

Chill of tragedy for Death's wife

THE INDIVIDUAL conscience versus the power of the state; man against woman; youth clashing with age; the claims of the dead against those of the living. Sophocles certainly went for – and achieved – the Grand Slam of mighty oppositions in *Antigone*, the tragedy revived now by Declan Donnellan.

With Jonathan Hyde giving a performance of enormous power and complexity as Creon, the Theban king who sets disaster in train when he refuses basic burial rites to Antigone's dissident brother, this is a production that does not make the common mistake of presenting the piece from the heroine's point of view or of treating her as a straightforwardly admirable opponent of some contemporary form of totalitarianism.

Emotionally shattering because of its lucid objectivity, Donnellan's account makes it easy to understand why it was this play that inspired Hegel to define tragedy as the conflict between right and right. Indeed, you leave feeling that the piece could just as validly be called *Creon*.

At the Old Vic, a special wooden thrust-stage has been built so that the audience surrounds the action. On this central arena, the tragedy unfolds with a keen purity of focus. The great confrontation between Antigone and Creon reminds you here, in its electric charge, of that between Angelo and Isabella, those other dramatic absolutists, in *Measure for Measure*.

Tara Fitzgerald's bespectacled, curly-maned Antigone speaks with the slow, almost insolently quiet intensity of the eerily self-convinced. There's a prickly spiritual arrogance about her that erupts comically when her sister, Ismene, attempts to share her

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fate but finds herself pushed rudely against the wall and told in no uncertain terms to "Keep out of my death!"

The eloquent translation is by the director.

Ms Fitzgerald's Antigone modulates into a deeply affecting figure as her wished-for yet terrible punishment draws near. The skilfully deployed Chorus of Elders, with their spats and long sticks and swelling dissonant chants, turns away as she approaches each of them individually, and it's the sheer loneliness rather than the splendid isolation of her stand that hits when she utters lines like: "I am death's wife and his feet are cold in bed."

Before that, though, she makes you understand just why this kind of woman would be the worst possible nightmare for Creon, who is new to his job and understandably desperate to prevent anarchy and civil war from returning.

Jonathan Hyde shows each stage of Creon's decline with appalling clarity. He lets you see that contact with Antigone brings all his weaknesses, catastrophically, to the surface. An affront to his sense of manhood, she intensifies his native obstinacy.

Left with the corpses of the wife and son his folly has killed, Creon emits sudden howls of animal anguish. This is tragedy at its uttermost.

After the critical thrashing he unfairly received for his inventive production of *Hay Fever*, it's good to see Declan Donnellan bouncing back in such masterly fashion.

PAUL TAYLOR