

# National Theatre Collection

## *Antigone* – Rehearsal Insights

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## About

This pack supports the National Theatre's production of *Antigone*, directed by Polly Findlay, which opened on May 30th 2012 at the National's Olivier Theatre in London.

These insights were prepared during rehearsals by staff director Drew Mulligan. They introduce the process of creating, rehearsing and staging this play.

## **Rehearsal Diary**

**Staff Director Drew Mulligan writes about the rehearsal process.**  
*Rehearsal Exercises are in italics.*

### **WORKSHOP WEEK** **February 2012: NT Studio**

Prior to the start of rehearsals we spent a week at the NT Studio workshopping ideas for the main production. The main area of exploration was how we could make the Chorus fit with our idea of the world of the play. Although we are creating the original period of the play we are taking major thematic and stylistic elements from the Cold War to help tell the story. The action will take place in the 'Operations Room' or 'War Room' of Thebes as its new leader Creon struggles to re-establish order after a bloody civil war. The battle has just ended and we now witness the aftermath. The Chorus will man the operations room.

The design team have taken the 1964 Stanley Kubrick film *Dr Strangelove* as a stylistic inspiration, along with images of the GDR (the German Democratic Republic, otherwise known as East Germany, was a state established in 1949 and dissolved in 1990 after the fall of the Berlin Wall) and the 2006 film *The Lives of Others* about the Stasi (secret police) of East Berlin.

Though we are creating a fictionalised world for the play to happen in, we are very keen that the actions and setting have some authenticity. It also doesn't seem like a world where the Chorus would speak as one, which is traditional in productions of Greek tragedies. The workshop week was very useful in helping us explore how this 'war room' might operate and what individual jobs or roles the Chorus might have within it. It would also help us to identify different characters and voices within the Chorus with a view to dividing up their lines and making them a group of individuals.

With this in mind we explored some background research on the GDR and watched parts of *The Lives of Others* to examine how the Stasi operated and what routines they used to monitor or spy on their own people. I organised a trip for the group to the Churchill War Rooms,

## Rehearsal Diary

guided by the head historian James Taylor. This trip was fantastic and we were fortunate to be taken into rooms that are not ordinarily open to the public. It gave us an extremely useful insight into the daily routines of the operating staff and a clear idea about how a war could be run from such a bunker.

We returned to the NT Studio and spent the rest of the week coming up with routines that could be run in such a war room. Once these were established we combined them with a movement vocabulary established within the group by our movement director Aline David. We came up with some methods that would keep a war room operating while focussing on certain individuals or tasks. This was by slowing the other actors down or by perhaps ‘muting’ their actions.

At the end of the week we had created a useful vocabulary for the world of the play and a way for the chorus to operate as individuals, but also as one, as a part of the war room of Thebes.





# Rehearsal Diary

## Rehearsal Week One

April 2012: Rehearsal Room 1 at the NT.

### Tuesday

Once we were nicely warmed-up we then had the model box showing led by designer Soutra Gilmour and the director Polly Findlay. Soutra talked through her design process, including wanting to react to the specific architecture of the Olivier Theatre. This production is set in a world that stylistically borrows heavily from the Cold War era and most especially the GDR. The 'Brutalist' design of the Olivier then forms the perfect backdrop to our Theban War Room. Brutalism is a style of architecture which flourished from the 1950s to the mid 1970s that came from the modernist architectural movement. Brutalist buildings are typically blockish and have straight lines, and are often made of concrete.



The National Theatre is a significant example of Brutalism.

## Rehearsal Diary

We sat round a table and Polly introduced the play and her ideas for the production. She gave a topic to each member of the company to research and report back on in week two. These ranged from research on the classical world of Ancient Greece to investigations of mid-20th-century Radar systems (for Kobna Holdbrook-Smith who plays the Messenger). The aim is to get a strong understanding of the classical world of the play and of the world of our production, mid-20th-century Cold War era.

Aline started work on some movement vocabularies that we will use throughout the production. We worked on a movement scale from 1 to 8, where 1 was a freeze and 8 was running. More on this later.

in the afternoon, we did a read through which went very well.

