

Jonathan Dryden Taylor is an actor who has recently played roles in *The Captain of Köpenick* and *Othello* at the National Theatre and who will be in the forthcoming production of *King Lear*, staged in the Olivier Theatre, and directed by Sam Mendes. Jonathan also writes extensively for stage, television and radio. He is the son of the playwright Ellen Dryden and of the writer and director Don Taylor who had a distinguished career in television, theatre and radio and was a prolific playwright. Don Taylor wrote 50 translations of Ovid poems, and he translated and directed Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone* for the BBC in 1986 and Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* in 1990. His translation of *The Theban Plays* was published by Methuen and his translation of *Iphigenia at Aulis*, together with those of *The Women of Troy* and *Helen*, was also published by Methuen under the title *Euripides: The War Plays*. Don Taylor died at the age of 67 on 11 November 2003, having been suffering from cancer. He had directed his last play, *The Road to the Sea*, in February of the same year at the Orange Tree Theatre, Richmond. Jonathan acted in his father's final production.

Interview by Chrissy Combes (National Theatre, 3 October 2013).

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CC. I am talking today with the actor and writer Jonathan Dryden Taylor. We are backstage at the National Theatre, where Jon is currently acting in Nicholas Hytner's production of Shakespeare's *Othello*. Hello Jon. Thank you for taking the time to talk to me this afternoon, between shows.

JDT. Hello Chrissy. It's my great pleasure.

CC. Jon, I hope that we might concentrate in our conversation today on Don Taylor's translations and acclaimed productions for BBC television of *The Theban Plays* and *Iphigenia at Aulis*. I'd like also to discuss how his classical translations have been used by directors in three productions staged here at the National Theatre since his death. So, to put your father's work in context, might we begin by talking a little about his early career? He joined the BBC soon after leaving Oxford, is that right?

JDT. Yes, he graduated in 1958, two years ahead of my mother, to whom he was at that point engaged. He killed time in Oxford waiting for her to graduate, really. He took a job as Assistant Director with Frank Hauser at the Oxford Playhouse. So, his very first steps in the professional world were in theatre. But then in 1960 my mother graduated, they immediately got married, and Dad was accepted on the Trainee Director Course then run by the BBC. By the end of the year he had completed the training course and, with the encouragement of Michael Barry, Head of the Drama department, he was directing his first productions for television with considerable artistic freedom.

CC. In your father's memoir, *Days of Vision*, published in 1990, he emphasises that classical drama, indeed, all great drama, is the inheritance, the birthright of everybody, food for the soul. One senses that his guiding socialist and aesthetic principle right from the beginning of his career at the BBC was to make the classics of theatre available to all through the medium of television. He refers to the BBC as the 'National Theatre of the Air'. Could you expand on his commitment to this vision?

JDT. Do you know, I don't know if that term was Dad's own coinage or if was something that was talked about then generally as an aim of the BBC. But I heard Dad use the phrase a lot; he certainly refers to 'The National Theatre of the Air' a good deal in *Days of Vision*. He thought television was a beautiful medium and was very passionate about it as a force for culture until nearly the end of his life. He became disillusioned near the end of his life and left television for good in 1990. But for most of his career, he was very excited by TV's possibility, what it could do, and the fact it was something that people invited daily into their homes. He thought it should be as challenging and as wide ranging and as enlightening and enriching a medium as theatre could be.

CC. In *Days of Vision* your father describes his artistic differences with Sydney Newman, who was appointed as Head of BBC Drama in 1962. Newman changed the department's structure, and had a more populist attitude to television, wanting to increase serials and series, at the expense of single plays. This approach compromised your father's vision of a 'National Theatre of the Air', didn't it?

JDT. To put it mildly!

CC. So your father's deep unhappiness with these changes in the Drama department drove him to leave the BBC in 1964?

JDT. Yes, that's right. *Days of Vision* describes much of what happened. I was only 17 when it was published. I knew nothing then about adult life. But looking at Dad's situation now, from the position of being a 40 year old man myself, I shudder to think what that enforced career change must have been like for him. His career in television had started off so glitteringly, he had worked particularly with David Mercer, bringing his early plays to the screen very successfully, not to mention the plays of Hugh Whitemore, Norman Crisp and David Turner. And then - not yet 30 - it looked as if all that was completely finished for him. However, he was helped by various people within the world of television (but not in the Drama department), so he managed to creep his way back into TV via dramatised documentaries. They came under Arts Features but they were essentially plays. There was one about George Eliot, one about D.H. Lawrence, one about James Joyce, and many more. And at that time he began developing as a writer. His first stage play *Sam Foster Comes Home* was produced at the Glasgow Citizens Theatre in 1967, followed by what's probably his most famous stage and television play *The Roses of Eyam* which was premiered at the Northcott Theatre, Exeter in 1970, directed by Anton Rogers, and featuring early performances by Robert Lindsay, John Nettles and Roy Marsden.

