“Impossible Moral Questions”: Examining the Role of Leaders, Artists, Journalists and Citizens in Crisis in *The Burial at Thebes*

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by

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Chair

University of California, San Diego

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DEDICATION

To the brave cast and creative team of *The Burial at Thebes*, who supported me. To Gabor Tompa, who challenged me. To Tommy Crawford, who believed in me. And to my family, who finally understand what I have chosen to spend my life doing.
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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

“Impossible Moral Questions”: Examining the Role of Leaders, Artists, Journalists and Citizens in Crisis in The Burial at Thebes

by

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Master of Fine Arts in Theatre and Dance (Directing)

University of California, San Diego, 2015

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Antigone is a play that has haunted me for quite a while. Consumed with the decision Obama faced regarding American intervention in the Syrian conflict, I wanted to find a play that tackled the dilemma of impossible moral choices. Rereading Antigone, the similarities between the consequences of Creon’s edict and Obama’s “red line” leaped out at me. My advisor had suggested taking on an open text for my thesis production to
develop my ability to create dramatic situations, and I was excited by the huge space left for a director’s concept in Heaney’s beautiful adaptation, *The Burial at Thebes*.

To tackle impossible moral questions today a production of an ancient Greek tragedy must be mythic enough to entice audiences down dark rabbit holes, yet familiar enough to erase the comfortable detachment offered by classic Greek dress. We do not need to reproduce the theatrical practices of the ancient Greeks; indeed we cannot, as our knowledge thereof is extraordinarily limited and unreliable. Instead, we should be inspired by what we know of ancient Greek theater and find analogous practices in our own theatrical vocabulary that can capture the essence of the play.
Impossible Moral Questions: Examining the Role of Leaders, Artists, Journalists and Citizens in Crisis in The Burial at Thebes

In the fall of 2013, Barack Obama faced an impossible moral choice. Almost exactly a year after he had suggested that the use of chemical warfare against citizens in Syria “crossed a red line” that would prompt a US military response, UN inspectors confirmed the use of sarin gas on civilians in the disputed Ghouta suburbs of Damascus. Facing a complicated civil war raging in Syria and an economically struggling homeland, Obama’s decision regarding US military involvement in the Syrian conflict had become far less black and white. If he did commit to military action, Obama feared repeating the United States’ mistakes in Iraq. Just as in the Iraq, the civil conflict did not present a clear aggressor, the intelligence of chemical warfare was not ironclad and the Syrian conflict could claim huge swaths of much needed tax revenue and even American lives. If he did not intervene, however, Obama risked washing his hands of a human rights violation and, more consequently, devaluing his word and that of the American presidency. Confronted with these circumstances, what was a leader to do?

Beyond proving the relevancy of Shakespeare’s “uneasy lies the head that wears the crown,” the Syrian crisis led me to question the impossible moral choices we ask our leaders to make daily on our behalf. Ultimately, Obama’s choice is America’s choice. What is our obligation as citizens to participate in the moral choices made by our country? In the midst of the crisis, Obama’s “red line” statement was revealed to be an off the cuff remark at a press conference. If all of our information on the crisis comes filtered through the lens of journalism, what is the moral responsibility of the media? And what is our role as artists - to see, to respond, to protest?
WHY *THE BURIAL AT THEBES*

Consumed with the situation Obama and our country faced, I wanted to find a play that tackled the dilemma of impossible moral choices. Rereading *Antigone*, the similarities between the consequences of Creon’s edict and Obama’s “red line” leaped out at me. Both rulers struggled to define state security and human rights; both rulers worried about the consequences of not upholding their word. At the same time, however, the distance *Antigone* provides from our own situation struck me as helpful in expanding the exploration of impossible moral choices beyond the limits of the Syria debate. Peter Brook in his book, *The Shifting Point*, describes the unique ability of ancient tragedy to get under our skin. In his 1966 devised piece *US* Peter Brook explored the ethics of the Unite States’ war in Vietnam. He discovered the piece was so immediately uncomfortable to an audience (whatever their politics) that they put up barriers and the experience remained superficial. A production of *Oedipus* that told the same story (our refusal to see the truth about our actions), however, gave the audience just enough distance to “go very deeply into the nether lands of human evasion,” (63). Far from being irrelevant, classic plays sometimes allow us to see ourselves more closely than contemporary work.

On a more personal level, *Antigone* is a play that has haunted me for quite a while. Antigone is no doubt one of the strongest female characters in the western canon. Although I admire Antigone’s bravery, her commitment to act in accordance with her principles and her deep love for her brother, I have had a secret inkling that put in that situation, I might follow in Ismene’s footsteps. Ismene in my reading of the play is not weak or selfish, but sees the world in more shades of grey than her sister. Her decision
not to help Antigone bury Polyneices is not only the choice to survive, but also to end the cycle of violence that has plagued her family and her country. When Ismene has exhausted all forms of compromise between Creon and Antigone, she asks her sister to join her in death. I connect deeply to Ismene’s belief that the consequences of moral questions are often more complicated than our first instinct towards right and wrong. I find her ability to change her mind courageous. In working on Antigone, I wanted to portray these two women in a more nuanced way than the traditional weak/strong dichotomy. I also set out to engage my cast, my creative team and myself in a deep exploration of our own moral choices.

Picking Seamus Heaney’s adaptation, The Burial at Thebes, was one of the easiest choices of this process. Heaney’s beautiful text captures the directness of the way Sophocles’ characters speak without losing the poetry of the choral odes. His adaptation follows the events of the original text faithfully and (with hardly any stage directions) leaves the interpretations of the situations of the scenes just as open as Sophocles does. My advisor had suggested taking on an open text for my thesis production to develop my ability to create dramatic situations, and I was excited by the huge space left for a director’s concept in Heaney’s text. After struggling with a “problem play” (Brecht’s Drums in the Night) in my second year, I was also thrilled to dive into a play so dramaturgically watertight.

Concept

Let us return to Peter Brook: to tackle impossible moral questions today a production of an ancient Greek tragedy must be mythic enough to entice audiences down
dark rabbit holes, yet familiar enough to erase the comfortable detachment offered by
classic Greek dress. We do not need to reproduce the theatrical practices of the ancient
Greeks; indeed we cannot, as our knowledge thereof is extraordinarily limited and
unreliable. Instead, we should be inspired by what we know of ancient Greek theater and
find analogous practices in our own theatrical vocabulary that can capture the essence of
the play.

This balance of the contemporary and the mythic is at the center of my production
of *Burial at Thebes*. We do not use masks like the ancient Greeks, and we have more than
three actors, but the production does include live music, fire and water and other elements
of the Greek theater. We dress our actors in suits, not classic Greek attire, but we also
fight against the reflex to reduce the stakes of the play to become a Washington political
thriller. The production has a strong media design including live camera feed not just
because we have that capability today, but because the press corps spins the news in a
very similar way to the Greek chorus interpreting the events of the play. The ancient
Greek theater was – by the way - not afraid to incorporate technology. In Brook’s
*Evoking and Forgetting Shakespeare*, he suggests that in bringing a classic play to life,
we must sometimes lose one or two threads of the original meaning in order to fully
expose the meaning of the play to us today. Brook’s words have been my guiding light. I
have attempted in discovering my contemporary analogies of each character to simply
ask, *who is this person today?*

In our production, Creon is a charismatic but rash Head of State who has had the
crown suddenly thrust upon him in the wake of a domestic terror attack. Creon must
choose between maintaining the strict order in the city he believes is necessary for peace
and obeying the laws of the gods. Tiresias in our production is a blind painter, specifically a political graffiti artist inspired by British artist/activist Banksy. It was important to me that our Tiresias not represent a particular religious institution, as her role in Theban society is more that of a respected and oft misunderstood outsider than that of a mainstream religious leader. I believe artists are the closest we get to prophets today. While our Tiresias absolutely engages in rituals and has a strong sense of spirituality, she fights for immutable and universal laws rather than the dictates of a specific faith. Our musician, playing the role of Tiresias companion (“the boy”), is a recent war veteran who uses his music to protest against Creon and to express his solidarity with the dead.