### **Wednesday**

The cast began the day doing circuit training with Aline, then we sat round the table and started to 'unit the play'. As Polly describes it, a different unit starts when 'the air changes in the room'. If someone says, in the middle of a conversation, 'I'm pregnant' and that is a new piece of information to those in the room, that becomes the start of a new unit. So we spent the rest of the morning slowly working through the play looking for the moments when the air changes. Once we have identified these units we then name them. We have also created scene numbers, as the play exists almost as a single scene. This task really helps to create a shared understanding of the play and the major events that happen throughout it. Unit-ing is not an exact science by any means but it provokes a very healthy discussion and engages everyone with the whole play and not just their own role.

In the afternoon, we were visited by the Classics scholar Laura Swift. She spent the afternoon filling us in on the context of the play, the history of Thebes and the story of Oedipus. She also helped us with some pronunciation issues. This was an extremely useful session and the company were full of questions.

## Rehearsal Diary

### Thursday

From a discussion about the GDR and military regimes with one of the cast, Paul Bentall, Polly was keen to see if it was possible to get someone from the military to come and speak to the company, and perhaps drill them. After discussions with Polly I sent the Ministry of Defence an email with what we were looking for and by lunchtime they had found someone to come to speak to us in the afternoon. We had a very useful discussion with Lieutenant Colonel Richard Frampton Hobbs in which he agreed to find a drill sergeant who would come and ‘shout’ authentically at the company. He would then return later in the rehearsal process to cast an expert eye on the pseudomilitary routines that we have established and tell us how effective they are.

We look at other translations of *Antigone* to check how they reference ‘the gods’. We wondered whether the ‘God’ mentioned in the text had been translated as such to fit into our mono-theistic Judeo-Christian tradition, as opposed to mentioning the ‘gods’. It seems in this particular case the reference to God refers to Zeus and most of the other translations name him directly.

# **Rehearsal Diary**

## **Rehearsal Week Two**

### **Monday**

The whole company met at Stage Door ready to board the coach for a trip to the disused secret nuclear bunker at Kelvedon Hatch in Essex ([secretnuclearbunker.com](http://secretnuclearbunker.com)). It was built in the 1950s when the threat of nuclear war was very real. It was created as an early warning bunker and refuge for government officials. It was the closest deep bunker to London.

The bunker had provisions to keep the inhabitants alive for 3 months, though the prospect of large-scale destruction of a nuclear strike meant that there probably wouldn't be much of a country left to come out for. Our trip to the Churchill War Rooms on Friday had felt like a celebration of plucky British grit; this had an altogether different feel. It felt haunted by fear. Even though you could survive a nuclear strike down here, what would you emerge to find? The operations room was stuffed full of old computers and telephones, futile attempts to control a country that would have been almost completely destroyed. This feeling of total war, and of trying to operate in extreme conditions was very useful to the company.

We are setting the production in our own version of the Cold War. Though nuclear strike is not a threat, the feeling of total war, of being surrounded, is very real. The period of the bunker and the type of technology of the time match our idea for the production and the duties of the bunker officers matched very closely our idea of the Chorus. The worth of this trip will become apparent as we start to build operational systems for our war room of Thebes later this week.

### **Tuesday**

*Polly set the cast to create systems to operate in the bunker. The cast were separated into three groups and given the task of creating a system for 20 people, the number in the cast, to operate the security of the bunker, the army and security of Thebes and lastly the system to maintain the operation of the bunker. We ran the same task in the workshop week and it was very effective. We had reports from cast*



## Rehearsal Diary

*member Tim Samuels on Stasi surveillance techniques and Emily Glenister on the life of women in Ancient Greek society.*



### **Wednesday**

*Having finished uniting the play we started to ‘action’ the scenes. There are many different ways to describe ‘actioning’ but basically it is a method to make sure that the actor is trying to affect the other characters on stage with every line they say. So, we take a line or thought and ascribe a transitive verb to it. This verb describes what the actor is trying to make the actor they are speaking to feel. An example is ‘I slap you’: you want the other actor to feel slapped by the line. This is a slow process and it takes a bit of time to get into the swing of it but it is very effective.*

After the break, Aline worked with the Chorus on the systems created the day before. We worked on the bunker maintenance system which was led by Jason Cheater. We had people in charge of the water, measuring the air quality, making the food and Christopher Eccleston in charge of pest control. Into this system Polly likes to add some variables. In this case there was air poisoning, which led to various characters being sick.

