https://doi.org/10.5007/2175-8026.2025.e105618

INTERVIEW WITH IRISH PLAYWRIGHT COLIN MURPHY ON HIS RADIO PLAY *#ANTIGONE* (2023)

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Sophocles' *Antigone* (441 BCE; 2003) has been notably regarded as Ireland's national play (Mee & Foley, 2011, p. 5), with adaptations of the tragedy frequently emerging in Irish theatre, particularly during periods marked by social and political turmoil.

Sophocles' well-known tragedy tells the story of a young woman who breaks the law by burying her dead brother and subsequently suffers a tragic death. It portrays a conflict between King Creon, who wishes to maintain order and unity in his kingdom, and Antigone, who protests about the violation of a right that she considers to be inviolable. Creon is "if not cruel, at least insensitive," but has his "own honesty" and his own "sense of responsibility." Antigone, for her part, has a "passionate feeling of what is due to her brother, to her race" (Kitto 1961, 129-30).

Antigone's claim has spoken with force directly to audiences situated in challenging political circumstances. The play and the character of Antigone have thus appealed to writers as diverse as Bertold Brecht, Jean Anouilh, Athol Fugard, and Anne Carson. Since the 1980s Irish playwrights have also written their own adaptations of *Antigone*. Aidan Carl Mathews' *The Antigone* (1984), Tom Paulin's *The Riot Act* (1984), and Brendan Kennelly' *Sophocles' Antigone* (1986) responded to times in which respect for human rights was at stake in

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the Republic of Ireland, where police had just been given increased powers, and women just been denied of their rights, and in Northern Ireland, then at the height of the so-called Troubles.

Later, during a period of economic prosperity in the Republic and peace in the North, Conall Morrison's *Antigone* (2003) and Seamus Heaney's *The Burial at Thebes* (2004), for example, addressed issues of human rights violations from a more international perspective. These plays offered critical commentary on the treatment of Palestinians in the Middle East and on the U.S. administration under George W. Bush during the invasion of Iraq, respectively. By and large, Irish adaptations of *Antigone* have provided critique of their times through specific contexts, allowing contemporary audiences to engage more deeply with the world of Sophocles.

Adding to this canon, Irish playwright Colin Murphy places *Antigone* in pandemic times in *#ANTIGONE*, written for radio and first broadcast on the Irish radio station *Newstalk* in 2023 (still available at *GoLoud*'s streaming service).[1] In this play, Antigone is a refugee in Ireland, and Creon is Críon, the first female prime minister in the history of Ireland, and the head of a military government. Críon has decided to close the borders of Ireland and to ban the burial of immigrants, whose corpses are lying on Irish beaches. The conflict in *#ANTIGONE* has as its backdrop the COVID-19 pandemic, which broke out in 2020 and had huge impacts on global politics, economy, arts and, above all, on people's lives.

Dublin-born writer Colin Murphy has a degree in Political Science from University College Dublin and writes chiefly about Irish political history, adopting mostly the documentary genre. His first play, *Guaranteed!* (2013), on the Irish government's arguable response to the global crisis of 2008, was incredibly well-received by audiences and critics alike. Murphy's stage plays also include *Bailed out!* (2015), *Jack Duggan's War* (2015), *Inside the GPO* (2016), *Haughey/Gregory* (2019), *The Treaty* (2021), *A Day in May (2022)* and *The Asylum Workshop* (2023). All of these are documentary plays about either contemporary Irish politics or Irish political history, incorporating extracts from official documents in their dialogue. From war plays to conflicts involving revolutionaries and politicians, and from disputes between bureaucrats and bankers to clashes between conservatives and LGBT activists, Murphy's theatre exposes the politics of conflict and the mechanisms of power. His political theatre has thus enabled audiences to rework their understanding and appreciation of Irish history through drama.

#ANTIGONE differs from the bulk of Murphy's work in that it is not a stage play and does not depict a historical event *per se*. However, *#ANTIGONE*, like the rest of Murphy's plays, emphasizes the politics of conflict and the mechanisms of power in its portrayal of the Antigone-Creon dispute. Set against the backdrop of the current refugee crisis in Europe and referencing events of the COVID-19 pandemic, Murphy's play, while engaging with Greek tragedy, offers a reframing of recent historical events that provokes insight into current social-political fault lines in Western societies.

This interview explores the enduring relevance of Sophocles' *Antigone* – as adapted by Colin Murphy in the audio play *#ANTIGONE* – with particular emphasis on issues of migration, political polarization and ethics of news coverage. It also examines the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on social life, the arts, and contemporary politics, as well as the possibilities that audio drama has opened up for post-pandemic theatre production.

