

# Antigone in the Voice of Mediterranean Youth

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The project “Antigone 2.0 Mediterranean” is a story about educational and theatre innovation based on an idea by the teacher Miroslav Minić that arose during literature classes at the secondary school in Danilovgrad, a city in Montenegro. It is also a story about the Mediterranean Citizens’ Assembly Foundation, which resulted in a youth project that managed to connect several shores, five countries, around ten schools, and teachers and students from all over the Mediterranean basin. Over seventy students together with their teachers wrote texts inspired by the Sophocles classic and created their Antigones in plays from Podgorica and Valencia to Oran, Rabat, Asilah, Nador and Beirut. Despite the pandemic and isolation, the voice of young people, which is so important, was heard throughout the Mediterranean. They were concerned about the same issues, regardless of their differences. For nine months, the rehearsals were recorded and interviews were conducted with all the participants. The result is the documentary *Antigone 2.0 Méditerranée*, screened in different festivals in the region and witness to this teaching innovation initiative.

## In a School in Montenegro...

The secondary school in Danilovgrad, a small town in Montenegro, has been known for many years for its extracurricular activities, which encourage and develop interest, curiosity, independence and creativity outside the framework of regular teaching and in a manner that addresses students’ psychophysical ability. For years, plays, exhibitions, short films, and so on, have been produced, and its students have participated in numerous contests. And in 2014, the school received the highest state recognition for education: the Oktoih Award.

In early 2020, the students wanted to create a new play. Their literature teacher, the journalist Miroslav Minić, brought them together, and they began to think about what they wanted to tackle.

Around this time the call for the first Dialogue 2020 Secondary School Theatre Festival had just been launched, organised by the mixed secondary school in Golubovci with the support of the Ministry of Education of Montenegro. The rules of the contest required the participants to write an original play. The students and teacher embarked on the adventure of developing it through numerous workshops and very soon a real creative energy began to emerge. In their literature classes they had been analysing the classic heroes for a long time and never stopped looking for parallels with their true heroes of today. One of the most important plays in world literature is undoubtedly Sophocles’ *Antigone*, written in the 5th century BC, which today continues to be relevant everywhere and fully engages with the audience. In the workshops,

the teacher proposed a discussion about the characters in Sophocles' tragedy, their decisions and actions, tragic heroes and guilt... As the conditions of the contest required an original play, they decided that each student, with the help of a teacher as mentor, would write their own story, their own reflections inspired by *Antigone*. Each student told an authentic story: thus, problems emerged including peer violence or bullying, the position of women, discrimination, environmental pressure, young people leaving the country, the omnipresent kitsch... Through the piece, they created a story about apathy, mentality, humanity and identity.

As they all showed that they wanted a better world and society, that they wanted to fight for their ideals, they were all Antigone in the play, so they called it *Antigona 2.0*, as an invitation to readers and future audiences to immediately understand that this is a new, modern "updated" Antigone.

March 2020 brought the pandemic and, as in the rest of the world, the lockdown closed schools in Montenegro, and classes went online. The eight students and their teacher decided to go ahead. At night, meeting in the virtual space, they reread the lines, continued with the rehearsals, and talked about the set design. The young people, creative and brave, turned their stories and personal experiences into actions that opened up very important issues.

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In June 2020, they heard the news that *Antigona 2.0* was receiving the award for best play in the Dialogue 2020 Theatre Festival. The jury, comprising directors and playwrights, explained their decision: "This drama has been valued, above all, for its originality. It weaves in the theme of youth and sends a strong message

about understanding the resulting violence. The critical approach is based on society's reaction to violence, and not on the victim-aggressor pairing. It is precisely here that this drama differs from others submitted for the contest. The prevailing idea is that even more terrible and stronger than the violence itself is the silence that legitimises it.

Summer holidays came, but the students and their teacher continued to rehearse. As the state of the pandemic in Montenegro improved, rehearsals began to be organised in person, at school, at the Karver bookstore in Podgorica, in parks... in short, in public spaces. *Antigona 2.0* took the form of a piece that is the synthesis of the classic play, but also has overtones of cabaret or a rock concert. The young actors showed their talent and skills in different ways: through words, writing, music, performance or movement, and all of it managed to be summarised in a dramatic whole.