## Rehearsal Diary

### Rehearsal Week Three

#### Monday

We spent the first part of the morning working on the Soldier's speech to Creon, describing how he had witnessed Antigone burying her brother, Polynices. We ran the scene a few times and then Polly tried a couple of exercises with Luke Norris, who plays the Soldier.



*Firstly, she asked all those listening to grab a pencil and paper and, as Luke spoke, they had to draw what he was describing. It made Luke really slow down and invest in every image that he was describing so as to convey exactly what he had seen to the 'artists'. This was a very effective way of forcing the listeners to really engage their own imaginations and to create a set of images in their minds for this scene. These images will now stay with all those on stage and cannot help but improve the scene.*

*Secondly, Polly asked Luke to repeat the speech but this time create a sculpture while doing it. Each image he described meant that he had to select and place a new object on the sculpture. These objects didn't*

## **Rehearsal Diary**

*have to have any connection with what he was saying; rather it was Luke's care in selecting and placing them that had the strongest effect on the way he spoke. The speech became slow and very specific and we really listened and connected to every thought.*

We looked at the Chorus' speech 'The Miracle of Man', which takes place after Creon has dismissed the Soldier to find out who buried the body of Polynices. This is an ode to man's capacity to learn and transform the world around him but warns against letting his power corrupt his morals and his faith in the gods. During this speech Aline has choreographed movement for the war room of Thebes. *Within this movement there are moments of suspension where everyone except the speaker goes into slow motion, moments where only one person is moving while the others are frozen etc. These techniques are great at animating the speech; they also bring a filmic vocabulary to the stage as they allow the director to focus the audience's attention on certain individuals where usually in theatre everything is in a wide shot.*

## Rehearsal Diary

### Rehearsal Week Four

#### Tuesday

We were joined by Company Sergeant Major Gareth Waddell, of the Irish Guards, to take the company through some drill training. We hadn't warned the company about this as we thought it would be a nice surprise, which it certainly was. We didn't introduce him either, because he was keen to dive straight in. He'd trained recruits at Sandhurst so felt that he could get a handle on a group of actors! *He suddenly called the company to form a line, tallest to shortest, and set about training them. For the next hour he drilled the actors to within an inch of their lives from basic standing positions to turning, marching, saluting and, of course, shouting. Those that didn't perform to the expected standard had to do press-ups.*

The idea for this was that we needed to inject a military bearing into the Chorus and the company as a whole. We feel that our Thebes is a state where everyone would have taken part in some sort of military training. The effect this has on your physicality is significant: you can spot an ex-military person a mile off just by looking at the way they stand and sit. We needed this to be embedded and we wanted it to be authentic. After an hour of training the company were looking very impressive.

We were joined by Major Rupert Hill, Second in Command of The London Regiment, who took us through the command structure of the British army, the differences in how the army acts in peace time and on a war footing, and how the army polices itself. Major Hill had been stationed in Germany before the reunification of the country and was able to give us an insight into the atmosphere of fear that must have pervaded the ranks of the East German military, where a staggering one in every 10 soldiers was also a member of the secret service.

He likened it to a police state where there is a constant pressure not to do anything wrong. He suggested that it might be like press night, performing in front of the critics, an experience that the whole company understood.

## **Rehearsal Diary**

### **Wednesday**

*We tried an exercise with Annabel Scholey who plays Ismene and Jodie (Antigone). There is a scene where the sisters argue about whether Ismene should share Antigone's guilt of the crime of burying their brother without having committed the act. This is a great scene, and to help each actor connect with what the other was saying Polly asked Jodie and Annabel to repeat the last two words of what the other actor had spoken, with a question mark after them. For example:*

*Ismene: Please, my sister, don't despise me! Let me share the honour and die with you.*

*Antigone: With you? You've no right to claim the honour for doing. What you were afraid to do. One death. Will be enough. Why should you die?*

*Ismene: You die? Because life without you won't be worth living.*

*Antigone: Worth living? Ask Creon to protect you. He's your uncle...*

This exercise has a clever effect of making the actors really listen to each other and helps to make each line an answer and correction of what the other character has just said. It also helps prevent the argument from becoming a shouting match.

