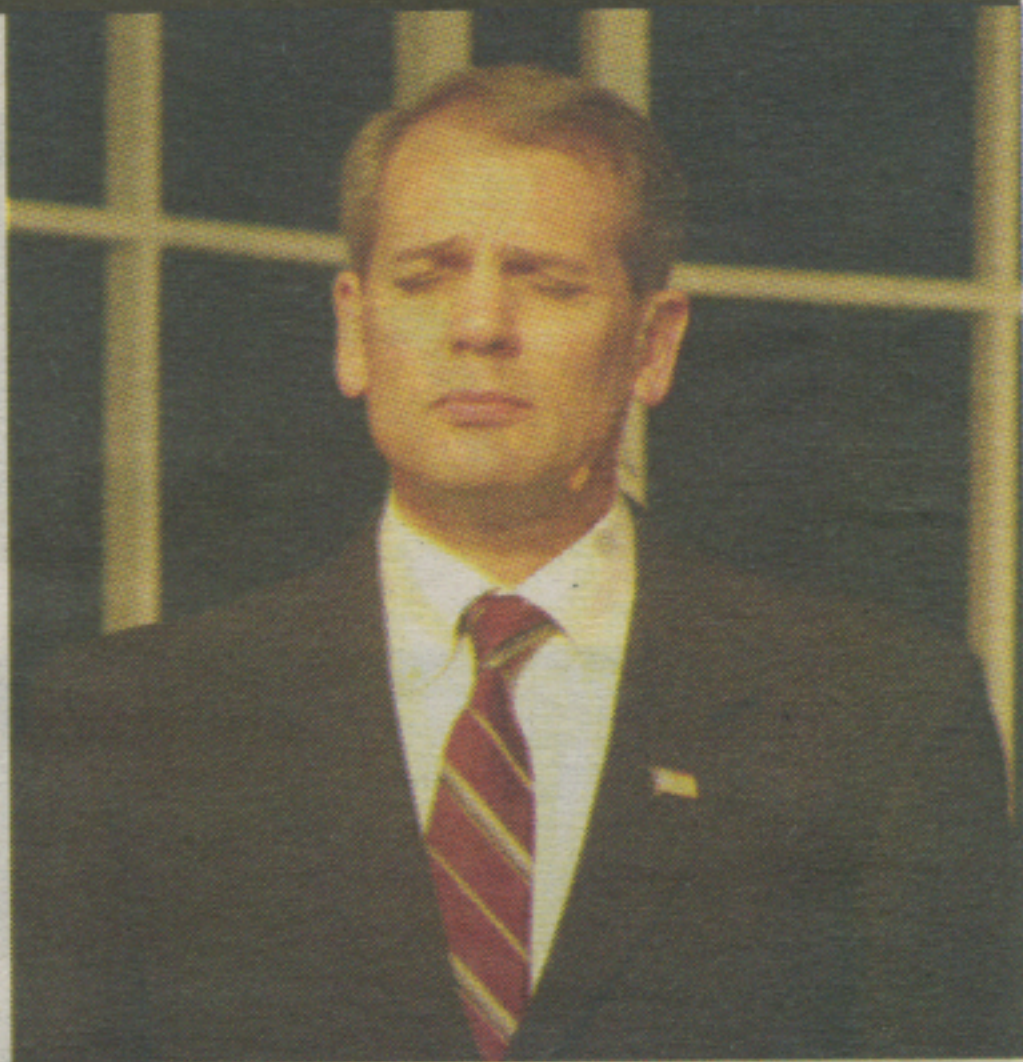
Certainly not a feel-good crowd-pleaser, this is the type of play that's driven by strong performances. Fiona Lawson plays headstrong and morally unwavering Antigone with severe tenseness. Lawson could have easily turned the role overly mawkish or shrill. Thankfully, Antigone remains powerful and darkly serious about her mission. Dirk Leatherman plays President Creon with a narrow-minded arrogance that is pointedly Bushian. He is a commander-in-chief more passionate about sticking to his convictions than about doing what is ultimately right. In an obvious take on current events, Creon justifies martial law by saying that there is no greater crime than a lack of leadership.

The play attempts to draw many other parallels to recent U.S. history, some more logical than others. When asked what he'll do with Antigone if he isn't going to kill her, the president responds that he will simply "imprison her indefinitely as an enemy combatant." "We're in a state of war," he says smugly, a comment that drew a few knowing chuckles from the audience. In one of the play's cleverer segments, a large movie screen is rolled down above the Oval Office set while a CNN-like news channel, WNN, is projected. Complete with info bars continually scrolling, the president and his chief of staff watch the news sitting in front of the stage. They scoff as a reporter conducts an "exclusive" sit-down interview with Antigone, giving her character a contemporary venue to make her final speech.

Though the tragedy may not translate perfectly to contemporary times, *Antigone* is still a pertinent play, and Tabard's production offers commendable performances from a small company that continues to upgrade itself.

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Jessica Fromm



LOOK FAMILIAR? Dirk Leatherman's President Creon channels George Bush in Tabard's 'Antigone (in the Oval Office).'

ANTIGONE (IN THE OVAL OFFICE), a Tabard Theatre Company production, plays Thursday-Friday at 8pm, Saturday at 3 and 8pm and Sunday at 2pm through Nov. 1 at the Theater on San Pedro Square, 29 N. San Pedro (above Peggy Sue's), San Jose. Tickets are \$10-\$22. (408.679.2330)