

Meerzon, Yana

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Theatralia. 2023, vol. 26, iss. 1, pp. 29-54

ISSN 1803-845X (print); ISSN 2336-4548 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/TY2023-1-3>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/digilib.77964>

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Access Date: 28. 11. 2024

Version: 20230505

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Playing a Tyrant – Rethinking an Autocrat in Asya Voloshina’s *Antigona : Redukciia*

Yana Meerzon

Abstract

Written by Russian playwright Asya Voloshina, the 2013 *Antigona : Redukciia* is, as the author herself refers to it, ‘a political satire with elements of poetry and reduction’, which recasts Sophocles’ title character, Antigone, from an existentialist tragic figure to a political rebel, whose actions of protest become inevitably and ironically performative in the highly mediated culture of social media influencers and performative post-truth. A radical juxtaposition between the individual and the state, Voloshina’s play exhibits deep internal connections with Bertolt Brecht’s *Die Antigone des Sophokles* (1948), which serves as its contextual and analytical entry point. Like Brecht, I argue, Voloshina interprets the tragic conflict of Sophocles’ *Antigone* as highly pragmatic. In her acknowledgement of Antigone’s new reality – which simultaneously reminds of George Orwell’s *1984* and Suzanne Collins’ *Hunger Games* – Voloshina challenges the premise of the 20th century political tragedy. Her Antigone stands to combat the state-based machine of manipulation with her personal truth. She ‘is motivated neither by religion nor by kinship’; for her Creon’s law is ‘simply a pretext to protest against her country turning into a totalitarian state’ (SYSKA 2022: 4); and so eventually she is cancelled out from the history and from the myth. I conclude that Brecht’s and Voloshina’s plays connect the two centuries together, diagnose their respective dark times, and demonstrate that the cultures of populism produce corrupt moral standards, compromise personal dignity, and cultivate post-truth, all channeled through the role of an autocratic, if not tyrannic, state leader.

Key words

Antigone, Voloshina, tyranny, Brecht, political tragedy, autocrat, Putin

One of the most influential tragedies of the Western theatre canon, Sophocles’ *Antigone* has served politically aware artists as an instrument of resistance and protest to the oppressive regimes for centuries. Written by Russian playwright Asya Voloshina (b. 1985), the 2013 *Antigona : Redukciia* [Antigona : Reduction] builds on this tradition.¹ Subtitled ‘a political satire with elements of poetry and reduction’,² it recasts Sophocles’ title character, Antigone, from an existential tragic figure to a political rebel, whose actions of protest become inevitably and ironically performative in the highly mediated culture of social media influencers, business moguls, and performative post-truth.

A radical juxtaposition between the individual and the state, Voloshina’s play exhibits deep internal connections with Bertolt Brecht’s *Die Antigone des Sophokles* (1948). ‘A triple hybrid of adaptation, translation and new play’ (REVERMANN 2022: 214), Brecht’s work serves as a contextual and analytical entry point for this article. Like Brecht, I argue, Voloshina interprets the tragic conflict of Sophocles’ *Antigone* as highly pragmatic. In her acknowledgement of Antigone’s new reality – which simultaneously reminds of George Orwell’s *1984* and Suzanne Collins’ *Hunger Games* – Voloshina challenges the premise of the 20th century political tragedy. Her Antigone stands to combat the state-based machine of manipulation, but she ‘is motivated neither by religion nor by kinship’; for her Creon’s law is ‘simply a pretext to protest against her country turning into a totalitarian state’ (SYSKA 2022: 4). In Voloshina’s version, Antigone is not just killed by Creon’s assistants, she is eventually cancelled out from history and from the myth. Written decades apart, I argue, Brecht’s *Die Antigone des Sophokles* and Voloshina’s *Antigona : Reduction* connect the two centuries together, diagnose their respective dark times, and demonstrate that the cultures of populism – so pervasive in their respective eras – produce corrupt moral standards, compromise personal dignity, and cultivate post-truth, all channeled through the role of a state leader – an autocrat if not simply a tyrant.

On Sophocles’ *Antigone* and its philosophical enigmas

Sophocles’ tragedy features princess Antigone, a daughter of the late King Oedipus, who died in a self-imposed exile, and a new King of Thebes, Creon, her uncle. Clearly an anti-war play: it begins at the end of the decisive battle between the people of Thebes and their invaders from Argos. Eteocles and Polynices, Antigone’s brothers, who fought on the opposing sides, are now dead, killed in the battle. To set an example of obedience and punish Polynices, who wrestled against his native city, Creon issues a prohibitive decree. Under the threat of mortal punishment, it forbids any Theban citizen to bury Polynices’ body. To Antigone, however, Creon’s decree is not just punitive. It defies the unwritten laws of grief and mourning as set by the Gods and by the

1 Directed by Anfisa Ivanova, the play was produced for the first time by the Alexandrinsky Theatre in St. Petersburg in 2014.

2 Unless indicated otherwise, all translations from Russian are Yana Meerzon and Dmitry Priven’s.



Fig. 1: *Antigone : Reduction*, Masterskaia Sovremennogo Teatra, St. Petersburg, 2020. Dir. Maria Galyazimova. Photo: Dmitri Yakubov.

cultural practices of Thebes, and so it is legally and morally problematic. In her decision to set things right, Antigone buries the body of her brother, and so goes against Creon's ruling. When Antigone is discovered and brought before Creon, she remains defiant.

One of the most often staged tragedies of the Greek canon,³ Sophocles' *Antigone* owes its popularity to the German Romantic philosopher Hegel, who read the play's major conflict taking place between the philosophical and moral convictions of its title character, Antigone, who stands for 'the interests of her family and rel[ies] on the unwritten laws of the gods', and those of Creon, who represents the interests of 'the public space and the laws of the state' (WILMER and ŽUKAUSKAITĖ 2010: 2). 'Hegel interprets the conflict between Antigone and Creon as the conflict between two forms of legality – divine law and human law – and as a conflict between the private sphere of kinship relationships and the public sphere of the state' (WILMER and ŽUKAUSKAITĖ 2010: 2). In the 20th century, Hegel's influential reading inspired contesting interpretations. From Lacan's psychoanalytic examination of Antigone's actions as an example of a pure death drive – 'Antigone's desire as not a desire for the Other (another human being) but the desire for death and self-annihilation'

³ The play 'received more than fifty translations into the English language in the last century and many adaptations all over the world' (WILMER and ŽUKAUSKAITĖ 2010: 1).

(WILMER and ŽUKAUSKAITĖ 2010: 3) – to Slavoj Žižek's critique of Lacan's work, the key thinkers and dramatists of the century re-imagined the play's civic conflict and politics. To George Steiner, for example, 'in *Antigone* the dialectic of intimacy and of exposure, of the "housed" and of the most public, is made explicit. The play turns on the enforced politics of the private spirit, on the necessary violence which political-social change visits on the unspeaking inwardness of being' (STEINER 1986: 11). To Judith Butler, the explanation of Antigone's fate falls not only with the feminist reading of her actions as defying gender expectations in a heteronormative and patriarchal society, or the issues of kinship as it was understood by Hegel, but in terms of the public and the political as proposed by Steiner. Butler advocates that 'instead of enjoying Antigone's "fatality" as a sign of her psychic complexity or a symptom of her gender, we should think about the political alternatives that her position suggests' (WILMER and ŽUKAUSKAITĖ 2010: 6).

