

“Cognizant of the Past, While Trying to Invent the Future”: Conversations with Aidan Mathews and Michael Scott

Richard Jones

Between 1928 and 1936, two leading Irish poets produced and published three versions of classical Greek tragedies: W. B. Yeats re-wrote Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* in 1928 and *Oedipus at Colonus* in 1934; Louis MacNeice adapted Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* in 1936. One might have thought that such productions would signal a flurry of interest in classical adaptations in Ireland. Such did not occur, however. In fact, it was not until over forty years later that another Irish play called directly upon Greek tragedy for its inspiration. Even that work, Brian Friel's *Living Quarters: After Hippolytus* (1977), bears little enough resemblance to the Euripidean story that, without the subtitle as a guide, an audience member could be forgiven missing the connection altogether.

In 1984, however, a trend did develop. No fewer than three Irish poet-playwrights, two (Aidan Mathews and Brendan Kennelly) from the Republic and one (Tom Paulin) from the North, wrote versions of Sophocles' *Antigone*. Since that time, all three have written other classical adaptations, and they have been joined by Derek Mahon, Frank McGuinness, Michael Scott, Colin Teevan, and, most famously, Seamus Heaney. Classicist Desmond Egan has published a straightforward translation of *Medea*, and director Deborah Warner and actress Fiona Shaw joined forces for an acclaimed production of Sophocles' *Electra*. In other words, after nearly a half century with no Irish versions of Greek tragedy, the last fifteen years or so have seen an average of an adaptation per year.

The first of these plays to be produced was Aidan Mathews's *Antigone*, directed by Michael Scott at the Project Arts Theatre in Dublin in August, 1984. Self-consciously a “dialogue with *Antigone*” rather than necessarily a version of it, this play nonetheless presents the characters and the basic story-line of the Sophoclean play. In this sense, its relationship to Sophocles is rather like that of Euripides, whose version of *Electra*, for example, tells the same basic story as Sophocles does, but the two plays would never be confused for one another. The

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setting is post-apocalyptic, or, perhaps more precisely, post-Holocaust, dotted with cultural symbols: a running river, an abandoned car, a *Godot*-like tree. Sophocles' Eteocles is now Peteocles, and the citizens have taken to scrawling the letter "P" on walls as a form of protest: an illegal one, at that. Heman (note the spelling!) is dressed like an SS officer. In our first glimpse of the solitary male Chorus, he scrambles—unsuccessfully—to find his identity papers. There is a meta-theatrical quality throughout the play, especially early on, when the actor playing Ismene wants the chance to play Antigone for a change. The first act ends as Creon intones the words of the proposed Criminal Justice Bill, which gave Irish police unprecedented authority to hold suspects without trial. Antigone is ultimately drugged and abducted rather than killed. This is, then, very much a postmodern *Antigone*, but it manages to retain much of the sense of the original.

In December, 1997, I had the opportunity to interview the two people most responsible for this production, Aidan Mathews and Michael Scott. Mathews has written several plays in addition to the *Antigone*, including *The Diamond Body*, *Exit/Entrance*, an adaptation of *The House of Bernada Alba*, and *Trojans* (mentioned briefly in the excerpts below, based on *The Trojan Women*, and set in Berlin in 1945). He has also published three volumes of poetry, a novel, and two collections of short stories. Scott is an independent theatre producer and director. As Artistic Director of the Project Arts Theatre, he directed *Bent*, *Trafford Tanzi*, and *The Normal Heart*, as well as *Antigone*. Other productions include *The Rocky Horror Show*, the *Cuchulain Cycle* of plays by W. B. Yeats, and his own adaptations of *Dracula*, *Agamemnon*, and *The Hostage* (with Niall Tobin).

At first glance they are unlikely partners: Scott exudes self-confidence and has a touch of the flamboyant; Mathews is soft-spoken almost to the point of inaudibility. But both, as the following excerpts suggest, are possessed of keen intellect and a passion for both the theatre and the world of ideas. Both men were interviewed in Dublin: Scott on December 12, Mathews on December 14. It seems to make more sense, however, to present the conversation with Mathews first. These interviews suggest something of the goals and processes of the *Antigone* project from the perspectives of playwright and director, as well as providing an insight into this unique collaborative effort. Both transcripts have been edited for length, clarity, and occasionally because background noise made the tape recording unintelligible.

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RJ: I'd like you to talk a little bit about the process of writing the *Antigone* and *Trojans*, because they both are so visual, and one doesn't often find that in plays, especially plays written by people who have literary backgrounds

outside the theatre. Did you start with the visual images, did you start with an idea? Why choose those plays to adapt?

AM: I started the *Antigone* when I was a child, in a sense, because I read Greek at school. I started Greek at school, and I developed a great interest in the classic plays, though we didn't undertake *Antigone*. We worked mainly with Euripides. When I went to Stanford, I studied under French philosopher René Girard [to whom *Antigone* is dedicated], who seemed to me to have a new teaching, which he offered with authority. He unrolled the scrolls for me. I was quite captivated by his reading of many different myths, and of many different literary texts. And so, when, in the early '80s, I was invited to translate the *Antigone*, I thought I would cheat on the commission, and use the opportunity to converse with the play as best I could. And what interested me most about it at the time was its name, the name "Antigone," which means "non-violence," but which also means "anti-theatre," insofar as the word *agon* denotes an actor, an agent on the stage. And it interested me that such a play existed. I knew by hearsay that Simone Weil had spoken of the *Antigone* as the Fifth Gospel, and anything she said was worth pondering. And it was in light of those influences and those borrowings from other mentors and tormentors that I read the play and tried to write about it in fashion which would disclose, humorously, I hoped, its interest in non-violence and its suspicion of representation itself.

RJ: . . . which accounts for both the violence we do see in the play, and the meta-theatrical quality of the two actresses both wanting to play Antigone, and the Narrator-cum-Chorus character . . .

AM: That's right.

RJ: How did the process work, from your perspective?