CC. So, in about 1986, having produced, written plays, directed plays, he was a real man of the theatre, as well as somebody who absolutely knew and understood and loved the medium of television, and then under Louis Marks, I think it was, wasn't it, the BBC producer..?

JDT. That's right, yes.

CC. ... we get these wonderful Theban Plays, *Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus* and *Antigone*. And the recent BFI screening on the Southbank, the season about Greek tragedy produced for television, showed all of these plays, the four plays (including the later production of *Iphigenia at Aulis*) and you just saw what a huge achievement that was, but also what a huge project. Can you talk a little bit about how that came about?

JDT. I think it was something he had just always wanted to do. He became obsessed with the classics at school but was frustrated by the way that they had been translated which struck him as un-poetic and later, as un-actable. He quoted (I don't know whose version this is) but he quoted the translation of *Oedipus the King* that he'd studied as a schoolboy having

Oedipus, having just blinded himself, coming on saying ‘Ah me, whither am I born, what spasms athwart me shoot.’

CC. That’s easy to say!

JDT. It’s not even easy to say purely in terms of diction, let alone to make real, or even more importantly, to make harrowing. So it was always something he’d wanted to do. And through the 70s and 80s he had managed a parallel career in television really because he’d directed a steady stream of his own plays but he was also directing classic drama for the BBC, classic rather than classical. So, he directed one of the BBC Shakespeare series, *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, he directed a production of *The Crucible*, of Harley Granville Barker’s play *Waste*. And then I think it came about because he said to Louis ‘I want to do some Greeks’. And Louis said: ‘Go on, then!’

CC. Your father didn’t want to use any of the translations then in existence?

JDT. No. He wanted to present these great dramas on the television screen with the resources and the cast they deserved. But he knew that television can be a merciless medium and that it would expose language that seemed either too stilted or over poetic. So he wanted to write his own translations, but as a playwright. That is how he tackled the sequence, always with the greatest respect to the original, but as a working practitioner.

CC. In your father’s Introduction to his published translations of *The Theban Plays* he makes it clear that the three plays in the sequence were not, of course, written as a formal trilogy to be performed in Athens on a single day, but that Sophocles wrote them as separate plays over a period of 35-40 years, with *Oedipus at Colonus* almost certainly produced posthumously. The very full Introduction reveals your father’s formidable knowledge of the Greek classical theatre in its theatrical, political and historical context. But he didn’t read Greek, did he?

JDT. He didn’t have the Greek. No.

CC. Can you tell me then, what did he do? Did he have a literal translation?

JDT. In his first year at Oxford, his next door neighbour in halls was a fellow undergraduate called Geoffrey Lewis who was reading Greats and who ended up being the Head of the Greek department at Edinburgh University. So he would first of all get an annotated literal translation from Geoff.

CC. Of the three plays?

JDT. Of the three plays and then of the three Euripides’ plays he went on to adapt as well. And when I say ‘annotated’, Geoff didn’t just send him, you know, a pass at a literal translation. If there was a double meaning or a nuance, that would be explained, you know, ‘this word in this place in the sentence could mean three or four things’, all in the very (I remember this detail so clearly) all in the very earliest word processor, that sort of a grey type Amstrad, with paper with the holes down the side that you tore off, and these would turn up and Dad would sit there and turn them into modern prose poetry.

CC. I’m interested that you say modern prose poetry. The language of the translations is quite colloquial and immediate, isn’t it, sometimes like prose? But it is also, in the dramatic sequences and the choral odes, very poetic, rich in metaphor and images. And your father does not appear to have made structural concessions to the target television audience. There are no major cuts and his translations seem to reflect the formal patterns of the source. Classical scholars can look askance at versions created by non Greek readers, but Professor Simon Goldhill, in his book *How to Stage Greek Tragedy Today*, writes that Don Taylor’s version of *The Theban Plays* avoids oppressive naturalism and is a highly successful

translation in which music and lyricism are worked together into a very supple and dramatic verse form. Your father was a dramatic poet as well as a playwright, wasn't he?

JDT. He was obsessed with poetry all his life and saw it, I think, as the highest art form and the one that spoke to him the most. Sometimes, that was in a sort of very partial way. I remember a big family discussion once when I was doing A' Levels when he said that Thomas Hardy was a more important poet than he was a novelist, which I don't think many others would agree with. And his favourite modern playwrights were people like Arthur Miller and Tennessee Williams, and of course, David Mercer who he worked with so much, all playwrights who used everyday language poetically to create a poetry in what looked like naturalistic conversation. And I am very pleased to hear the Goldhill quote because I think what is most successful for me about Dad's translations is that they are verse and they don't necessarily sound like it. They can be delivered by actors because he was a practical writer, Dad, above all, they can be delivered by actors and delivered convincingly by actors, while the plays at the same time pay a very humble tribute to the poetry of the original. There were a few people who complained about some of the modern references...