The history of theatrical adaptations of Sophocles' play illustrates the impact of these philosophical debates. For example, in Germany *Antigone* was used as a vehicle for cultural resistance starting from the mid 19th century. This tactic was especially prominent during Hitler's rule, when *Antigone* 'serve[d] as a hidden code of sorts for the intellectual resistance against the Nazi regime' (FISCHER-LICHTE 2010: 338).⁴ Paradoxically, in the Third Reich, the play served also as a propaganda tool. A symbol of 'a racial kinship between Greeks and Germans', *Antigone* validated the Nazis' claim for being 'the legitimate heir of and actual successor to ancient Greece' and 'as an act of resistance' (FISCHER-LICHTE 2010: 339). At the same time, seeing a young woman, who could question the authority of an autocrat in public, in a theatrical spotlight provided the German audiences with an alternative way of thinking about the authority.

This political prominence of *Antigone* spanned a lot further than Germany or even the European continent: from the 1942 adaptation by Jean Anouilh, which was prohibited for staging in France due to its anti-authoritarian message till 1944 shortly before the Nazi's occupation was over, to such important post-colonial plays as Kamau Brathwaite's *Odale's Choice* (1967), Griselda Gambaro's *Antígona Furiosa* (1985–1986), Femi Òsófisan's *Tègònni: An African Antigone* (1994), Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona's *The Island* (1999), and Seamus Heaney's *The Burial at Thebes* (2004), as well as the plays from the post-communist theatre repertoire, such as Miro Gavran's *Creon's Antigone* (1990), Janusz Glowacki's *Antigone in New York* (1993), and most recently Slavoj Žižek's *Three Lives of Antigone* (2016), the story of Antigone has been used as a weapon for political fight and a space for philosophical transgression. For Žižek, for instance, Antigone is not just a bystander or a victim of the conflict, she is the play's central subject and problem. Following 'the mode of Bertolt Brecht's three learning plays' (ŽIŽEK

4 Fischer-Lichte makes this statement in application to Karlheinz Stroux's production of *Antigone*, which opened on 3 September 1940 'at the Staatliches Schauspielhaus (State Theatre) am Gendarmenmarkt, the former Royal Theatre in Berlin' (FISCHER-LICHTE 2010: 338). 'From 1940 until 1 September 1944 – when Joseph Goebbels ordered all theatres in the Reich to shut down – at least fifteen productions and approximately 150 performances [of *Antigone*. – Y.M.] were recorded on German stages' (FISCHER-LICHTE 2010: 338).



Fig. 2: *Antigone : Reduction*, Masterskaia Sovremennogo Teatra, St. Petersburg, 2020.
Dir. Maria Galyazimova. Photo: Dmitri Yakubov.

2016: xxiv), in his own dramatic adaptation of the myth, Žižek provides three alternative versions of how one can interpret the play's major conflict:

The first version follows Sophocles' denouement, and the concluding chorus praises Antigone's unconditional insistence on her principle – *fiat justitia p̄reat mundus ...*; The second version shows what would have happened if Antigone were to win, convincing Creon to allow the proper burial of Polyneices, i.e. if her principled attitude were to prevail. In this version, the concluding chorus sings a Brechtian praise of pragmatism: the ruling class can afford to obey honour and rigid principles, while ordinary people pay the price for it. In the third version, Chorus is no longer the purveyor of stupid commonplace wisdoms, it becomes an active agent. At the climactic moment of the ferocious debate between Antigone and Creon, Chorus steps forward, castigating both of them for their stupid conflict which threatens the survival of the entire city. (ŽIŽEK 2016: xxiv)

To Žižek, in other words, only such multidimensional rendering of the play's conflict and Antigone's place within it can facilitate our better understanding of its politics. It can also force us to 'abando[n] our sympathy and compassion for the play's heroine making her part of the problem, and propos[e] a way out which shatters us in our humanitarian complacency' (ŽIŽEK 2016: xxv). Bertolt Brecht's *Die Antigone des Sophokles* occupies a special place within this history of political resistance through theatre. It recasts the old Greek conflict of predetermination and fate into a pragmatic discussion of one's responsibility for their actions.

Die Antigone des Sophokles by Bertolt Brecht

Written in 1948, upon Brecht’s return to Europe after his American exile, *Die Antigone des Sophokles* was Brecht’s gesture of homecoming: an opportunity for him and his wife Helene Weigel to work again ‘as director and actress in an actual German-speaking theatre’ (REVERMANN 2022: 105). The play also served Brecht as a particular ‘political gesture that aspired to the complete rationalization of Greek Tragedy’ (DUARTE 2017). To write his adaptation, Brecht used Hölderlin’s German translation of the play, which was ‘hardly or never played’ and whose ‘Swabian intonations and gymnasium like Latin constructions’ made Brecht feel ‘at home’ in his native tongue (Brecht quoted in REVERMANN 2022: 111). ‘There [was] also something Hegelian around,’ Brecht explained; but as he continued working on the script, he started to realise that in his newly emerging play “‘fate’ eliminates itself by default’ and ‘of the gods there remains the local saint of the people, the god of joy’; thus, giving space for an ‘extremely realistic folk legend’ to develop (Brecht quoted in REVERMANN 2022: 111). Brecht’s true theatrical innovation, however, belonged with his radical re-interpretation of the character Creon, who appeared in his play as the unlawful invader of the neighboring country, a tyrant, whose moral dilemmas must be approached solely within the context of his war crimes. Brecht’s Creon was now dreaming of expanding Thebes’ territories and of forcing its life order onto the others. Clearly a totalitarian leader, ‘a transparent stand-in for any autocratic ruler’ (REVERMANN 2022: 118), specifically Hitler, he spearheaded an imperialistic war ‘for the grey metal’ (BRECHT 2004: 8). In other words, Brecht’s *Die Antigone des Sophokles* invited the post-WWII German audiences to reflect on the historical choices that led to the major tragedy of the 20th century; and it brought Creon’s war crimes and his personal corruption to the forefront of its dramatic conflict. So, if in the original play of Sophocles ‘Creon’s crime [was] impiety-flouting’, Brecht ‘stresse[d] Creon’s inhumanity’ and made Creon ‘his own enemy’ (JONES and VIDAL 1957: 40).

In this rationalisation of Creon’s actions, Brecht gestured toward Hannah Arendt’s work on totalitarianism. In her 1966 article on the political theatre of Brecht, later republished in Arendt’s book *Men in the Dark Times*, Arendt scolded the artist, who after his exile from the Third Reich, went back to the German Democratic Republic to collaborate with its communist regime. Today, however, as Markell suggests, it is high time to re-read Arendt’s argument as her defence of Brecht’s work within the frames of ‘poetry’s political vocation’ (MARKELL 2018: 509).