AM: It worked in fits and starts. I was working with Michael, and with a number of the actors and actresses who [were] young at the time, middle to late twenties, some in their early thirties. They were an ensemble who'd worked together frequently. So I had the advantage and the gift and the blessing of working with persons who were very much at ease with each other in an experimental space called the Project. Michael himself was a very lenient director who gave me heart, gave me or headway, so that it was evident within a short time of his asking me to undertake the piece that it would not be in any form or fashion a transcript of the text, but a dialogue

with it: because the play itself is a dialogue, it seems to me, between the two great traditions of the Eastern Mediterranean. It's a dialogue between Athens and Jerusalem. It's a dialogue between, if you like, the Periclean intellectuals and the Jewish prophets, in the sense that it is a dialogue between two ways of telling a story. The story that Creon wants to tell is a Greek story, it's a story of founding and of foundations, it's an *ab urbe condita* story of how a civilization got kick-started. And in order to narrate the origins of a social order, it's important to Creon that that narration inscribe a moral system, that is to say a binary system. So one brother is nominated as hero and demi-god, and another brother is nominated as villain and ogre. One is Romulus and one is Remus; one is Cain and one is Abel; one is black sheep, one is a Lamb of God. That's the way the mind thinks; that's the way the Enlightenment mind thinks. And Antigone [counters] this because she's Jewish, because she's a Semite, and she thinks in different terms; her anthropology is completely different. She says, "No. No, this is not adequate. We can't found a social order on the basis of these distinctions. We have to think more generously, more inclusively, more compassionately. We have to make room in our stories, and our theologies, for a much more Creole, a much more mulatto, a much more piebald understanding of things." She's a deconstructionist, in effect, two thousand years before her time—two thousand five hundred years.

RJ: The particular manifestation of this blurring and distinction between the two brothers that you chose: the letter "P" and the elimination, the airbrushing of one of the brothers out of the official photographs . . . are there special ideas, things that led you in that direction, to use those images?

AM: The airbrushing and the "P's" . . . No, I think they're so endemic to the socio-politics of the world in which I live. They're part of the vocabulary of institutional violence everywhere. They're borrowings, in that sense: they're merely echoes of what exists. And indeed, there's a more explicit antecedent for the hand, because there is a famous photograph of Trotsky in which he has been removed, if you look over from the platform. And the "P" is used because in this country, in Ireland, "P," which is often an abbreviated form of a first name, has a rather derogatory or foolish ring to it. But more than that, of course, it really represents, as Peteocles and Polynices, it really represents the absolute identity of persons who believe themselves to be rivals. And this is a straight debt to Girard, because all my life I have been very bewildered by the close relations which appear to exist between amity and enmity. And it was more and more apparent in my own life, because of

the dimension in my own life, the vicious dimension in my own life, I was more and more aware that the relationship between them is complex. The Yiddish proverb says, "When chimney sweep and baker fight, baker turns black and sweep turns white." And Girard, of course, being a genius, and one of the great thinkers of the century, has reflected very profoundly on the intimacy between rivals, and on the dialectic of desire and resentment which links them—attraction, repulsion—so that's there in a very straightforward fashion, the image of two brothers who are deemed to be opposites but who are in fact doubles. Meyerhold did a treatment of *Hamlet*, away in the camps, and my information is that it wasn't meant for his lifetime, a posthumous production, in which *inter alia* Hamlet in the boudoir with Gertrude, instead of showing her a signet ring with his father's image on it, goes to the wall, the tapestry wall of her bedroom, and he rolls down the rolled image of the father, and then side-by-side with it an image of the uncle, and he speaks the celebrated lines to those larger images. And of course they're identical images: there's no difference between Claudius and the father, which I think, in terms of political standing, a point of the utmost clarity.

RJ: It seems to me not only that the conflation of the brothers, but that in the meta-theatricality of the play we get an integration of the sisters as well: that the actor of Ismene wants to be the actor of Antigone and those two characters merge as well: so that we have, in the case of the brothers, an artificial distinction in terms of public persona, and in the sisters we have an artificial distinction in terms of private persona.

AM: Yes, you're absolutely right, of course, it's very true. It's true not only in the performative sense, that our personas and personalities are variable guises which we don and doff at will, but it's also true in the sense that the Western tradition beginning with Plato asserts that "I" affirms the ego, puts forward a sort of dogged *cogito* as an image of authenticity. The theatre rests upon difference, and the opposition of different forces, but the reality is that in human life we are much more alike than unlike, and that our assumption of our own likeness is a counterfeit, a pretense. So the very kind of many-sidedness that theatre postulates is in some sense untrue. The self of which we boast does not exist. We are many selves, and that's both a strength and a weakness. Insofar as Antigone is many selves, she's unaware of it: she's has turned her virtue into virtuosity. She has turned her solitariness into victimhood, and her victimhood into narcissism. And Ismene intuits this. An egotist, Ismene intuits that, and wants to appropriate

it for herself. Because in some sense Antigone is at risk of becoming involved in the culture of victimhood, of the Judeo-Christian outsider, of Stephen shot through with stones, of Sebastian shot through with arrows, of the rather narcissistic Christ-like figure who imagines himself as authentic precisely because rejected with violence, set apart, thrown at, ostracized. It's the final twist in the tale, do you know? Antigone is always at risk of becoming in some sense . . . devoured by her own virtues, in much the way, I think, that it's possible for liberalism in our day, or for dissent *per se* to become officious and self-adoring, really because it derives a bogus kind of credential from the Judeo-Christian tradition of the outsider, the prophet. So, yes, there is a trading of roles and costumes, and presences and performers: in other words, in egoistic terms, and in the terms of George Steiner, it's very hard to determine any real presence at all.