Our Antigone is not a noble woman standing up to a tyrant, but rather an extreme activist. She is brave and loves her brother deeply, but is more concerned with making a point to Creon and to Thebes than with simply doing what she believes is right. Ismene, on the other hand, is a pragmatist. She has faith in compromise; her biggest mistake is in thinking that she can make either Antigone or Creon see reason. In this production even the minor characters face an impossible moral choice in the course of the play. Haemon in our production is a model son, honestly torn between his loyalty for his father and his belief that Antigone is right. Eurydice, who is much more present in our production than in the text, struggles between giving her husband the support he needs and believing that he has gone too far in condemning both her nieces to death. Under Creon’s threat, the Guard in our version also as has to choose between turning in Antigone (who he thinks has acted rightly) and his own life.
One of the biggest challenges in any contemporary production of an ancient Greek play is solving the chorus. In *Antigone* (and *The Burial at Thebes*) the chorus sensationalizes and interprets the action of the play. Our chorus is the press corps – a group of print journalists and media personalities who have individual spins on the events, but also function as a unit. Turning the chorus into the press corps puts the moral responsibility of journalists in crisis at the heart of the production and constantly reminds us of our reliance on journalists in interpreting our world. In my preparation of the text, I created a specific situation for each choral ode and divided the lines between chorus members based on the specific personalities I created for each of them. The Host is a prime time TV anchor who flatters Creon. The Co-Host is the second fiddle network anchor who sentimentalizes the story. The Producer is a no-nonsense pragmatist who is always looking for a new angle. The Reporter is an award-winning print journalist who constantly challenges Creon. The Blogger is a hipster new media journalist who is trying to make her mark. Other chorus characters include a Field Reporter, Photographer, Intern and three camera people. Finally, we created a character called the Press Secretary who speaks lines originally attributed to the chorus, but plays the role of Creon’s trusted advisor.

The city of Thebes is in chaos; the visual world of our production takes inspiration from images of the civil war in eastern Ukraine and areas of economic decay in America – Detroit and the L.A. River. Our Thebes is divided into two distinct areas: Creon’s world downtown (depicted by a crumbling neoclassical façade and a temporary headquarters in a blown out office building), and Tiresias’ world at the edge of the city.
(depicted by an urban canal littered with graffiti and trash). The final component of the concept is the use of water as a metaphor for the presence of the Gods in our world. I believe that spirituality is often pushed aside in our society, and in our production water is limited to a pathetic urban canal at the edge of the city. When Antigone wants to wash her brothers body as part of the burial ritual, the only place she can turn is the putrid water of the sewer. At the end of the play, a storm envelops Thebes. I believe that natural disasters are one of the last places we still acknowledge a power beyond man (hence the phrase an “act of god” in insurance policies). The storm represents the wrath of the gods, but also the fact that Thebes has finally recognized and accepted the role of the gods and through this baptism, may find a new beginning.

**Scene One**

The first image of the production introduces the Musician. He leans against the flagpole in a pool of light, looking across the stage at the shadows of two bodies in the distance. He plays a riff of mourning for the dead on his guitar and the light fades on him, revealing Antigone lying prostrate on the body of her brother Polyneices. Tracing the Musician’s arc through the play and working with him on the composition of the music was one of the steepest learning curves for me in this production. I had worked with original music many times before, but never with a live musician whose character was

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1 The separation of these two worlds on stage was ultimately not as clear as I wanted it to be and caused many practical staging difficulties, which will be addressed in the assessment portion of this paper.

2 This part of the concept was not effectively achieved on stage and hence, was less present in the production than as originally conceived. This failure will be addressed in the assessment section.
not explicitly in the text. In my original concept of the music, the Musician was meant to be a mythical character outside of the world of the play: a representative of the gods on earth, who played an ancient lyre. We worked with this idea for the first few weeks of rehearsal and found several stumbling blocks. First, the idea that the Musician was outside the world of the play was confusing. Could the other characters see him or not? Keeping him totally invisible limited the function of the music because he could not interact with the other characters, but making him visible was just as problematic. Whereas Tiresias had a specific task (her painting) to do on stage, the Musician did not have a specific action when he was not playing, which lessened his power. In the last few weeks of rehearsal we developed the idea of the Musician as a young veteran. In this version, his character was fully part of the world of the play - creating many opportunities for him to interact with the other characters. As someone who has seen the brutality of war, however, he retained an aura of wisdom. The choice of this specific character enabled us to focus the music on two specific functions: to protest against the society, and to connect with the dead. I believe these are two of the strongest functions of art in our world. Making the Musician a street artist rather than a mythical being opened another level of meaning to the piece.

Once we made this choice, we knew that the Musician could no longer play the ancient lyre. Switching to guitar solved many problems. The lyre, while beautiful, is very limited and always sounds, as its name suggests, lyric. With the lyre, the action of the play felt halted in exactly the moments it needed to plunge forward towards the inevitable tragedy. Not only did switching to guitar place the Musician more cohesively in the world of the play, it also freed him musically and gave him the ability to drive the play
forward with music. The changes we made to the Musician and the music of the play in the last two weeks of rehearsal were very effective. If I had crafted this more specific concept for the music from the beginning of the process, we probably could have finessed the compositions and further developed his arc as a witness throughout the play.

As the Musician’s guitar riff fades, Antigone hums a lullaby to her dead brother, covering his body with her own. She repeats the phrase three times, trying to control her grief, but it bursts from her in a wail. The sound of her sister’s cry sends Ismene running. Ismene is afraid to be out on the edge of the city and afraid of her sister’s extreme actions. She comes closer to see the body, recoils, and tries to run away. Antigone rushes to her sister, imploring Ismene for her help. Antigone brings Ismene back to the body and pleads, “...Help me to lift / and lay your brother’s body,” (4). Ismene refuses, and reminds her sister of the tragic history of their family, asking, “Are you and I to be next?” (5). During Ismene’s speech, Antigone turns away; in this moment she disowns her sister. Antigone picks up the body herself (not an easy task for the character or the actor) and hauls Polynices to the water, rips his bloody shirt, and begins to wash his body. The choice to cast an actor as Polynices and bring the body on stage (as opposed to the ancient Greek offstage tradition) made this scene visceral and immediate, rather than an exclusively intellectual debate.

We also chose to make Polynices’ death a gruesome one. Imagining he died in an IED explosion, costume designer Janet O’Neill created a burned prosthetic for his face, distorting him beyond recognition. This choice also connects the image of his body to those we have seen from the recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. As Ismene leaves,

3 All pagination references refer to the Samuel French edition of The Burial at Thebes.
Antigone begins to wash Polyneices’ body. The horror of the body of her brother causes Antigone’s grief to erupt again. She realizes the futility of washing the body and trying to perform a rite in this sewer canal. At this moment, the Musician appears from house left, where he has been watching the scene, and plays an instrumental funeral song for Polyneices. His music gives Antigone strength. She lights two candles and places them on either side of Polyneices’ head, laying the body out according to her rite. She nods at the Musician as she leaves, thanking him for the support and leaving him to watch her dead.

Scene Two

As soon as Antigone exits, the Guard interrupts the ritual. He discovers Polyneices’ body has been moved and scrambles to place it back on a pile of pallets as a swarm of journalists fills the stage. This first choral ode begins with the return of electricity to the city of Thebes. As the jumbotron powers up and the lights upstage buzz on, the camera crews scramble to set up their first shots, and the Host begins with a resounding, “Glory be to brightness,” (8) referring to the electricity in our situation. In this first choral ode, the chorus sensationalizes the war (“Argos is defeated, the army beaten back / All their brilliant shields / smashed into shards and smithereens,” (8)). As teams of journalists rush around the stage to grab the best shot, our jumbotron (set up “downtown” for Creon’s Inauguration) displays live feed from two different camera people (one downtown, one from the river). The footage is stylized to look like contemporary news broadcasts, complete with breaking news ticker and catchy titles. The use of multiple-camera live feed provided many technical challenges (to be discussed in
the assessment section), but the stylization of the live feed allowed us to explore the
difference between what was actually happening on stage, and the way our media teams
spun the news into sensational images and oversimplified catch phrases.

In a moment of conflict in this ode, the Field Reporter crouches down by the body
and live feed of Polyneices’ gruesome corpse fills the stage; the Guard roughly pulls The
Field Reporter away, but releases him as The Photographer catches this on camera. The
Reporter steps forward, kneeling by the body and reassuring the Guard that the story will
be told respectfully, “Their banners flew, the battle raged / And they fell together, their
father’s sons,” (8). A moment of respectful silence stops the journalists, but it is only a
few seconds before they are buzzing again in a chaotic moment before Creon’s arrival.

