

DIDASKALIA 

The Journal for Ancient Performance



Didaskalia is an electronic journal dedicated to the study of all aspects of ancient Greek and Roman performance.

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About Didaskalia

Didaskalia (διδασκαλία) is the term used since ancient times to describe the work a playwright did to teach his chorus and actors the play. The official records of the dramatic festivals in Athens were the διδασκαλία. *Didaskalia* now furthers the scholarship of the ancient performance.

Didaskalia is an English-language, online publication about the performance of Greek and Roman drama, dance, and music. We publish peer-reviewed scholarship on performance and reviews of the professional activity of artists and scholars who work on ancient drama.

We welcome submissions on any aspect of the field. If you would like your work to be reviewed, please write to editor@didaskalia.net at least three weeks in advance of the performance date. We also seek interviews with practitioners and opinion pieces. For submission guidelines, go to didaskalia.net.

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Note

Didaskalia is an online journal. This print representation of Volume 9 is an inadequate approximation of the web publication at didaskalia.net, which includes sound, video, and live hyperlinks.

Sophocles' *Elektra*

Translated by Anne Carson
 Directed by Thomas Moschopoulos
 Tom Patterson Theater
 Stratford Shakespeare Festival
 Stratford, Ontario
 July 29 to September 29, 2012¹

Review by Ruth Scodel
University of Michigan

The Tom Patterson Theater at Stratford, Ontario, is an intimate space (496 seats) with seating around a runway-style thrust stage. This production was the third Greek play that I have seen in this space, the first two being a fine, taut, *Medea* in the Jeffers adaptation in 2000, with Seanna McKenna at her best, and a noisy, colorful, but uninspired *Birds* whose last ten minutes or so were lost in the great blackout of August 2003 (and not much regretted). This production makes superb use of the space. The immense double door often dominates in the best tragic manner, although it is flanked by piles of black plastic garbage bags, from which potsherds are scattered, apparently to symbolize the fragmentation of the family. The stage is fenced by light posts (Elektra is imprisoned). Folding chairs around the perimeter give the chorus an alternative to standing when they listen. The center of the long stage is occupied by three tables, on each of which rests a fragment of an immense *kouros*, which presumably represents Agamemnon. The tables also serve as platforms and as writing surfaces, as if the tablets of the mind have been made literal, and they provide a surface for the chorus to use for rhythmic percussion. (Narratives in particular are accompanied by rhythmic pounding; the Old Man beats with a staff during the false account of Orestes' death. Initially I found this exciting, but it became mildly irritating after a while; I gather from the program that the director has the idea that rhapsodes performed this way. The director also says that tragic choruses did not wear masks. There are other errors in the program, too.)



Laura Condlin (left) as Chrysothemis and Yanna McIntosh as Elektra. (Photo by Cylla von Tiedemann.)

The colloquial and fast-moving translation works on the stage. Sometimes it modernizes ethically in a way I do not like: "do not breed violence out of violence" for μη τίκτειν σ' ἄταν ἄταις invites an anachronistic interpretation, and "violate Elektra" for τοῦμὲ μὴ λυπεῖν imports modern ideas of the authentic self. The translation does not introduce Christian echoes too often, however, and it often has real power.

There are seven women in the chorus, and both they and Yanna McIntosh (Elektra) can sing. The composer, Kornilios Selamsis, gives them haunting, lyrical, music. Having so restricted a space may actually be an advantage: each movement has an effect. This production would be well worth attending only to experience a really effective chorus. To be sure, the chorus does not seem to represent any social group or present a coherent attitude, and so it comes to feel almost as if it is an Other projected by Elektra—an effect that works well, since the loneliness of this Elektra is overwhelming.

The colorblind casting is not really colorblind at all. While the chorus members are racially mixed (Sarah Afful is Ghanaian-Canadian), none is as dark as McIntosh, and the visual contrast between her and Laura

Condlin (Chrysothemis, a beautifully modulated performance) and Seanna McKenna (Clytemestra) was essential to the overall effect: Elektra does not belong to this family. The contrast is accentuated by her costume, which includes a black oversized sweater, dark-rimmed glasses, and clunky black shoes (it unfortunately reminded me of Daria, the heroine of an MTV animated series in the late 90s, but the strength of McIntosh's performance overcame this small problem). The chorus wears a sort of postmodern-classical mixture, with bits of the texts inscribed on their garments (supporting the fragmentation theme, I suppose). Clytemestra wears an elegant suit, a scarf, and high heels, Chrysothemis a light brown outfit with sunglasses and heels. Pylades looks like a street thug, and behaves like one.

Orestes at the beginning wears only knee-length underpants, and he is carried or supported by Pylades and the Old Man. He is explicitly and consistently infantilized. For the recognition and murder, he wears Bermuda-length shorts and knee socks (he puts on a butcher's apron before he enters the house to kill his mother); the outfit seems designed to evoke the uniform of the Hitler Youth. He spends a good section of the play buried in a glass coffin full of sand at the end of the runway. Towards the end, he is uncertain and robotic.

And this is where I have some trouble with this production. This Orestes is an utter weakling, a puppet of the real movers of the action, the vicious-looking Pylades and the smooth, manipulative Old Man. Similarly, Clytemestra has no depth at all. It is obvious, when she talks about Iphigenia, that this is a mere excuse—she is a world-class rich bitch. Aigisthos is a playboy. These interpretations would work very well in a production that wanted a happy ending; when Aigisthos suggests, for example, that the deed cannot be noble if they need to hide it inside, we have the impression of a man who is accustomed to being able to talk his way out of all difficulties, so that the audience does not need to take what he says seriously. Indeed, he uses his talk to prepare for a sudden attempt to escape, which Pylades stops. This performance, however, does not end happily; with this Orestes, it could not.

The weakness of Orestes allows for a distinct and moving conclusion, as Elektra is left alone outside the doors (although Carson's stage direction has Elektra follow Orestes and Pylades inside). She cannot get in; it is still not her house, and her brother will not provide her with any comfort. That she should marry this Pylades is unimaginable. The chorus concludes by repeatedly chanting that the children have reached "the finish line," but the irony lies not in any expectation that the Furies will appear, but in the likelihood that, although Elektra is now nominally free, she is still utterly isolated and trapped. "The finish line" may be a real end, but is an end of hope for the family, not an end to its sufferings. Elektra needed her brother not only for revenge, but to love her and to give her a place in a social order, and this Orestes obviously cannot do that. It is a moving conclusion and a fine modernizing twist.

Yet I cannot help but be a little troubled by this interpretation. Clytemestra is apparently based on the Helen of *Orestes*; Pylades probably shows the influence of the *Orestes*, too. Orestes seems to be an extreme version of the character from Euripides' *Elektra*. Sophocles' *Elektra* has been dropped into a play otherwise populated by Euripidean characters. Carson's translation, which puts Sophocles' play in a volume called *An Oresteia* with Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* on one side and Euripides' *Orestes* on the other—all translated in similar style—perhaps invites this. I would surely be less troubled if the director had interpreted the characters on his own. But whichever of the tragedians wrote his *Elektra* first (I think Euripides is likelier), and whatever the difficulties in inferring authorial intention, I am reasonably confident that Sophocles intended his play and his characters to be his own. It seems a cruel trick on him to corrupt it with figures from another playwright.

note

¹ Editor's note: Dana E. Aspinall reviews the same production in Number 12 of this volume (<http://www.didaskalia.net/issues/9/12/>).