

Griselda Gambaro

History of a Frustrated Adaptation

*Antigone Furiosa*¹ started from a project - which I immediately joined - involving two women, the director Laura Yusem and the dancer Bettina Muraña, to create a performance free of commercial pressure. This was a wish that emerged with huge passion because, of course, the basic idea was to protect the work from suffering the obligation of having to be commercially successful during rehearsals and later, during the run. Up to that point we had debated the freely imagined concept of an artistic product, and that red light that financial producers turn on to signal that the investment should turn a profit, that theatre is just another consumer product. This concept of unfailingly profitable cultural merchandise ends up blurring relationships, the intensity of each performance, the destiny itself of theatre. The obligation of commercial success oppresses, consumes and bastardises the best product, at least according to our own experience in Argentina.

So with Laura Yusem, who had directed my most recent plays, we undid the way: we decided not to go to financial producers nor accept the minor impositions of the official theatres; we chose to follow the direction of a theatre that is self-financed, has limited resources and works with little-known actors in what we call co-operatives; a system that assigns each member of the team, as the only pay, a percentage of the small or large box office takings. Of course, from the start we thought of a reduced cast and a single set, easily transportable and adaptable to the characteristics of any available space.

But Laura Yusem had in mind a particular play, the choice of which seemed to conspire against these desires and limitations - the staging of Sophocles' *Antigone*. It is evident that the staging demands of this play are huge, not only from an aesthetic point of view; but in our case, adapting the original text to the working conditions was obligatory.

I must confess that I rarely work on adaptations, but Laura Yusem and I had shared several premieres and this long-standing relationship and collaboration between her

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staging and my dramaturgy had resulted in a mutual appreciation and understanding that went beyond theatre. So I listened to her proposal and observed some improvisations on Antigone by the dancer Bettina Muraña, who would play her first role as an actress.

As we know, theatre has its feet firmly on the ground; this is a necessary condition. So Laura Yusem's proposal, with her feet firmly on the ground, was to adapt the text keeping in mind the extremely limited financial resources we would have, a reduced cast and a transportable set. Laura Yusem had already imagined a cage with iron bars in the shape of a cut-off pyramid, which should establish Antigone's space, and two coffee tables on a chequered floor, to establish the separation of the Chorus outside.

"The lack of means creates the style", said Braque, and the lack of means together with the presence of a protagonist interpreter whose greatest expression, due to her dance background, resided in the gestual, determined the style that this adaptation of *Antigone* should have.

When I read Sophocles' text again and tried a first draft, I realised it was impossible for several reasons; firstly because of the necessity for *simplification* when considering the performance. I could not bring Sophocles onto my side, rather it was Sophocles who carried me with him, mute. It was impossible to touch this perfect play, even if I limited myself to eliminating characters, lines of dialogue or several sequences of the action. So, after a frustrated attempt at adaptation, and timid approaches to modernise, I understood this way couldn't be more wrong. I closed the book and allowed Sophocles to speak from afar, as if a voice coming from the other side of the mountain.

With great plays, not even the worst adaptation can affect the invulnerability of

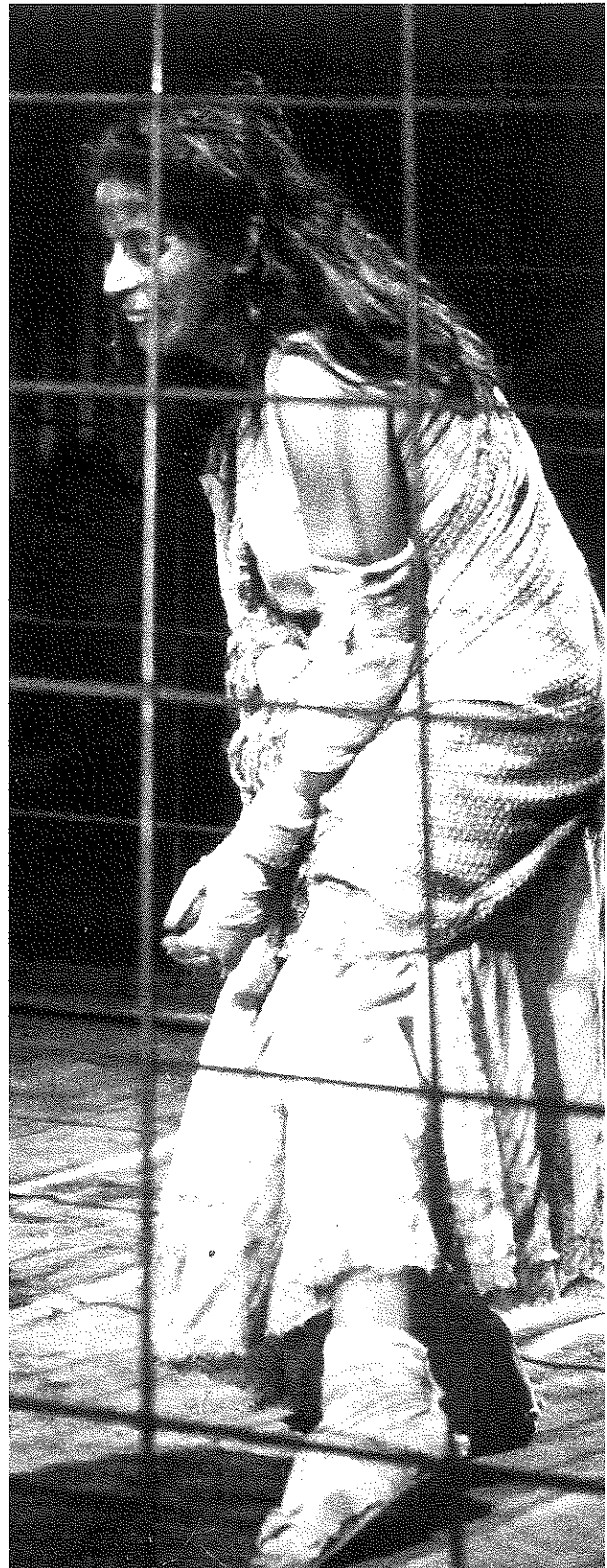
the original text; at any rate I would not "adapt" *Antigone*. The need to create an autonomous play was imposed upon me; one that would not literally appropriate Sophocles' situations, language, thought and vision of the world. The method would be to extract from *Antigone* - beyond respect, the fear of quotes and of comparisons - what was essential for me to elaborate my own text, my contemporary vision of *Antigone*. For my part I, too, accepted a series of limitations and started to work from them. That is, to take advantage of what I didn't have, of what I didn't know. I do not possess a great classical background; I had not read Greek literature extensively; I had to work from translations and I did not embark on research to find ones different from those I had at hand: one in Spanish, that sounded terrible, and one in French with notes, from 1869, by a Mr. Artaud - prophetic name - that seemed good to me, and which finally I used. I reacted like this, not out of laziness, but out of an intuitive acceptance of a peripheral culture that is mine, and that has neither the time nor the economic possibilities to have the two years Peter Stein and his team have to study Euripides and his era in order to stage *The Oresteia*. And, also, because what works for me is never the detailed knowledge, the exhaustive information, but, on the contrary, a measured, even vague, information - the memory. More than with the knowledge in itself, I work with the emotion that this knowledge leaves in me and this emotion is a motor that carries the imagination so as to fill in the holes - what I know that "I don't know" - with my own inventiveness.