In September 2020 came the premiere at the Festival of International Alternative Theatre in Montenegro, a benchmark in the region for decades. The play premiered on the roof terrace of the Budo Tomović Cultural Information Centre in Podgorica following sanitary measures and with limited audience capacity. It was striking to see the large audiences staying under the stairs to listen to a performance that no one could describe as amateur.

Notably, this first premiere since the outbreak of the pandemic was a sign of the seriousness and enthusiasm of the students of the secondary school in Danilovgrad, and that the entire creative process had been carried out altruistically. The critics instantly recognised the merit of the piece, and the main national newspaper of Montenegro, the *Pobjeda*, wrote: "From the perspective of adolescence, this play deals seriously and profoundly with the growth and creation of identity in the environment of a disturbed value system. The current local context of discrimination, degrading and devastating influence of the dominant cultural models, and of

course violence, is seen through the need to show these failures of society as a whole, as a kind of appeal and a call to awaken parents and children. In a wider perspective, the play *Antigona 2.0* breaks the stereotype of the ignorance of young people as a theatre audience in Montenegro and reassesses the need to create projects like this.”

The play was also performed on the big stage of the Arts Centre in Tivat and the Arts Centre in Danilovgrad. It was a starting pistol, and every media outlet in Montenegro wrote about it – and more importantly, both its aesthetic and educational qualities.

### A Mediterranean History...

After the great success of the play, the Mediterranean Citizens' Assembly Foundation (MCAF) recognised its educational and intercultural potential and decided to work on it together with its circle in Montenegro, led by Minić and the journalist and cultural manager Zorka Kovacevic, to expand it to a greater number of young people from the basin belonging to the MCAF network. It was also agreed to invite the Montenegrin students and Minić to Valencia, within the framework of the Mostra Viva del Mediterrani international festival, to perform the play and discuss future projects. Unfortunately, due to the pandemic, travelling from Montenegro to Spain was impossible, so the Algorós Youth Centre, under Valencia City Council, hosted the online performance of *Antigona 2.0*. Moreover, the activity was streamed along with several interviews with participants and protagonists of the play. After this first international performance, the president of the MCAF, Vicent Garcés, highlighted that the objective of the project was to turn it into an international and Mediterranean initiative “that would allow young people from the entire Mediterranean region to have a common dialogue through the theatre of Sophocles, as

well as reflect on the societies in which they want to grow up.” So, in 2021 “Antigone 2.0 Mediterranean” was created, an initiative of the MCAF with the support of the Anna Lindh Foundation, in cooperation with the Mostra Viva del Mediterrani festival and funded by the European Union. The project included participants from five Mediterranean countries and seven cities or circles of the MCAF: Valencia (Spain), Podgorica (Montenegro), Nador, Asilah and Rabat (Morocco), Oran (Algeria) and Beirut (Lebanon). In August 2021, the project crystallised into seven different plays with audience in seven Mediterranean cities, thanks to cooperation with various organisations in these five countries (Amel, Le Petit Lecteur, Asticude, Fomeje, Cafe Europe and MVM) with extensive institutional support.

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The first step was to write the manual “Theatre as a Tool for Promoting Intercultural Dialogue Between Mediterranean Youth”, a kind of guide for teachers from the seven participating cities. This methodological manual was written by the actress and drama teacher Maria Colomer and the teacher Miroslav Minić, art coordinators of the entire project. The text was translated into Spanish, Montenegrin, French, Arabic and English.

At the same time, an international selection process was opened for the teachers of the project, who were asked to recognise motivation in young people and choose up to ten students, who would be responsible for writing the pieces and putting on the performance. Selection processes, creative reading workshops and preliminary work and structuring sessions were held in the seven Mediterranean cities. Students analysed Sophocles' play, and teach-

ers helped them channel their experiences to connect with readers. This process also included the assistant director, mostly in charge of students or teachers of dramatic art and theatre direction. In rehearsals, students from across the Mediterranean analysed and deconstructed Sophocles and his *Antigone* for months, while their mentors helped them express their experiences, reinterpret them, and put them in a new context for audiences. The groups had an assigned budget that enabled the staging, the costumes... in short, the planning of the play.

