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From The Times

October 11, 2008

Derek Walcott and Seamus Heaney take on The Burial at Thebes

Two grand old men of letters, Derek Walcott and Seamus Heaney, tell our correspondent about friendship and a joint opera



Andrew Billen

RECOMMEND? (3)

If, a couple of Mondays ago, on your way to pay your council tax at Woolwich town hall you happened to get lost and found yourself in its basement, you would have chanced upon not one but two winners of the Nobel Prize for Literature. Seamus Heaney, the English language's most-read living poet, should surely, I thought, be digging a sod somewhere or debating poetry over a Guinness. And, even at 78, his fellow grand old man of letters, the Caribbean author Derek Walcott, would have looked more himself striding from the waves on to one of the St Lucian beaches evoked in his great poem, *Osmeros*.

But here the two friends were in southeast London, scruffy jackets, crumpled brief-cases at their feet, up to their ears in a project that in itself sounds like a game of Consequences: an opera adapted from Heaney's *The Burial at Thebes*, a version of Sophocles' *Antigone*, to be directed by Walcott and staged at Shakespeare's Globe. It is the Globe's first opera, the first opera Walcott has directed and about the seventh Heaney will have ever been to.

The poets were having fun, or at least the thrice-married Walcott was, flinging his arms round his *Antigone*, the German singer Idit Arad, who remarked, in praise of Heaney, how unusual it was to sing arias containing thoughts more complex than "I love you, I love you. Don't leave me, don't leave me." Heaney confined himself to reminding Brian Green, singing the part of the tyrant Creon, not to rely on the Faber edition of *The Burial at Thebes*, as he had changed some lines for the libretto.

The conductor, Peter Manning, whose company is producing the piece, eventually called lunch, and the laureates and I retired to a room where a dancer was rehearsing. As he flew around the space, we sat on plastic chairs, a pile of M&S sandwiches behind us.

Heaney seemed to regard this operafication of *The Burial at Thebes* as a *fait accompli*. Eighteen months ago, he had received a letter from the composer Dominique Le Gendre saying that she and Manning intended making an opera of his 2004 reworking of Sophocles' tragedy of personal versus civic duty. He did not like to object, especially since Walcott was committed and he had long wanted Heaney to write a play he could direct.

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"And this play is operatic in itself," Heaney conceded. "On the Greek stage there would have been dance and songs, so there must have been some kind of music. And for me the great thing, and I am sure for the choreographer, is to have the poetry made physical."

"Irene Papas, the Greek actress, said that the closest thing to a Greek play is an American musical," interjected Walcott, who a decade ago directed one of Broadway's great flops, Paul Simon's *Caveman*. "I am from the Caribbean and I like to see physical movement. So I thought a dancer would be like an abstraction of what the chorus is saying. I didn't want a whispering, Waspy treatment. I wanted it exultant."

Heaney's play had kept the action in Ancient Greece. For the opera, after toying with setting it in the Middle East, Walcott chose to place it in a Latin American dictatorship, unnamed, although he had in mind the Dominican Republic and that "son of a bitch Trujillo". The journalist in him had considered Mugabe's Zimbabwe or Saddam's Iraq.

"Well," Heaney said, "the play was commissioned in 2003 and came out in 2004. Creon says at some point, 'I flushed them out. Whoever isn't for me is against me.' And, of course, they were trapped like the Democratic Party or the American electorate. If the people say anything against Creon, they are traitors. It is a terrific political play. It was the best play about Iraq you could imagine, or about the American situation of the time."

Walcott added: "And our Creon will be wearing a suit. The suit is a lethal thing now. In Hollywood they talk about the suits and look at these dictators in their suits!"

"But," Heaney objected, "the thing is he is not quite a dictator. He's a head prefect. There's something in me responds to Creon's position, you know. He has to hold the line."

"You are a natural dictator," teased Walcott, leaving us to it.

"No, no, no," protested the Irishman. "It is more that I would like to think myself as more Sophoclean in understanding the tyrant and understanding Antigone. I keep quoting this line in any interview I'm cornered in, but it covers everything. Yeats said he had attempted to hold in a single thought, reality and justice. I mean I did a song about Bloody Sunday which was sung immediately afterwards. I did a song about the first baton charge of the civil rights march in Derry and so on, and that is a form of political action but it's not what I think of my calling to be, you know."

Heaney was born in a farmhouse 30 miles northwest of Belfast in 1939 and held a British passport until he moved with his family to the Republic in 1972 and failed to renew it. I supposed that holding an Irish passport ruled him out of becoming our next Poet Laureate. He said it did not, actually, and that after Ted Hughes's death in 1998 he had been informally sounded out. "But I didn't think it was my job in any way. Someone said at that stage it would be a very good symbolic action. I said, 'The time for symbols is past. What we need is action.'"

The pair met in the late Seventies when Heaney reviewed Walcott's collection, *The Star-Apple Kingdom*, which includes his classic poem, *The Schooner Flight*. Walcott dropped him a note of thanks and they met in a New York pub. Then they found themselves teaching in Boston, Heaney at Harvard and Walcott at Boston University. They ate Chinese meals together in Walcott's apartment, and, though they were already middle-aged, felt young in each other's company.

Had they felt like accomplices in the minority activity of versification. "Not really, no. When you meet other poets, that disappears. No paranoia, no sense of minority. Nothing like that," Heaney said. "The other thing that brought us together was a sense of humour, mockery and that again is young poets' stuff. And I think there was a sense of sharing and being at an ironical distance from, if you like, the English tradition of English literature and of English culture. Because I'm doing English in Belfast and he's doing English in St Lucia and we both know English and the English and we're not English ourselves."

Heaney is now in his 70th year. The cuttings record how many friends' memorial services he has been speaking at recently (his first was Robert Lowell's in 1977). Until now he had not spoken about his own ill health.

"I had a stroke a couple of years ago and I stopped running around. It wasn't too bad in that I was paralysed down the left side. My speech wasn't affected. My memory wasn't affected and it took me five weeks to get back on balance and then, well, a pacemaker etc, etc. So I came back. But I changed my ways. I

CARL BARAT



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cancelled everything for a year. I mean, I'd taken on a lot."

Was death creeping into his work? "Slightly more elegiac than before, maybe, but no. No. Funnily enough I wasn't scared because I was very lucky at the time. Well, I didn't know what the hell had happened. I woke up with . . ."

He paused. "I think that's probably enough about that." He did not like talking about it.

Back in the main hall the rehearsal was about to begin again and we noticed that the once great pile of sandwiches had one by one disappeared leaving us hungry.

I interrupted Walcott's latest flirtation and asked about the vacancy for poet laureate. He pleaded that he needed to spend time in St Lucia. "But I do not think it is a joke job." Yes, if the terms were right he would accept. Now Heaney and I noticed that Walcott was carrying two packs of sandwiches. Bad poets, we recalled, borrow; great ones steal. We should soon know Walcott's intentions for the work he had taken from his friend. It was, I felt, a grand poetic larceny of which Sophocles would have approved.

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