So, moved by the memory of what I had read and by Antigone's tradition in Western culture, I only resorted to Sophocles when I needed a fragment of his text in a precise circumstance within my own version.

In the writing of the play that, as a whole, functions as a kind of a collage over the unifying base of my own language, there are three levels: Antigone's, Creon's and the Chorus'. The last is close to my contemporary daily life and is, at times, almost cynical. Listening to Sophocles from afar allowed me a great freedom in forming the verbal structure of the piece: not only is Sophocles present, but also Shakespeare, with Ophelia's songs and a final quote taken from *Hamlet*; there are quotes from Ruben Darío, hidden allusions to Faulkner, Kierkegaard ... And all of this allowed me to suggest, on a verbal level, other ruptures in the time of the story, placing it in a frame where all times are possible.

And it is important to point out that in the previous process, I knew that what was separating me from Sophocles was not only the exhaustive knowledge, even if forcefully acquired, of the culture of his times, but also my history and gender. I would write with the voice of a Latin American, Argentinean woman, and with the voices of other women, who in Argentina had tried to do the same as Antigone: disobey the ominous power and bury their dead. I refer to the Mothers of Plaza de Mayo, those women who unceasingly demanded their abducted and disappeared children during the military dictatorship of 1976-83. Most of them were threatened, suffered imprisonment and some, like Antigone, paid for their disobedience with their lives.

Antígona Furiosa was meant to have a reduced cast, and it did; only three characters appeared - Antigone and two men of the Chorus, one of whom, using a carcass, represented Creon. As opposed to responding to the classical structure of a theatre play, *Antígona Furiosa* refers to the form of a *cantata* in its structure in contrast to that of a classical play, in that, in our rendition, one knows the outcome of the plot from the



Bettina Muraña in *Antígona Furiosa*.
Photo: Graciela Yentel

very beginning. It is Antigone, hanged in her first appearance, who resurrects in order to tell her story, and this initial death makes, in a certain way, Creon's action useless. Antigone was conceived, as I said, for an actress with a dance background, and this fact imposed a meaning on the play, without me being aware of it. Imprisoned for her disobedience, Antigone - a woman's body caught in a cage - nevertheless owned the expression and freedom of her body; and so it was clearly visible, particularly in the staging, that Antigone not only disobeys Creon's cutting edict in reference to funeral rites but also, by slowing down her movements, she freed herself from other layers of repression: the repression of memory, of being a woman, of justice.

Finally, I think the selection of Antigone as a base for a new text was due to the greatness of the character, but most of all because of a similarity in experience. Antigone belongs to us through a painfully acquired right. Antigone has lived and still lives in Argentina, a country that repeated with an undisguisable parallel, the ancient history of a single-minded power that exacts revenge, assassinates those it considers enemies and denies them not only burial and a grave, but also the right to collective memory.

For myself, I realised that I finished telling the story, not so much of this Antigone about whom so much has been written, but of those Antigones that every

Thursday, during the harshest years of military dictatorship, covered with white head-scarves and bearing the photos of their children, went around the square, the Plaza de Mayo, overcome with fear and stronger than the fear, to demand justice - with fury - and to bury Polynices.

Translated from Spanish by Roxana Avila and
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1. *Antígona Furiosa* (Furious Antigone), a play by Griselda Gambaro, opened in September 1986 at the Goethe Institute of Buenos Aires. In its stage version, it was presented for three seasons in different theatres. Published in *Teatro*, Volume n. 3, Ediciones de la Flor, Buenos Aires; and in English, in *Three Plays*, Northeastern University Press.

GRISELDA GAMBARO (Argentina) is a novelist and dramaturg and her plays have been staged in America and Europe. She has published six volumes which have been translated in twelve languages. Her latest work *Es necesario entender un poco* received the National Theatre Award and the María Guerrero Award. In March 1998 a complete edition of her short stories will be published under the title *Lo mejor que se tiene*.