Arendt associates poetry with truth-telling – not the mere recording of information, nor the disclosure of philosophical or (as in Heidegger) ontological truth, but a kind of disruptive faithfulness to factual reality, one that interrupts efforts to derive practical conclusions, as if automatically, from philosophically or theoretically simplified appeals to facts. This account complicates the familiar picture of Arendt’s political thought as built around an impassable gulf between work and action, or poetry and politics: it suggests instead that Arendt was able to explore the fraught but fruitful interdependence between these terms by holding poetry, like politics, at a distance from philosophy. (MARKELL 2018: 509)

Brecht's reading of the classical myth unfolds along these lines: in writing *Die Antigone des Sophokles* one of his objectives was to create a new tragedy relevant to his time and his audiences, but also to avoid a simple anti-war agit-prop (DURANTE 2017). To achieve his goals, Brecht not only reworked the plot structure of the original but also changed the characters' actions and motivations: in his play Creon 'wages an economically motivated war against Argos for the material resources', while Polyneices and Eteocles 'fight on the same side, for Thebes against Argos. [...] Eteocles now dies in the battle at Argos whereas Polyneices deserts after he sees his brother slaughtered, only to be killed himself by his uncle Creon with his home city of Thebes in sight' (REVERMANN 2022: 117). In Brecht's version, Antigone's fate unfolds almost the same as the original; but Creon's fate changes significantly.

A messenger informs Creon of the defeat by the Argive forces which are now marching against Thebes to annihilate it [...]. Creon does not resist but actually embraces the prospect of imminent annihilation, as do the members of the chorus who announce that they will follow their leader Creon into the abyss. (REVERMANN 2022: 117)

Thus, Brecht's ploy of making rationalisation of the characters' actions and motivations the driving force of the new political tragedy was now to 'be situated as firmly as possible within the realm of human accountability and intelligibility instead of being shaped by a metaphysical entity like that of the divine or fate' (REVERMANN 2022: 117). And so, through this streamlining of the characters' moral conflict Brecht presented Creon as a modern tyrant, whose downfall was the result of his own 'aggressive overreach caused by material greed' and supported by Creon's hold of an 'absolute aristocratic power' (REVERMANN 2022: 117). In Brecht's adaptation, the conflict between Antigone and Creon was recast in terms of pragmatism and accountability; it emerged within 'the inescapable and self-annihilating fall of absolute aristocratic power, which Brecht felt was at the core of the underlying Greek story anyway' (REVERMANN 2022: 118). Coming from the place of the people, Brecht's Antigone 'blame[d] Creon for the crimes he commits', had 'her eyes firmly set on the human order and the "here and now"', and projected the ideal state order in the socialist terms 'characterized by "kindness", where man is the friend of man' (REVERMANN 2022: 119).

To put the idea of tragic rationalisation into action, Brecht turned *Antigone* into a 'theatre lab', in which he experimented both with dramaturgical forms and other 'stage-related aspects like scenography, blocking, delivery, rehearsal technique, acting and so forth' (REVERMANN 2022: 105). The script implied a heightened theatricality, which was to prepare Brecht's audiences for the labour of performative alienation, a tool of storytelling in Brecht's theatre and a spectator's means of critical analysis of their own thoughts and actions:

In its first version, Brecht's *Antigone* starts off with a Prelude [Vorspiel] that takes place at the end of the war, in April 1945 in Berlin, presenting as the main cast two sisters, their brother as a deserter, and an officer of the SS (BFA 8: 195–199). For the production at Greiz in 1951,

Brecht removed this overture and replaced it with a New Prologue [Prolog] in which Tiresias, the seer, addresses the audience in a didactic tone, presenting the characters standing beside him, Antigone and Creon, along with a brief narrative of the action. This speech is key to understanding what it means to deal with form through content. (DURANTE 2017)

In his new opening monologue, Tiresias summarised the plot for those who were not familiar with it and named Creon ‘the “tyrant of the city of Thebes”’ (DURANTE 2017). This device allowed Brecht to put forward his views on the value of the tragic pathos: and thus, unlike the ancient Greeks, who believed in the place of man ‘as subjected to the laws of fate’, Brecht’s spectators were to learn that ‘the fate of man is man himself’ (Brecht quoted in DURANTE 2017).

Brecht’s rationalisation of *Antigone*’s conflict found extensive echoing in post-colonial and post-Communist renditions of this play. Asya Voloshina’s *Antigona : Reduction* is one of them. It presents the tyrant and his victim as potential beneficiaries and fatalities of mediatisation of life and culture, unable to free themselves from the powers of simulacra, populism, and post-truth.

Antigona : Reduction by Asya Voloshina

Born in Rostov-on-Don in 1985, Asya Voloshina is a recipient of many prestigious literary and theatre awards, with more than thirty productions in Russia, Poland, France, and Estonia.⁵ After Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, Voloshina left the country. Today she lives in Israel. Recently she took a new pen-name Ester Bol (VOLOSHINA 2022b).

Voloshina’s book of four plays about Russia – *Gibnet khor. Chetyre piesy o Rossii* [Chorus Perishes. Four Plays about Russia] (2018) – presents Voloshina as one of the most politically outspoken Russian playwrights: ‘What’s happening in the country today is traumatic and makes it hard for me to live here,’ she states. ‘It prevents me from living a normal life [...], from having a child. This atmosphere is nurturing for writing but sickening for people’ (Voloshina quoted in MASLAKOV 2018). Echoing these statements, Voloshina often focuses her dramaturgy on the notions of personal freedom and free will. ‘I prefer not to write about love, art, the artist’s purpose or responsibility and powerlessness of the intellectual,’ Voloshina continues. ‘I would rather write about the will of humans, both in the sense of “freedom” and in the sense of “daring”’ (Voloshina quoted in ISMAILOVA 2020). For Voloshina, these two concepts – freedom and daring – are closely related. As she clarifies further, in her opinion, ‘all claims to power, to authority, to any pressure, external violence, repressive apparatuses and mechanisms metaphysically refer to the fact that without freedom there is no daring; and vice versa – without daring, there is no freedom’ (Voloshina quoted in

⁵ Voloshina studied journalism in the Maxim Gorky Literature Institute in Moscow and later theatre history and dramaturgy at the Russian Academy of Theatre Arts in St. Petersburg. She holds an MA in Dramaturgy (2010–2013), the class of Nataliia Skorokhod.

ISMAILOVA 2020). Although she would not necessarily place her work in close proximity to Brecht's theatre, her interest in the epic dramatic forms, her work on Chorus, and her criticism of state oppression, violence and civil war, mobilise her anti-war politics, including such plays directly related to the Russo-Ukrainian War as *Podtverdite, chto vy chelovek* [Confirm You Are Human] (2019), *Zlye pesni* [Wicked Songs] (2021), and *The Crime #AlwaysArmUkraine* (2022).