RJ: Your *Antigone* happened in the same year as Kennelly's, and the same year as Paulin's: and this after a period in which, with the exception of Friel's *Living Quarters*, which is sub-titled *After Hippolytus*, but there's precious little resemblance to *Hippolytus* except in the broadest outline of narrative. With the exception of that play, there's really nothing noteworthy in terms of Irish adaptations of Greek tragedy back as far as MacNeice. Was something in the water in 1984? What happened? They're very different plays, and yet we have this impulse. And since then, we have . . .

AM: . . . a great many.

RJ: A great many: all three of you have subsequently written other plays, and Seamus Heaney, and Colin Teevan, and Derek Mahon . . .

AM: Yes. It's very hard to say. It's a culture in which the teaching of the classics, and I mean both the language and the stories, persisted rather longer than in certain other states, but it's now largely gone, too. It may be the case that many of those persons might have undertaken scriptural stories at an earlier point, because in the time of the Revival, and through the '20s, '30s, '40s, '50s, many persons working in different forms—and playwrights—did loot the Hebrew Bible and the Christian scriptures in search of paradigms and analogies. And it may be the case that there's a certain reticence at the moment of doing that, and that classic plays offer a freedom, if you will, from any sort of sectarian resonance. I'm not sure. It's very hard to account for these things. And then, the inflections and emphases in the translations are quite different. Paulin's *Antigone* [the play is titled *The Riot Act*] derives

from long-standing experience of a very powerless statelet, and it has a fierce and immediate local application which is very powerful. I think that just as the Greeks themselves very frequently used the myths and legends of the Trojan conflict in order to expound and eliminate temporary crises, so the whole Greek deposit, if you will, primarily the tragedians, though also on occasion Aristophanes, too, offers a comparable kind of canon, and is used in rather the same hard-headed fashion. It's a kind of Sears and Roebuck catalog, if you like. It provides an acoustic, much as the theatres themselves provide an acoustic in which it is possible to hear pennies drop, from great distances: so the Greek texts provide wonderful acoustical spaces in which to say quite local and vernacular things, and they carry because of the acoustic provided by the space, the source text. And it's interesting that *Antigone* was the one which attracted more courtiers than any other play at the time, I think. And it's interesting that throughout, whether it be *Antigone* or the *Philoctetes* or *Bacchae*, *Trojans*, that the plays that have been translated, or transposed, the plays that have been the green grass for us to sit on, have tended to be plays which either have a Judeo-Christian element in some sense, that is a wind from Galilee blowing through it, with an interest in women, there's an interest in victimage and victimhood, there's an interest in innocence and guilt. I know all these things are universal, and not peculiar to the [Jewish] faith, but it is interesting that, in the main, the plays which have attracted Irish practitioners are plays which have a Jewish perspective, if you will, on minorities, on the ostracized and the martyred.

RJ: Certainly, one thing that's very interesting, it seems to me, about the plays that are being written in Ireland, both in the North and in the Republic, on Greek themes in the past fifteen years, is that the protagonist figures tend to be, almost without exception, either female or foreign or both, in the case of Medea, in the case of Hecuba. Even [in] Paulin's *Seize the Fire*, we have Prometheus, who is in some ways the ultimate outsider. And so there does seem to be that connection. When you talked about Paulin's *Riot Act*, you talked about the use of very local vernacular. Your narrator figure in *Antigone* is very Dublin, the other characters less so. Is this, then, a play which requires a Dublin, or at least an Irish audience, or is this a play that can be taken outside of that localized setting? I'm not suggesting that it doesn't *belong* in Ireland, but does it belong elsewhere? If I were to do a production of this in Kansas—I'm not suggesting that that audience would get the *same* thing that a Dublin audience would—but would they get *something*?

AM: I think so, very much. The Chorus is written, as best I can, given my own limitations as someone born into the privilege of a settled and prosperous middle-class family, it's an attempt to write the protean of the street. And whether I've done so or not, I can't honestly say: I hope I have. I certainly wrote him that way because I wanted the Chorus to reflect, as is so often the case in the Greek canon, of course: he's captive, or under restraint, or under obligation. And so I wanted some kind of proletarian cadence in the speech of the Chorus, as someone who would critique the pretentious discourse of the middle-class characters, whose adjectivity is itself a suggestion that they have never starved: this language is so fat, bloated.

RJ: If this play were to be produced elsewhere, would you want that narrator character to remain Dublinesque, or would you want a director to say, "I'm doing this production in the American South; we'll [use that vernacular]."

AM: Oh, yes. Oh, very much so. And not, I hope, for any reason of decor, because in one's discourse one has to try to preserve the connection between the mouth and the anus, through the gut, do you know? Because the danger of all discourse is that it forgets the silences and the aphasia in which it is rooted, because suffering's in all of us, first and foremost. If the heart of experience is suffering, the heart of suffering is silence. And you have to keep a connection. I think if there's a error—and there are errors everywhere, of course—the speech of the Chorus suggests a kind of levity or mirth which isn't there. It is in fact a frantic phonetic, almost psychotic talking to oneself. It's a chattering of the teeth, do you know?

RJ: Absolutely. The Chorus figure in this play is more tragic because he is—comic is not the word, but—sardonic. Certainly in this play, and even more so in *Trojans*, we get this connection to Nazi Germany and to Hitlerian and World War II images: the Heman seems to be a member of the SS. Is this just an area of particular fascination for you, or is there some sort of connection that you see between that period and that mentality and contemporary life? It strikes me as interesting that you would use that general idea in two different plays on Greek themes.

