The Island: Everlasting Prison

The Island, as described in South African playwright Athol Fugard's notebook, is "a rigid crowded square when the warder is present; an explosion into inner space when he leaves and they are alone." They are John and Winston, two prisoners on the Robben Island prison camp, rehearsing a performance of Antigone. The warder, a presence never physically seen, but felt, is Hodoshe.

Upon its 1973 premiere in the Space Theater in Cape Town, the play was given the Afrikaans title of Die Hodoshe Span, or "Hodoshe's Work Team." A direct reference to the very real Robben Island, the infamous prison where Nelson Mandela was held for 23 years, would have been unacceptable to the South African government at that time. "Hodoshe" is a Xhosan word, which means "carrion fly." It is the name the prisoners gave to a particularly brutal guard, and a word which well represents the parasitic apartheid regime.

The Island was devised by Athol Fugard, John Kani, and Winston Ntshona. The play's creation and presentation in Cape Town in 1973, the men were invited to stage The Island in London. In order to obtain travel visas from the apartheid-bound government, John and Winston were forced to pose as Fugard's chauffeur and gardener, despite the fact that Fugard had neither a car nor a garden. The Island opened in London in 1974 and quickly moved to Broadway, where John and Winston were jointly awarded the Tony Award for Best Actor.

The Island was originally staged in the charged political atmosphere of an apartheid-era South Africa. The current revival points to The Island's greatness as a dramatic work. While the work is entrenched in a particular time, it reflects a universal reality, the experience of violent oppression of one group by another. In 1973, the unique political defiance of staging the work created economic and diplomatic pressure to end apartheid. Now it stands to remind us of an all-too-recent history and the danger of remaining silent and uncritical of an oppressive state.

Antigone and The Island

Antigone is drama's first and, perhaps, greatest conscientious objector. Part of the reason The Island succeeds as a drama outside of one particular time and place has a great deal to do with the play within the play, Antigone. The metaphorical power and cultural pervasiveness of Antigone argues for the constant relevance of human rights and can be viewed as veiled criticism of an abusive government and unworthy state.

The actual plot of Antigone is more complicated than the abbreviated version, featuring solely the characters of Creon and Antigone, enacted within The Island. The original play opens with King Creon's declaration of Polynices as a traitor, who will not be buried, but his sister Antigone defies the order. She is caught and sentenced by Creon's son Haemon. After the blind prophet Tiresias proves that the gods are on Antigone's side, Creon changes his mind, but it is too late. He goes first to bury Polynices, but Antigone has already hanged herself. When Creon arrives at the tomb, Haemon attacks him and then kills himself. When the news of their deaths are reported, Creon's wife Eurydice takes her own life. Creon is left alone.

Creon represents the State and nomos (law) and Antigone represents the will of the gods and physis (nature). The chorus shifts between calls to light and dark, attempting to illuminate and discern the truth. Creon is, at first, deemed correct, but as the play proceeds and Antigone defiantly denies Creon, the chorus begins to understand that the gods are, in fact, on Antigone's side. The confrontation between the state and the gods - supporting, ultimately, acts of defiance for the rights of humans - is the essence of not only Sophocles' work and time, but that of Kani, Ntshona, and Fugard.

Oppression by law is, in the end, overcome by the human spirit. Kani, Ntshona, and Fugard have called upon the Greek drama not just for metaphor, but for its power and connection to the act of catharsis - a release indicating hope and revelation out of dramatic order.

Gods of our Fathers! My Land! My Home! Times waits no longer. I go now to my living death, because I honored those things to which honor belongs.

- Winston, The Island