

DIDASKALIA 

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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 10 is an inadequate approximation of the web publication at didaskalia.net, which includes sound, video, and live hyperlinks.

Seneca's *Thyestes*

Directed by Claire Catenaccio
 April 4-6, 2013
 Minor Latham Playhouse, Barnard College
 New York, New York

Review by **Timothy Hanford**
The Graduate Center, City University of New York

The Barnard College/Columbia University Ancient Drama Group offered a spirited and stimulating performance of Seneca's tragic masterpiece *Thyestes*.¹ Thanks to the Matthew Allen Kramer Fund, there have been productions of ancient drama in their original Greek or Latin at Barnard/Columbia since 1977. The *Thyestes*, like last year's *Alcestis*, was directed by Claire Catenaccio, under the guidance of Helene Foley. Ashley Simone was lead producer for this year's performance. The cast and crew mostly consisted of Barnard and Columbia undergraduate and graduate students, but, as in past productions, students and faculty from various institutions in the New York City area were also involved.

Seneca's *Thyestes* has as its subject the shocking revenge of Atreus, mythical Greek king of Argos, on his brother Thyestes, who once seduced Atreus's wife and subsequently usurped his brother's throne. At the beginning of the play, Atreus is again king of Argos, and Thyestes is in exile. In the prologue, the ghost of Tantalus, the notorious filicide punished by the gods, grandfather to Atreus and Thyestes, is summoned from the underworld and forced by the Fury to infect the house of Pelops with yet another cycle of murder and cooking of human flesh. From there, we witness Atreus planning his revenge and luring his brother and nephews into the trap: Atreus deviously welcomes his brother back to Argos, but meanwhile manages to kill Thyestes's sons and serve them as food to his brother. The play ends with the revelation of Thyestes's unspeakable feast on his children. In four odes interspersed throughout the play, the chorus ruminates on various related subjects, such as Tantalus's punishment in the underworld, the nature of kingship, and the cosmic chaos which the chorus witnesses in the wake of the brothers' unequalled crimes.

How could one perform such a horrific 'freak show' onstage for a 21st century audience? This production made the bold choice of employing a circus metaphor for much of the play, in which Atreus was intriguingly portrayed as 'ringmaster' (and old-time magician) for the ensuing drama. This metaphor strongly activated the sense of horrific exhibitionism present in Seneca's tragedy, particularly in the last two acts. However, it was not employed



The messengers, played by (left to right) Talia Varonos-Pavlopoulos, Kara Takashige Boehm, Solveig Gold, and Phil Stamato. Photo by Joseph Henry Ritter.



Atreus, played by Gavin McGown. Photo by Joseph Henry Ritter.

exclusively throughout the play; for example, the first act, and in fact all the choral odes, had little clear connection to this circus theme. To be fair, Senecan tragedy often seems to be made up of disparate elements; in particular, the chorus often seems unaware of the actual events in the dramatic episodes, and is probably offstage during these episodes, as it was in this production. Also, the choice of the circus metaphor necessitated rather bright stage lighting, which this production used; one could argue that the bleak subject matter of the play sometimes called for darker, more frightening illumination. In fact, the circus motif, as it was employed in this production, at times felt too 'upbeat' and boisterous for Seneca's very disconcerting material. That said, this motif did effectively allow the audience to contemplate Seneca's tragedy as a 'show' in the fullest sense, meant to entertain its audience, with all the difficult issues that notion implies, given the nefarious and nightmarish nature of the *Thyestes*.



Thyestes, played by Ridge Montes. Photo by Joseph Henry Ritter.

Furthermore, as Polyxeni Strolonga reminded this reviewer, the actors were moderately successful in bringing out the strains of black humor present within the play, sometimes eliciting laughter from the audience. Here too the play is problematic: are we to laugh with the actors, at them, or not at all? In the last act, for example, when Thyestes requests that he be reunited with his sons, not knowing that he just ingested their flesh, Atreus reassures him by saying *satiaberis, ne metue* ('you will be satisfied, do not fear,' 980). We the audience could very well laugh: Atreus's words play on the various meanings of the verb *satio* ('satisfy the appetite, fill up, gratify, sate'). We could also imagine Atreus's words as directed to us the audience: we too will 'get our fill' of the grisly spectacle Atreus is about to unveil.