AM: I think it's largely because I'm the Catholic nationalist middle-class child of parents who . . . [The interview is interrupted briefly at this point] I was born in '56, ten or eleven years after the war. My parents were married in '42 during the battle of Tobruk. And the neutrality of the Irish state during the war was in some sense a prophylactic measure which protected us from

experiencing it first-hand, the catastrophic suffering of the Second War. I was brought up in the '50s and '60s to look upon it with a very Euro-centric point of view, to see Athens and Jerusalem and Rome as the coordinates, to see the Mediterranean *as* the medi-terranean, the "middle of the earth," to see Europe as in some sense the *omphalos* of the planet, and to see everything else as derivative from it in some cultural or economic way, and to have a very expansionist and rather imperialistic sense of the march of Christianity to East and West. And so, as I grew up, I gradually became aware [that] the whole of the Greco-Roman Judeo-Christian enterprise culminated in the Greco-German culture of the eighteenth and nineteenth century that gave rise to Fascism, and that in fact the whole of the Christian enterprise culminated in the Christian genocide of the Jews, and that this was in no sense limited to psychopaths from Bavaria and Prussia, that it was an undertaking into which, in one way or another, the whole of Europe entered, and with which the entirety of Europe was complicit. And that's a problem, obviously, for me as a middle-aged man who is a European and a Christian. It's a practical problem in the sense that everything I believe in, and everything I cherish, and everything I would like to transmit to my children has been compromised to the point of bankruptcy within my parents' lifetime.

[The next two paragraphs are Mathews's responses to questions specifically about *Trojans*. They are included here because they relate to *Antigone* as well.]

A.M. I think theologically we're ready nowadays to talk about the ordinariness of the human being insofar as that ordinariness manifests itself in goodness, but we're still not prepared to talk about the ordinariness of our sins. We talk about the banality because that's rather reproofing and derogatory. I'm fascinated by the extent to which human beings are ordinary, both in their virtues and in their vices. I'm fascinated by the way in which human beings can be saved or redeemed by their vices and in which they can be destroyed by their virtues. And I'm fascinated by the incoherence of persons who become icons of virtue or of vice. I feel it's interesting to try to represent that ordinariness and the incoherence of that ordinariness without becoming incoherent or ordinary: and that's the trick.

We appear, I appear, as I get older and older, to become more and more alarmed by my own capacities for trespass and transgression, more and more in sympathy with the great line of Pirandello, which I've kept over my desk for a time. He wrote in his diary, at exactly my age, forty-one, "Someone

called Luigi Pirandello is living my life, and I do not have the first idea who he is." [Both laugh.]

RJ: I love Pirandello! Do you have any other projects in the works, ideas for future plays, on Greek themes or otherwise?

AM: I do, yes. I have notes for two plays. I have notes for *Oedipus at Colonus*; it's set in '56 before the Hungarian uprising. It's set at a check-point. And the third in that kind of trilogy or triptych is Aristophanes' *Peace*, which is set in Moscow during the Cuban missile crisis. And the three, then, *Trojans*, *Oedipus* and *Peace* will make a trinity of plays which will move from Berlin in '45 to Hungary '56, primarily concerned with East European Jews, who resisted Hitler and their plight and their frustrations. These were persons, some of whom, in Czechoslovakia particularly, were interred in the same prisons by wardens in different uniforms over a ten-year period. They were failed by two Messiahs. Who were left a truly God-forsaken world because all the flags turned into body-bags. And in Aristophanes' *Peace*, which is a very grim play, but very fun, moves from Budapest, the divided city, to the Soviet Union in '62 . . . so I hope they will companion each other as a trio. In practical terms they visualize the same situations, the same gifts, the same talents of the actors.

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RJ: Could you tell me a little about the genesis of the *Antigone*?

MS: Well, the *Antigone* came from two things. I was running a theatre company at the Project Arts Centre in 1983-1984. I had been talking for a number of years previously, four, maybe, with designer Bronwen Casson about doing a version of *Antigone* based on a series of visuals which she had. We knew we had visuals, and we didn't have quite the process to write a text. And I said, "Oh, we'll cobble a text together." I'd already done a production of the Anouilh *Antigone* very successfully. And I kept saying, "I don't want to do Anouilh again. It doesn't quite fit what we have visually, and we have an interesting idea of a very decayed city; we have photographs of *Antigone* in post-war Berlin, basically. And we conceived an idea of doing a kind of a production which was about people living in tents, and where the background was war, basically: the aftermath of a major war. We had a huge production book of visuals. And in the Project I had a group of actors, and I said, "OK, let's now do *Antigone*; I really want to do this." I had been talking to Aidan

and he said he'd like to do a version of *Antigone*, and I said, "well, let's put the whole thing together." Bronwen and I had a scenario of a certain number of ideas, and talked through things with Aidan. I can't remember if it was Bronwen or myself or Aidan came up with the idea of changing the letter "P" to being a crime. But we also came up with the idea of the Criminal Justice Bill, which was being passed at the time. We decided it would be quite intriguing to put it into Creon's text at the beginning of the play.

RJ: What exactly are the provisions of the Criminal Justice Act?

MS: I think they've probably been superseded, but at the time, if they decided to arrest you for *anything* that they deemed to be a criminal activity to do with security of the state, they could basically hold you without trial for something like 48 hours. I think they could have extensions of that for sort of two-three month periods without charging you.

RJ: Was there a specific impetus for this? A reaction to terrorism?

MS: It was a reaction to terrorism. And this was '84. We felt that this was quite a mess with people's liberty. I'm not a director or author who is specifically political in the day to day sense, because I think that's not what theatre is about. I think that political theatre like that passes and goes with time, whereas true classical theatre can encompass something in a society and a time but also move it into a timelessness, which is what we did. I think that works in that way. And through the sort of process I go through with a text and actors, and the sort of process Aidan goes through, both of us fed off each other in developing the scenario of the play. I remember one of my ideas—it had come from my idea with Bronwen originally—was that the play began in a Holocaust situation, but that there was very near to getting a throwback suddenly of *Antigone*, to a happy past of family with Mummy and Daddy, having nice gloves and white lace. And she remembered the present through an echo of the past. And we created a scene like that where this atomic bomb would go off at the beginning of the play, and then we see her scrawling on the wall. And this family in white appeared in crinoline and muslin, and kind of did happy family things. And they disappear together, and she was left in this kind of desolate limbo. We decided eventually that it didn't quite [mesh] with the text, so we cut it.