CC. Yes, He uses modern language as well as poetic language, doesn't he?

JDT. Yes, Ajax is described as 'the superstar of Salamis' in *Iphigenia at Aulis*! But, again, these come from, you know - those moments were all moments where Geoff had said 'You have permission to do something here because this is what, I think, the writer is doing. So it's not putting in 'superstar' to be cheap. It's trying to - there's an echo of that in the original line.

CC. And although the chorus of women from Chalcis drool over Ajax and the other warriors in their *parados*, by the end of the play Euripides seems to reveal the onstage Homeric heroes as weak and morally ambiguous, compared with Clytemnestra and Iphigenia. In his Introduction to his translation of *Iphigenia at Aulis* Don Taylor writes that Euripides, in fact, does a huge demolition job on these war hungry heroes! Your father was never unaware that the Greek dramatists were writing in the context of the Peloponnesian war and of Athenian politics, was he? And in his book *Directing Plays*, published in 1996, he refers eloquently to that 'continuing fire that warms us from Athens'.

JDT. Absolutely. And this is where we come to the contemporary relevance of Sophocles and Euripides. For instance, I remember that the BBC production of *Antigone* was being filmed for TV at a time when there was a government whistle blower called Sarah Tisdall who went to prison. (I was young, I don't remember the full details). But I remember that Juliet Stevenson, who played Antigone, said in the documentary that was made about the making of *The Theban Plays* how those echoes came very strongly into the rehearsal room. There would be discussions in rehearsal about this woman - admittedly not being walled up alive like Antigone - but still a woman going to prison for what she believed in as an individual against the state. The Greek tragedies were political in their time and they always have relevance to ours. That's one of the main reasons that Dad wanted to do his own translations of the plays and direct them for television.

CC. His translations then, while not having complete literal fidelity to the source, retain the spirit and impact of the original. But, in terms of staging, there is a big leap from the spectacle of an ancient Athenian amphitheatre to the intimacy of a modern television studio. And a very different audience. Did he want to recreate any of the original theatrical conventions?

JDT. That's an interesting question. He didn't use masks. He used twelve actors for the chorus and they sometimes speak in unison. There's some regimented movement from the

chorus but no dancing, no singing, although there is vocal music in the background, for example, in the preparation for Iphigenia's sacrifice there is some vocal music. I think for the television he was working in a form which doesn't exist anymore and only really existed for about twenty years, which is the multi-camera on video television studio play. This was then a new form, and although he didn't know it at the time, it was to be very short lived. Drama on television now is usually interior form or on film. Even single dramas tend to be single films rather than studio dramas, and they have plenty of location shooting. If you do see a version of a play (and it's very rare to see an existing play on television now) it's usually something like when they took the cameras into the Royal Shakespeare Company for David Tennant's *Hamlet*, and it's really just a filmed version of a successful stage production. But Dad's productions were a combination of television mixed with the feeling and the adrenalin and the sweat of live performance. It's relatively well known by people who know such things that Dad didn't do a play in a take by take fashion. He rehearsed it like a play in a rehearsal room and it was then filmed like a play in real time. For each of the four classical productions that he made for television, the three Sophocles and the one Euripides, he did two complete performances on camera and then edited between the two, with the hope that if an actor fluffed a particular line in one take they wouldn't in the other. And they were done with a full camera rehearsal first and then these two performances on alternate days. Dad was one of the last people in television to work from a complete camera script that was there before he went into the studio. He knew, he had planned in advance, what every shot was going to be. So the camera rehearsals would be very similar to a technical rehearsal in the theatre and then you would have what were essentially two performances and they were like the beginning of a theatre run. So I think that's the tribute to the way that they were done in Attic times, not so much in performance style or in terms of various ancient theatrical traditions, but maintaining one of the unities – maintaining the unity of time.

CC. And all the productions convey the excitement and danger of live performance. Coming back to the staging for a moment, the setting for the production of *Antigone* would have broken ancient theatrical conventions, of course, because it was an interior setting, a kind of inner atrium, with massive portraits of Creon hanging on the walls. But one of the things that did strike me could have perhaps been a resonance in a way was that in *Oedipus the King* there were these great central doors. The play was staged in front of the palace wasn't it, as it is in the original, set in front of the palace, and this setting, I thought, worked to spectacular effect throughout the play but particularly when Oedipus appears as the blinded Oedipus. Could you perhaps describe a little bit of that, because it was just stunning.