Written in 2013, a year after Vladimir Putin's return to power as Russia's president, *Antigona : Reduction* documents a so-called 'point of no return' in the modern history of Russia. The year 2012 signaled the end of the political and economic reforms in modernisation put forward by Medvedev's government and the country's slide towards a right-wing nationalist agenda, which in 2014 resulted in the annexation of Crimea and in 2022 a full-scale war in Ukraine. 2012 also happened to be one of the most intense years in the modern history of Russia's public protests and its suppressions (GESSEN 2017: 344–350). It saw the silencing of the anti-Putin Bolotnaya Square rally and the first public trials and imprisonment of the protesters, including the trial, conviction, and imprisonment of three members of the feminist performance art group Pussy Riot after they staged a 40-second Punk-Prayer inside Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Saviour on 21 February 2012.⁶ A 'political pamphlet on "mature Putinism"', manifested through the suppression of mass protests against falsifications in the presidential and parliamentary elections and the subsequent tightening of the political regime' (SYSKA 2022: 1), Voloshina's play comments on many of these events. A dramatisation of Antigone's solitary protest, it gestures toward the performativity of Pussy Riot's rebellion, and it also demonstrates that within the autocratic society, the only way for a citizen to be seen and to be heard is to perform an act of insolence within the mediated public sphere. Media plays the most significant role in this act of resistance but also of reduction:

For me [Voloshina writes. – Y.M.], the impulse to rewrite the story of Antigone was to think about the role of media in our society. If Dostoevsky's Raskolnikov wanted to repent on Senaya Square today, he would immediately be filmed by strangers; the video would go viral, and his act of repentance would assume an entirely different meaning. [...] He could become a star or a meme. Similarly, Antigone is not an existential heroine in my play. My Antigone knows that she is shallow, a kind of 'minus-Antigone'. But when she sees a chance of getting into the spotlight, a possibility of impact through the televised transmission of her actions, i.e., of her sacrifice acquiring meaning, she decides to act. (VOLOSHINA 2022b)

Voloshina's text demonstrates, therefore, that it is the energy of a televised transmission and populist propaganda that defines Antigone and her actions. Antigone,

6 Pussy Riot is a feminist protest and performance art punk rock group, which was founded in 2011 in Moscow. The group staged activist performances and filmed music videos that became popular on the internet. Their central focuses were the rights of women and LGBTQ+ community, criticism of the Russian Orthodox Church and President Putin and his governance. After the 2012 incident, the group became notoriously famous in the West, where they continue their activist work today.



Fig. 3: *Antigone : Reduction*, Masterskaia Sovremennogo Teatra, St. Petersburg, 2020.
Dir. Maria Galyazimova. Photo: Dmitri Yakubov.

Voloshina writes, 'is not a victim of the media. She works with the idea of personal responsibility, but she is not ready to sacrifice her life for this abstract concept' (VOLOSHINA 2022c). Antigone can and will act for the benefit of others, but only when she realises that 'media can and will reproduce her actions and so her sacrifice will be seen' – 'This is the Antigone of 2013,' Voloshina (2022c) explains.

This desire to question the notions of personal responsibility and heroism connects Voloshina's play to Brecht's anti-fascist project of 1948. Brecht's Antigone challenges Creon and his law. She sees him as an imperialist and a coloniser – 'Antigone: Better we'd be sitting in the ruins of our own city / And safer too than with you / In the enemy's houses' (BRECHT 2004: 25) – but she also sees him as a mere mortal, who has created the new law. In fact, Brecht's Antigone sees herself as Creon's equal – 'A mortal then may break it and I am / Hardly less mortal than you are' (BRECHT 2004: 25). And she believes that it would be more responsible of her to die in this battle for the truth than to continue living in the shame, not being able to bury her brother and to defend the God's order:

But if I die
Before the time I think I will, that is
I say, even a gain. Who lives like me

With many ills surely receives
Some small advantage, dying? (BRECHT 2004: 20)

Written in verse (Act One) and in prose (Act Two), *Antigona : Reduction* continues this discussion. It mixes myth with contemporary reality, but it 'violates the main principle of the ancient myth – obedience to the gods. [...] Voloshina excludes the Gods' intervention in Antigone's decision: to bury her brother and to die is only her choice' (KISLOVA 2015: 223). To Voloshina, modern tragedy cannot mimic the original Greek tragedy – because 'the type of theatrical communication as it was practiced in Greek theatre has been irrevocably lost' (Voloshina quoted in SOKOLOVA 2018) – but it can still seek forms of catharsis. Theatre today, Voloshina believes, can still speak in tragic terms, if it will present peoples' lives as ruined 'not in melodramatic, but in existential terms' (Voloshina quoted in SOKOLOVA 2018). To generate this new dramatic form and to seek catharsis, Voloshina uses strategies of literary quotation, gesturing to the original, borrowing, and commentary (TYUTELOVA et al. 2022: 377). Tiresias – the blind seer of Sophocles' original and the narrator/media outlet in Voloshina's rewrite – provides audience with a description of the dramatic state of the equilibrium, in which the play begins:

TIRESIAS:

We repeat the emergency given circumstances. Today our dear King Creon has issued a supreme decree. The decree forbids to bury the body of the mutineer Polynices or to conduct any kind of funerary rites. I quote: 'And the birds and the scavenging dogs can do with him whatever they like. This is my command, and as long as I am King, no traitor is going to be honored with the loyal man.' End quote. The words are from the King's mouth. Translation by Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald. Disobedience is punishable by death. (VOLOSHINA 2018: 29–30)

In this passage, exemplary in its rhetorical style of the Act One of *Antigona : Reduction*, the authorial irony and distancing are expressed through the stylisation of Tiresias' speech, and direct quotation from the famous Soviet translation of Sophocles' play into Russian. This way Voloshina not only discloses her literary sources, but she also comments on the futility of the concepts of truth and the original in today's Russia. Much like in Brecht's theatre, here the act of authorial irony and distancing serves Voloshina as a device of political resistance and commentary.

These literary strategies are typical to the work of the second generation of the Russian *New Drama* writers, who wish to move away from the techniques of documentary theatre and to seek a self-reflecting character, whose origins lie with Greek tragedy, mythological thinking, and the metaphorical expressivity of their own politics (Voloshina quoted in NEVINNAIA 2020).⁷ At the same time, these strategies remind of

⁷ Due to how the devices of citation and borrowing work, these borrowed texts often appear in Voloshina's play as 'alien' (TYUTELOVA et al. 2022: 377). She uses such strategies of creative writing as doubt, (self)irony, and distancing to create new texts and new meanings, reflective of the time and the

the formalist theatre experiments of the early 1920s⁸ and of the postmodernist search in performativity, including fragmentation, montage of citations, and palimpsest of borrowed texts; all of which serve as a vehicle of the authorial creative utterance and personal truth, Voloshina’s ‘vision of ways out of the ideological crisis’ (TYUTELOVA et al. 2022: 386).