RJ: The thing that struck me about the play, was, well, two things. One was the writing the letter "P," which took on a particular significance for me last

spring, actually, [when I directed] Evgenii Shvarts's *The Dragon*. The idea of writing the letter "L" on the wall in that play becomes very significant in terms of remembering Lancelot, but also of course this is a Russian play of the '40s. And "L" also stands for Lenin. So the idea of playing around with the letter, and having "P" stand for either brother sort of struck me as an interesting idea. You [seem to] know the play. Was there some resonance . . . ?

MS: No, not at all, no. I think I remember a meeting that Bronwen and I had with Aidan in April of that year. And I do remember the three of us sitting down and saying, "well, what can we do? what will we do with this?". And I know we generated the idea of the letter "P" between the three of us. Maybe it was Aidan; I don't remember. What we wanted was . . . a lot of it was the images we had. I think we were going for the images. But we had lots of images of people scrawling on walls and spraying paint. Oh, I remember now, actually, because it's in the visual book. There was a load of stuff that Bronwen had [of] anti-Semitism from Nazi Germany. We felt we wanted to go along that direction. And we had quite a lot of visual stuff on it, and in fact we produced a series of fly posters like the Nazi ones for that production which we stuck on the walls. And I think the idea probably came from there. These things . . . I don't know if they're in the text: I've never read the play since we did it . . . I know that the set involved for us fourteen tons of sculpted concrete, a wrecked motorcar, a running river, and a tree which was like Beckett's tree, which Heman slashes . . . it's very much like Godot's tree, and haunts everybody. There are lots of images that are just snuck into the thing intentionally to make a connection with a sort of Irish past. And the depiction's extremely violent, I mean Heman is *extremely* violent with Antigone. And the show began also as a joke for me which was that the reason we've wrecked cars is that Creon makes a speech which is broadcast all over the speakers [as if he were] the Pope in the Pope-mobile, because that was all going on the time. He kind of popped out through the box some [way] into the speech. It collected all the sort of iconography of the time: Pope running around the place, and the religious world, and here's Creon, delivering his speech about privately built-up freedom from the same sort of a physical image, except it was a wreck and dug into the sand. So for us, certainly a lot of the physicalizations of the production had very integral roots in a series of [images].

RJ: Certainly I was struck by the visual imagery that one normally doesn't find in a play text.

MS: I don't know what he wrote into the script, eventually. I never read it [since the production]. I was very happy with that production, and it was asked to tour. I think it was the best production we did in the Project. I liked it. He [Mathews] thinks there something wrong with the end of play. And I think there probably is, too. I don't know what the end is now, but a lot of people felt it very complicated. It was largely that Antigone died in a sense, and went into a cave, which was in fact the cave of her unconsciousness because Heman was supposed to basically drug her, so she was basically reduced to being a driveling idiot. And Aidan [wrote the ending so that] she would disappear, and just become a bigger legend. And one of the reasons they had the river in the theatre was that the play began with Antigone crossing the river, which was into this dead world; and at the end of the play she crossed over the river, carried by the Chorus: like the Nile, or the Styx, into the land of the dead

RJ: I think the idea that she does achieve greater fame in death than in life certainly comes through in this production, and [the characters talk] about: well, maybe she was seen in [Kharkov, or near Munich] . . .

MS: . . . I am a psychologist, it's my degree, and I was playing with the idea of people's freedom being removed, and yet again, her freedom was being removed in a far nastier way than being locked up in a cave, as she was in the original legend. [She] was in fact this doll which Creon can play with, and his problem was that actually the doll disappeared, and because of wanting a leader. These things connect in different ways. I mean, for me the cave of her mind was a bigger cave to be locked in and a more horrible death because she was consciously dying as a human being, although her body was going to continue, and I think that in a sense that's how we always felt, that human freedom is expressed in the ability to motivate oneself in the theatre of unconsciousness and the existential responsibility. [When] that relationship between and responsibility disintegrates, and one is no longer free, one is manipulated. And that is essentially what Creon does, using the man who is supposed to be her lover to destroy her. Of course, obviously, in the original play the two of them get locked up together, whereas Heman in Aidan's play doesn't have . . .

RJ: He's much more complicit . . .

MS: He is, and he doesn't realize in the play that he obviously is destroyed equally by his acts.

RJ: So you're playing on the idea of one's essence [and] of one's life being different things. Antigone maintains one, to a certain extent, while losing the other; Heman: it's the flip-side.

MS: That's right. One of the interesting things that came up in rehearsals, and Aidan came up with the same idea: we were doing some work on loss and death, and what happened when your man died, what was left of him. And we had this bag of clothes that the sisters were wrapping up, and the only thing they actually found was his beard shavings, which was all that's left of him. In production, it was where Ismene found his razor, and she opened it and she shook it out, and there was what was left of her brother; it was all there was. In the play, Ismene wanted to be Antigone.

RJ: Yeah, I wanted to talk to you some about that sort of meta-theatrical quality, that Ismene wants to be Antigone, and they in fact sort of banter about it.

MS: I remember doing quite a study between a couple of versions of *Antigone* at the time. And I remember thinking, there's some kind of sibling rivalry of some kind, where Antigone has always been the one who pushes things to a certain degree and Ismene wants to get in on the act, but never quite had the ability to completely let go and really die, and actually make a decision. And Antigone did it. I think the difference in a sense is that Ismene would think about it and actually not quite achieve her own freedom, whereas Antigone locked herself in a new kind of cage by actually deciding to be so free she actually kind of made a battle out of everything. So that she equally trapped herself in a kind of a battle: the aspiration of one person for the other. So that "is either of them free, and who's freer?" doesn't actually force the issue, so to speak, as that she survives, to a certain extent. [There is a brief interruption of the interview at this point.] Ismene had—they were all in [ragged] clothes—but she had a great string of pearls she could wear very proudly, you know, last vestige of the past. There was a game going on for me as a director in the fact that the costumes . . . I've always kind of aspired to a kind of Poor Theatre; we re-used costumes from one show in the other, intentionally. It's sort of the metaphor that the costumes [represented] in the other show, linked in my head. In fact, in Creon's case, the coat he wore in the show was in fact the coat I'd used for Max in *Bent*, which, for Max, is a play about freedom. He gives up his freedom, and he gains a bigger one by being a Jew, and of course a modern-day homosexual. And I'd actually bought this particular coat—it was a '30s coat/'40s coat—in Paris for *Bent*, specifically. [And it was] the right sort of costume to work for

Creon because it creates an old past. And Ismene had kind of vestiges of a very good dress, but she still had a bit of pearls left, whereas Antigone had adopted a kind of soldier's jacket, so she kind of looked like a boy. [Shows production photograph.] If you didn't know it was a girl, you'd think it was a boy.