JDT. Covered in tinfoil they were! (Tearing down the fourth wall!). Yes, the designs I believe were by David Myerscough-Jones for the three Thebans. And for *Oedipus the King*, yes, there was a landscape with a cyclorama around it so that it made it very clear that it starts with the Thebans arriving at dawn. There were great huge steps and yes, these huge giant doors that dwarfed Michael Pennington and he comes out of them at the beginning in this wonderfully militaristic white suit and he had a blond wig for it and just looked every inch the golden boy and the hero. And then later he creeps through these doors. It was a great image (to coin a cliché) of how the mighty have fallen. He comes in with these two gaping red holes where his eyes should be. He's still in the white suit, still with all the trappings of success and leadership around him, but destroyed.

CC. The arm was across the face, wasn't it, and then the blood appeared very slowly and trickled down. I can still remember that. Speaking of Michael Pennington, your father assembled a superb company for both *The Theban Plays* and *Iphigenia at Aulis*, didn't he? Could we perhaps talk a bit about these actors and their performances?

JDT. Extraordinary casts. There was Claire Bloom as Jocasta, John Shrapnel playing Creon throughout the three plays, John Gielgud as Teiresias, Anthony Quayle as the old Oedipus in *Oedipus at Colonus*, a young Juliet Stevenson as Antigone. And Gwen Taylor, who spent so much of her working life doing sitcoms, showing how unbelievably good she is, as Ismene. And of course, the chorus were largely the actors that Dad had grown up seeing, certainly that my mother had grown up seeing in the midlands, going to the RSC in the 1950's, people like Robert Eddison, Edward Hardwicke, Jerome Willis and so on. There was a sense of a wonderful company getting together.

CC. And among the cast for *Oedipus the King* was a young Jonathan Dryden Taylor? Can you just tell us what you played?

JDT. Jonathan Taylor before Equity got their hands on my name! I played a plague victim of Thebes who had lost his legs and was therefore wheeling himself round by his hands on a cart. I was all of twelve years old. My parents in their spare time, or what they laughingly referred to as their spare time, ran a youth theatre at my school which was just a normal London comprehensive but had Don Taylor and Ellen Dryden and Patrick Stewart directing their school plays! And there were about 10 of us from CYT, Chiswick Youth Theatre, CYT, who were used as part of that opening sequence. My dad always called it his Bergman sequence. There are all the faces, with a very different mood, in Bergman's film of *The Magic Flute*, you've got all those faces one after the other. And there was incredible music by Derek Bourgeois, if you're talking about Dad's TV greats. The music Derek wrote was so evocative and sinister and wonderful. And there's this whole sequence of non specific ethnicities or time periods, but of suffering. So there are people who look like they might be from the nineteenth century Balkans, there are people who look like early twentieth century maybe diaspora Jews coming from pogroms, and again, touches of the holocaust, and there's a sort of forties woman with a pram, looking like a refugee from the Battle of Britain. And then there's the kid with no legs! And I remember it being murder on the insteps, very painful.

CC. That opening sequence, with all the refugees, establishes the sense of plague, which the ancient Athenians had, of course, experienced, and of pollution, which they were terrified of. I thought it was a brilliant concept of your father's, harnessing Sophocles' themes to comparatively recent images of sickness and despair. Might I ask what it was like for you, being directed by your father?

JDT. Oh I was used to it. Fortunately, there was no sense in the BBC company of 'these kids are going to be difficult to deal with' as Chiswick Youth Theatre was always run like a professional company.

CC. In *Oedipus the King*, then, you were among the younger members of the cast. At the other end of the age range, Sir John Gielgud as the blind Teiresias was then 80 years old, wasn't he?

JDT. That's right, yes.

CC. In *Directing Plays*, your father writes about John Gielgud's definitive performance in the role. But apparently, this great actor became anxious as the performance day approached and said to your father in rehearsal: 'Am I really alright?' It seems so touching that this eminent, hugely experienced actor, famed for his incomparable verse speaking, should need reassurance.

JDT. Yes, that's true. Of course, we younger members of the cast kept a respectful distance from Sir John, although we all ran up to him at the end of the production, and got him to sign

things. But he wasn't the only one who got nervous. I remember Cyril Cusack, who gives a most wonderful performance as the Priest at the beginning of *Oedipus the King*, looking fairly white beforehand. Actors at that age don't tend to have great big blocks to speak like Teiresias or the Priest, those long dramatic monologues that are integral to Greek tragedy.

CC. Talking of nerves, your father (again in *Directing Plays*) refers to his work as a director with Juliet Stevenson during the rehearsal period for the production of *Antigone*. She was just beginning to emerge at the RSC as a leading actress, wasn't she? He describes how she was justifiably nervous about delivering one of the great passages in classical drama, Antigone's *kommos*, the lamentation she speaks with the chorus before being taken away to her mountain prison to be buried alive. It is a typical and very important scene in Greek tragedy, a protagonist, on the threshold of death, bidding farewell to the warmth and light of the sun. Don Taylor describes how he encouraged the young actress to use her voice as a musical instrument in this beautiful verse lamentation.