### **Friday**

We looked at the re-entrance of Antigone when she is preparing for death and we worked out routines that the Chorus might perform when preparing someone for the Death Penalty. Antigone was frisked, had a medical check, signed for her clothes and had her photo taken. It was clinical and chilling. Antigone was left seated alone. We experimented with different ways of restraining Jodie for this speech and finally ended with her being dragged off screaming by Ross Waiton (Chorus). This is not a heroic noble death and the anger and fear felt by Jodie was very moving.



## Rehearsal Diary



We explored the Messenger scene with the actor, Kobna Holdbrook-Smith. The Messenger arrives and starts breaking terrible news to two low-status characters. Very soon they are joined by Eurydice, who overhears their conversation. He then has to deliver the terrible news to her that her son has killed himself after finding Antigone dead, and that he blamed and cursed his father, her husband Creon, for it. This is a very difficult speech to deliver. Kobna and Polly agreed that any over engagement of the speaker in the horror of the images he had seen would seem self-indulgent and lessen the impact of the images themselves. His duty is to tell Eurydice everything he has seen. We agreed that the Messenger had a friendship with Haemon and Eurydice and so he felt compelled to tell her everything from a personal as well as a professional standpoint.

*Polly marked out two squares on the floor, one for Kobna to work out the facts that he had seen, and the other with details that he would actually deliver to Eurydice. It was very effective in making the images explicit but it had the effect of lessening the action towards Eurydice which was 'to give her all the information' or 'to respect her' by not sugar-coating the news.*

## Rehearsal Diary

### **Tuesday**

We had our first proper run-through of the play. It lasted 1 hour 47 minutes, which was far too long. But it had some great moments and revealed some areas to work on.

### **Thursday**

There will be a clock on stage giving the time of events, so I spent some of the morning trying to create a plot of the clock through the play. It means trying to set a time for each event and guessing how long the intervals are between them. There are moments when the time needs to jump forward two hours, for instance. These time jumps always happen during the Chorus odes. We want to make our clock spin forward during these scenes. [The clock later became static during previews rather than showing the time in the play].

### **Saturday morning**

We ran the first 30 pages of the play, up until Teiresias arrives. Polly told the company that we have the structure of our production, and now it is time to fill it with emotional intensity. The second big note was that the company needed to 'go through the middle of each line and not glide over the top of it'. The actors need to meet the story head on and engage with it. Greek tragedy gives an actor the opportunity to go to areas of human experience where other dramas do not take you. Basically, the instruction was to not hold back. It was a great note session and a real call to arms.

# **Rehearsal Diary**

## **Rehearsal Week Six**

### **Monday**

Polly had decided that we needed to get to the point quicker in some speeches so she had cut some lines. The company accepted them with good grace and with a collective understanding that the play would benefit from this tightening up.

*With these cuts still fresh in our heads we did a speed line run of the whole play. We sat in a circle and spoke the play to each other, playing the full intention and emotion of the line, just quicker. We read the whole play in 50 minutes and observed that some parts of the play had never felt better. This energised the whole company and gave them an understanding of the level of attack required to perform this play; the actors and the audience should be breathless by the end of it.*

### **Tuesday**

I worked on the trial scene with Jodie and Annabel. We wanted to look at this scene with regard to the new blocking that had been created. The sisters are separated and are sat facing away from each other. We wanted to make sure that this blocking didn't affect their connection with each other and lessen the drive of their argument. *We used an exercise where the person listening repeated the important word from the speaker's speech before she then said her line. This 'activation' word is the word or phrase that makes you want to speak. This word becomes the word that makes you breathe in before you speak. This was a really useful exercise because Jodie and Annabel didn't always choose the same activation words. It really helps the actors to listen and think about what the other actor has said and to connect with each other and the argument.*

### **Wednesday**

We did a speed-run of the show. The note was to think faster and not compromise on the clarity or the acting. There was plenty to note, especially not to shout too much and give away authority. Everyone needed to try more successfully to keep a lid on the situation.

