

'Antigone' — hero for our times, too

by Linda Blaker Hirsch

There are few women heroes — classical or contemporary. That's why actor Denise Collins likes "Antigone." Although the language is strange, the story is familiar. She identifies with the Greek heroine. "Like Antigone, if I am right, I'll stand up for it," she says.

In fact, director Clay Stevenson of the Hartford Stage Company's Youth Theater Unlimited says he chose "Antigone" because "women are becoming more assertive. Many go into politics and demand a voice in government. This is a political play — not just rhetoric. The politics come out of the situation."

Indeed Antigone did fight against the will of the state for an honorable burial for her brother Polyneices. Her honor and determination cost her life. In ancient Greece, women were stoned for much less than insisting on the right to make decisions about burying bodies. Yet Antigone does what Collins says she would do. "Ac-

As she became more involved with Youth Theater Unlimited, Collins also volunteered for lighting, costumes and makeup in productions at her Manchester High School. Learning these skills added to her confidence. "I could see that I could help myself and didn't depend on anyone. I am using that information for myself now."

Collins has accumulated training as well. Winning a scholarship to participate in a Stevenson workshop, she learned acting techniques "to make the character more real for us." Warm-ups and dance movements, monologues and scenes opened her emotions and helped her find the character.

Certainly Collins is excited about playing Antigone. Her first starring role is an adventure. She will explore and discover more about herself, her limitations, her capabilities. And as strange as it is to act in an ancient play, complete with chorus and translated text, she is comfortable playing the role of a strong woman.

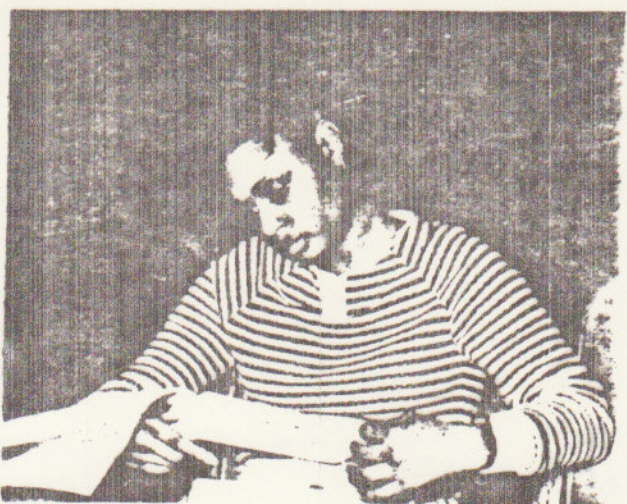
And as a strong actor, she is listening to her director when he tells her, "Denise, you're working for yourself, not for me. Explore the role from how you see the world."

This is an important point for Stevenson to get across because he thinks the times put people less and less "in touch with their feelings." "What can you do?" is the current refrain of the American chorus. "Young people study politics from a distant place," says Stevenson. "In truth, however, politics are a part of everyday life and political philosophy is a way of life. But these kids in the troupe have a political consciousness. They initiate political conversations."

Those conversations must be pithy, because Stevenson culls these kids from cities like Hartford and bedroom communities like Farmington. Does this make for a heterogeneous mix or a cultural clash?

Collins gives testimony to the former: "It is better for us. We are all actors. We all want the same thing — and that separates us from the rest of the world." Expanding on this theme, Stevenson notes, "Working in proximity, they learn about each other. They examine differences as well as similarities." Even through the differences, he maintains, they communicate, respecting each other through experiencing each other.

Touching bases with each other



Denise Collins studies script

puts the actors in touch with themselves and their character. "You have been hired to do this," the director tells his cast, "and I can't tell you how to feel." After all, he points out, anyone can read the play in her favorite easy chair. Anyone can understand the play intellectually. But "the subtext is what we have to feel and what the audience comes to experience," says Stevenson.

The interaction adds to the acting all the way around. On the day Stevenson spoke of it, the chorus and principals rehearsed together for the first time. It was good! And the cast built its individual self-esteem on the experience without having to ask "was I good?"

That self-esteem allows the young cast to accept Stevenson's sometimes eccentric methods. He makes funny noises to get the sounds he wants, rolls his eyes and sucks his teeth to express the gesture he is after, and the kids try it with wary adolescent giggles. How come? "Because they come with a need to grow and take themselves seriously," the director said. They also come to him with serious theater intentions.

And Stevenson's methods definitely lack the fun-and-games therapy of the usual teenage theater. Expecting them to be prepared, to do their homework, he treats them as he would any other professional. For

him, professional theater means honest theater: "working hard to get the truth."

"If you are working with someone who has facility," says this director, "adults and kids are not really different. Some actors have facility to see and to respond on an intuitive level, whether adult or young. You're in luck if you can get to those deeper levels."

But the young who are stage-fixated face a decision. Fifty young women auditioned for the coveted role of Antigone. Stevenson encourages those to trust their natural response. "People may see your life in other terms; they are not being vindictive, but aware of the lack of guarantee in theatre life." He suggests those youngsters ask themselves, "Do I have a choice? Can I see myself as a computer operator or a nurse?" Once the choice is made for theater, then they must fight for it!

The youngster must dovetail acting with academics. Collins takes a sensible viewpoint: "I'm 'here' and also 'there'. I maintain good grade averages as well as acting. And I am respected because I am able to do both." She isn't pressured by the considerable rehearsal time, which runs 3 p.m. to 9 p.m. after school and all day

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Clay Stevenson

ting aggressive and obnoxious." Antigone decides, in true fifth century fashion, that it would be better to die a noble death and put one's money where one's mouth is.

Collins welcomes playing with pathos rather than her usual sentimental roles. Stevenson has guided her through musicals like "Prodigal Sister" at the Artists' Collective and Youth Theater's production of "Boys From Syracuse." Collins stretched this experience in "Improvisation 1981," directed by Richard Dana at Manchester Community College.

Maybe the age of 17 is experience enough for musicals and improvisations, but is it ripe enough for an actor to play Antigone? Doesn't acting with depth require a tradition of experience that takes time to accumulate? Beginning to act at the age of two does extend Collins' tradition to 15 years, making a "veteran" of her. She says she was "always performing — little childish things: a little girl walking a tightrope (which was on the floor). I thought I was really doing something then!"



Rehearsal of 'Antigone' Chorus