JDT. Oh, absolutely. And I remember he took this directing approach not just with Juliet Stevenson but also with the young actress Imogen Boorman who played Iphigenia in the production of *Iphigenia at Aulis*. They worked together for a long time on her final threnody which occurs after Iphigenia has agreed to be sacrificed so that her father's fleet can sail to Troy and the war can begin. Regardless of the inconsistencies in Iphigenia's sudden agreement to die for Greece, whatever the irony of that decision, she suddenly becomes aware at the end (like Antigone) that she is to be cut off in her youth and that she is saying goodbye to life forever. Dad told Imogen that the threnody had to be sung, not literally, but that this section of the play was meant to be a great operatic aria. He sent her away to listen to *Der Abschied* from Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde*, which is this exquisite outpouring of somebody who knows they are dying, a farewell to the earth, full of grief and regret. And, when you watch the production on television, you see and hear that Imogen rises to the mood. Dad's translation of Iphigenia's threnody ends with the words: 'Goodbye, daylight. Great torch of the world, goodbye. Another life for me now, another time. All unknown and strange, my eternal home.' Imogen's delivery of these words is unbelievably poignant to listen to.

CC. You hear lovely vocal colours throughout the productions. Sometimes, the voices ascend to tremendous anger as in Oedipus' great denunciation of his son Polynices in the production of *Oedipus at Colonus* – Anthony Quayle is terrifying. And, of course, the vocal intensity of the performances makes each *agon* very dynamic, really brings out the conflict between the characters. Plus, your father lets the camera come right in for quite lengthy close ups on the faces during these crucial duologues. For instance, in the confrontation between John Shrapnel as Creon and Michael Pennington as Oedipus in *Oedipus the King*, you can absolutely see the thought behind the eyes.

JDT. So much of those arguments are rhetoric. So much of it is two people standing there and each one saying: 'Here's my point and now you are going to give your counter-argument.' Of course, the ancient audience was trained to listen to arguments being stated, developed and sustained, the modern audience isn't. So Dad really concentrated on making them work for television.

CC. The actors truly seem to own the words they are speaking. They own the emotions too. I thought Fiona Shaw was stunning as Clytemnestra in the production of *Iphigenia at Aulis*.

JDT. Oh, again, that's interesting. June Hudson, who designed the costumes for *The Theban Plays*, took some footage during one of the performances and included the moments *before* Clytemnestra's second entrance, the scene after she has just discovered the betrayal by

Agamemnon and knows that he intends to have Iphigenia sacrificed. Clytemnestra is about to engage in the great confrontation with Agamemnon (played in the production by Roy Marsden). Anyone who has seen the TV production knows that Fiona Shaw explodes into the scene, there is this fire and passion. The extraordinary piece of footage shows Fiona Shaw just about to go on for the scene (and, you know, 'go on' isn't a piece of terminology we usually use about television) and she is standing by an offstage wall and hammering away at it with both fists in order to whip herself up into the fever pitch. Dad and I had seen Fiona Shaw in Brecht's *The Good Person of Setzuan* here in the Olivier, and been so impressed by her in that extraordinary moment when the heroine decides that she will do anything to protect her child. Her Brecht performance struck a chord with Dad regarding casting her as Clytemnestra, this anti-heroine who will do anything to protect Iphigenia.

CC. She plays it like a lioness defending her cub.

JDT. She does. It is one of the most powerful television performances I have ever seen.

CC. And Fiona Shaw howls like an animal when Iphigenia is taken off to be sacrificed. You can see clearly from that performance that Clytemnestra is the woman who is going to go on and slay Agamemnon in the fullness of time.

JDT. Yes, Dad's slightly cheeky stage direction at the end of his translation of *Iphigenia at Aulis* is 'The first lines of the Oresteia are already being written.'

CC. I am interested to see that your father's translation of *Iphigenia at Aulis* includes the contentious ending, believed, like so much concerning this very late play by Euripides, to be an interpolation added some time afterwards.

JDT. Yes, whatever, the provenance of the ending, Dad felt that it is a natural part of the play's structure and something that emphasised Euripides' cynicism about war, following the failed Sicilian expedition. Dad's production implies that the Messenger's miracle story of Iphigenia having been saved by Artemis and a deer slaughtered in her place is a piece of political spin, a pack of lies on the part of Agamemnon. Clytemnestra is not even slightly assuaged by the story, you can see that in Fiona Shaw's reaction to Greg Hicks, who plays the Messenger in the TV production. One of my favourite modern touches in Dad's version of the play is Clytemnestra's line in response to the Messenger Speech: 'You bring me plasters for a broken heart'.