This deep interconnection between seeking a new artistic language to express one’s personal politics and criticism of the existing political order connects Voloshina’s project back to Brecht’s one again. Like Brecht, in *Antigona* : *Reduction* Voloshina embarks on the rationalisation of the tragic conflict. Here it takes place between the title character (Antigone) and media, controlled by the tyrant Creon (who serves as a fictional stand-in for Putin) and the head of his administration Antibunt (or Antirebellion, to translate this made-up name into English), who is reminiscent of the infamous Vladislav Surkov – the First Deputy Chief of the Russian Presidential Administration (1999 to 2011), one of Kremlin’s ideologists responsible for the notion of Russia’s ‘sovereign democracy’, and the country’s Deputy Prime Minister, between December 2011 and May 2013. The blind seer Tiresias is turned here into a powerful media outlet and an instrument of state propaganda. In the past Tiresias ‘used to pick up “waves” of truth like a radio receiver’, but as the action unfolds, he ‘becomes a mouthpiece of power and undergoes an “upgrade”: a screen is built into his body, thanks to which he acquires an ability to also broadcast images’ (SYSKA 2022: 3). In this system of characters, Creon appears only as ‘a media spectre, the image of the King, necessary to influence the collective psyche of the people’ (SYSKA 2022: 3).

We see Creon on stage only once: instead, it is Tiresias, who under the close guidance of Antibunt, broadcasts Creon’s wishes, decrees, and mighty deeds. Antibunt – a cunning master of ceremonies in Creon’s palace – is also a director and an archivist of the state’s spectacle. He uses ancient Greek amphorae to record Thebes’ history, from which anyone who does not fit the narrative (including Antigone) can be erased. Antibunt is a shrewd ideologist of Creon’s Thebes, and thus he holds a special position in the play. Not only does he control Tiresias’s televised transmissions, but he also uses state media to create political myths. In the following passage, Voloshina provides a description of Creon’s mighty deeds, which Antibunt chooses to depict in his vase drawings. These images are highly suggestive of Putin’s own performative and widely televised activities as a mighty Russian leader and an alpha-male.

culture in which this writing takes place. ‘Orientation to the “other”’ – other text – turns in Voloshina’s work into ‘an artistic gesture’ and ‘a type of technology for generating meaning’ (TYUTELOVA et al. 2022: 377), symptomatic of the writer’s personal doubt. Here ‘the chosen pretext is perceived not as an object for destruction and an instrument of postmodern play, but as a fundamentally different statement about the world’ (TYUTELOVA et al. 2022: 383). Using some of the well-recognised works of Russian literature – or in the case of *Antigona* : *Reduction*, a translation of the famous Greek tragedy – Voloshina creates her own texts; she constructs them on this ‘dialogue with the “other”, on the basis of an ironic verification of theirs [this other’s. – Y.M.] position’ (TYUTELOVA et al. 2022: 383).

8 This method is rooted in Voloshina’s admiration of the Akmeism, a poetic school, which emerged in 1912 in St. Petersburg; specifically the poetry of Osip Mandelstam (1891–1938), one of the Akmeists.



Fig. 4: *Antigone : Reduction*, New Stage Workshop, Alexandrinsky Theatre, St. Petersburg, 2014. Dir. Anfisa Ivanova. Photo: Tatiana Tumanova. From personal archive of Asya Voloshina.

ANTIBUNT:

For the descendants I depicted all in vivid colours, black and ochre, exerting efforts as required. (Showing her the amphorae with the drawings). Behold: here soars Creon across the firmament, on Dedalus' wings, and yonder – observe – he plunges into the ocean's depth, consulting with Poseidon how to convert the deep-sea sheepskins into fleece. Here he's with Zeus at Mount Olympus, and here – oops, forgive me, this is private, are you eighteen yet? He is with Aphrodite here, but believe me, they're only dancing! (VOLOSHINA 2018: 50)

Now let us compare how Catherine Schuler describes Putin's actual theatrics:

A staple of Russian political history from Petr I through Joseph Stalin, the theatrical metaphor has been revived under Putin – an actor-politician with rare (and largely unforeseen) gifts for stagecraft and statecraft. The most brazen and amusing examples of Putinesque theatricality are universally notorious: bare-chested mountain man, virile vampire, trendy dude, custodian of endangered species, environmentalist, nightclub crooner, Formula 1 race car driver, hockey star, surrogate parent of orphaned Siberian cranes, and more recently, fisherman extraordinaire. Photographic evidence indicates that, far from a 'man without a face' (Gessen 2012), Putin is a man with a surfeit of faces: in point of fact, an actor. Pumped up



Fig. 5: *Antigona : Reduction*, New Stage Workshop, Alexandrinsky Theatre, St. Petersburg, 2014. Dir. Anfisa Ivanova. Photo: Tatiana Tumanova. From personal archive of Asya Voloshina.

on performance enhancing endorphins, this human bricolage of imperial, Soviet, post-Soviet, post-socialist, and postmodern identities takes focus like a seasoned professional. (SCHULER 2015: 137)

Voloshina’s play, however, makes it ambiguous as to how much power Creon really has. It suggests that in the era of total spectacle, someone like Antibunt, someone who controls a mediated state narrative, possesses more authority and influence than even the tyrant himself. It is curious, that in *Antigona : Reduction*, even Haemon, Creon’s son, is surprised with the mightiness of his father, who always seemed a bit ‘unsightly’, ‘specifically for the VIP cadre’ (VOLOSHINA 2018: 39). Thus, the major conflict of Voloshina’s play is not between Antigone, who stands by the divine order, and Creon, who speaks for the human law, but between an individual and the culture of fear created by Creon’s autocracy and its mediated performance.

Even for those in power, it is unclear who manipulates whom, i.e., who performs the act of manipulation (Creon or his assistant Antibunt) and who serves as an object of this manipulation. At the end of the play, we will learn that everything that happened here was done for the sake of big money, although we cannot be sure about this either; this version can also be only one possible interpretation. (VOLOSHINA 2022a)

To return to Brecht: in his version of *Antigone*, the blame is very clearly with Creon. Creon is responsible for everything, including the colonial war he began, which he will lose. His son, Haemon, tries to make Creon face this responsibility but fails in his attempts. By contrast, in Voloshina's version, nobody takes on any responsibility: in the world of post-truth, the state's power is omnipresent, even if we know who we must blame, we also know that we have no mechanisms to make these people accountable for their actions. There are no Nuremberg trials coming up. In this context, one of the major questions that *Antigona : Reduction* asks is whether in a society of total spectacle, simulacrum, and mediatisation of self – when the images of self and of other are constantly edited and adjusted – there is any space for personal heroism. Voloshina responds to her own question with the answer, which in its ambiguity seems to be equal to the ambiguity of post-truth created by the play. In Voloshina's version, Antigone remains in the place of the tragic character, but the motivations of her actions seem to also be performative.

Antigone agrees to marry Haemon, but when she sees Tiresias, who amidst their wedding ceremony begins broadcasting state propaganda, she suddenly realises the potential implications of transmitting her protest publicly and leaves the wedding party. When Antigone rushes back to her brother's body, Tiresias catches her protest and starts broadcasting it to the public. This situation creates new performative conditions, in which Antigone turns into a tragic character.

