

# Not so much tragedy as a domestic tiff



FIRST NIGHT

by Nicholas de Jongh

Antigone ○  
Old Vic



Tara Fitzgerald as Antigone "only rises to the heights of considered reasonableness" in this understated version of the last portion of the Oedipus cycle

Picture: ALASTAIR MUIR

young male messenger. A bearded Anna Calder-Marshall plays Antigone's sister and unconvincingly the prophet Tiresias. Zubin Varla's Guard is given words that make him sound like a London taxi driver. The Greek chorus, always a problem today, here become young chaps in half-length trousers, black jackets and yellow socks. Wielding poles, chanting wordlessly to drown the sound of actual words, prostrate and parading, moving in choreographic sequences, they seem preposterous in their soulful artiness — the Theban Court's Eurhythmic and Callisthemic class.

Reckless passion and high emotion ought be the play's dangerous, driving forces. Miss Fitzgerald's bespectacled, dowdily dressed Antigone, who defies King Creon's decree to try to bury her dead brother, only rises to the heights of considered reasonableness. She uses her hands like a policewoman on traffic duty. Her manner resembles a concerned social worker. Hyde's voice is not so much plummy as redolent of a whole fruit-salad. His lofty, Anglo-Saxon smugness rules out either the fury or the anguish that possesses Creon, and his final cries of "Aye!" or something like that emerge ridiculously from his lips. Only Zubin Varla as Creon's doomed son, conveys the real stuff of tragedy.

Ratings: ○ adequate; ★ good; ★★ very good; ★★★ outstanding; X poor

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**H**ERE'S a mighty cause for depression. Here's a sign of decline and fall, as the Old Vic struggles to begin again under new management. It makes me fear for our theatrical future. The bad news comes in the blundering shape of Declan Donnellan's underdone, undercast and understated version of Antigone, the last portion of the Oedipus cycle. Sophocles's great trilogy of ancient Greece, which begins with the fatal consequences of Oedipus's unwitting marriage to his own mother and ends in unpredictable, family catastrophe a generation later poses huge challenges to modern interpreters.

Donnellan, freely basing his own version of Antigone on a literal translation and directing the production himself, imposes airs of arty contrivance. Often the most inspirational of directors, he here converts the elemental tragedy of the Royal House of Thebes into an irritating domestic tiff. Jonathan Hyde's King Creon in apricot robes, behaving like the pompous headmaster of the Ancient Thebes Academy for the sons of Gentlefolk,

disastrously cracks the cane once too often and too hard.

Comparing the state of the Old Vic in 1999 with its glory days of 50 years ago points an alarming difference. Today a charitable trust struggles to save and buy the theatre. Not even an artistic director is in place. No play policy apparently exists. This Antigone is a shot in the dark which misses. Unhelpfully, Donnellan chooses a traverse staging, with a small portion of the

audience seated rear stage, the playing area extended into the stalls. This gives a stronger sense of distance and detachment to a play needing intimacy. Minimalist designer Nick Ormerod opts for an open and bare stage. This unatmospheric space, hard to see in full from the dress circle, with its gorgeous wooden flooring, is reminiscent of a 1999 Clerkenwell loft space, not of an ancient anywhere. Donnellan otherwise oddly mixes

ancient and modern. The governing tone is misguidedly mild and listless. Actors irritatingly break sentences into jerky sing-song. Anachronisms — "be my guest" "number one" — intrude with all the unwelcome inappropriateness of an indecent exposé at an art gallery. I would not wish to venture down Donnellan's poetic purple passages. The classic Greek habit of doubling roles irritates — Tara Fitzgerald's Antigone appears as a

Antigone Standard Old Vic

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ianharris  
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