**Scene Three**

I chose to make Creon’s first speech a public address to Thebes at his
Inauguration ceremony, complete with patriotic pomp and circumstance. Creon and his
family (Eurydice, Haemon, Ismene – Antigone is conspicuously absent) enter through
house right to the Theban National Anthem (an original recorded piece of music,
composed to imitate the sentimental and militaristic feel of a national anthem played by a
large orchestra). Creon shakes the hands of audience members as he enters, establishing
that we are all present at his inauguration. The Press Secretary hands Creon the
ceremonial keys to the city, and as he smiles and waves at the applause. Creon’s face
replaces a tacky inauguration animation on the jumbotron and he begins, “Ladies and
Gentlemen. We have entered calmer waters,” (9). As Creon congratulates the city for
surviving the attack from Argos, “So, friends, well done,” (9) thunderous applause
interrupts him. Toby Owunmere (the actor playing Creon) and I worked diligently on this speech to imitate the oratorical style of Obama in his national addresses.

Seamus Heaney used pieces of language from George W. Bush’s addresses in his translation of Creon’s speeches. In casting an African-American actor as Creon, I knew the audience would read associations with Obama and I was particularly interested in this conflation of Obama and Bush. Despite the two leader’s different political worldviews, I find their language on terrorism frighteningly similar. Casting an attractive, charismatic actor who reminds us of Obama also gave Creon a stronger arc (from beloved to disgraced) than if he played the tyrant from the start. The idea that tragedy is inevitable – Creon is doomed to his fate – is an important dramaturgical device in ancient Greek tragedy. By depicting the inevitable fall of a charming, well-intentioned ruler, I wanted to explore the idea that our own leaders (however idealistically they begin their presidencies) are doomed (like Creon) to commit immoral acts to uphold the state. The laws of man and the laws of the Gods are not synchronous.

After charming the city, and feigning humility (“the throne has come to me,” (9)) Creon builds the case for his edict. As Creon declares, “Nor would I / Ever, have anything to do / with my country’s enemy,” (10) our jumbotron switches footage to reveal the uncomfortable faces of his family, who are seated in the first row of the audience. Creon catches the image of his wife, son and niece out of the corner of his eye, but stays firm, announcing that “For the patriot / Personal loyalty always must give way / To patriotic duty,” (10). The live feed added several layers of complexity to Creon’s speech here. On the most basic level, the live feed allowed the audience to see an angle (the first row of the audience) they would not otherwise be able to see, but more
importantly the image of the royal family reminds both Creon and the audience of how personal his decision is. Creon is not only disobeying the laws of the Gods by not allowing Polyneices’ burial, he is also betraying his family. In this moment, we are reminded of how the media has made politics extraordinarily personal. Television and the Internet have brought the personal lives of our leaders literally into our living rooms. The families of candidates are investigated and judged on the campaign trail. The personal lives of our leaders cloud our judgment of and response to their political acts (e.g. the tarnishing of Clinton’s legacy after the Monica Lewinsky scandal).

As Creon’s speech ends, the press swarms around him. This brief interaction sets up two of the lead press characters. The Host flatters Creon with her line, “Loud and clear, King Creon / You have laid down the law,” (11). As Creon attempts to cement his sympathetic relationship with the press, however, “And that is why I regard you from now on / As agents of the law,” (11) the Reporter challenges him, “Your guards / would be better for that job,” (11). Creon pushes away the cameras and responds with a threat, intimidating the press, “…You’re not to lend the least support / To anyone who’d go against the order,” (12).

One of the main challenges in choosing to portray the chorus as the press was to make sure every single line truly reflected the relationship between press and President. The relationship between the Elders and King Creon in the original text allowed for a more equal distribution of power between Creon and the chorus than our contemporary version would. Splitting the chorus into distinct personalities gave me more options

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4 Heaney’s text reads “Younger men / would be better for that job,” (11). I altered the text here to fit our interpretation of the chorus.
in interpreting the text. In our production, The Reporter rebels quite early against Creon’s threats, quits after scene five, and returns as a citizen in the end of the play. The Press Secretary, who has a more intimate relationship with Creon than the press, was also able to take on some of the lines questioning his actions. In the original text, the chorus seems to flip-flop a great deal in their response to Creon (mirroring the audience’s vacillating sympathies). Creating distinct pro-Creon and anti-Creon characters within the chorus allowed for a clearer arc in the press’ relationship with Creon.

As Creon threatens the press, we hear the Musician’s guitar and he appears down by the river. In this interlude, the Musician sings a funeral song for Polyneices. The lyrics for this song are inspired by the repeated bird imagery in the play (which we also used as a sound motif) and the desire the Musician has to end the cycle of violence in Thebes: “Crows, crows, everywhere I see / Pickin’ at the ground and pickin’ at me….Over and over and again / Brother kills brother, friend kills friend.” During this song, two contrasting funerals take place. Downstage, Antigone walks up to the Guard, who stands by Polyneices’ body. He recognizes her. She steps toward him, making clear her intention of moving the body. They share a moment and then he steps back, allowing her access to Polyneices, who she lifts and carries off. Upstage, Creon and the royal family conduct a formal state funeral for Eteocles, until the Guard interrupts with the news that Polyneices’ body has been moved. Finding the physical language of these non-textual interludes was essential in this production. At first, the actors were unsure how to play these interactions without text. Once we established that the actors did not need to think of the interludes as literal realistic portrayals of events, but rather as having a theatrical language of their own based in movement and music, these moments became
some of the most powerful in the show. Since the ancient Greeks performed the choral odes with song and dance, these non-textual interludes of music and movement helped us capture the rhythm of the play.

(Scene Four)

Solving the character of the Guard proved complicated in this production. In the ancient Greek tradition, the Guard narrates offstage action. In our production, however, the body was visible to the audience, so we would see the very moment the Guard describes in Scene Four. If I staged exactly what the Guard describes, the speech would become redundant and illustrative. In my original concept, the solution was to create the character of the Guard as a clown. The idea was that he had fallen asleep guarding the body and lies to Creon about what happened to cover his own mistake. I do believe the Guard is written as a bit of comic relief – in Seamus Heaney’s text (as in the original) he is the only character who speaks in prose and his text is disjointed and closer to natural speech. In rehearsals, however, I found that playing the Guard as a clown lowered the stakes of not only the Guard’s scenes, but of the whole play. Out of context, the text of this scene could work as a clumsy clown routine. In context, however, this choice did not add any meaning to the piece or support the overall concept of impossible moral choices.

Instead, we chose to create a connection between the Guard and Antigone. He believes that burying Polyneices is the right thing to do and to cover for Antigone the Guard makes up a story to Creon about the body miraculously disappearing. Creon suspects foul play and accuses the Guard of being involved. He threatens the life of the Guard (in our production with the help of another Guard, who is his personal bodyguard)
and demands that the Guard bring him the guilty party. This choice gave the Guard an impossible moral question of his own: should he turn in Antigone, whom he believes is doing the right thing, to save his own life? The choice also created a stronger dramatic situation between Creon and the Guard in this scene; in our version Creon is correct that the Guard is not telling the whole story. If Antigone’s actions represents the role of the citizen in crisis – civil disobedience motivated by a moral imperative – the Guard allows us to explore the role of the civil servant or soldier in crisis. When should one’s own moral beliefs trump the orders of the state? Are we responsible for our actions when we are under direct orders? This solution for the Guard supported the concept and added complexity to his scenes. I believe it would be possible to play these choices and still not lose the comedy of the scene because the Guard’s extreme fear of Creon can be quite funny. In our production unfortunately, Walker Hare (who played the Guard) struggled to keep the stakes real and also play the comedy inherent in the text. Interestingly, by the final two performances, as he finally relaxed into the character and situation and stopped trying so hard, the comedy returned.