CC. This was a beautiful production of the play, and, sadly, to my knowledge it was the very last production of a Greek tragedy produced for television. Almost a quarter of a century has passed since 1990 and I don't think there has been any Greek drama made for television in all that time (although I could be wrong). So it seems all the more a pity that Don Taylor's planned television productions of *The Women of Troy* and of *Helen* never took place as part of a trilogy with *Iphigenia at Aulis*. Again, this would not have been a trilogy created by Euripides himself. We know that *The Women of Troy*, for instance, was written as part of a trilogy with an *Alexander* and a *Palamedes*, now lost to us. However, your father had clearly intended to produce the three plays together as a developing story on the Trojan War, with *Iphigenia at Aulis* first, about the start of the war, *The Women of Troy* next, about the end of the war, and the *Helen*, lastly, to show what happened seven years after the war had finished. Could I possibly ask you why he was not able to proceed with *The Women of Troy* and *Helen*?

JDT. I have to tread carefully here or I'll get angry. Basically, the BBC pulled the plug and cancelled the other two. All the Drama department money was going towards the production of *Eldorado* at that time.

CC. That is an unbelievable shame. I can fully see why your father became disillusioned with television. The great theatrical tradition replaced by the trivial. Before those cancellations, had he had actors in mind to play particular roles?

JDT. Well, neither of the other two projects got close enough to the offers stage or for anything other than wish-list ideas. But I imagine that Dad would have through-cast Tim Woodward as Menelaus in each of the three plays. That was his policy in the Sophocles' trilogy, with John Shrapnel playing Creon throughout. I know that he planned to approach Judi Dench or Vanessa Redgrave for Hecuba and Juliet Stevenson for Andromache, availability permitting. And in 1990, his first choice for Helen in both the two plays that were never produced for television was Miranda Richardson. Later, he was keen to do a production of Helen onstage, with Frances Barber in the title role.

CC. It seems so unutterably sad that those planned television productions were lost to us. However, the fact remains that Don Taylor's productions of *The Theban Plays* and of *Iphigenia at Aulis* on the small screen will always be a wonderful legacy, a testament to his work. And, of course, his translations have been used and continue to be used in the theatre as well, as he intended them to be. Polly Findlay turned to his translation of *Antigone* for her 2012 production in the Olivier theatre. And Katie Mitchell used the Don Taylor translations for both her 2004 production of *Iphigenia at Aulis*, a year after his death, and for her 2007 production of *Women of Troy*, in the Lyttelton. Both *Iphigenia at Aulis* and *Women of Troy* were staged while the Iraq war was taking place, making the theme of invasion of a foreign country hugely significant for the audiences at the productions. Katie Mitchell brought some similar production values to both the Euripides' plays: a 1940s time period, a setting in a bleak requisitioned room, sequences of beautiful, expressionistic slow motion, the chorus occasionally breaking into a robotic foxtrot or quickstep to big band music. And she directed rehearsals using her rigorously psychological Stanislavski methodology which generated gripping emotional intensity in the acting performances. So, I wonder if we can go on to talk very briefly about the productions that have taken place here, starting with the Katie Mitchell productions. She was very experienced in directing Greek tragedy by the time she came to do the *Iphigenia at Aulis* here. And she'd done this particular play before, in the Abbey Theatre, hadn't she, in 2001?

JDT. Which Dad saw.

CC. Did he see that production?

JDT. Yes, we went over to Dublin.

CC. Did he like that production?

JDT. Yes he did. And he said to Katie (which is a measure actually of his generosity as an artist) he said 'I wouldn't have done it like that but I loved it.' Because they don't have much in common as directors, Dad and Katie. I think Dad and Polly Findlay have a lot more in common in the directorial sense. But both Katie's productions here, the *Iphigenia* and the *Women of Troy*, were incredibly powerful productions. I thought *Iphigenia at Aulis* was absolutely harrowing. And an extraordinary performance from Kate Duchêne, I think. She is every bit Fiona Shaw's equal as Clytemnestra.

CC. And she played Hecuba in *Women of Troy*, didn't she?

JDT. Yes, another wonderful performance. And *Women of Troy*, the entire production, that was just a sledgehammer. It was so uncompromisingly bleak, but it wasn't depressingly bleak, there was a grandeur to it. It was one of those 'don't speak for ten minutes afterwards' productions.

