

Children's Theatre Co.s' 'Antigone' another strong, impressive effort

BY DOMINIC P. PAPATOLA

Theater Critic

With its current production of "Antigone," the Children's Theatre Company is trying to do two things that are next to impossible: They're trying to capture the bottled lightning of the company's 2003 staging. And they're trying to get the attention of teenagers.

That they won't succeed completely is a given. That they come as close as they do is pretty impressive.

Three years ago, CTC staged "Antigone" at Intermedia Arts, a place with solid urban-hip credentials. The current production takes place on the new Cargill Stage on the more benign campus that CTC shares with the Minneapolis Institute of Art.

Still, the theater's flexible second space works well for this "promenade" staging, in which there are no seats and the actors move in and around the audience. The lighting grid has been lowered and the boundaries of the playing area have been drawn in, to give the room an intimate, slightly claustrophobic atmosphere.

Scenic designer Joseph Stanley and costume designer Mary Anna Culligan go a little overboard, littering their created junkyard with crumbled newspapers, police tape and bandaged, bruised, raggedy-clad souls wandering around the space. Combined with the violin and accordion players strolling around in their faux finery, it looks a little too much like a gritty production of "Cabaret."

Most of the cast from the 2003 production has been reunited for this

staging, and their work is again stunning.

In the title role of a 15-year-old girl who defies her king by burying her disgraced dead brother, Sonja Parks demands attention.

She's a more flawed heroine this time — a victim, as the chorus says, of her own self-will. But when she casts those burning eyes into the audience and proclaims that "What a person can do, a person ought to do," it makes you want to run out and paint a picket sign for whatever you happen to believe in.

Luverne Seifert powers through his performance as Creon, showing full measures of hubris and insecurity as the besieged king. If you want to know what a jolt of electricity feels like, position between him and Shawn Hamilton — who plays his son Haemon — while they're arguing over Antigone's life. You can almost feel the sparks fly between them.

Director Greg Banks has amped up his original staging. This version feels louder, more percussive and more physical: Creon, trying to rid himself of the nettlesome Antigone, at one point actually picks her up and deposits her in the arms of an audience member, with instructions that she be brought to her room.

Much of the time, it works. When Marvette Knight comes onto the scene as the blind prophet Tiresias, she predicts doom accompanied by flashes of lightning. Probably the most galvanizing moment, it's the only time when the audience of teenagers with whom I saw the show were all absolutely silent.

But occasionally, the interaction between actors and the audience feels overly calculated. In their zeal to connect collectively with the 200 or so people that surround and follow them, there's a sense that opportunities for more intense interactions — a line, perhaps, directed specifically to a mouthy or inattentive teen — are being missed.

Teenagers have highly sensitive BS detectors, and while some of the young people with whom I attended periodically drifted away from the proceedings, they vectored in on the important parts — climbing onto a platform for a better look, chiding a classmate when they were called out during the show, sometimes even talking back to the characters.

Were they perfectly attentive? No. But they were engaged in an ancient story with contemporary resonance. And that's a pretty good start.

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When: through Nov. 19

Where: Cargill Stage, Children's Theatre Company, 2400 Third Av. S., Mpls.

Tickets: \$28 for adults, \$18 for teens

Call: 612-874-0400

Capsule: CTC's teen programming takes another step forward with a powerful production.