At the end of this scene, the Guard notices that the Musician has been watching from the steps of the building and they share a moment on the Guard’s “Yours truly won’t be back here in a hurry,” (16). As the Musician begins to play (an instrumental piece), Tiresias enters downstage by the river and lights a fire – her ritual to begin painting by the river embankment. The Guard returns to the water just in time to see Antigone walking with a shovel (having just buried her brother). The Guard freezes. Antigone drops her shovel and walks towards him, holding out her wrists to be arrested. In this moment, the Guard’s dilemma is made even more complicated. He understands
that Antigone wants to be arrested. This moment also complicates our portrayal of Antigone. If she only buried her brother out of religious devotion she would not want to be caught; in our version, however, Antigone is an activist who also wants to make a point to Creon and to Thebes. This interlude helped to support my concept that neither Creon nor Antigone has the moral high ground; they both see the world in black and white and stubbornly want to prove they are right.

Scene Five

The choral ode in scene 5 (often called the “Ode to Man”) was one of the most difficult choral speeches to translate into our contemporary production. The text, which traces the history of man from the primordial “shivering on the shore in skins,” (16) to the civic “Home-maker, thought-taker, measure of all things,” (17) is extremely poetic and dense. The speech ends with a warning: “…But let him once / Overstep what the city allows…He’ll have put himself beyond the pale. / When he comes begging we will turn our backs,” (17). In the original context, I imagine this speech showed the Elders’ support for Creon’s edict in this moment of the play. In ours, not only did the language of the ode not fit the language the press, but the message also did not seem like something journalists would author. My solution was to make this text a press release from Creon that the press must disseminate (whether or not they support it). The formal language and the threat make more sense in this context.

Staging this situation proved to be problematic. My original idea was that we would watch the journalists read this release hot off the presses and that the Reporter would mock the end of the text. The first problem with that situation was that it was hard
to connect the text the chorus was reading with the idea that Creon had written the text. Also, the action of reading a text out loud is not dramatic. I initially staged The Reporter ripping the press release, but since he did not follow through with any additional action this moment was not very strong. In rehearsal, we solved the problem of establishing Creon writing the text by using a montage technique. At the same time we saw Creon dictating the text to the Press Secretary in his office, we also saw the press reading it. Sharing the lines of the text between Creon and the chorus was very effective. The problem remained, however, that the chorus reading the text was not a compelling situation and their confusion/disapproval of the text was not a clear action.

In tech I switched the situation; the press reported the press release live, shocked at what they read. We also added a more complete action for The Reporter. Rather than just ripping the press release, he quit the press corps in protest, throwing down his badge and storming off. This action scandalized the rest of the press and created a stronger dramatic moment for the end of the scene. Unfortunately the solution to this scene came so late in the tech process, I did not have time to restage the scene and adjust the lights. Although the final situation of the scene worked well, the use of space and movement was not effective, and the actors were not very confident in their actions, so the scene remained slightly flat in performance.

*Scene Six*

Just as The Reporter storms off amidst a press hubbub, the Guard re-enters leading a handcuffed Antigone. The lengthy scene that follows contains a number of important events: the Guard reveals Antigone as the culprit, Creon confronts Antigone,
Ismene changes her mind and tries to join her sister, Antigone rejects Ismene and Creon condemns the two girls to death. The most important choice in creating the situation for this scene was which events should be public and which should be private (and to what extent).

In the original text, the chorus has lines throughout the scene, but it did not make sense that Creon would be so mistaken as to allow all the press complete access to these interactions. Here, the character of The Press Secretary was extremely useful. In our production, Creon is caught off guard by Antigone’s arrest in front of the press. He asks the Guard to describe how she was caught, hoping to make a clear and public case against her. He makes a mistake, however, in letting the Guard speak. The Guard spins a dramatic yarn of discovering Antigone burying Polyneices amid a cloud of dust sent by the Gods. He claims that she took care to “do the whole thing right,” (19) and bravely “showed no signs of panic when we trapped her,” (19). In our production, we know that the Guard is lying about the actual course of events – and yet, his words have power. By the end of the Guard’s speech, as he apologizes to a tearful Antigone for having to turn her in, public opinion in Thebes is clearly on Antigone’s side. Creon, realizing his mistake, orders the removal of the press and confronts Antigone.

Creon and Antigone’s interaction begins as a passionate exchange of rational arguments, but Creon quickly loses his temper. He grabs Antigone, tying her to the flagpole in the center of the plaza and cursing at her, “No woman will dictate the law to me,” (24). This action not only gives the scene a more dramatic situation, but also creates a powerful image of Antigone humiliated literally under the flag of Thebes. As The Press Secretary brings Ismene out on Creon’s request, Ismene is so moved by the image of
Creon’s cruelty, she pulls off her belt and symbolically ties herself to the pole with Antigone, declaring “.now I stand with her to take what comes,” (24). Antigone rejects her sister, however, turning away from her and reminding her, “You wouldn’t help. / We cut all ties. / It’s over,” (25). Ismene, failing to reconcile with Antigone, tries to appeal to Creon on a personal level, “You mean you’d kill your own son’s bride-to-be?” (27) but Creon is beyond any appeals. He unties the women and ushers in the press, who swarm around a defiant Antigone and terrified Ismene.

I believe the situation I created for this scene worked, but the set was problematic here. The flagpole was a late addition to the design, and every placement we tried for it created some sightline issues—Creon inevitable upstaged himself while Antigone and Ismene were tied to the flagpole. Furthermore, the placement of the whole scene was too far upstage, which lessoned the power of a scene that depends on rational arguments and the clash of ideas. The acting in this scene was also somewhat inconsistent, so the success of the scene was highly variable during the run of the show. Since the confrontation between Antigone and Creon is such a turning point in the play, I believe I should have gone into scenic design conversations with a more powerful image in mind for this moment, so we could have supported the scene better in the design.

As the press flock around Antigone and Ismene upstage, and the Musician plays a driving instrumental riff on the guitar down by the river, Creon has a moment of self-doubt. He turns around to see Eurydice watching him, but as he reaches out to her for support, she turns her back on him. This non-textual moment between Creon and Eurydice is the first time we see the rift that has developed between them. In the original text, Eurydice does not have any lines until the final scene for a practical reason: the actor
who played Eurydice also played Haemon and Ismene. In our production, however, Eurydice is much more present and her silence becomes not only a defining aspect of her character, but also her strength. Creon is a man of many speeches, but Eurydice can fragment his confidence with a look. Creon returns to his office and feels a tingling sensation on the back of his neck. As he turns around, the sound of a flock of crows fills the space and the shadow of Polyneices’ ghost appears looming on the tarp in the rear of Creon’s temporary office. Downstage, the sound of the crows stops the Musician’s song and Tiresias’ painting; they both recognize the sound as a bad omen. Tiresias turns on her radio to find out what has happened.

Scene Seven

The text of this next choral ode traces the curse on the House of Oedipus and ends with the warning, “Our luck is little more than a short reprieve / That the gods allow,” (29) This re-cap of family history filled with dramatic imagery (“And now a light that seemed to glow / A hope for the house of Oedipus, has died.” (28)) worked perfectly as the Host’s pre-recorded introduction to her exclusive sit down interview with Creon and Haemon. We shot this sequence off site at AV Concepts’ studio (where projection designer Ryan Brady works) and so were able to effectively capture the lighting and style of a 60 Seconds intro sequence. Ryan edited the segment together with an animated intro sequence and “b-roll” footage of Creon, Antigone and Haemon. All of the b-roll footage was shot during a run of the show in tech – either by Ryan or by the actor who played the photographer – so we were able to capture images the audience had seen on stage from the angles the press would have captured it.
Despite all the detailed planning that went into the design of this segment, technical problems plagued this scene. The sound for the pre-recorded segment came from a different system than the video and we were unable in the final tech to troubleshoot a small delay between the video and sound. Furthermore, the complexity of this sequence sometimes overloaded the media system, causing it to freeze. Technical issues in this scene were especially obvious and problematic because the pre-recorded segment was the main action on stage.  