CC. Could we just touch on an aspect of Katie Mitchell's work that tends to divide the critics – the additions and cuts she sometimes makes to the text? (Or, in this case, to the translation). For instance, in the production of *Iphigenia at Aulis*, the first entrance of Clytemnestra and Iphigenia took almost five minutes, with cases, flowers, a tailor's dummy with the wedding dress, being brought on in stages during improvised dialogue. But whereas *Iphigenia at Aulis* was highly acclaimed in the reviews, *Women of Troy* was less well received overall. Charles Spencer, in the Telegraph, accused Katie Mitchell of smashing up the classics and said that Don Taylor's fine translation of the play was brutally cut. And I think this was mainly to do with the dropping of the Prologue with Athene and Poseidon. Do you think your father would have approved of that or not?

JDT. Well, I don't know ...He wouldn't have done it himself. Partly, that was because Dad's favourite thing about Euripides was the savagery of his comedy. Dad really always wanted to do a production of *Helen*. (And, of course, Mum ending up directing Dad's translation of *Helen* for the radio, for Radio 3, three years ago, with an incredible cast: Frances Barber, Paul Ritter, James Purefoy). And there is some of that uncompromisingly savage Euripidean wit in the portrayal of the gods in *The Women of Troy*, and Dad would have relished that. At the same time, I can absolutely see and he would have understood how when you are going for something that is so uncompromisingly about the brutality of the modern world as Katie Mitchell did in her production, you don't want some gods coming on at the beginning saying 'Let's have some fun destroying human lives'. The message of Katie's production wasn't 'Let's blame it on the gods' it was 'It's our fault'. So I can understand the cutting of the gods. And Dad would have understood it. Ultimately, Katie prepares and researches meticulously, she has enormous integrity, she was the director, and she was free to make those decisions. As a family, we might not have been wild about the changes, they might have grated a bit, but they certainly weren't deal breakers, when viewed in the context of those superb productions. And we are incredibly grateful to Katie for championing Dad's work in the way that she has done.

CC. Yes. Don Taylor's dreams of a National Theatre of the Air might not have been fully achieved, but the great classical tragedies, in his translations, are now staged wonderfully at the National Theatre.

JDT. I think Dad would have been slightly amused at the irony of him becoming a regular presence at the National Theatre – only after his death!

CC. Might we speak finally about Polly Findlay's production of *Antigone* in the Olivier Theatre? *Antigone* is a play that lends itself to contemporary issues, and these were pointed up here, with Polynices clearly emphasised as a terrorist threat. The design, by Soutra Gilmour, set the action within a 1970's GDR war bunker, with office desks, reel to reel tape recorders, reinforced concrete.

JDT. With the glass inner sanctum for Creon.

CC. Jon, you were there in the Olivier Theatre on the press night and you wrote a very moving review of this production. You called it a devastating production. What did you find so devastating?

JDT. Well, partly, you are in a state of high emotion anyway, going in to sit in the Olivier auditorium to see your dead father's work. You are susceptible already. But the power of particularly the two central performances from Jodie Whittaker and Christopher Eccleston, and the way Dad's translation sounded so new minted and so fresh and new, I wasn't ready for it, I was expecting, you know: 'I know *Antigone*, I know what happens, I'm sure it will be very moving' but I wasn't expecting....And it's partly because of a very brave decision

that Christopher Eccleston, or Polly Findlay and Chris Eccleston made, which is for Creon at the end not to have processed what's happened to him. So often you get in all kinds of tragedy, Shakespearian tragedy as well as Greek, you get people who are instantly able to internalise the horror of what's happened. And Eccleston was nowhere near understanding what had happened to him. It was: 'I've done this, but how has it ended up with my wife and my son dead? Half an hour ago, I was convinced I was doing the right thing, and now my life is utterly destroyed.' And that bewilderment was so fascinating to me. And the moral certainty that Jodie Whittaker brought to *Antigone*. You think, if she's on your side she's a heroine, if not, she's a suicide bomber.

CC. In your review, you commented on the final minutes of her performance.

JDT. Yes, indeed. Up to her final scene with Creon, Whittaker's *Antigone* had been so defiant, so certain. Then the actress pulled off a heart-breaking change of tack. Once Creon had told *Antigone* exactly how she was to die, we suddenly saw her terror. This *Antigone* never lost her nobility or her integrity, but she broke our hearts by showing us her fear as well.

CC. Could I just ask for your comments on the chorus in this production? I ask this because of a debate which arose during Polly Findlay's National Theatre Platform Event (the events where practitioners discuss current NT productions with audiences). I attended Polly Findlay's Platform on *Antigone*. Anthony Garrick, who was the production manager for your father's BBC production of *The Theban Plays*, and June Hudson, who designed the costume for the television productions, were present in the Platform audience. They both said that they had enjoyed Polly Findlay's production.

JDT. That's fantastic.