RJ: She looks like Bob Dylan!

MS: Yes. (Laughs.) The thing with Antigone that we were playing with, too, was that she behaved like a boy. She began the play with toys; she began digging with a spade, which is what brought her back to her childhood memories. It was the idea of again playing with digging, but playing with the idea of the past of children: these children have to grow up and become adults and deal with the real world, which was changing and re-setting itself. And Creon goes blind, like Oedipus, and has to be led on with a candle. And I don't think anybody can quite remember who thought of what: there was myself and Aidan and Bronwen.

RJ: Well, those are the best processes, I think. No one seems to quite know.

MS: No, I mean, I think if you had asked us at the time we'd probably not quite be sure who came up with something. Because in a sense the production emanated from an energy that we had as a company of people. The text itself was very important. Aidan's speech is very poetic sometimes and very black at times, but there's always a lovely rhythm to it. He's a poet, after all A lot of the production and the play, certainly what I was striving for, was this world for the audience. When they walked into the theatre, they had to walk through concrete, through this hell. Some of them had to cross the river to get to their seats, and walk on the set. It was to try to create a production, and a production style, and a style of acting which was extremely immediate and honest, which was confrontational, because the Chorus talked to the audience (it was very chatty, but nonetheless . . .), and he gets beaten up by Heman That part [the Chorus] was written specifically for the actor, Mannix Flynn, who is a wonderful Dublin character, but . . . he's a wonderful actor, a sensitive actor, and Aidan wrote the text for his syntax, so that it didn't sound like acting; it sounded absolutely like this is how he spoke, when in fact it was very carefully written by Aidan, and beautifully written by Aidan to develop the character in the play and lead you where he wanted you to go in the text.

RJ: Let me ask you about that, also. The idea that this play as currently written . . . the text seems very much of a particular time and place, and not readily transferable. If I wanted to do a production next year in Kansas, it would not be the same play even if I used the same words . . .

MS: I know what you mean . . .

RJ: . . . in the way that there might be something else that you and I would direct, and it would still be the same play. It would be a different spin on it, there would be a different interpretation, but . . . Do you think that this is a play that does transfer at all, or is the production unique in the manner of a production by Grotowski, for example?

MS: Maybe because people do underestimate—there are many productions now, choreographic productions, and productions in the postmodern theatre . . . there's a lonely world in which the text is not the prime source or the prime giver. And yet people can sit for an hour and a half with no words, and enjoy it. And in a sense I have always been striving for theatre whereby the text become an extra-important element, because you have this visual dialogue which happens. And you can see the play, and then the text is extra; the text is an extra deepening of the whole experience for you: our relationship with an actor, which deepens the process of theatre, which I think is about communication and honesty. And so perhaps, on the page, the play doesn't seem to spring off. But I think the play is an eternal play, and not an adaptation just of its time. I think the problem probably is that the Chorus is written in a sort of Dublin dialect, and unless you actually know exactly how that's working, and why it works in certain ways . . .

RJ: So that is somewhat limiting in the sense that, if I wanted to do a production in Kansas, the only way I can do it is to make it sound Dublin, which distances it, [whereas] your production says, "Here it is. This is now. This is a link to the audience."

MS: Well, no, I don't think so. I think you could probably change the Chorus's text, and I think it would possibly work, to a regional accent. Because I think the Dublin accent is a regionalization. Yet, of course, it links into Beckett, into a whole pile of things, that when the Chorus speaks . . . I think the Chorus is probably operating extremely like *Godot*. *Godot* works best either in French or with a Dublin accent. And I think that Aidan's Chorus is exactly the same as a *Godot* character, even is supposed to be: he does the

bits [like] that "P" in the confession, the letter "P." I think that the play is a timeless play, and I think that you could do it by regionalizing that accent.

RJ: So you really think it's only that one character that would even need that much change.

MS: Yes. I mean, the man who played Creon was English. And so he speaks "English." Ismene would be best to be English, because she's an aristocrat, probably. Strange little lady: in Aidan's text, does she open a box at the beginning? [Note: the moment does not appear in the printed text.] For us . . . she used to [go to] the river and open a box, which was Pandora's box, and let all the evils out. That haunts me: that comes into my mind quite often. I don't know if she says very much. I do remember she used to find E.T. and pull him in the river. He used to say "phone home" to her. I still have the E.T. [Both laugh.] But for me, one of the things I was playing with was—I did begin it with this curious person shuffling about, opening a box, which was Pandora's box, and letting the evils out in the world, and everything was darkness, and the next thing was Creon. And one of the things Creon does, of course, is that he plays "Going Home" for himself on the gramophone. And one of the tricks of that, of course, is that it's an evocative piece of music, and it moves the audience in a certain way, a unique way. And you can say all sorts of things over it, which can be horrible, and yet they're emotionally caught in a different way by the music, so that there's a dialectic and a tension that's interesting. And because Creon is quite a sympathetic character, as he is in the Anouilh . . . I think he's actually very, very nasty in [the Sophocles]. [In Mathews's play] Creon has lots of grey, lots of recriminations, lots of sadness. He does go blind . . .