Scene Eight

As the segment plays, the Host and her camera crew create an impromptu interview setup and an anxious Haemon takes his seat. The Press Secretary gives Creon a pep talk (“Allow a youngest son to have his say,” (29)). Creon greets the Host and on live TV asks his son, “Are you coming here / To rant and rage against me, or are we still / Father dear and father’s son, as ever?” (29). I chose to make Haemon’s confrontation with his father public rather than private for several reasons. Following Creon’s earlier PR mistake (allowing the Guard to speak to the press about Antigone), he intends to fix his image and regain the city’s trust with a heart-warming interview with his son. Making this scene public raises the stakes considerably for Haemon; it also makes it nearly impossible for Creon to back down. Haemon initially confirms his support for his father and Creon uses the opportunity of the public forum to lay out his case against Antigone. Creon, still bruised from Eurydice’s rejection, appeals to his son as a man: “Nothing’s worse than marrying yourself / To a woman that’s no good,” (30). Just as he says this,_____________________________________  

5 More in depth discussion of technical issues in the Assessment section.
though, he looks up to see Eurydice standing off to the side of the interview. She looks at him and at Haemon; Creon continues, looking right at Eurydice, “For of this you can be certain: I won’t be making / A liar of myself in front of the city,” (30). Eurydice’s presence successfully complicates the situation in this scene and gives Haemon confidence to speak up. Haemon puts his father on the spot: “For your own sake, then / I ask you: reconsider,” (30). The Host – who has up to this moment flattered Creon – notes that Haemon’s arguments make sense. Creon’s temper flairs and the Host quickly shuts down the now out of control interview. Downstage, Tiresias turns off her radio and frantically begins to paint. Eurydice storms out as Creon threatens Haemon. Haemon looses his cool, lunging at his father and threatening his own death. Creon explodes, claiming he will have Antigone killed in front of his son and Haemon (with a coolness that is even more frightening than his temper) claims, “Never. And never, father, again / Will you set eyes on me,” (35). By the end of this scene, Creon is in an even worse PR nightmare: he has publically lost the support of his entire family. This scene was one of the strongest in performance; the situation raised the stakes of the text considerably and the acting was consistently powerful. Performing this scene live as well as projecting it on the jumbotron allowed the audience to see the difference between what happened in the studio and the way the cameras framed the interview. Furthermore, the close ups of the camera and the use of a boom microphone in this scene created an intimacy that some of the other upstage scenes lacked.
Scene Nine

On fire at the end of the interview, Creon decides the time has come for Antigone to be put to death. The Press Secretary calms him down enough to admit that Ismene was not involved. As Creon describes how Antigone will be walled in, the Musician ominously strums the guitar. Switching tones with Creon’s exit, the Musician’s tough strum melts into a gentle finger pick and he croons, “Some of us can’t bear to lose, can’t bear to lose.” Down by the water, Antigone enters with a white piece of fabric and kneels by Tiresias. Tiresias touches Antigone’s face and the cloth; she understands that Antigone has come to prepare for her death. Antigone kneels by the water and removes her black pants and shirt, looking vulnerable in her undergarments and afraid of what is to come. Tiresias pulls a ceremonial bowl of tea from her fire bucket and kneels next to Antigone. She prays over the tea and they take turns sipping it. Tiresias wraps the fabric around Antigone, creating a flowing white wedding/death dress. She is no longer afraid. Tiresias kisses her and exits; Antigone prays by the river. Critic Rush Rehm, in his book A Wedding to Death, writes about how many Greek tragedies feature a conflation/perversion of the wedding and death rituals. Antigone is self-aware here that her wedding has become her death.

Finding the right ritual for this moment was difficult. I initially intended Tiresias to wash Antigone in the water, but since the water looked less like the river I had imagined, and more like a sewer, it was no longer an appropriate place for a purification ritual. The song the Musician played during this ritual was one of the first pieces he wrote (initially for the lyre), and while it was very beautiful, the lyrics were less specific to the action than the rest of our songs. The dress Janet designed also looked more cliché
“ancient Greek” than the simple white maxi-dress I had originally imagined. If I had the opportunity to further finesse this sequence, I would adjust several of the elements; nonetheless, the interlude was very moving and gave depth to Antigone’s character.

As soon as Tiresias exits, the press stumble upon Antigone praying by the water and scramble to film her, like a National Geographic crew discovering an animal in the wild. The Co-Host is brought nearly to tears with compassion (she also realizes this makes for good TV), kneeling by Antigone and pronouncing with too much sincerity, “Antigone, you are a bride / Being given away to death,” (37). Antigone tries to ignore the press’s flattery, insisting that she is instead like “a rock that weeps forever” (37) and asking the press to save their mockery until she is gone. Playing into the camera (live feed projected her image on the jumbotron here), Antigone dramatically says goodbye to Thebes. She swoons and the press swarms around her with concern; she opens her eyes and laughs. Antigone begins to exit, but the Field Reporter calls her back, saying that she is “Paying, perhaps, in your life / For the past life of your father,” (38). Antigone hugs him for his perceptiveness, and then turns to the camera to retell the gruesome tale of her family’s history. The Reporter, now dressed in civilian clothes, enters and reminds Antigone that her death is not the consequence of her family’s history, but rather of her own choices. The Reporter, stripped of his job, has become a voice of truth in the play. His own moral choice – to quit his job rather than accept Creon’s restrictions on the press- turns out to be a noble one in this moment. He has not shirked his responsibility as a journalist to tell the truth; he has simply realized that he must do it as a citizen rather than a member of the official press corps. Antigone recognizes the truth he speaks, and in this moment fully accepts what is to come: “No flinching then at fate,” (39).
Creon barrels in with his guards, interrupting the moment and forcing the press to put down their cameras. The Guards strip Antigone of her ritual garment and force her into an orange jumpsuit (resembling the jumpsuits from Guantanamo Bay). As Antigone struggles, she lays out her argument for the press (and for Thebes) one more time. After a final confrontation, Creon orders her death, “The sentence stands. The law will take its course” (41) and the Guards march Antigone up house right as the Musician begins to play in protest. This scene raises questions about the way we treat our enemies. Creon’s cruelty in not allowing Antigone to die in her ritual garment echoes his disregard for Polyneices’ burial. His justification that by walling her in but not actually killing her he is keeping the city from bloodguilt reminds us of the prisoners in unending detentions in Guantanamo Bay. The United States feels it can avoid bloodguilt by not executing these individuals (most of whom, like Antigone, have had no trial), but the conditions of their imprisonment lead many to commit suicide just like Antigone. This scene reminds us that the right to live and to die humanely has not changed in over 2,500 years.

Scene Ten

As Antigone disappears in the back of the house, The Field Reporter notices Tiresias’ painting on the embankment and his team films it before their exit. The Musician’s song here is all anger, all pain: “I am an instrument of Fate,” he sings for Antigone’s death. Following Antigone’s march, a storm also begins to brew. The stage darkens and rolls of thunder and gusts of wind are heard in the distance. Creon slowly walks to where the Musician plays in the middle of an empty section of seating, house right, and sits in the row in front of him. In this moment of vulnerability, Creon needs
guidance and finally really listens to the Musician’s songs. The choice to have Creon sit in the house was very powerful; the image of the Musician and Creon in the midst of empty seats is evocative of an empty church. As Creon stares at his city on stage it almost seems like he is outside watching his own play.

On stage, the press has re-entered and reports on the storm and impending sense of doom in Thebes, “Not battlements of stone nor black-hulled fleets / Can fend off fate or keep its force at bay,” (42). The press has at this point in the performance fully abandoned Creon; they do not, however, intervene. As the threatening thunder continues, the press runs for shelter. This choral ode is extremely short (12 lines in the original, 11 in ours) and therefore could not sustain a full event. I chose to use these bits of text as part of the interlude – the Musician’s song underscored straight from the end of scene nine through the beginning of scene eleven. As a transitional fragment, this scene and the music helped drive the action of the play forward.

Scene Eleven

Tiresias walks down house right to the sound of Tommy’s song, and sits next to him (directly above Creon) right as the music ends. She reaches out a hand and grasps Creon’s shoulder on, “Sir, my countrymen, I know you’re there,” (42) I originally intended to stage Tiresias’ scene with Creon in his office. The structure of the scene clearly starts out as a private conversation and becomes public as Tiresias speaks her prophecy (the chorus only has lines after Tiresias leaves, but they have clearly heard what comes before). I quickly realized in rehearsal, however, that the office was too far upstage for a scene this text heavy. My mentor suggested moving the scene into the house
and having Creon push Tiresias down the stairs, bringing the horde of journalists running
and allowing them to witness the second half of the scene. This staging also created a
stronger situation for the scene; now, it was not Tiresias that sought out Creon in his
office, but rather he that sought out her. The way Creon goes to listen to the Musician’s
song and Tiresias (though blind) knows she will find him there implies that this space is
somewhere they have met before and strengthens the relationship and sense of history
between Creon and Tiresias.