CC. However, Anthony Garrick slightly questioned the fact that Polly Findlay had separated the chorus into ten individuals, each with distinctive characters and each speaking separately. He expressed the view that your father's interpretation had been more authentic, because although the chorus in the BBC production of *Antigone* spoke sometimes individually or in small groups, they often spoke in unison, were dressed the same (as judges, in black and white), and frequently moved together. June Hudson added that your father had wanted a timeless quality in the costume for *The Theban Plays*, which she felt had worked better than the costume for the NT production where the chorus members were each dressed differently, some in shirtsleeves, some like civil servants, some in military uniform. Both felt that Don Taylor had been more faithful to the chorus as a community, a collective voice steering public opinion, as was their role in the ancient Athenian theatre.

JDT. I think that's true. But I don't think you can have a choral speaking chorus in the war bunker. It is an extremely naturalistic setting. And the way that the chorus was divided up in Polly Findlay's production, with people shouting information to each other across the room, there was a real excitement to it. I agree with what Anthony Garrick said, in that I like the way the chorus is treated in Dad's TV versions, because there is a poetry to it, an elevation in the language. But I just don't think that choral speaking would have been appropriate in Polly's production. The chorus is always one of the most difficult aspects to handle in a modern production and it's something the director just gets to make a decision on nowadays. I saw a production of *Medea* recently with just one member of the chorus. It didn't work but it could have done! As to the issue of costume, we have to remember, there's a difference between 1984 when Dad started his productions and 2012. In 1984, we're still processing the holocaust, that's still quite close, and we're still processing the cold war. Man's inhumanity to man is something that's in living memory but it's not immediately before us. Cut to 2012,

and we've basically been at war for about 20 years, albeit a distant drone led war. You could do timeless in the 80's. But when you do these plays today, you can't shy away from what a brutally militaristic era we live in.

CC. Anthony Garrick and June Hudson both said what an inspiring man your father had been to work with. And Sam Walters, Artistic Director of the Orange Tree Theatre, where your father directed his last play, *The Road to the Sea*, pays tribute to his great courage. Sam told me that Don Taylor directed the play until his illness became too advanced and he had to retire from the production. Sam Walters says also that the fact you found the strength to continue in the cast afterwards is exactly what Don would have wanted. In all Don Taylor's writings, including *The Road to the Sea*, his deep political engagement, his sense of history, and his passion for dramatic poetry are evident, and he brought these qualities to his work in the classics. I wonder, then, whether we could close our discussion by you reading aloud part of your review of the Polly Findlay production of *Antigone*? (I've edited it quite a lot, I'm afraid). I know it is rather putting you on the spot, Jon, but I would love you to read it because your words pay tribute not only to the production but also to Don Taylor, to his writing, and to that 'continuing fire that warms us from Athens.' Would you mind reading it for us?

JDT. Of course I will. It will be my pleasure. Thank you.

'It's become a cliché to talk about how the greatest Greek plays effortlessly bridge the 2500 year gap since they were written, but my goodness this play is about things which are in our newspapers daily. Just look at this week's news. *Antigone* has something to say about Syria. About Leveson. About Charles Taylor's imprisonment and Julian Assange's extradition.

But it wasn't the 2500 year gap that was uppermost in my mind last night. It was the nine year one and the twenty-eight year one. Making no apologies for partiality, the crowning glory of this production is dad's extraordinarily tight, lucid, poetic, clear and theatrical translation. He started work on it in 1984, directed it for telly the same year, and died in 2003. It's an old translation, by anyone's lights; we're as far away from when he wrote it as he was then from Bill Haley and Hungary and Suez. But we don't even need to do this striking piece of maths. When he died, never mind when the translation was written, we lived in a very different society.

We were at war, just, when he died - but dad never lived to see the Messianic, god-told-me-to-do-it Blair, just the slick politico who smoothly paved the way for invasion. Dad was dead long before London exploded in 2005, when those four kids – Antigones themselves, or maybe Creons? – strapped bombs to their chests in the name of what they thought was right. And that means that he lived and died in a Britain where our civil liberties were never a major issue. He never worried about being scrutinized by government, or having his emails read, or leaving voicemails for friends that would be listened to by journalists. He didn't see our current government, which when it is caught out in lies tell us loftily and with a sense of entitlement that those lies don't matter. And yet in his interpretation, Sophocles' words, heard in 2012, don't sound like they written by a dead man a lifetime ago. They sound as if they were written tomorrow.

So, now, it's over to the inky scribblers to pronounce on the success or failure of this production. The initial signs are that the notices are going to be good. But that doesn't matter, because tonight something bigger than any review happened. Tonight a man who died 2500 years ago, and a man who died 9 years ago, got together with some actors and a director and a designer and a crew, and told us about a society neither of them ever saw, but which both of them understand.'

CC. Jon Taylor, thank you very much for reading that, and thank you for talking to me about your dad – Don Taylor.

JDT. Thank you. My pleasure.