

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.

2011 Staff

Editor-in-Chief:	Amy R. Cohen	editor@didaskalia.net +1 434 947-8117
		Post: <i>Didaskalia</i> Randolph College 2500 Rivermont Avenue Lynchburg, VA 24503 USA
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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.

Alexis, A Greek Tragedy

Created by Motus (Italy)

Directed by Enrico Casagrande and Daniela Nicolò

Performed at Under the Radar Festival, La MaMa (Ellen Stewart Theater), New York

January 4–14, 2011

Review by Aktina Stathaki

Alexis, A Greek Tragedy, a new production by the Italian group Motus presented in the 2011 Under the Radar Festival at the Ellen Stewart Theater (La MaMa), is in many ways a theatrical essay on the character of Antigone and its projection onto contemporary questions of social dissent. Its premise is simple: who is Antigone today? As the play text lays bare the group's working process, we are told that Motus were conducting workshops exploring this question when they heard of the shooting of 15 year old Alexis Grigoropoulos by the police and the subsequent widespread rioting in the center of Athens in 2008. The group set out on a trip to Greece in search of the character of Antigone in the midst of those events and

collected information on the incident. This quest fed into their workshop process and the result was the creation of *Alexis*, a documentary theater piece including footage of the riots and the neighborhood of Exarchia (where the shooting happened), interviews with residents and intellectuals living in the area, personal thoughts about the group's journey, and rehearsals of scenes from the tragedy, interspersed with comments on the artistic process itself—explorations of how facts from the actual events (what the boy wore, what the mother said) can influence the performance of *Antigone*. According to its creators, Enrico Casagrande and Daniela Nicolò, *Alexis* is a call to action. But the performance, created in 2010, feels outdated and surpassed by the reality outside the theater. The massive current worldwide protest movements make *Alexis* already seem a thing of the past, slightly reminiscent of the 1970s performance experiments in getting the bourgeois audiences out of their comfortable seats (especially towards the end of *Alexis*, when audience members are invited on stage one by one to join the cast in simulated rock throwing). But outside the theater the bourgeoisie of today has become the 99% and already taken to the streets. While *Alexis* is spent talking about action, theatrical action is absent, and the complexity of the social action on the streets remains unaccounted for.



From *Alexis, A Greek Tragedy*. Photo by Pierre Borasci

Tragic action, social action

Antigone is focused on the burial of Polynices' corpse. The statesman Creon has prohibited the burial on the grounds that Polynices is an enemy of the state, but Antigone defies his decree and buries her brother in fulfillment of familial and religious duty. The dead body and the act of burial trigger a conflict between two different sets of responsibilities (to the family and to the state) that a citizen carries in a democracy. In the course of the play the two poles of the conflict (Antigone and Creon) become increasingly fixed in their viewpoints, bringing about personal and civic catastrophe. Between those two extremes there is a physically present chorus of elderly Thebans who maintain allegiance to Creon while trying to inspire some moderation in him, as well as an invisible implied 'chorus', the body of citizens, who, we are told, support Antigone in her action but are too afraid to speak up.

One would expect that a serious contemporary attempt to grapple with the figure of Antigone—given especially her popularity in explorations of civic disobedience—would dig deeply into the dynamics of her conflict with Creon, the significance of the tragic elements (i.e., tragic action, chorus), and the play’s structure (i.e., how the characters shift in the course of the play) beyond the easy and overused binary symbolism Antigone = resistance / Creon = tyranny. It is therefore surprising to see how little thought and exploration of the actual tragedy have gone into *Alexis*. Beyond the question “Who is Antigone today?” and a few text excerpts, there’s really no committed engagement with Sophocles’ tragedy itself, its ideas, questions, characters, or dramatic structure. As a result, the play limits its interpretation of the tragic character of Antigone to a generic and generalized symbol of resistance, stripped of any context. Questions of allegiance and responsibility to civic and private obligations, as well as the character traits that make the tragic heroes hold on to their beliefs beyond self-doubt, give way in *Alexis* to a romanticized/idealized depiction of dissent, seen as a virtue in and of itself, and to an a-priori demonization of the state as a mechanism of oppression. What is structural in the original tragedy (the state *becomes* increasingly repressive) is essentialized in *Alexis* (the state is repressive, by definition). In the Greek context where Motus’s production is set, both repression and dissent are much more complicated, as the latter is usually accompanied by extreme lawlessness while the former, when it is not pure state-sponsored violence, is often lacking in ideological foundation.

With the same ease with which the play appropriates Antigone as an unproblematic symbol of resistance, it uses the dead body of Alexis Grigoropoulos as a “stand-in” for the dead body of Polynices. A parallel is drawn between Creon’s proclamation that the warrior’s body is to be left unburied, a feast for the birds, and the Greek police’s reaction of shooting and then abandoning the boy’s body in Exarchia Square. Here the performance misses a very crucial point. Polynices’ dead body is heavy with meaning: he is a disinherited heir to the throne, who came back to claim his rights and is now proclaimed an enemy of the city; he is a brother, a citizen, and a leader, and the sum of these conflicting roles and responsibilities render his burial a crucial political issue. By contrast, what was tragic about the shooting of Alexis Grigoropoulos was its complete lack of meaning. The shooting was pure accident, in the existential sense of a death determined by the flip of a coin. The boy, a middle-class teenager from the suburbs of Athens who was hanging out with his friends in Exarchia Square that evening, provoked the police, and an exchange of insults ensued. The police car followed the kids, and when they responded by throwing empty cans, a policeman left the vehicle and shot Alexis dead. It is precisely the event’s complete accidentality (reminiscent of Meursault’s shooting of the Arab in Camus’s *The Stranger*), the ultimate absence of any serious reason, motivation, meaning, politics, or ideology behind this clash between citizen and authority, that caused unprecedented rioting in the city. It was as if the shooting signaled the eruption of bottled lawlessness, lack of governance, and meaninglessness experienced by Greeks for years: generalized feelings that actions don’t matter because no one is ever held accountable, even for a killing in the street. These were riots of destructive despair and anger, not protests for change. The events of 2008 were more of an anti-tragedy, closer to the world of Camus, where meaning is lost, than to the world of tragedy’s multiple negotiations of meanings that are equally valid for their defenders and worth dying for.

This is why Motus’s exploration of who Antigone is does not go far enough, despite rather shallow attempts such as “Antigone is the protesters” or “Antigone is the Exarchia Square that still resists.” In forcing its own narrow meaning and oversimplified binaries (protesters vs. state) onto reality, the performance misses the far richer and more productive complexity of the actual social conflict. A good look into reality (not only in Greece but anywhere in the world where indignation boils) will reveal the diversity of backgrounds, viewpoints, interests, and motivations behind the protests, which represent a collective that is messy, unclassifiable, and conflictual, as all collectives are in such moments of profound social change. Such a look might have engaged the group in a deeper exploration of the intricate relations between leader and led, as illuminated by the tragic dialectic among heroes and between hero and

chorus. To choose instead to impose premeditated meanings on such a crucial historical moment is an indication of social irresponsibility, as one reviewer rightly notes,¹ as well as a missed artistic opportunity.

note

¹ Barker, J. M. Motus's Alexis A Greek tragedy at UTR . *Culturebot* January 6th 2012. Source: <http://culturebot.net/2012/01/12225/motuss-alexis-a-greek-tragedy-at-utr/>