

Sophocles's *Antigone* has a rich and unique history of being performed on Slovenian professional stages for over a century. It began with the unsuccessful performance directed by Hinko Nučič in the Drama Ljubljana in 1912. It continued with Fran Lipah's popular production in the same theatre on the eve of World War II. After the war, the Celje City Theatre took the lead in staging the tragedy; in fact, it was the only Slovenian professional theatre to stage it, first in 1956 (dir. Herbert Grün), then in 1973 (dir. Franci Križaj), and most recently in 2011 (dir. Anđelka Nikolić). The main reason for the odd absence of Sophocles's *Antigone* on other Slovenian professional stages was probably the extraordinary popularity of Smole's play by the same title, which was staged no less than eight times over this period. In addition, Sophocles was also ousted by the (rarer) staging of other modern *Antigones* (Dušan Jovanović, Miro Gavran, Janusz Głowacki). However, the last decade has seen revived interest in Sophocles's version (and, at the same time, declining interest in staging Smole, which confirms our speculation that they compete for a place in the programme). Following the critically well-received production directed by A. Nikolić, the year 2013 was the first to see two productions, one in the Ljubljana City Theatre (play reading, dir. Ira Ratej) and the other in the Ljubljana Puppet Theatre (dir. Marko Čeh). Lastly, in 2017, *Antigone* also made a striking return to SNT Drama Ljubljana (dir. Eduard Miler).

The article gives an overview of all these productions and evaluates them by drawing on their reception by contemporary critics and later theatre historians.

Keywords: Sophocles, Antigone, Slovenian theatre, Celje City Theatre, SNT Drama Ljubljana, Ljubljana City Theatre, Ljubljana Puppet Theatre, theatre criticism, performance concepts

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Sophocles's *Antigone* on Slovenian Professional Stages

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This paper deals with the more than century-long history of staging Sophocles's *Antigone* on Slovenian professional stages. After the first, awkward attempt by Hinko Nučič in the Drama Ljubljana (1912), the impression was saved by the very well-received second production directed by Fran Lipah (1939). The reception of *Antigone* in the wider Yugoslavia in the first decade after the war was marked by a highly successful production in Belgrade (1950), directed by Tomislav Tanhofer and Miroslav Belović. Also, the key to the further development of the (ambivalent) Slovenian relationship with the myth of Antigone – in its dramatic and theatrical as well as its philosophical reception – was the literary adoption of the myth among Slovenian emigrés to Argentina dealing with the trauma of the post-war massacres. The third Slovenian production, and the first post-war one, directed by Herbert Grün at the Celje City Theatre (1956), was carefully thought out in dramaturgic and aesthetic terms. However, the result on the stage left critics with mixed impressions. Then followed the rise and supremacy of Dominik Smole's *Antigone* (1960). With a little help from its "peers," the other contemporary Antigones, it managed in an intriguing way to oust Sophocles's tragedy of the same name from Slovenian professional stages for half a century, with one important exception: until 2013, the Celje City Theatre remained the only theatre to stage it in the post-war period. It was staged for the second time in 1973 with the production by Franci Križaj, which got middling reviews – Križaj, incidentally, also directed the first and fifth stagings of Smole's *Antigone* – and for the third time in 2011, in the critically well-received interpretation of the Serbian director Anđelka Nikolić, which was characterised by its aesthetically anachronistic and genre-fluid approach to the original.

That production stands at the beginning of a theatrical decade that may be said to have featured a Slovenian revival of sorts for Sophocles's *Antigone*: four professional productions in six years, as many as had been staged for nearly the past century. In 2013, Ira Ratej staged a play reading in the Ljubljana City Theatre with a mission to make it inclusive for the blind and the visually impaired. The same year, in the Ljubljana Puppet Theatre, Marko Čeh directed an *Antigone* with elements of puppetry, which with experimental enthusiasm sought a balance between comical distance and activist

engagement. In 2017, Sophocles's tragedy returned in grand style to the stage of SNT Drama Ljubljana, where it had begun its Slovenian journey more than a century earlier. The latter project by the director Eduard Miler wowed the critics, also thanks to the energetic acting by Nina Ivanišin and Jurij Zrnec and the striking music of Damir Avdić.

This enthusiasm for *Antigone* in the theatre was also accompanied, over the same decade, by a rich reception of Sophocles's *Antigone* in the fields of philology, philosophy and literary criticism. Also important for its far-reaching relevance in Slovenian theatre, however, is the fact that ancient *Antigone* in this decade inspired a broad range of stage projects that we can place neither in the stage tradition discussed above nor (at least not without serious reservations) in the tradition of modern dramatic retellings of the *Antigone* myth that Jean Anouilh blazed the path for on the international horizon and Smole on the Slovenian one.

Among such heterodox projects, we find Matjaž Berger's philosophical/performance work *Marina Abramović ali kako sem izgubil pot do Antigone* (*Marina Abramović or how I lost my way to Antigone*, 2014), in a co-production of the Anton Podbevšek Teater (Novo mesto) and SNT Drama Ljubljana; the interactive sound performance *Pavana za Antigono* (*Pavane for Antigone*) directed by Hanna Preuss and produced by the Centre for Sonorous Arts of the Vodnik Homestead in the same year; the (retro) futurist performance *EKSCENTRIK :: nenehna Antigona* (*Eccentric: nonstop Antigone*, 2017), directed by Dragan Živadinov and produced by Delak Institute (*Osmo/za*); and *Staging a Play: Antigona*, a monoproduction by the choreographer Matija Ferlin at the Old Power Station a year later. A special case amid all this (re)interpretive ferment is Slavoj Žižek's dramatic work *Trojno življenje Antigone* (*The Three Lives of Antigone*, 2015), the first performance of which was staged by Matjaž Berger in the Anton Podbevšek Teater in 2017. Žižek's *Trojno življenje* is a badly failed attempt at a meta-dramatic showdown with Sophocles's work, a bizarre collage of *Antigone* with infantile interventions in the text that first try to convince us that there is an ethical and political misconception at the heart of Sophocles's work and then try to correct it by sleight of hand. Berger's direction wrung out of it what it could, thanks, of course, to Sophocles's text rather than Žižek's; it is thus a challenging theatrical event to evaluate since the extraordinary contributions of the first-class cast (Petra Govc, Klara Kastelec, Pavle Ravnohrib, Jana Menger, Joseph Nzobandora, Janez Hočevar, Aleš Valič, Borut Veselko and Lana Voljč), as well as certain innovative stage solutions of Berger's, actually pointed to what could have been an excellent production of Sophocles's *Antigone*, but unfortunately was only shown in fragments, isolated and deformed by their framing within a charlatanic dramatic technique.

At the time of this fascinating outbreak of theatrical interpretations and experimental permutations of Sophocles's *Antigone*, we can observe another significant

phenomenon that confirms our above speculations that the ancient Greek tragedy and its modern dramatic namesakes compete for slots in theatre programmes: Smole's *Antigona*, which has kept its status as one of the best Slovenian plays of all time, and which for three decades from the beginning of the 1960s to the end of the 1980s was a staple of Slovenian professional stage programmes, has been all but gone from them in the past three decades (with a single exception, directed by Jaka Andrej Vojevec at the Drama SNT Maribor in 2010). One of the most intriguing questions regarding the stage reception of Sophocles's *Antigone*, therefore, is also in what proportion these two parts – which, each in its own unique way, have so fatefully marked our cultural history – will be staged in the theatrical century that lies before us.