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In the sessions, various topics were discussed: who are the Antigones of today, what qualities do these heroes or heroines have that allow young people to recognise them?, what are human rights for these young people – some of them activists for human rights, against gender violence and intra-family violence; environmental activists; activists for a diverse education for minorities or disadvantaged groups in society, etc. Once the piece was written, mentors and students decided on the aesthetic approach: theatre forum, text-based, physical, musical theatre... or a combination of all of the above. Along with the onsite sessions in each city, the Mediterranean Citizens' Assembly Foundation held online meetings with the participants, who exchanged opinions, established debates and constructed their pieces together. The MCAF team was in charge of strengthening the link behind this symbiosis, with Esmā Kućukalić as director, Marine Fournier Ramos as project manager, and Chantal Ferrari and Gustavo Pérez Colomer as the team that organised, translated, harmonised and monitored the project to ensure correct implementation. The mentors – in addition to creative directors Miroslav Minić and

Maria Colomer – were Jihad Fawza Karrami from Rabat, Bougrassa Djawed from Oran, Abdel Illah Fouad from Asilah, and Abdrazak El Omari from Nador.

All the performances represented the life of the young people outside the stage and resulted in very complex pieces. Although the groups dealt with problems in their own countries, all the plays explored a possible, more beautiful and better life in the Mediterranean. Each show was built as a story in itself, with its introduction, middle and end and without an idea of pathetic catharsis. But, although independently functional, the plays made it possible to see the whole and understand that investing in young people and working with them is actually investing in the future of the Mediterranean and the world.

### International Premieres...

The presentation of the project “Antigone 2.0 Mediterranean” was in June 2021 in Valencia, in La Nau Cultural Centre of Valencia University. The teacher Minić and Maria Colomer were accompanied by the Vice-Rector for Culture, Ester Alba, and the Youth Councillor for Valencia, Maite Ibáñez. It was an international premiere that could be followed online from all cities, and included the participation of the mentors Bougrassa Djawed from Oran, Jihad El Karrami from Rabat, Azzouz Bougladour and Abdrazak El Omari from Nador, and Abdel Illah Fouad from Asilah, giving the event an international character.

Immediately afterwards, the curtain rose to offer the premiere of the play created by students from Valencia under the direction of Maria Colomer and Susu Benítez about Antigones based on stories about visas. The premiere of *Teret / The Load—Antigone 2.0 Mediterranean* was in Montenegro in August 2021, this time at the Budo Tomović Cultural Information Centre in Podgorica. The play was written and

directed by Miroslav Minić with the students Filip Ćuković, Nikolina Dobre, Vasilije Marunović, Miloš Smolović, Anja Jankovic and Petar Drljević, who also performed it.

After Spain and Montenegro came the premieres in the cities of Asilah, Nador, Rabat and Oran. Unfortunately, due to the difficult conditions of the pandemic in Lebanon, the premiere in Beirut did not go ahead. In August, the world premiere of the documentary *Antigone 2.0 Méditerranée* was held in Podgorica, and was directed by the journalist Esma Kucukalic, accompanied by several leading figures from the Balkan regional cultural scene, such as the writer Svetlana Jovetić Koprivica, the actress Varja Đukić and the film critic Vuk Perović. The film will also premiere at the Underhill Fest, the documentary film festival in Podgorica, as well as in other Mediterranean cities that participated in the project, the Socialmed Valencia festival and the Sarajevo Winter Festival in Bosnia and Herzegovina.

Despite the distance in time and the original language of the play, Antigone is a heroine with

whom it is easy to find points of identification, since she represents the universal values that characterise human beings. Young people easily recognise all the principles on which this myth is built: universal justice, the tragedy represented by the relationship between the heroine and Charon – where violence, loneliness, injustice, the fight for a set of principles, humanity, empathy, breaking with stereotypes and social clichés, or the values of solidarity and diversity are present –, and apply them to their current parameters and life experiences, all of them challenges in Mediterranean societies that are addressed in a dysfunctional way. In Sophocles' tragedy, Antigone declares: "I was born to share love, not hate." In the seven plays that emerged through this project, none of the participants speak these words, but they transcend all performances. Although the project participants share kilometres of distance that divide them into continents, languages, nations or religions, they all shared the same idea: "We want to project our voice and change the world for the better through ourselves."



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