

Young Thespians at Home in Ancient Greece

By DONNA DINOVELLI

The scene could have been something out of "Fame." In sneakers and sweatpants, running shoes and headbands, T-shirts and leg warmers, the teenagers were rehearsing their lines in what seemed like the basement of a high school for performing arts. Well, not exactly rehearsing: joking and smoking and mumbling some unintelligible jibberish about some city long ago.

Until the director stepped in. Under the gaze of Clay Stevenson, this seemingly undisciplined, uncaring crowd of adolescent actors became a classic Greek chorus.

"Hail the sun! The brightest of all that ever dawned on the city of Seven Gates, City of Thebes! Hail the golden

dawn over Dirce's river rising to speed the flight of the white invaders homeward in full retreat! The army of Polyneices was gathered against us, in angry dispute his voice was lifted against us, like a ravening bird of prey he swooped around us with white wings flashing, with flying plumes, with armed hosts ranked in thousands."

Here were about 20 kids, poised between the brink of adulthood and the soft bed of childhood, transforming themselves into ancient messengers of Greek tragedy. This was "Antigone." But given the enthusiasm conveyed by the youthful actors, the unknowing spectator might have thought it was "Grease." Seeming obstacles do not deter or intimidate them. The language is no stumbling block — "We have an excellent translation." The

not outdated — "It has much relevance for today."

And so the young thespians of Youth Theatre Unlimited gave up their winter vacation and their nights after school to rehearse for the production of "Antigone" by Sophocles which will be showcased at The Old Place, 65 Kinsley St., Feb. 25, 26 and 27 at 8 p.m. and Feb. 27 at 2 p.m. A special benefit performance is scheduled for Feb. 28 at 2 p.m. In March and April the troupe will tour area high schools.

Why?

The Director

"Like Martin Luther King said, 'If a man hasn't discovered something that he will die for, he isn't fit to live.'"

"Antigone," Stevenson explained, is about a young person "taking a posi-

tion," deciding what is worth dying for and what is worth living for.

"It's not just about rebelling against authority but questioning it," he said. When Antigone, daughter of Oedipus, decides to defy the king in order to bury her dead brother, she is taking a political position which ultimately threatens her own life. But, Stevenson explains, this making of a responsible decision, a political decision, says much to the adolescent who is moving into the adult, and therefore the political, arena.

"The theater is supposed to be about taking a position. The play doesn't offer a solution... but it is a compassionate play."

Stevenson added that the Greek classics have the "stigma" of being "nothing but boring." But he finds them dramatic, exciting and full of spectacle, far from "archaic and static."

Stevenson's conviction seems to have rubbed off on the young actors. His control over them stems from a combination his own charisma and their respect for his past experience. They know he has worked with Howard Rollins, who recently garnered an Oscar nomination as Best Supporting Actor for his performance in "Ragtime." (Rollins appeared in "Mojo," the Alice Childress one-act play that Stevenson directed last fall at the Lunchtime Theater and which many considered the hit of the short but successful season.)

Stevenson has also used his dance background (he minored in dance at the Boston Conservatory of Music) to choreograph a brawling macho ballet for six members of the chorus. The ballet opens the play.

He speaks of the multi-racial group that he directs with respect. "They haven't learned to be cynical. I haven't had to treat them with kid gloves. I don't have to think about their attitudes." On the other hand, he said, they are quite willing to "joke with me about my shortcomings" — chief among them that he changes his mind about what he wants in a certain scene. He tells them he doesn't know exactly



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what he wants from an actor until he hears it.

The Kids

The actors for "Antigone" were chosen on a percentage basis to insure participation by experienced actors, those with untapped talent, and those with as yet only latent interest. Of the cast, 50 percent had some kind of involvement with the theater in the past; 25 percent showed pure potential; and another 25 percent displayed interest only.

One member of the chorus in a black "Queen" T-shirt has his hair parted in the middle. "Hey, you trying to look like Howard Rollins?" says a fellow chorus member. "Yes," is the answer, "but my hair's too long."

The blind prophet Tiresias walks around the basement of the Old Place in sneakers and green sweatpants waiting for his time to rehearse.

When it comes time to talk about their futures, they trade names such as

Jaillard, New York University and Boston University like baseball cards that lend their owner a special prestige. When they talk of "Antigone" or Stevenson, they are serious.

Denise Collins, a 17-year-old senior at Manchester High School, plays Antigone. "I am someone like her. Politically, she was a liberated woman." Taking her cue on method acting from Stevenson, she has thought long about what kind of a person Antigone would have been. "You make the character real for yourself... you find that character in yourself."

Collins, who hopes for a career in theater, said Stevenson has taught them how "to use all our body. It's not just saying lines, but you have to train your body, your voice, your eyes."

Tom Desrocher, an 18-year-old from Penney High School in East Hartford, plays the part of Haemon, engaged to marry Antigone and son to Creon, the ruler.



Youth Theater chorus rehearsing a scene in their production of "Antigone."

Youth Theatre Sets 'Antigone'

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He readily talks at great length about his character. Haemon is an "intelligent, reasonable person, in contrast to his father who acts on his gut feelings. He is open instead of acting like a horse with blinders on. He loves his father."

Luis Robles, 17, and Gregory Thomas, 18, both of Hartford, are standouts in the chorus and the pivotal dancers in the ballet. They too talk of what they've learned during the process of rehearsing for "Antigone."

Robles: "I believe you have to be honest, you can't just dismiss things. You have to deal with it ... the theater has a lot to say about now."

Thomas: "I've learned how to respect acting and take the character serious as if it was a real human being."

The Organization

The Youth Theatre Unlimited has an image problem. It has changed names recently, and changed addresses too, leading many to think it is the Hartford Stage Company Youth Theater, which performs in the summer.

Youth Theatre Unlimited is, in fact, the offshoot of the Institute for the Study and Development of Youth Theatre Inc., which began in Hartford in 1973. Since that time it has given acting classes and worked with other educational and youth organizations to bring drama to high school students.

When "Antigone" winds up its run at the Old Place, the company will tour 13 area public and private secondary schools. The Institute, headed by Phyllis Robinson, has also prepared a 30-minute videotape to be shown in the high schools before the staging of the play so that the students will be prepared to understand its theme, plot and characterizations.

In the past, the Institute has received funding from local foundations and a variety of other sources including the National Endowment for the Arts. A recent grant from United Technologies Corp. underwrote the publication of a book called "Careers in the Performing Arts," aimed at helping high school students decide on the ifs and hows of a career on the stage.

Robinson said there has been a recent surge of interest in her group because of the popularity of the television version of "Fame," which tells of a group of students in a high school for the performing arts. Maybe one day, she said, such a high school will be a reality in Hartford and then her organization may cease to exist. But for now it is this organization which provides the education for the kids with a theatrical bent.

It was just the other day that the student who plays Tiresias, the blind prophet, said, "I don't know what it is, but I love the theater."

That, said Robinson, is what the organization with the confusing name is all about.

Donna Dinovelli is a free-lance writer who frequently covers arts-related topics for the *Courant*.