In the beginning of this scene, Creon has come to Tiresias for advice and he
listens. She warns that her rites have failed and indicates the Musician when she says,
“the boy here saw it,” (43). The Musician lowers his hood, acknowledging that he is her
witness. This is the first moment that the Musician’s character is mentioned in the text of
the play (and indeed, this line was my original inspiration for adding a musician
count), but it solidifies the role we already know he has been playing: a witness to the
thesis and a guide for Tiresias. As soon as Tiresias blames Creon’s edict for the pollution
growing in the city, however, Creon shakes off her hand and becomes defensive. He
accuses Tiresias of being bribed and when she shoots back an accusation, “Rulers too
have a name for being corrupt,” (45) he grabs her roughly and pulls her down the stairs.
On the last step she trips, falling into the town square as the press comes running. Tiresias
holds her cane out as the prophecy comes to her and unleashes her full power on Creon.

This scene was quite effective because of Tesiana Elie’s powerful performance,
but also because Tiresias’ character had been established throughout the performance in
the interludes and her ritual with Antigone. Although Tiresias’ physical painting on stage
was not achieved the way I had imagined, her presence as an artist and spiritual leader in
the community was clear. I believe that establishing Tiresias early in the performance is important in a contemporary production, because we do not have the background knowledge of Tiresias’ role and status in society that the ancient Greeks did. In the original production, Tiresias’ late entrance to the play would have been understood – even expected as a convention of tragedy – but to a contemporary audience this scene would have been an off-putting deus ex machina if we had not previously seen her on stage and understood her role in Thebes.

As she leaves with the Musician, the press gathers around Creon. For the first time, The Host speaks openly against Creon: “Never, in all my days, was that woman wrong / When she warned the city, the city knew to listen,” (47). Creon turns to The Press Secretary, his last champion, and asks her, “What’s to be done? Tell me and I’ll do it,” (47). The Press Secretary (convinced by Tiresias, but also realizing the city has turned against Creon) suggests setting Antigone free. The Blogger and the Co-Host step forward, cameras and microphones down, speaking for the first time as concerned citizens rather than journalists, and implore that Creon reverse his judgment. The thunder bellows and the storm grows and Creon realizes he has lost. Creon reverses the edict and runs out to free Antigone himself. This moment represents a turning point for the chorus. For a brief moment, they put down their cameras, stop interpreting the action, and actually intervene. The turning point is clear in the original text (this is the first time the Elders tell Creon what to do), but in our production the journalists’ choice to get involved helps establish the incredibly high stakes of this moment; they would not intervene if they did not feel their own lives (and those of the whole city) were in danger.
Scene Twelve

As Creon rushes off to free Antigone, the Musician appears by the water in a mysterious warm light. He begins plucking the lyre and singing, “Call up the God of Thebes.” During this sequence, projected footage reveals Tiresias’ painting / prophesy on the jumbrotron: ancient Greek graffiti letters translated as “Creon will fall.” The chorus watches the Musician and then one by one cross down to the water in darkness. The Press Secretary hands out candles and the press lights them, creating a candle light vigil for Antigone. As the Musician sings, the chorus slowly joins in as if they remember this song from long ago; the song is something they learned in childhood, but perhaps no one in Thebes has sung for many years. The lyrics for our “Call to Dionysus” are an adaptation of the text that was originally the final choral ode (48).

This choice came to me very early in my planning. First, the text is densely poetic and includes more repetition than most of the other choral odes. I believe the text implies that the chorus performed some sort of ritual during this ode – a prayer to Dionysus that would have been recognizable to an Athenian audience. I knew I needed to create a contemporary ritual recognizable to our audience; candle light vigils have become all to frequent in America in the wake of so many shootings in schools and acts of police brutality. In our production, however, this vigil also takes on an additional meaning. After cutting the lyre from the rest of the show, we decided to keep it for this song because the moment becomes a recalling of a distant cultural heritage.

In the rest of the play, I removed any direct references to Zeus that would pull us out of the contemporary moment. The characters referred instead to “the laws of the gods” or “human rights;” I thought changing the text to a monotheistic “God” would
place us to specifically in a Judeo-Christian context, where as the “laws of the gods” refers to universal, immutable laws of right and wrong separate from any religious practice. In this moment, however, the citizens of our contemporary Thebes recall their ancient heritage and sing a song they had long forgotten. The Musician’s lyre is anachronistic here, but the magic of the ritual justifies it.

*Scene Thirteen*

The Guard bursts into the candle light vigil, interrupting the song and sending the journalists scrambling for their cameras. The thunder rolls and lighting flashes and the stage remains completely dark except for the lights attached to the cameras. The cameras illuminate the Guard, who stumbles towards the water to wash his hands with blood dripping down his face. The chorus bombards him with questions and Eurydice and Ismene enter, Eurydice speaking for the first time: “I am in dread…I know what to expect, Just say what happened,” (50) One camera focuses on Eurydice, and the other on the Guard – their two bodies glowing amidst the darkness of the storm. The Guard does not want to tell her what he has witnessed, but he must. As he details her son’s death, Eurydice barely flinches. He finishes the story and there is a moment of silence, interrupted by a monumental crack of thunder and lighting that causes Eurydice (and the audience) to jump. Ismene reaches out to her, but Eurydice pushes her away and exits, surrounded by the press.

This scene is probably the furthest from how it would be portrayed in a traditional production. First, the role of the Guard in this scene is actually meant to be an entirely new character, “The Messenger.” The role of the Messenger is a convention of ancient
Greek theater that no longer has any meaning for us. By giving this scene to the Guard, I was able to create a more full arc for the Guard: he now witnesses the deaths of Antigone and Haemon and feels guilty for the role he has played in their tragedy. Second, Ismene does not appear in the text after scene six. In the ancient Greek productions this was a practicality: the same actor who played Ismene also played Haemon and Eurydice. Contemporary directors often solve her disappearance by having Ismene kill herself as well. In my interpretation of Ismene, however, this ending would not make sense: she is a survivor. I wanted her to live and represent a tiny beacon of hope for the House of Oedipus and for Thebes. I gave her a few chorus lines about Eurydice’s silent exit (“That silence is a danger in itself” (52)) and she runs after Eurydice with the Guard, trying to hold her family together.

Just as Ismene and the Guard run off after Eurydice, the lighting reveals Creon carrying a bloody Haemon in his arms down the stairs house right. Creon cries to the chorus, “Make way for your king of wrong” (53) and lays Haemon by the water as his bodyguard places Antigone on the pallets behind him. The Guard re-enters full of anger and passion and tells Creon of Eurydice’s death. Creon cannot comprehend the news at first amidst the chaos of his grief and the storm, but the lighting reveals a bloody Eurydice in Ismene’s arms. Creon takes Eurydice’s body from Ismene and sobs, “Mother and child, both / I have wived and fathered death,” (54). The Guard feels no pity for Creon and tells him that Eurydice cursed Creon’s name as she killed herself with his sword. Creon cries out to the Gods, “Let every verdict be pronounced / Against me” (54) and places the Guard’s hands around his neck, begging for death. The Guard will not give him that satisfaction, however, and throws Creon to the ground.
As Creon weeps, the storm picks up and rain begins to fall into the water. The chorus scramble away to shelter and The Press Secretary, holding an umbrella over Creon, tries to offer encouragement: “Bear with the present; what will be will be,” (55) but he pushes even her away. He reaches to Ismene, who recoils and lies down with Antigone’s body, recalling the first image of the play. Thunder crashes, lightning flashes and Creon kneels in the water under the pouring rain between Eurydice and Haemon’s bodies, trying in vain to wash the blood off them. Unable to let Creon have the last word, The Host steps into another stream of rain with an umbrella (illuminated by her camera person and projected on the jumbotron) and finds a final catch phrase, “Wise conduct is always the key to happiness,” (55). A crash of thunder and lightning knocks out the power on the Host and the jumbotron and reveals the Musician in distance upstage. As Creon continues to wash Eurydice with the rain and his tears, the sound of the storm fades slightly to the final chords of the lyre.