Gonçalves and Kopschitz (G&K): Colin, thanks for agreeing to talk to us about your adaptation of Sophocles' *Antigone* as radio drama. In your documentary theatre, you have portrayed events in Irish history with care for detail and factual accuracy. Now, in *#ANTIGONE*, you have adapted an ancient classic for contemporary times, touching on issues such as authoritarian and anti-migration tendencies. What is there about the myth of Antigone and the Greek tragedy that you consider relevant for our times?

Colin Murphy (CM): They say a history play is never about history or never only about history. It has to be about today. Similarly, I think if one is producing or adapting one of the classics it has to be about today. It has to feel relevant. You have to make it relevant to the current moment. Particularly Antigone, I think is always relevant. I don't remember when I was first introduced to it. I did a degree in Politics and Philosophy. I was always aware of it as the prototypical political play. One way of framing it is to say it's about the individual versus the state. That is, I mean, a modern way of framing it, but I think it's accurate. So it is, of all the Greek dramas, the one that probably resonates the most with modern politics. As I have ploughed my own furrow writing political drama, Antigone was always there for me as an idea or something of a model. Then, at some point, early on during the pandemic, it struck me. I think it might have been when I was working on a long article, an essay, for the newspaper about some of the historical and cultural resonance of the experience of a pandemic or a plague. As it occurred to me, Antigone, which is in part about the importance of funeral rights and how we honor the dead, which was of course something that became problematic in the site of conflict during COVID, might have particular resonance with that moment.

(G&K): What role does the context of the pandemic of COVID-19 play in *#ANTIGONE*? How do you evaluate the Irish response to the virus? How do you evaluate the response given by other major countries, such as England and the USA?

CM: The other role that the context of the pandemic played was in the practical sense. The Arts Council of Ireland responded to the shutting down of theatres and venues by creating a crisis response grant as a way of funding money to artists who would have otherwise been completely out of work. I applied for one of these grants in order to adapt Antigone and stage a rehearsal that was done online using an alternative to *Zoom*. It was both the thematic catalyst and a provocation for the

project. Through unlocking funding, it was the means by which it could happen. In terms of evaluating the responses, you could obviously write a thesis on that, I think it's complicated. One of the reasons it is so complicated is because I think even the analytical response to the pandemic was often clouded by hysteria and obscured by group thinking. What group thinking said was that Ireland largely did very well and the UK and America, led by populist leaders, did very badly. I think, to the extent that I've looked to the data in a more granular level, I think Ireland reasoned it well, but it's very difficult to parse how well have the other countries done because of the nature of experiential growth and travel. London and New York, as global urban centers, were always likely to get hit more quickly and harder earlier in the pandemic and once that happens the spread can be quite unpredictable and I don't think it's possible to say with the confidence what left liberal critics have said that the impact of the pandemic in those countries was down to Boris Johnson and Donald Trump's responses. One thing that does run contrary to that narrative that is very critical of Johnson and Trump was the British and American success with the vaccines, which was extraordinary and obviously was ultimately transformative. About the Irish narrative of the success of the response here, my feeling was that we tipped the scales too much in the direction of restrictions and weighed freedoms and rights a little too lightly. There is a whole other area of analysis in this.

(G&K): In *#ANTIGONE*, Críon leads a military government that, in a moment of crisis, breaks with constitutional order and restricts the rights of immigrants and refugees. What events of Irish domestic politics and/or of international politics have led you to worry about the fragility of democracy and the current condition of immigrants and refugees in Western societies?

CM: Prior to the pandemic, the great shocks of the previous few years had been the Mediterranean migration crisis provoked largely by the war in Syria, which had a hugely destabilizing effect on European politics. Separate but not unrelated to that, BREXIT and, of course, the election of Donald Trump in 2016. In Ireland, we have been largely inured from the migration crisis and people tended to look on scans at the political effect it was having in Europe, and, really, I thought the only difference was that politically we hadn't had that surge in migration; we had not had small boats landing on our shores – if we had, we would have been likely to have seen similar political effects here. In my late twenties, 25 years ago now, I spent two years working in Angola as aid worker with the Irish NGO called Concern Worldwide. So, I saw, firsthand, something of the nature of state failure, and the consequences of authoritarianism and state and societal collapse. I think I've since then been conscious that our democracies, states and societies are more fragile than most people allow for. Those two separate phenomena that we then lived through of a large-scale migration crisis, itself caused by state collapse, and of a pandemic, which for a moment of start, in a worst-case scenario, looked like

it could also lead to a similar state of collapse. Those things brought that fragility to the fore and made it an obvious thing to explore in drama.