Tiresias undoes his cloak. Everyone can see the likeness of Antigone burying her brother's body at the gates of Thebes. She senses that she is being seen and looks at her audience too. (VOLOSHINA 2018: 64)

Tiresias begins to first howl and then broadcast Antigone's words over radio interference and others' voices:

Dear friends, I'm sorry to have ruined your celebration, my only excuse is that I have also ruined my life and... '...and met with the unanimous support of the people...' ...so I'm sorry, Haemon... When I realised you'd never know... 'The Sacred Goat Cheese. You're worth it...' But when I realised that my voice could still be heard ... I'm not doing this to fulfill an ancient rite – ancient rites are not really observed anymore. And not to stay or become who I am, not to... '...just add water...' ...and not even to fulfill a mission and play my part. I've almost come to terms with my part as a happy wife. '...standardised children's tunics...' I am doing this because otherwise '...the situation in Thebes of the Seven Gates is perfectly under control...' ... and so... you can't get that image out of your head. Freedom is painful, but...

ANTIBUNT:

But enough...

Tiresias is stripped of his cloak and wrapped in a straitjacket of sorts. A distorted image of Antigone can still be seen. Antigone is subdued by the soldiers. She reads a poem trying to break free. Fragments of it can be heard because Tiresias continues to resist as well. (VOLOSHINA 2018: 66)

Voloshina’s criticism here lies with the potential for the personal corruption that the power of mediatisation of action (be it a private action of an individual or a public protest) brings. The scene suggests that only ‘when she becomes a meme – a media object capable of replication in the minds of others’ (SYSKA 2022: 5), Antigone’s self-sacrifice can acquire a special meaning and create an impact.

[Antigone] briefly seizes the media agora monopolised by the system, that is, the ability to produce ‘new reality’ and to broadcast it to the masses, and hence appropriates the symbolic capital of power. Here, it is the making of reality by mass media, not the authority of the law, that is manifested as privilege. (SYSKA 2022: 9)

To a certain degree, Voloshina’s rendering of Antigone as a tragic character of the digital age gestures back to the Lacanian reading of Sophocles’ tragedy as an ultimate representation of the death wish, but also to Butler’s re-positioning of the dramaturgical conflict from the sphere of the domestic into that of the political:

Although [Antigone’s] act is suicidal, the stakes are symbolic: her passion is death drive at its purest [...]. What makes Antigone a pure agent of death drive is her unconditional insistence on the demand for the symbolic ritual, an insistence which allows for no displacement or other form of compromise [...] The problem with Antigone is not the suicidal purity of her death drive but [...] that the monstrosity of her act is covered up by its aestheticization: the moment she is excluded from the community of humans, she turns into a sublime apparition evoking our sympathy by complaining about her plight. (ŽIŽEK 2016: xv)

However, in Voloshina’s play, even Antigone’s aestheticisation of a death drive is put into doubt: Antigone’s punishment, her physical, social, and symbolic death takes place within another gesture of mediatisation.

Antibunt erases from the amphorae (i.e., from history) all non-politically correct episodes involving the Theban princess and thus ends up erasing all images of Antigone altogether. This ending seems unambiguously pessimistic – protest and even sacrificing one’s life are ineffective, and the oppressive state, with its law enforcement and media at its disposal, can not only physically eliminate dissidents, but also freely manipulate their symbolic being. (SYSKA 2022: 10)

Voloshina’s play, in other words, sets out to reflect this omnipresent performativity of state power. It also comments on the longstanding dramatic conflict of Russian national tragedy: between the state and its people.

Unlike in Sophocles’ original or in Brecht’s adaptation, in Voloshina’s play the function of the Chorus – the mouth-speaker of the people and of the author’s own view on the conflict – is reduced from its usually much more prominent role. Here a Theban society is represented by two random bystanders – Old Demos and Young Demos – who symbolically stand for the Russian people. Two Demoses appear on stage twice: in



Fig. 6: *Antigone : Reduction*, Masterskaia Sovremennogo Teatra, St. Petersburg, 2020.
Dir. Maria Galiazimova. Photo: Dmitri Yakubov.

the first instance they are there to celebrate the wedding of the royal couple and in the second they arrive after Antigone is already arrested to cheer the second reiteration of the same wedding, now with the fake Antigone (Ismene dressed as Antigone) on stage. In Voloshina's play, the Chorus is reduced to the collective figure of these Two Demoses, who in their disappointment with and fear of the regime, remain ambivalent if not indifferent to Antigone, someone who dares to take on the heroic role of the leader of the resistance.

As Voloshina explains, her play demonstrates that in Russia 'Putin and the Russian people not only complement each other, they are mutually contaminated. [...] The point is not to reveal the contaminated atmosphere between the Russian Creons and the Antibunts, but to show the contaminated atmosphere between them and the Demos, the people of the country' (VOLOSHINA 2022a). This is how Voloshina depicts this tension – tyrant vs people, individual vs Chorus – in her play: in Voloshina's Thebes the structural power of the city is so corrupted that it's not just Creon who might serve as puppet in the hands of his own assistant/handler, it is also his people (Chorus) who can be seen as silent accomplices of Antibunt. The silence stands for conformism, and thus turns into complicity.

This is how we meet Theban people (the Chorus of the offstage) for the first time: not in person, but through the words of Antigone: 'Fear becomes the herd. Our souls

become all one with fear. The trough’s filled to the brim with silk and wine and grub and beer – “no thank you” seem to be the hardest words’ (VOLOSHINA 2018: 32). Tiresias’s broadcasting plays an important role here – like all propaganda narratives, the purpose of Tiresias’s transmissions is to create fear, draw an image of an enemy, and present his audiences with the televised performances of happiness. At first the people of Thebes seem to doubt the truthfulness of this programming, but as the power of the state grows, so too grows peoples’ feelings of contentment. These are some samples of soothing narratives produced by the state and transmitted by Tiresias:

Today Creon visited a children’s symposium. He assured the young citizens who had lost their parents in the war that all necessary steps would be taken to ensure their speedy adoption by wealthy and trustworthy Theban families with traditional values. Incidentally, as of today, Aeschylus has been taken out of the Theban lyceum curriculum as an author who incites mutiny. (VOLOSHINA 2018: 30–31)

Occasionally, Tiresias’s transmissions get interrupted, so people can hear the world outside of Thebes: ‘TIRESIAS (*with an accent*): According to our records, Thebes has seen an increase in coercion ... (*Interference. Interference. Interference*)’ (VOLOSHINA 2018: 34). In the context of post-truth, however, the bigger the lie and the larger the crime, the easier it becomes to believe and to accept them: ‘Armed combat is raging in faraway lands, which, according to our reporters, are full of headless beasts with eyes in their chests – [Tiresias continues his transmission]. In the Kingdoms of Thebes, however, the situation is absolutely stable’ (VOLOSHINA 2018: 34).