This final sequence was nearly impossible to rehearse in the room and proved very difficult to tech. We could not rehearse any technical elements in isolation because the lights, sound, rain and projections needed to work together to create the storm and yet rehearsing them all together made it difficult to calibrate the individual elements. It also took a long time to reset given the rain and very wet actors. We only had about five passes at this very complicated sequence and I do not believe we ever got it just right. A couple changes to lighting we made in the final tech (in response to notes from the first preview) overshot the problem and made the final moment a bit clumsy. In the future, I would not make so many technical changes that I do not have the opportunity to see in the context of a run (although a normal preview period would allowed time to solve this
problem). The acting in this final scene was a bit inconsistent because it was under rehearsed. Overall, the final image of the play was still very moving and the storm effectively created chaos on stage. If we had an additional preview and tech, however, I believe we could have finessed the technical elements and acting moments to truly land the final scene.

**Inspiration & Research**

My initial inspiration for *Burial at Thebes* came from current events. In the creation of the production, however, a number of performances and texts served as inspiration and foundational research. Deborah Warner’s production of *Medea* at BAM starring Fiona Shaw (which I was able to watch via the Lincoln Center Theater on Film and Tape Archives) was a major source for how ancient Greek theater can be contemporized. Warner depicts the chorus as the maids and staff of Medea’s household and the way she splits up the lines between maids was useful to me in preparing my script. The main scenic image in Warner’s set is (also!) a pool of water, in which Medea’s children sail toy boats early in the play. In the final scene, a bloody Medea and Jason grapple in the water and their previously pristine costumes are soaked in water and blood. This image contributed to my staging of the final moment of Creon holding Eurydice’s bloody body in the rain, and the use of the water throughout the play reminded me how important it is to see a scenic element like water used in multiple ways throughout the performance. Most importantly, however, Fiona Shaw’s powerful performance encouraged me to never let the scale of our contemporary world diminish the stakes of the tragedy. Polly Findlay’s *Antigone* at the National Theater and Ed
Iskandar’s *These Seven Sicknesses* at The Flea Theater provided additional sources as successful contemporary productions of ancient Greek texts.

For research on ancient Greek theater, Rush Rehm’s *Marriage to Death: The Conflation of Wedding and Funeral Rituals in Greek Tragedy* was an early source for understanding the role of ritual and burial in the text. Michael Walton’s *Greek Theatre Practice* and R.W. Burton’s *The Chorus in Sophocles’ Tragedies* provided a great context for understanding the theatricality of ancient Greek performances. Peter Brook’s essays on Oedipus in *The Shifting Point* as well as his essay, *Evoking and Forgetting Shakespeare* gave me a strong theoretical context in contemporary performances of classic texts.

Our depiction of media was inspired by contemporary news broadcasts, especially *60 Minutes*, *CNN* and Obama’s inaugural address. Aaron Sorkin’s teledrama *The West Wing* also provided inspiration for the role of The Press Secretary and other additional characters within the chorus. David Fincher’s film *Gone Girl*, which opened during our rehearsal process, also contributed to our interpretation of the press.

**Design**

*Scenic*

The main concept for the set, designed by Lily Bartenstein, was a clash of distinct worlds: the seat of Creon’s power downtown and the site of Tiresias’ art making on the fringes of the city. For Creon’s world, we created a neoclassical façade (a City Hall-like ceremonial space), which gave a wink to the traditional *scene* or palace entrance of the ancient Greek theater. In our production, however, Creon comes to power in the wake of
a domestic terror attack. The neoclassical façade was nearly destroyed by an IED planted by Polyneices’ rebels: one column is castrated and the whole structure is damaged by smoke and fire. In the first choral ode, we see The Press Secretary hastily raising a shiny banner that reads “Thebes is Saved” to cover the destruction of the façade for Creon’s inauguration. This image sets up the circumstances of Creon’s reign: the city is in chaos and he is hastily attempting to create order.

We also created a private, functional space for Creon. The idea behind this space was a temporary headquarters in the bombed out remains of a sleek office building. Inspired by a photo of a derelict office in Detroit, the space is made from industrial piping, tarp and wooden scaffolding, and contains rudimentary office furniture. The improvised nature of this space furthered the sense of chaos in Thebes and the contemporary materials clashed with the neoclassical façade. Originally, I had intended to use this space for several of the private scenes. However, its placement so far upstage made it unusable for any textual scenes. We did find several moments to use the space for non-textual scenes, but we were not able to use this space to its full potential. With more resources we might have been able to track the office downstage for certain scenes and then bring it back upstage; or, we should have rethought the orientation of the space all together.

Tiresias’ world developed from images of the Los Angeles River. I was interested in water as a metaphor for the presence of the natural world (and hence the gods) in an otherwise urban space. The scarcity of water in the LA River served as a metaphor for the limited presence of spirituality in Thebes. The LA River has also, however, become home to a vibrant community of street artists. We were interested in seeing Tiresias create a
space of art and spirituality amidst the rubble. Our canal stretched from vomitorium to vomitorium, and a concrete embankment outlined the thrust downstage. During the performance Tiresias painted on the embankment using graffiti markers, and in the “Call to Dionysus,” video footage reveals the painting to the audience. The execution of both the river space and Tiresias’ painting was the biggest failure in this production. Budget restrictions limited the size of the river to 2 1/2 feet wide and 9 inches deep, far smaller than desirable. In the rehearsal room and on the plans, Lily and I thought this size canal could work, but in the space it looked miniscule. Rather than an urban canal, the water looked more like a sewage drain. Furthermore the rubber lining the scenic shop required for the water did not look anything like the concrete image of the LA river, making the space to clean.

Tiresias’ painting suffered similar limitations. We were unable to use spray paint in the space, and the graffiti markers that we used instead looked more like children’s craft supplies than the materials of a street artist. The placement of the embankment did not allow a majority of the audience to understand what Tiresias was doing downstage, and the reveal of her painting was not very clear. If I had the opportunity to try this idea again, I believe Tiresias should paint on the upstage wall with actual paint that could be painted over between each performance.

We strove for a minimalism in terms of props – every single item that appeared on stage was used. Lily successfully outfitted the chorus with equipment that both was functional and added detail to our portrayal of multiple news teams. We resisted the inclusion of any unnecessary set dressing.
Costumes

Janet O’Neill created three distinct worlds in the costume design. The royal family was elegantly dressed for Creon’s inauguration entirely in the state colors of Thebes (black, orange and gray). While the chorus members were dressed appropriate to their role (television hosts in snappy skirts and dresses, camera people in functional cargo pants and vests), they also had a very unified color palette of neutrals: gray, khaki and off white. Antigone stood out from both of these worlds in all black and combat boots, and Tiresias and the Musician (as the artists of Thebes) created a third group, dressed in knits and loose fitted layers. We strove for simplicity and a very monochromatic color palette in all the costumes.

Sound

The sound design in the play served three functions: creating atmosphere (especially of the storm), supporting the Musician (Tommy Crawford’s) music and supporting the media design. In the first scene, designer Andrew Vargas used low levels of atmospheric sound to sustain the idea of the river and introduced a flock of crows. This sound of crows, inspired by the profusion of bird imagery in the text, became a leitmotiv in the piece, returning to haunt Creon as an ominous sign of fate. In scene three, the national anthem in conjunction with applause sounds created the atmosphere of a live event and allowed the audience to feel like they were part of Creon’s inauguration. We also used very low levels of atmospheric sound in every scene that were imperceptible to the audience but prepared the ear for the extensive use of sound during the storm.
We scored the storm like a piece of music, creating five distinct levels of the storm (wind, rumbling thunder, gusts of wind and cracking thunder, rain and cracking thunder, and finally chaos) as well as more than a dozen specific sound events (coordinated with lighting to create lightning and thunder). Finally, amplification played an important role in the sonic world of the play. From the low level support of Tommy’s guitar and voice, to the hand held microphones Creon and the press used, to the pre-recorded sound as part of the media design, the balance of these amplified sounds required absolute precision.

**Lighting**

Lighting played a large role in separating the two worlds of the set. Bo Tindell used primarily low sidelight for the scenes by the water and a brighter, cooler light for Creon’s world downtown. Actor-operated lights on the cameras played a huge role in the design. These gave focus during the choral odes and by the final scene became the only source of light during the storm. In the final scene the light of the cameras also became a metaphor for the intense invasion of the press into Eurydice and Creon’s private moments of grief.