## Rehearsal Diary

That afternoon some of the production staff came to see a run-through, as well as Director of the NT Nicholas Hytner and Associate Director Ben Power. Inevitably there was tension and anticipation in the room. This run was a real improvement on the morning's run, and we felt relieved and excited at the potential.

### **Thursday**

We worked through Polly's notes from the run through. We were lucky enough to have Major Rupert Hill present to cast his expert eye over the military routines that we had created and examine the 'believability' of our Theban War Room. After rehearsals, Aline and I spent an hour with Major Rupert and received some great feedback. We hoped to implement this the next day. Overall he felt that we had managed to recreate the atmosphere very accurately, which was very reassuring to hear.

### **Friday**

Once notes were given we had another run through. The actors were getting into the rhythm of the piece now and this was their best run yet. It was clear that there were still many things to work on. The best use of time was to prepare for the technical rehearsals by fixing blocking and scenechange issues rather than acting and character notes as these could be done during the dress rehearsals and previews. We started with the opening of the show, making all the entrances quicker and cutting out superfluous moments.

This was our last day in the rehearsal room. We started technical rehearsals the next afternoon. We'd had an amazing time in this room, creating the outline and filling in the details of what we hoped would be a thrilling and moving production. The production was at a great stage and we were all really excited to get into the theatre.

## Interview with Polly Findlay

### Interview with Polly Findlay, Director

**What were your initial reactions on first reading *Antigone*?**

It was exciting to come across a two-and-a-half-thousand-year-old play with a woman at its centre.

Greek plays are part of our DNA, they're the building blocks of our imagination. We've rarely come up with better stories. Most movies that we're familiar with are reworkings of Greek texts.

This play is incredibly modern in its structure, it moves really fast, there's no 'faff' to it; it often is ahead of its audience. It made me think of a Channel 4 political thriller.



**So did that have an influence on the production?**

I definitely wanted it to be accessible: I've seen other productions of ancient texts haven't felt relevant to my world.

It felt important that the machine of power at the heart of the play was tangible to us and that we could have some kind of real imaginative