RJ: I think one of the things that interests me in looking at this play, but also the other two Irish *Antigones* from the same year: Creon seems to be simultaneously nastier and more sympathetic in these versions than in the Sophocles. In Paulin's version, I'm struck by the fact that although he is obviously the "bad guy," probably to a greater extent than in Sophocles, it is *his* downfall at the end that seems to be the most poignant in its way. Something like that happens in Kennelly, and certainly that happens in this play: there are those shades of grey . . . Tell me about the three *Antigones* in one year after essentially fifty years of nothing [of the sort].

MS: Bronwen and I had been thinking of doing an *Antigone* and it occurred to me to do it at this particular point in time for a variety of reasons. Equally,

Field Day had decided to do *Antigone* and there was a huge amount of pressure put on me initially to not do an *Antigone* because Field Day—the Gods—were doing it. I was told by the board, "You can't possibly. Field Day are doing it, so you'll have to go and find something else." And I said, "Well, it's very simple. I'm not a director who come up with plays that you do [just] because you do plays. Certainly you're talking about a minimum six to eight months . . ." I'm trained in Europe, and I work in a very European way, and we're talking two, three years and massive amounts of time and things. [We don't] have the idea to do it tomorrow. I've actually thought about this so long distance, so far away. So, they refused to let me do the play. And I soon came up with another option which was very grotesque, and which required me to go to a board meeting wearing lots of black leather and white leather, my hair sprayed blue [RJ laughs.], gold—dots of it, and my Walkman playing. I think I probably had blue eye-shadow or something, or black lipstick. And I sat there very, very, passively, and I was very thin at the time, and just looked at them all and said "this is the other play." And the other play involves a father who is left alone to mind the baby, and can't stand the baby screaming, and smashes the baby up. A horrific play. And the baby ends up in intensive care and the father keeps saying "Oh, God, God, I wonder how it happened." And they looked at the American play, and they basically wanted to cry, and said "This is horrific. This play is so horrific, what happens in this play." And I said, "Yes." But we had just previously done the European premiere of *Extremities*. And I said, "Yes, but the cutting edge of theatre is these plays coming from America: they are horrifying plays; they question the nature of theatre. How can you sit in a room, or hear this, or see this? People being raped. Where does theatre and art begin and end? It's a completely different question. It has to be dealt with in a very naturalistic form, which is a deeply serious question about form and the use of theatre in our society." And they said, "Well, we think maybe you should go back to *Antigone*." And I said, "OK." [Both laugh.] And then they just left me to it, and didn't interfere again.

RJ: Is the tension that came from Field Day something that it's OK [for me to] write about?

MS: [Laughs.] Well, it wasn't really Field Day at all. Curiously enough, lots of people from Field Day came to see *Antigone*. And I think their *Antigone* opened in Derry and later came here, so I think there was a month, two months, difference.

RJ: And they're such different plays.

MS: Completely.

RJ: I mean the Paulin and the Kennelly are reasonably close, although certainly very identifiable, and certainly they have fundamentally different takes, but the Mathews play is nothing like either one of them, and in fact like nothing else I've ever read, except his *Trojans*, which is very similar (curiously enough!).

MS: Yeah. I think the tension about that didn't come from Field Day, but came from other people in the Irish theatre who couldn't conceive that the form in which an Irish . . . in which *a* play takes place can seriously affect the content of the play. I am a director who basically believes that form—because we've all said what we've to say—it's the form in which we do our work which translates it to our society. And each of us, through the processes we go through, changes the form of the play, so if I were to do Sophocles' *Antigone*, or you [were], they would be different productions. Different things translate to our perceived audiences, through the groups of people we put together to make a play. I was deeply influenced in France, [by] a certain sort of naturalism, and a certain type of way of using music. What French theatre taught me was how the sound of language holds space, how it holds air, how the French use their voices, how they growl, how they purr, how the tones affect the theatre and the thought. And silence surrounds that, often. Nowadays, Coca-Cola signs and . . . [people] read visuals and don't know they haven't heard a word. And that's not a new thing. That's been coming a long time—more noticeable now, but it's been there for fifteen years, twenty years. And I think that the form in which we did the play, which was a very semi-naturalistic form, but also once again challenged: how can you have a car in the theatre? Nobody did these things in the Irish theatre. Nobody put fourteen tons of sculpted concrete with a running river, a dead tree, and a motorcar into a theatre in 1984. They did not do it. They still don't do it in this country.

RJ: But you did.

MS: I did. I mean, I previously built a forest the year before. I went through a period in the Project of using space as an environment. When we did *Bent*, it was eleven and a half tons of gravel. We took all the chairs out, put in armchairs for the audience to sit in, put barbed wire between the audience

and the actors. And people said "you can't put a barrier between the audience and the actors." And I said, "Yes, actually, they'll watch it through barbed wire. It's a prison."

RJ: Grotowski did it; why can't you?

MS: Exactly. But that is not how the Irish theatre, which is a literary theatre, is perceived. Although I'm a writer, and I had to battle actors recently in my own version of *Dracula* over the words, as anybody might, I am a visual director. My [impetus] to make a play comes from a visual, not a text. Any play adaptation, anything I've ever written or made, comes from a series of images. I first of all have to find an image which unlocks the play for me. Could be one image, could be several. And so, I think this is one of the problems with *Antigone* finding a home: that the visual book of the production must be observed as much as the text, because the tree can be linked to the Irish theatre and to Beckett and to *Godot*, and to waiting and to death and to loss, just as in fact the river is linked to the Nile, but it's also linked to the Liffey. The toys: those things are all part of the loss of childhood which the two sisters had as girls, and yet they almost have a lesbian relationship. They kiss each other in a way which is just on the edge, because Ismene so wants to be her, she might sleep with her to be her.

RJ: There are also all those pop-culture images of "Star Trek" mind melds and that kind of thing.

MS: They're all there. They're absolutely all there. Those things are part of the visuals of production, even if they're not in the words, and I think if you don't put them into it, it doesn't work, because you're not getting the full impact of what's actually in the play.