(G&K): How similar is your Antigone to Sophocles' Antigone? How similar is your Críon to Sophocles' Creon? How about the nature of their conflict? What in Sophocles' *Antigone* did you consider important to preserve in *#ANTIGONE*? And what didn't you consider important?

CM: The obvious difference is gender. I didn't start out with the idea to make Creon female, but at some point, while I was writing it, Derbhle Crotty, the actress, just popped into my head and I had an image of her as Críon. I had seen her play the part of one of the heroines in Druid's version of Shakespeare's history plays. Perhaps it was the image of that, but anyway, the idea just occurred to me and I was interested in her as Críon. Whereas I thought it through, I liked the idea of exploring what effect that would have in the play. I had some discussions with Conall Morisson, who has written his own version of *Antigone*, and he was quite opposed to the idea and felt that the gender conflict was an important part of the conflict between Creon and Antigone. It's not so much that I refute that. I thought the play would be robust to losing that aspect of it, and that in doing so I might be able to uncover other aspects of the play that potentially would be interesting. I was always interested in viewing Creon with empathy, as somebody who is genuinely trying to do the best for Thebes and is led to his harshness out of necessity. Casting the role as female, more specifically casting Derbhle Crotty in that role, I thought it would really help to get under the skin of that character. And the other change I made in the end was, instead of Creon being struck with remorse, to have her denying her responsibility and being provoked to a full embrace of authoritarianism. I thought that I was looking for a twist and for something to keep the play surprising and challenging to my audience. That was why I did that.

(G&K): Were there any previous adaptations of *Antigone* in Irish drama that had an impact on you? Did any of them play a role when you wrote your own version of *Antigone*? How so?

CM: I didn't particularly look at previous Irish adaptations of *Antigone*. I looked at a number of adaptations, but I largely stuck to the very straight ones, the classical translations. I wanted to work from texts as closely to the original as possible, not being too influenced by contemporary versions or other Irish versions.

(G&K): Does the character Theo Elder play the role of the chorus in your play? For you, what is the importance of the chorus in Greek tragedy?

CM: Yes, Theo Elder and Professor Choragos are the chorus. I think, in scriptural terms, the chorus can often seem very obscure today as in originally written, but

I was initially struggling to find a way into translating or adapting the chorus and I thought about first of the principles and what the role of chorus is: to mediate the drama for the audience; to speak to and to warn the characters. I found a close analogy with the media. So, I thought "well, part of the chorus is set in a world I know very well – a news studio." That helped me find a fatality in it, but then also, when I looked into the actual text of the choruses' speeches in *Antigone*, when I dug down deeper to get a closer look, there was sometimes an uncanny resonance, partly because of the nature of the chorus' role in prophecy and judgment, and those are so much in the heart of the news media and punditry works.

(G&K): When I listened to *#ANTIGONE*, I had a feeling that the story was convincing and sounded contemporary. Did you wish to make a play that sounded convincing and contemporary? Were there any techniques that you applied in your play to attain this?

CM: Yes, absolutely. My whole ambition was to make it contemporary and convincing. I wanted to write as much as possible in the language of contemporary politics and media, and to have people surprised they realized they listened to an age-old story. I wanted people to feel as if they were listening: if you think of that great radio drama classic, Orson Welles' *The War of the Worlds*, an adaptation of H. G. Wells' story, which he did notoriously as if it were a breaking news report. I wanted to have that effect to the people. Turn this on and it would immediately sound like the words they're used to hearing come from the radio of political leadership mediated by punditry and commentary. There were few techniques, I suppose, that I applied to attain this: I had Críon's public facing speeches as if they were addressed to the nation; I had the reporters at the news conferences handing Críon with questions; I had the anchor and the professor in the studio commenting on them.

(G&K): Why did you choose to tell a new story of *Antigone* in audio drama?

CM: That was partly opportunism. To be a working playwright you have to be opportunistic; you have to be able to spot and seize opportunities to get your work made. After I got a grant to do an online/*Zoom* version of Antigone, I then brought the idea to one of the radio stations and through them got funding from The Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, which is a fund for independent radio production. So that was simply a way to get a second opportunity to do the play. But, again: one of my first jobs in journalism was in a radio station and radio is hugely important in Ireland in disseminating politics and news. So, it felt for me a very natural feat to tell the story through radio.

