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A Chorus Remembers Michael Brown in 'Antigone in Ferguson'

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Tamara Fingal, foreground, with the gospel chorus that features significantly in “Antigone in Ferguson.” CreditSara Krulwich/The New York Times

Never underestimate the wisdom of the chorus during a tragedy, onstage or in life. It may be the ambitious monarchs and vengeful soldiers who always, often disastrously, initiate the action. But it is the chorus, so much more than a backup group, that has always had the long view. The mighty ignore its voice at their peril.

The chorus that first mourned the doom of the titular heroine of a deathless work by Sophocles in Athens some 2,500 years ago has been reincarnated on Convent Avenue in Upper Manhattan, where Theater of War’s “Antigone in Ferguson” opened this week at Harlem Stage. Though its members sing a different tune from their Greek forebears — with soaring gospel strains that make the rafters tremble — they remain somber, celebratory and essential to listen to.

But as you watch this theatrical event — conceived and directed by the classicist-cum-activist Bryan Doerries in response to the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Mo., four years ago —

you'll become aware that there's more than one chorus in the house. In addition to the annotative singers onstage, there are the people sitting around you.

In this production, every member of the audience is also a member of a chorus. And in the discussion that follows the reading of the play, Sophocles' tragedy, a portrait of an act of civil disobedience that stirred a nation into convulsive protest, echoes and assumes new forms in the divided America of the 21st century.

Since its founding by Mr. Doerries a decade ago, Theater of War Productions has combined staged readings of classical texts with conversations among people who might identify with those oft-told tales of loss and destruction.



Tamara Tunie as Antigone, and Tate Donovan as Creon in the reading of the Greek tragedy. (Chris Myers is seated at right.) Credit Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

Employing an ever-changing, often starry ensemble of performers, the company has visited military bases and hospitals, prisons and schools, to initiate discussion and, ideally, to inspire the catharsis that has traditionally been the mandate of tragedy. (Mr. Doerries has written about his theories and experiences in his book "The Theater of War: What Ancient Greek Tragedies Can Teach Us Today.")

"Antigone in Ferguson," specifically, is meant to open the door on the thoughts and feelings aroused by the shooting of the 18-year-old Mr. Brown by a white police officer, and by the protests that followed. The production was first staged two years ago at Normandy High School in Missouri, which Mr. Brown had attended.

Then as now, it comprised two parts: a reading of a one-hour adaptation of “Antigone,” by Mr. Doerries, followed by responses from the audience. Any thoughts that the significance of a death in 2014 might have begun to fade were banished as soon as the focus shifted to the Harlem Stage audience, who included Michael Brown Sr. (Mr. Brown’s father) and the St. Louis activist Anthony Shahid.

The estimable readers on the night I attended the show were Tamara Tunie (as Antigone), Tate Donovan (as Creon), Chris Myers (as Creon’s son, Haemon, among other roles) and Chinasa Obguagu (as Ismene, Antigone’s sister, and Eurydice, Creon’s wife). With force and focus, they unspooled the events that lead to Antigone’s being sentenced to death for daring to bury her brother, an enemy of the victorious state, at the end of a civil war. (I should also mention the guitarist Willie Woodmore, who read the role of the blind prophet Tiresias with a rich mix of gravity and insolence.)

It is the gospel chorus, though, reacting to confrontations among these characters, that viscerally lifts the play into timelessness. (New York recently saw a similar mix of African-American spirituals and Greek mythology in the brief Central Park revival of “The Gospel at Colonus,” about Antigone’s father, Oedipus.)

Conducted by Phil Woodmore (Mr. Woodmore’s son), who also composed the music, this choir includes social workers, law officers and teachers from St. Louis and its environs, among other places. In other words, they know what they’re singing about. Lushly blended in layered harmony with detours into virtuosic solos, their voices swell in wonder, praise and sorrow at the mysteries of life and fate.



Michael Brown’s father, Michael Brown Sr., in a panel after the reading. Credit Sara Krulwich/The New York Times

But what lingers most poignantly are the softly intoned concluding words of a paean to victory:
And may we
Never forget
What happened here.
And never go to war again.

As became clear in the passionate discussion that followed, no one is going to forget what happened to Mr. Brown, or to the other young black men and women who have been killed by police officers since. Some of the speakers were in Ferguson to witness the protests and clashes with police that followed Mr. Brown's death.

"It was the first time since my childhood that I saw my city come together as one," said Erica Wright, who photographed what she saw, and who now lives in Brooklyn. That aspect of the aftermath was beautiful, she said. But "it was ugly at night — like a war zone." And it always seemed to be raining.

Many speakers — including a St. Louis police officer (and choir member), Lt. Latricia Allen — remarked that it was a woman in "Antigone" who stood up to power, and they saw parallels in the increasing prominence of women in politics today. There were descriptions, from Michael Brown Sr., among others, about how distorted and "disrespectful" they thought the accounts in the media were of the victim's life and death.

As for Creon, who lost his family and his kingdom through the rash and arbitrary enforcement of law, at least one speaker — a member of the Man Up! Inc. community outreach program in East Brooklyn — perceived a very specific contemporary parallel. "When I see that king in that play," he said, "the first name that came to mind was Donald Trump: arrogance, misogyny, tunnel vision."

I hesitate to call the second part of the evening a post-performance session, as if it were merely one of the talkbacks that have become fashionable in mainstream theater. Mr. Doerries, who last year was named a public artist in residence for New York City, doesn't believe in such formal distinctions.

I see his point. As many of the audience members gathered over food and drink to keep talking about what they had seen — that night and long before — it felt as if any barriers between the pity and terror evoked by atrocities of ancient days, and yesterday and tomorrow, never really existed. A chorus, whatever form it takes, is always with us, to witness and remind.

Correction: September 14, 2018

An earlier version of this review incorrectly identified the guitarist Phil Woodmore. He is the son of Willie Woodmore, not his father.