

Perversity strips Antigone's soul

Theatre

Antigone
OLD VIC

DECLAN DONNELLAN is almost universally admired, both in Britain and abroad, as a director of rare intelligence and integrity.

Yet more often than not I find myself irritated by his work. In his new production of *Antigone* at the Old Vic, he has at least abandoned some of his more tiresome theatrical mannerisms — the house lights aren't suddenly brought up to underline key moments in the drama, and the characters don't keep freezing in artfully arranged tableaux.

Yet though great productions of Greek tragedy effortlessly transcend the 2,500 years that separate us from them, constantly startling us with their freshness, power and almost eerie topicality, I watched this staging of Sophocles's great play in a curious state of detachment. It continually misses the heart.

The piece is staged with the self-advertising simplicity that is one of the hallmarks of Donnellan and his designer Nick Ormerod. The Old Vic has served Lilian Baylis, Laurence Olivier and Peter Hall perfectly well over the years, but Donnellan feels it is time for a change.

A vast wooden platform has been built out over the stage and into the stalls, with the audience watching from steeply raked seats at the back of the stage as well as from the usual auditorium. It's like a great gash in the middle of this beautifully ornate theatre, but perhaps that is appropriate for a play about the brutal disruption of war.

The production's greatest

Picture: ALASTAIR MUIR



Debunking heroine: Tara Fitzgerald as Antigone

weakness is Tara Fitzgerald, whose lack of stage experience is fatally exposed in the title role. Apart from a few muffled sobs at the start, she gives little impression of a desperate, determined woman who has seen almost all her family wiped out by cruel fate.

In her glinting gold spectacles she does capture one aspect of the character well — the infuriatingly smug certainty of the fundamentalist, dedicating her whole life to a single cause, in this case burying her dead brother.

But there needs to be far more feeling and depth here, more hurt, and it seems typical of the production's perversity that this Antigone's one moment of intense emotion is when she declares that she would never seek to bury a husband or a child with the same determination that she shows for her brother.

Goethe said he would "give a good deal if some talented scholar could prove these lines were interpolated, not genuine." Here in contrast, Antigone's most inhumane outburst becomes the very centre of her emotional life. This is an

exercise in diminishing, if not debunking, a great tragic heroine.

The flatness of Fitzgerald is cruelly emphasised by the resonant richness of Jonathan Hyde's performance as Creon, the production's one triumph. He has a superb authority, moving from pragmatic statesmanship through tyranny to terrible howls of grief as tragedy overwhelms him at the end. Here, for the first time, one experiences the raw intensity of Greek tragedy at its most potent.

Donnellan has recruited his chorus from this year's drama-school graduates and they have been brilliantly drilled. Dressed in black suits, Fair Isle sweaters and gaiters, they look like recently demobbed soldiers from the First World War, pale and hollow-eyed with the horrors that they have witnessed. They carry long staves, move with precision, and sing Paddy Cunneen's haunting plainchant score beautifully. The only problem is that with so much movement and music, it is often hard to concentrate on the meaning of the words.

There is one further serious miscalculation. As in Sophocles's day, the main actors are required to play a number of roles. In ancient Greece, though, they wore masks. Here they don't, so you get the absurd situation of Fitzgerald coming back on as a messenger to announce the death of Antigone, whom she has just been playing. All too recognisable in her blank inexpressiveness, it's yet another example of this production's knack of taking careful aim and missing by a mile.

Tickets: 0171 928 7616.
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