Lighting also was essential in the creation of the storm. Lighting effects synchronized with the sound created lightning and the precise column of down light on our rain effect isolated Creon, helping to create the image of rain. The camera lights and the lightning were very effective techniques and the use of almost no colored light in the production created harsh atmosphere. Unfortunately the spatial organization of the set and the off-white costumes of the press prevented us from successfully using lighting to
give focus in the larger group scenes. Additionally, using primarily sidelight in the thrust of the stage meant that the lighting was very uneven in different parts of the house. More collaboration between the scenic designer and lighting designer in the early part of the process could have helped avoid this issue.

**Media**

Media design was an essential part of the concept of the show. Very early in the process, media designer Ryan Brady and I discussed how the stylization of the media design (be it live feed or pre-recorded footage) would create meaning. We wanted to explore how the media sensationalizes current events and manipulates public opinion through the use of sound bytes and repetitive images. We also wanted to use the cameras as an agent of invasion, to explore how the media eradicate the line between the public and the private for our leaders. We chose to use a jumbotron as the main projection surface to establish the idea of Creon’s inauguration as a live event. Although live feed was used in a number of scenes, we created specific stylization for each media event: the sensationalized depiction of war in the first choral ode imitated the style of network “breaking news” coverage, the kitschy coverage of Creon’s inauguration represented state sponsored broadcasts, the highly dramatic set up of Creon and Haemon’s interview aped a 60-Minute special, and so on. When the jumbotron was not used for live broadcasts, LED style static images portrayed public safety announcements from the Theban State.

Very early in the process, Ryan and I established which sequences would be live and which would be pre-recorded. After working on UCSD’s production of *Titus*
Andronicus, Ryan and I were both aware of the challenges inherent with live feed and tried to address as many of the variables as possible in the rehearsal process. Ryan led the actors who played camera people in several workshops, so we were able to achieve consistent shots during performance. We also created specific shot lists for the camera people during the staging process, so they knew what to film by the time we got to tech. We did end up making many adjustments to this shot list during tech, but having a good first draft in the room helped enormously.

Ultimately, the main problem with the media design came from the technical limitations of our system. We experienced several technical problems, including the failure of a system meant to switch camera shots (which had to be done manually instead) and sporadic freezing or delays. Ryan was also severely ill during tech and missed some rehearsals and I believe this greatly contributed to his ability to troubleshoot these technical issues.

Rehearsal Process

The rehearsal process began with a rigorous investigation of the text. Borrowing from Anne Bogart’s book A Director Prepares, I asked the actors to bring in a number of sources (images, text, videos) that touched on the major themes of the play. In one early rehearsal, the entire company responded to the question: who are you today, Antigone or Ismene? Engaging with the impossible moral choices of the play on a very personal level – in addition to a thorough text analysis – provided a strong foundation for the depth of the work.
The initial staging of the play was a very difficult process. Although I had carefully prepared situations for each scene, the actors initially struggled to play the situation over the poetry of the text. I also struggled initially with finding the correct tone for the chorus and the Guard. The clowning we tried first with the Guard and the satirical stylization of the chorus was preventing the weight of the tragedy from landing. Finally, some of my initial staging ideas were not possible once I realized that the office was too far upstage to use for any major scenes. Through all of these shifts and turns, however, the morale of the company remained strong. I believe this was due partially to my openness with the cast about what I was trying to achieve and why the changes were necessary, but also to the company’s belief that the work we were doing was important.

As the rehearsal process went on, we were able to work in great specificity on several of the important scenes (Antigone and Ismene’s first scene, Creon’s inauguration, Tiresias’ scene, the press’ interaction with Antigone by the river). The most successful aspect of this rehearsal process was that the work improved every day – including significant improvements during the tech process and during the run of the show. Several of the actors said that this process required them to push themselves beyond the limits of what they had done before (physically, emotionally) and that growth is a testament to the strength of the community built in the rehearsal room.

Assessment

I am simultaneously extremely proud of the work I did on Burial at Thebes and haunted by the mistakes that I wish I could correct. I believe that my concept for the play was strong and my pre-production preparation was very thorough (a huge growth after
struggling with inadequate preparation in my second year production, *Drums in the Night*). In the execution of the concept, however, several mistakes harmed the production.

The most damaging mistake was in the scenic design. Lily and I created the set with an idea that it would be like an installation: several distinct spaces that could contain simultaneous action. This installation idea did not ultimately work with the Forum Theatre. The way the space was arranged made much of the playing area too far upstage, creating difficult sight lines and minimizing the power of the acting. Furthermore, the idea of the world of the river and the world downtown being two separate spaces was not clear to the audience. I believe now that it would have been more powerful to create a single, more theatrical space. Our set also remained mostly static during the performance; all of our original ideas of transformation (the set crumbling and leaking and becoming more chaotic by the end of the performance) were cut due to budget restrictions. If we had created a simpler single space we might have been able to realize these transformations within our budget. As previously mentioned, both the river and Tiresias’ painting were not achieved effectively in the scenic design and therefore those aspects of the concept were not successful on stage.

Although I generally believe the costumes in the show were successful in creating a whole world and distinguishing between groups, the use of off-white costumes in the chorus was quite problematic. The light tones of the costumes of the chorus pulled focus from Creon and Antigone in some of the larger group scenes and made those scenes extremely difficult to light. The use of so much white in the chorus was something I flagged early as a concern to Janet, but we miscommunicated about how to solve the problem. She asked to see the costumes in tech before dyeing them – I thought she was
going to dye the white costumes gray or khaki, but in fact she only intended to take down the shades of white. By the time we realized this miscommunication we did not have time or budget to solve the problem. In the future, I want to have a tighter hand on color palette and make sure that we are thinking of focus in addition to character in the costume design.

Ultimately, I believe the music was a successful aspect of the performance. The interludes ended up being some of the strongest, most theatrical moments in the play and Tommy’s music gave the play an emotional depth and a drive that helped us hurdle towards tragedy. I do think if we had discovered the function of the music and made the switch to guitar earlier in the process we could have had more time to develop powerful lyrics and finesse the music of each song. Next time I work with a composer and/or live musician I think workshopping the music in advance of the production is essential to the success of the production and the sanity of the creators.

Overall, I believe our storm was successful. Having struggled to depict a storm in a previous production, I had a clear vision of what was necessary in terms of lighting, sound and rain to build the storm. The final scene – and especially the final image – was very powerful. That being said, however, I believe that a number of cues remained clumsy in the final production and the actors’ performances in the final scene were slightly inconsistent because the sequence was under rehearsed. We scored the scene as much as possible in the rehearsal room but in the future I would set aside more tech time to run this sequence in its entirety for both designers and actors to finesse.

In the end, I was extremely proud of the high-octane performances in *Burial at Thebes*. Toby Owunmere especially gave a nuanced and powerful performance as Creon.
Zakiya Markland, after a rough process, grew immensely in tech and the run of the show and ultimately played a fierce Antigone. Tesiana Elie and MacGregor Arney gave consistently strong performances as Tiresias and Haemon. N’Jameh Camara’s performance of Ismene was never quite as powerful as I wanted. Her physicality was too casual and she was never quite able to play the stakes required by this piece. I believe I could have helped her more in the rehearsal process if I had not been so focused on working with Zakiya. I did, however, give her several notes during the run of the show that greatly improved her performance. Walker Hare really struggled with the text in the role of the Guard and often fell out of the situation. He greatly improved during the run of the show, but never quite achieved the specificity the role required. The chorus gave solid performances, but I believe with more time I could have worked on their physicality and created more specific stage images in their scenes.

In general, I believe that the situations in the play were strong, but due to my focus on situation and specific work with certain actors, I did not pay enough attention to composition in the space. The set contributed to the issue of composition, but in the future I would focus more on the images I create in staging and working with the actors on movement.

I grew tremendously as a director during this process. I have improved my ability to do detailed conceptual work in advance of the production and greatly improved my situation work in the rehearsal room. This process continued to challenge me to be more specific in my work with both actors and designers. Most of all, however, I grew in my ability to be self-critical. I have always had a gift for collaboration and creating a warm, positive environment with my actors and with my designers. In this production, however,
I learned how to balance that supportive environment and positive moral with a brutal honesty with my collaborators and with myself about what was and was not working. I was not afraid to make radical changes in the work and I challenged my collaborators to do the same. As my mentor has often reminded me, there is no great art without pain. Working on *Burial at Thebes* forced me to confront that directing will not always be joyful, and that if I want to create great work I must learn to be my own harshest critic. In the end, I know that however my mistakes may haunt me, they will also be my greatest teachers.