Tiresias’s speeches not only gesture toward nationalist ideological practices of today’s Russia, but also illustrate that in a totalitarian state the practices of post-truth are normalised, with the voice of propaganda serving as the state’s essential instrument to stabilise its power. Censorship, public and domestic violence, and oppressive tactics of the police-state are implemented, stabilised, and accepted; so, the tyrant can enjoy his unlimited autonomy and produce one punitive decree after another.

In order to curb philosophistry, we are working on a law on insulting religious feelings of citizens – [Tiresias speaks again]. Offensive speech directed at the gods will result in fines and jail time according to the Olympic hierarchy. [...] The law has met with unanimous support of eighty-two per cent of the population; the remaining eighteen percent are being dealt with.⁹ (VOLOSHINA 2018: 43)

Antigone acknowledges this spellbinding power of televised propaganda: ‘Like junkies, the people are getting high on fear and idolatry – all it took was one dose’; and then she asks ‘Why, Tiresias, oh why?’ (VOLOSHINA 2018: 44). The blind seer cannot respond to this question, but Voloshina can. She brings the Old Demos on stage, who

9 In this passage Voloshina unmasks Putin’s government and its punitive legislations that would increase in number, frequency, and power after his return to power in 2012.

teaches the Young Demos to forget his knowledge of the old truth and to accept the new one, to pretend that nothing has ever happened and to remember that obedience is the only tactic of survival available for them: 'if you want to save your ass, keep your mouth shut about that wedding! [...] The last thing I need is an argument with the authorities' (VOLOSHINA 2018: 83). To Voloshina, therefore, it is important to reveal the truth about the people but also to show 'how they are induced with powerlessness, an acquired helplessness, how they sense the current agenda in the air. Amazing how they learn to behave as expected on the fly' (VOLOSHINA 2022a).

Russian theatre has a tradition of questioning the unspoken bond between the people and the tyrant. Douglas J. Clayton argues that it was Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837), who was among the first Russian writers to stage Russian people as a tragic Chorus and as accomplices to the crimes of the tyrant (CLAYTON 2015: 98). Voloshina's *Antigona : Reduction* speaks to this tradition as well: one can trace the dramatic genealogy of Voloshina's tragic Chorus to Russia's first national tragedy – Pushkin's *Boris Godunov* (written in 1825), via Brecht.

Clayton positions *Boris Godunov* 'in a direct line between Shakespeare's history plays and Bertolt Brecht's epic theatre' (CLAYTON 2015: 98). Although written a century prior to Brecht's invention of epic theatre, Pushkin's tragedy speaks to the essence of its civic conflict and stages a complex interdependence between the state and the people. Written about a period of Russian history remote from Pushkin's time,¹⁰ *Boris Godunov* spoke of the 19th century Russia – a country on the verge of revolution, 'probably with a bloody overthrow of the emperor' (CLAYTON 2015: 99). Pushkin, a 'poet-dissident', to use contemporary terms, knew that 'living in the Russian Empire, where information was tightly controlled', it was better not to 'describe the situation directly' (CLAYTON 2015: 99), and so he turned to the Aesopian language of metaphor and history to speak his mind.¹¹ Still, Pushkin's tragedy was never properly staged during his lifetime. The reason for this was the play's 'potential for political interpretation: the same centralization of power in one figure, the same intrigues, the same silence of the narod [people. – Y.M.] persist' (CLAYTON 2015: 108).

Voloshina's play continues Pushkin's interpretation of the Russian people – *narod* – as an 'elemental force, fickle, [and] unpredictable' power that holds political potential for the revolt (CLAYTON 2015: 102). However, this unpredictable energy is hidden within the people's indifference and seeming apathy. Pushkin closed his tragedy with a symptomatic stage direction 'the people are silent', which pointed at the unspoken

10 Boris Godunov was a ruler of Muscovy Tsardom from c. 1585 to 1605.

11 Pushkin's play describes the events between 1598 and 1604 surrounding the succession to the throne in Muscovy after the death of Ivan IV ('Ivan the Terrible') and his last male heir, the boy Dmitry, who died in mysterious circumstances at Uglich, outside Moscow. In the play Boris is blamed for his murder. The text is a sequence of fast-moving scenes focusing alternately on Boris, in Moscow, and the young monk Grigory Otrepyev who declares himself to be Dmitry and escapes to Lithuania. In Cracow, the Poles hail Grigory as Dmitry. The Pretender leads his troops across the Russian border and advances on Moscow. Boris dies and the Russian people gathered in Moscow are induced to acclaim Dmitry as Tsar. Boris's wife Maria and son Fyodor are strangled offstage; the people are then told they have poisoned themselves and (in a stage direction in the 1831 version) 'remain silent' (CLAYTON 2015: 98–99).

bond – contamination and interdependency – between the tsar and his people. This famous stage direction served as a warning sign of the dangerous potential that Russian people possess (CLAYTON 2015: 103): the Chorus can be silent but their silence is never clear whether it is a sign of submission or brewing revolt.

In *Antigone : Reduction*, Voloshina issues a similar warning. With Old and Young Demoses representing the people of Thebes, a highly reduced in size and functions Chorus figure, turns into a metatheatrical replica of Pushkin’s *narod*/people. But if in Pushkin’s *Boris Godunov* the silence of the people remains ambiguous, in Voloshina’s play there is nothing uncertain about Demoses and their standing. They choose to remain silent and keep safe, because these Demoses – like Voloshina’s own audiences of 2013 – choose personal comfort, economic stability, and the glamour of the rich over the truth.

At the same time, silence is also instilled through fear and propaganda. This is what happens a bit earlier in the play: when Tiresias begins to transmit foreign media by mistake, Antibunt immediately shuts him down. There can be no free media or opinion in the totalitarian Thebes.

TIRESIAS:

Tyranny seems to be coming into fashion... International experts are seriously concerned about the readiness with which the Thebans have accepted the new regime. Not a single attempt at revolt, a single protest, a single picket or even a performance with political overtones has been recorded during the whole period of tyranny. This scenario is indicative of... (*Radio static*). (VOLOSHINA 2018: 47)

The ending of Voloshina’s play speaks even more directly to this concrete moment of Russia’s history, the moment to which the playwright belongs. Antigone is dead now, while Thebes prepares for Haemon’s second wedding. Tiresias broadcasts: ‘The Thebans are redoubling their efforts in preparations for the King’s son’s wedding. We have been informed that all the toasts have been memorised’ (VOLOSHINA 2018: 84). And unlike the Chorus of the Greeks, these people – the Two Demoses – stand in silence; they neither approve nor condemn the actions of the state. Much like Voloshina’s compatriots, they allow Creon and his apparatchiks to play out their endgame.