RJ: That was sort of the question I was asking about transferring it someplace else. In other words, it seems to be very clear that you can't do this play without a strong set of visual images. The question then becomes need it be *this* set of visual images?

MS: I think that, as in all visual images, it's a bit like saying "We can do *Godot* in any empty space, can't we? Do we need the tree?". What's the difference between that tree and the tree in the *Antigone*, or the gramophone records playing, or Toujours [a female nurse/chorus figure] bathing Heman's eye or Creon's eyes while holding a candle? Right. I mean, he's bandaged like

Oedipus because he has wounded himself. And so there's a whole literary tradition carried, and again Yeats has done a version of *Oedipus*, which is carried, one way or the other, into the text, into the idea. And so there are lots and lots of images. There's a young boy who's not far off "Clockwork Orange," but he's dressed like the brownshirts. I don't think he had very much to do, but he represented this kind of neo-Nazism that was part of the Creon-speak. And that neo-Nazism is lurking in the Anouilh, obviously, too, again a profound presence. And I think you can miss these things. Some of these things are things that the Living Theatre threw into their version of [the play]. I think all of these things are lurking. Maybe Aidan gave them a physical voice, as in he [employed] the images and set down the icons. And I think that Aidan's play maybe hasn't found a time now, but it might in the future find a time—that play of this century.

RJ: I think it's a fascinating work, both as a literary text and also from what I can glean of what the production seems to have looked like: the overall feel of the production and the emphasis on visual images. It seems to me that it's very clear that out of all the plays I'll be writing about, the process seems to have been more intimately linked between the production and the text [in *Antigone*] than it would be in . . .

MS: Yeah, I mean this was not a text that was delivered and we did it. It was one where Aidan locked himself in his room and worked like mad, and we'd feed him ideas. It was amazing, occasionally, like the one about the razor where we kind of came up with something like that: where I think we were working with the idea of folding his clothes, Aidan came up with the idea of the razor, and they came up independently. And we said, "God, I had the same idea!" It was so symbiotic in a sense because we had agreed what we were doing, we were so close in what we were up to, we were all heading in the same direction. I don't even remember if we rehearsed in sequence: I suppose we must have started at "A" and gone to "B," but I mean there were things I did which were visual ideas which might have got cut, but there might be one vestige of them left somewhere in the text, and that does for the whole thing. So that I'm sure that although we cut the scene about our Antigone and her childhood past, I'm sure we left somewhere some marker which, instead of doing the whole scene, there's a little marker. The woman who played Toujours, I remember [people] adored her, they thought she was extraordinary because her performance was amazing. It was very sympathetic—it was kind of like the bits missing. [She fulfilled] the function of the Nurse, but for Creon, rather than just for Antigone. And it was

interesting that—one of the things that we wanted to avoid was a *big row* between Antigone and Creon, as in the other plays. And in fact the character of Toujours gives the opportunity to reminisce, rather than having to be didactic. Certainly in the Anouilh, even when you do want to be sympathetic with him, he [proceeds] in a didactic way to convince Antigone of his correctness, and therefore you don't feel for him, whereas in Aidan's play you can actually feel the sadness of this man who's doing the job, seizes the job that has to be done. And how he feels trapped, consciously, by whatever. And how he realizes his responsibility and, deeply, he realizes he doesn't win on the character. But he didn't expect to lose the way he loses. I think the rocking sequences, where he kind of strangles her, because she will not give in, and she's going to die . . . She's put in a Beckett rocking chair. And I remember there's a lot of violent rocking and smashing about of her in the process. And again, it was like people dying in their chairs, and there's always those things that are remembered in the Beckett works. We didn't want to quote the Beckett works, as if quoting Beckett, but we did want to sort of say, you know, "Here you are in the most calm kind of rocking chair, the kind of thing you'd like to grow old in. In this horrifying wilderness, there's a chair. And instead of becoming a thing of comfort, it's become a prison." It had bars across the back—we chose it carefully so it had bars.

RJ: Which is just another layer of irony, I think, in this deeply ironic play. Well, it's an ironic play to begin with, and this version plays up that irony.

MS: I think so. I think Aidan's version very much plays off a knowledge of the myth and of the Anouilh. I think his play is cognizant of the past, while trying to invent the future. When we were doing it, we never actually talked about it, because we'd already talked the talking out, and we knew where we had to get to. And so when he delivered the text, I didn't have to think, "What the fuck does this mean?" I knew exactly because we both knew what we wanted the play to be. In fact, Bronwen ended up not being able to design it because she was doing something at the Abbey at the time, so that Brian Power and Barbara Bradshaw designed it. And they went on to make a series of environmental things at the Project. I think I talked to Aidan this year or last year about maybe we should do it again. [But] both of us get busy and we don't. It's kind of one of those things where I'd like to do it, but I'd do it with different people, and obviously I wouldn't do it in the Project, but I'd probably do the same production, differently. I'd remember my own visual icons. I would bring my production book out again, and the

thing is—most of the shows that I've done got revived at least once—sometimes in the same production at the same theatre. And it's always intriguing when you change the cast how by finding the truth of what you're doing, people tend to actually walk and talk and stand and sit in the same places. I don't know if you've ever found that. But having faced many, many actors without ever saying "this is where you have to sit"—they actually find . . . they might do the opposite move, but they do exactly the same thing in the same place.

RJ: Because the impulses . . .

MS: They're in the text.

RJ: In a well-written text, with a sensitive actor, that's going to happen.

MS: That's right. I never know what makes [a production] successful, but I do know that those ingredients, they've got to be there.

RJ: You don't know what makes it successful, but you do know what makes it unsuccessful?

MS: Yes . . . Syntax and speech and visual. I do remember that we were very conscious of the different sort of syntax that each of the characters had. Like Creon had. Aidan knew him, certainly Olwen and David [Heap, as Creon], quite well, so he was able to write for them specifically, and we'd done quite a bit of work the year before as a company, so he could have seen the kinds of work we did together.