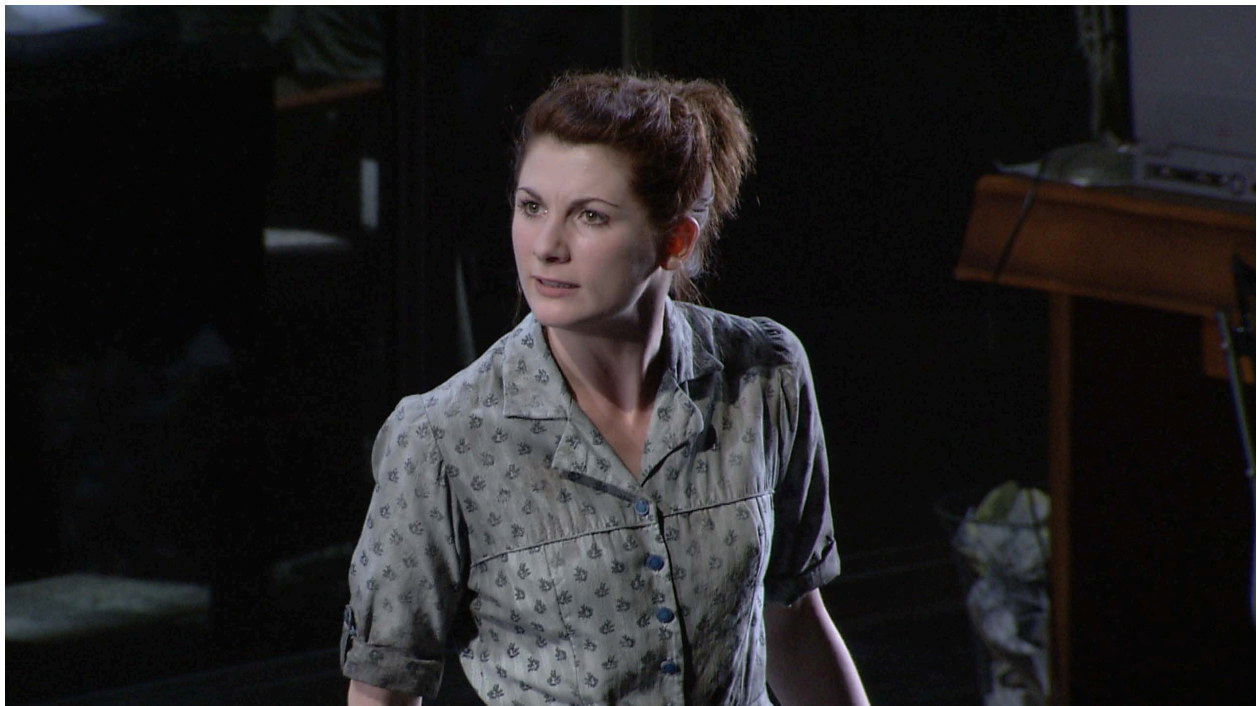


## Interview with Polly Findlay

purchase on it. But at the same time we wanted to avoid making it an indictment of any particular political regime. We wanted to find bits of vocabulary from political thrillers we'd enjoyed and bits of vocabulary from things we knew about from various political regimes, things that were part of our collective imagination. We borrowed quite a lot from a film called *The Lives of Others* and *Dr Strangelove* as well as real-life war bunker locations, like the Government War Rooms or Kelvedon Hatch.

### **What were you looking for in the casting of Antigone and Creon?**

The difficulty with the play on the page is that Antigone appears to be the goodie and Creon the baddie. We as audiences really like to back an underdog. But in casting Creon we wanted someone who the audience would like, who was charismatic on stage, with a big presence, humanity, vulnerability and charisma, so Creon didn't seem completely like a big bad wolf. For Antigone, we really wanted to find someone with presence, who wasn't going to be girly or apologetic, and we found all that in Jodie Whitaker.



## **Interview with Polly Findlay**

### **What were the challenges of the rehearsal process?**

Creating the role of the chorus felt like a core thing. It's the greatest challenge for anyone staging the play now. The Chorus feels like a convention very far removed from us now, although when you look for it, there are choric elements to everyday life. The people that run London Underground are basically choric. We wanted to find a way of making those people real and give them an individual and collective identity. So in rehearsing that aspect of the play I've had to decide how much you want to see them, or focus on them. From a personal point of view, moving that number of people around the stage is something I haven't had to do before so it was a learning curve. The challenge with texts that old and dense is to make them feel transparent and the throughline considered, even though that thought is coined by someone in a different culture and with a different thought process.

### **The play has quite a large sound design. What are the elements you wanted to bring out through this?**

It felt very important in terms of creating atmosphere, which is perhaps an obvious thing to say. We wanted to create a very specific world for the war room bunker in terms of the horror taking place there, and the conveyor belt sort of bureaucracy. So we wanted to set the tone with the sound design.

We also wanted to find a way of channelling the Ancient Greeks' religious understanding and make sense of that. Dan Jones [Music and Sound Designer] did a lot of work on finding the tension between a bureaucratic, banal sense of horror, and – particularly in the choral sections – a heightened, more angular, other-worldly landscape.

The playwright's intention – and it's not often obvious in reading it – is that the choral lines are musical. We wanted to fulfil the playwright's instructions to lift it out of naturalism, to heighten the atmosphere of the play, to give it a metaphorical currency.

### **Did the production develop a lot in the preview performances?**

It's always fascinating that when you put a play in front of an audience you

## Interview with Polly Findlay

see it through other people's eyes. It has changed quite a lot. We've found a way of driving the pace, and we've tried to plant more seeds earlier on to show Creon's humanity before he hits the big tragic wall at the end. We've had to do a bit of reblocking to focus things. It's been a process of honing technical elements and ensure we're all singing from the same song sheet.