

‘Antigone in the Amazon’ Review: The Drama Is Brazil’s Land War

The Swiss director Milo Rau drapes a traumatic episode of Brazilian history with a Greek tragedy on a Belgian stage.



From left, Sara De Bosschere, Frederico Araujo and Arne De Tremerie in “Antigone in the Amazon” at NTGent. Credit...Kurt van der Elst

By Laura Cappelle

May 15, 2023, 7:41 a.m. ET

GHENT, Belgium — You can't say the Swiss theater director Milo Rau doesn't practice what he preaches. Art and activism are deeply intertwined in his work: As part of his "trilogy of ancient myths," he rehearsed and filmed part of an adaptation of Aeschylus' "Oresteia" in Iraq in 2019. In the next installment, "The New Gospel," inspired by the life of Jesus, he staged a film, using refugees in Matera, Italy. For the third project, "Antigone in the Amazon," Rau has turned his focus to Brazil and the Marxist-inspired Landless Workers Movement in which farmers have been occupying unworked fields and growing crops there. Last month, Rau and actors from NTGent theater in Belgium helped Brazilian activists re-enact the murder of 19 of these farmers, in 1996, by a military police unit. This action, at the site of the massacre on the Trans-Amazonian Highway, became a national talking point in Brazil.

That's all before any part of "Antigone in the Amazon" reached the stage. The play had its premiere on Saturday at NTGent, where audience members were greeted by politically-inspired banners in the theater lobby. On each seat was a copy of the "Declaration of 13 May," a new manifesto against the destruction of the Amazon rainforest and "neoliberal green-washing," signed by a long list of intellectuals and activists.

Arriving after so much political action, the play feels like an afterthought. Watching its four actors narrate the history of Rau's project and the making of the re-enactment, aided by ample video footage shot in Brazil, it often looked as if the production was a mere repackaging of the events that led to its staging.

Not that it isn't well-crafted. Over his term at NTGent, Rau, who will depart later this year to become the artistic director of the Wiener Festwochen, has perfected the art of bringing real events onstage, by laying bare the process and inviting audience members to think along. In "Antigone in the Amazon," two Flemish actors from NTGent, Sara De Bosschere and Arne De Tremerie, address the audience at regular intervals, explaining the tricky process of making the show and the ethical issues it raised.

At one point, they are shown onscreen performing a scene from "Antigone" for the residents of a remote Amazonian village, who sit in a circle around them. De Tremerie then comes forward to reflect on the experience. He talks about the sense of privilege he couldn't shake while he was there, and the risk of leaning into "a guilt complex disguised as activism."

This is a welcome bit of self-reflection, since Rau is sometimes at risk of leaning into the figure of the white savior. The first part of his trilogy, "Orestes in Mosul," felt especially grating in that regard: In it, survivors of war in Iraq revisited trauma through fictional scenes involving murder, yet they were unable to travel to meet the audiences watching them in Ghent or Paris — a situation that left me wondering exactly who or what I was clapping for.

I occasionally wondered the same thing about "Antigone in the Amazon." Still, it is a more balanced, effective production than "Orestes." Two Brazilian performers, Frederico Araujo and Pablo Casella, join the Flemish cast onstage. A third, the Indigenous activist Kay Sara, was supposed to join them and play Antigone, but we are told early in the show that she had "decided to go back home, with her people."

Instead, in addition to other roles, the charismatic Araujo plays a gender-fluid Antigone, the Greek heroine who opposes her uncle Creon, the ruler of Thebes, when he decrees that her brother Polynices won't be buried or mourned after his death on

the battlefield. Only a handful of scenes from the classic tragedy are featured in Rau's play, all in service of the production's metaphor: The Landless Workers Movement is Antigone, rising up against injustice.



The Indigenous philosopher Ailton Krenak as Tiresias. Some scenes are performed live onstage, while others feature actors who were filmed in Brazil. Credit...Kurt van der Elst

Some scenes are performed live onstage; others feature Brazilians like the Indigenous philosopher Ailton Krenak (as Tiresias), who were filmed. The level of emotion that emanates from the screen often makes more of an impact than the stage action: The actress Célia Maracajá's quiet dignity is breathtaking when she appears as Eurydice, Creon's wife. Even the dirt that covers the nearly bare stage, to match the setting of many scenes in Brazil, feels like a prop compared to the vividness of the film.

Many in Ghent rose to their feet at the end of "Antigone in the Amazon." Yet even then, I wasn't sure what I was supposed to review. In writing about this play, am I actually being led to evaluate the ideals of the Landless Workers Movement? Or a re-enactment that took place in Brazil, in a social context few in Europe know anything about?

The question isn't unique to Rau: Whether you agree with the vision of the world that underpins a piece of theater tends to impact your appreciation of it. Yet in some of Rau's productions, the political messaging is the point. Reviewing them feels like being asked to rate their inherent "goodness." Who, with any empathy at all, would pan Indigenous activists saying lines from "Antigone" into Rau's sympathetic cameras?

While political theater, as a genre, has a tendency to speechify about sociopolitical issues from the safety of the stage, Rau at least gets up close to his subjects. In that sense, I reflected after the applause had died down, "Antigone in the Amazon"

The New York Times 15/05/2023

actually feels more like long-form journalism than theater. Drawing on extensive research, Rau distills historical facts, commentary and anecdotes, sets up compelling scenes and characters, all to educate his audience; even “Antigone” feels like the metaphor a shrewd writer might use to describe a just struggle against an inequitable system.

But we don’t typically review a reporter’s work as art. In putting this strand of political theater onstage, Rau is, simply, reporting effectively.

Antigone in the Amazon

Through June 10 at NTGent, and on tour in Europe; ntgent.be.