The last scene takes place in the office of Antibunt, who asks Tiresias to transmit a prestigious foreign auction. Apparently, Antibunt saved one amphora with Antigone’s image on it and secretly put it up for sale. As the curtain falls, we learn that the value of this artefact is rising, and Antibunt is getting richer and richer. *Antigone : Reduction* suggests, therefore, that when unleashed through media and populism, the power of the state can be relentless and unstoppable. It can dictate the ways our present time unfolds, and it can impact the future. Moreover, this last scene provides a double critique: it condemns Putin’s government and Russian political elites, who are ready to sell anything just to gain personal profit, and it reproaches Western democracies, which remain dependent on Russian goods (gas and oil) and continue doing their business with the country that successfully revived totalitarianism.



Fig. 7: *Antigone : Reduction*, Masterskaia Sovremennogo Teatra, St. Petersburg, 2020. Dir. Maria Galiazimova. Photo: Dmitri Yakubov.

To conclude

As I have demonstrated in this article, Sophocles' tragedy *Antigone* served as a tool for political critique, resistance, and satire by many theatre makers of the 20th century and today. The figure of the tyrant Creon has often been in the centre of these interpretations. In Bertolt Brecht's 1948 antifascist play, Creon appears as a modern dictator and exemplifies 'the greed, cruelty, inhumanity, and nihilistic violence' of a human being (REVERMANN 2022: 131). Asya Voloshina's 2013 project echoes Brecht's work: in her play Creon is an omnipresent spectre of power broadcasted to his people through the state-sponsored media, because it is his assistant, the cunning Antibun, who constructs and controls the state's narrative. Thus, Voloshina shifts Brecht's project of rationalisation of the tragic conflict from the figure of Creon, as an embodiment of 'the unambiguous monstrousness of humankind' (REVERMANN 2022: 131), to the discussion of the detrimental impact that state-sponsored propaganda has on peoples' minds and behaviour. Voloshina's *Antigone's* decision to act or not to act, to commit self-sacrifice or not, depends in this play on whether she is in the media spotlight. This 'reduced' tragic character is driven by pragmatism, not existential convictions.

Antigone's reduction, so to speak, began with the Brechtian project. As a protagonist of a classical tragedy, from the perspective of its formal structure, she deserved his attention: 'For the present theatrical enterprise the *Antigone* drama was chosen because

it was able to gain a certain contemporary relevance and posed formally interesting tasks’ (Brecht quoted in REVERMANN 2022: 132). But as a vehicle for his politics and as a representative of German antifascist resistance, she was not strong enough:

As for political material, however, the analogies with the present day which, after through-rationalization, had become surprisingly strong, turned out to be more of a disadvantage: the big resistance figure in ancient drama does not represent those fighters of the German resistance who have to appear to us as most significant. (Brecht quoted in REVERMANN 2022: 132)

Thus, as Brecht explained, he turned to Sophocles’ *Antigone* to depict ‘the role of force during the collapse of the head of government’ (Brecht quoted in REVERMANN 2022: 132). But for him, the problem of Antigone rested with her origins, and so she could not fully suit ‘the present context of resisting fascism or capitalism’, because she ‘remain[ed] an integral part of the ruling class’ (REVERMANN 2022: 132). For this reason, Brecht’s sentiment remained with the people of Argos and the work of the Chorus.¹² To make a true political impact, Antigone would have to undergo a radical change: she would need to become one of many – one of the people.

In Voloshina’s adaptation, the act of Antigone’s reduction, her blatant pragmatism, gestures toward such transformation, too.

Any playwright writes about today. And about themselves today. [...] Even if they write about a prehistoric era, it’s just a set. And the flesh and blood is still today. [...] There is one difference though: the classical texts have already passed the test of time and entered the hall of fame. But a play written yesterday may fall into oblivion tomorrow, because it turns out to be short-lived. (Voloshina quoted in MASLAKOV 2018)

Directed by Maria Galyazimova in December 2020 in St. Petersburg,¹³ this production of Voloshina’s *Antigona : Reduction* offers a vision of the corrupted state and its politics relevant even seven years after the text was written. To the director, the story Voloshina’s play tells is ‘a confrontation between a person and a system’ (Galyazimova quoted in STARODUBTSEVA 2020), and it expresses a state of confusion as felt by many Russian people. This text, Galyazimova explains, demands the artistry of Brecht’s political theatre; and so, she repositions the action of Voloshina’s play into

12 Martin Revermann explains, however, that Brecht’s opinion about Antigone was changing in time. In his ‘(unpublished) “Notes on the Adaptation” (BFA 24: 350–3) for the 1951 German premiere of the play in Greiz, however, Antigone suddenly emerges as a model of resistance, with clear parallels to the German situation in World War II’ (REVERMANN 2022: 136). Revermann explains this anomaly by the evolution of Brecht’s own views on tragedy and on his work (REVERMANN 2022: 136–137) and by the impact Helena Weigel’s interpretation of Antigone on stage (REVERMANN 2022: 135) had on the writer, a discussion that remains beyond the scope of this article.

13 Galyazimova’s *Antigona : Reduction* was presented on 20 December 2020 at Teatr Pokolenij [Theatre of Generations], as part of the OFF-Program of the St. Petersburg’s award for young theatre artists Proryv 2019; it was created within the directors’ ‘Masterclass on Contemporary Theatre’.

a rehearsal hall and asks her actors to use Brechtian devices of breaking the fourth wall and character-distancing to make the message more urgent. Galyazimova insists that it is the performers not the characters who must turn to the audience and explain their personal attitude to politics (STARODUBTSEVA 2020). A performer Alexander Khudyakov, who plays Haemon, states that 'here and now, in this room, he can change the play's circumstances, even influence the course of the performance. But what can he do outside of it? Can he dare to change something in the country?' (quoted in STARODUBTSEVA 2020). The same question that theatre critic Starodubtseva believes the audience should ask – 'can we change anything?' (STARODUBTSEVA 2020).

With the current war in Ukraine, as Voloshina states, there is no room left for hesitation, confusion, or compromise: the answer is only that – to fight against the aggressor is to side with the defenders of Ukraine. Written in 2013, before the annexation of Crimea and today's war, *Antigona : Reduction* documents its own moment of history, when 'almost no one went to the barricades' (VOLOSHINA 2022c). It speaks to the moral obligation of the artist, who, when they 'seem to be powerless in the face of reality, can try to do something for the other, or maybe for oneself, to keep in us the ability to feel empathy, and not only for yourself, but also for all of humanity' (Voloshina quoted in NEVINNAIA 2020). With this call for empathy and for an open expression of one's position toward the tyrant and their politics, Voloshina's project connects back to that of Brecht, and to the entire anti-fascist movement of the 20th century.

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Professor Yana Meerzon

University of Ottawa, Department of Theatre
135 Séraphin-Marion, Ottawa, Ontario, K1N 6N5, Canada
ymeerzon@uottawa.ca

Yana Meerzon teaches for the Department of Theatre, University of Ottawa. She is a past President of the Canadian Association for Theater Research (2020–2022). Her research interests are theatre of migration and nationalism, cultural and interdisciplinary studies. She is a co-editor of nine scholarly collections and an author of three books, with the latest one *Performance, Subjectivity, Cosmopolitanism* published by Palgrave in August 2020.



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