(G&K): Tim Crook (1999, 66), in *Radio Drama: Theory and Practice*, writes about radio's imaginative spectacle and the active participation of the listener in it. For Crook, audio drama presents "a powerful dynamic: by giving the

listener the opportunity to create an individual filmic narrative and experience through the imaginative spectacle the listener becomes an active participant and 'dramaturgist' in the process of communication and listening." Do you think this art form contributes to making Greek tragedy and the pandemic experience even more convincing and compelling? How so?

CM: What Tim says is obviously the essence of radio drama as opposed to stage or drama staged screen. The listeners are doing more images of work and, therefore, more individualistic work in interpreting the drama. It is one of the exciting things about it. You know, in a more mundane level, you can take it with you in your earphones. That's very compelling for a writer: you know, to make something that people don't need to come together – they can even sit down at the couch to experience it; they can hear it on the train or on the commute; or while walking the dog. There is an intimacy about that. You know, I consume a lot of podcasts mostly on politics and history, so I'm very attracted to the idea of writing for that form.

(G&K): During the pandemic of COVID-19, there were moments in which people could not go anywhere, including to the theatre. What impact do you think the pandemic had on the arts, especially theatre? Do you think that audio drama was then an interesting alternative? What role do you think audio drama can play in Irish post-pandemic theatre?

CM: The pandemic closes down initially and, because of that, ends up being more protracted than we had anticipated. Then audiences were slow to come back and, in some cases, they didn't. So, there is a huge very literal and visceral impact. At the same time, it was creatively a provocation or a catalyst. It forced the funding agencies and producers, and also us as artists, to think about alternative ways of making drama and bringing drama to people, including the use of screen to present staged drama, something that happened, as a matter of course, in the sixties and seventies but had grown out of fashion. For the time, that was all quite exciting, and one of the positive legacies has been that we're now, as a matter of course, budgeting to film our theatre productions. That's helpful and just exciting to reach somewhat, even if it's not obviously the same. But the other impact was that I found the experience of the pandemic very stimulating creatively because I think societal stresses are creatively stimulating; the kind of things that we respond to that are instinctively very political. I find it very provocative. So, for me, it was quite a rich time in terms of thought. I think audio drama, generally, I mean, is a little neglected. It hasn't had the podcast boom that talk radio has had. At an earlier stage in the podcasting form, I thought that audio drama might experience something a little like the boom of what we call the "box set television" because it is a terrific form. The question is always "how do you get to an audience"? RTÉ, our national broadcaster, has a terrific drama department, *Drama On One*, but they don't get huge exposure

in terms of slots on live radio. I suppose I'll be hopeful that in the podcasting online space there is room for more growth.

(G&K): Jane Montgomery Griffiths (2020, 82), in "Adapting the classics: pall-bearers, mourners and resurrectionists," article published in the collection *Adapting Translation for the Stage*, herself an author of another recent adaptation of Sophocles' *Antigone*, has written that the adapter's duty of care consists in translating "Greek drama's communal responsibility more experientially than the slavishly faithful translation," so as to "resurrect a text that never was but will always be about to be." What is your take on this? For you, what would be the duty of care of the adapter of ancient classics?

CM: I love what Jane says. I wasn't familiar with this, but I agree absolutely. Just a first thing that I wanted to say earlier, but it may fit here, which is to adapt a classic (I've also done a very playful version of *Hamlet* for radio, called *Hamlet Prince of Derry* [2020]) is an opportunity to co-write with a genius. It's like coming into the office every day and sitting down with Shakespeare or Sophocles and asking them what they do overnight; and having the temerity, the cheek, the impertinence to take what they have done and see if I can refine or rework it for my audience and my concerns. That's the real joy of it. That's the first instance, the reason for me as a writer to do this is to get a chance to work closely with extraordinary playwrights. But I'm a contemporary writer: I don't have a duty of care to them; I have a duty of care to my audience; I have my own integrity. I really think that, when it comes to these texts, I have total freedom. The great joy is that they are robust. They are going to survive. My versions are not going to survive. Therefore, if anything, they are strengthened by being taken apart or teased out anew each time by contemporary writers and adapters.

Note

1. Link to #ANTIGONE: https://www.goloudplayer.com/episodes/antigone-Y2E2ZDMwMzc5NzUyNmRkN2I1MDU4NTJjM2QxNDQ1MjM=.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT: Data related to this interview will be available upon request to the corresponding author.

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Submission date: 07/03/2025
Acceptance date: 04/08/2025

Section Editor: Magali Sperling Beck