Seneca's five-act play was performed in an economical 90 minutes without intermission (approximately 100–200 lines were cut from the original text of about 1100 lines). The first act effectively set the stage for Atreus's coming revenge. Tantalus (Matthew McGowan) and the Fury (Katharina Volk) frighteningly evoked terror and sadism respectively. In the second act, we first saw Atreus, played expressively by Gavin McGown, peering into a mirror, a nice touch given his introspective initial monologue. The attendant, played by Mathias Hanses, provided a calm contrast to Atreus's mania.

The third act introduced us to Thyestes, played by Ridge Montes, filled with hesitation about returning to Argos and visiting his brother. Of Thyestes's three sons, Tantalus Jr. was played by Talia Varonos-Pavlopoulos, while the other two sons (*personae mutae*) were displayed as walking puppets approximately two feet in height. The use of puppets was inventive, carefully done, and in keeping with the carnival theme, but also somewhat confusing, given that one son was played by a live actor.

The fourth act, containing the messenger's extended description of the murder and cooking of the sons, was arguably the high point of the performance. Rather than being performed by one messenger, the role was ably divided into four parts (played by Solveig Gold, Kara Takashige Boehm, Talia Varonos-Pavlopoulos, and Phil Stamato); each actor lent a shocking buffoonery to the horrific subject matter, just the sort of mix the production was aiming for.

In the final, climactic scene of the play, in which Atreus revels in his revenge and Thyestes recoils at his recent meal, Gavin McGown effectively displayed Atreus's sense of fiendish mastery, while Ridge Montes explored the depths of a father's despair, at one point dramatically crouching on the stage as if to vomit. Atreus did not reveal the heads and hands of the sons to his brother; instead, a large layer cake was employed, which, when split open, appeared to be made up of the sons' entrails. This device seemed to contradict line 764 of Seneca's play, where the messenger notes that Atreus in his butchery saves the

heads and hands, presumably for this purpose (*tantum ora servat et datas fidei manus*).

The play was delivered entirely in Latin, with English surtitles. While such a linguistic format can pose challenges to both performers and audience, the Barnard/Columbia Ancient Drama Group rose to the occasion, expertly negotiating Seneca's iambic trimeters and choral meters. While actors spoke the Latin with varying pronunciation, some trilling their r's or nasalizing their vowels more than others, this variety in no way detracted from the performance; the actors and singers truly brought Seneca's Latin to life. The English translation (by Ursula Poole and Claire Catenaccio) was concise and effective. Occasionally the size of the theater and the height of the projection screen caused the actors onstage to obscure the surtitles, making it difficult to follow the English. (Last year's *Alcestis* production was in the Glicker-Milstein Theatre, also on the Barnard campus, a larger space with better sightlines.)

The set design was simple, with colorful, abstract paper wall hangings. The instrumental music, composed by Kate Brassel, was provided by a live four-person ensemble, consisting of piano, saxophone, and percussion. The music was an eclectic mixture of modernist pieces, including playful references to pop culture; the presence of the ensemble at far stage left added to the dynamics of the action visible to the audience.

The chorus was divided into two sets of four singers and six dancers. The singing melodies (also composed by Brassel) were experimental and did not shy away from dissonance; the chorus sometimes quickened the pace of its singing to show excitement. During the choral odes, the dancers occupied the center of the stage, were expressive, and moved in elaborate patterns, sometimes miming the action that was being described in words. Both singers and dancers were dressed in bright white, a choice that did not fit exactly with the bleak and lurid tones of the play.

The actors' costumes were impressive and worked well given the setting of the *Thyestes*. While one of the highlights was the golden dress worn by the Fury in the first act, complete with an elaborate headdress and light-green shawl, most of the costumes tended toward the circus theme. Both Atreus and Thyestes wore vintage dark suits, the messengers were dressed in clownish fashion, and Tantalus was frightfully arrayed in a bloodstained white frock. The makeup was expressive, evoking a haunted carnival; patches of dark and light hues on the actors' faces echoed the use of masks in ancient drama.

The members of the Barnard/Columbia Ancient Drama Group took a difficult yet compelling ancient Roman tragedy and truly made it their own. The production was a sophisticated mixture of various elements that consistently reflected a great deal of effort and enthusiasm on the part of those involved. Seneca's tragedies are not frequently performed, especially in their original Latin. One recurrent issue in scholarship on Senecan tragedy is whether the plays were originally intended for reading, private recitation, or full stage performance. This production of the *Thyestes* powerfully demonstrated that Senecan tragedy can and indeed should be performed onstage.²

notes

¹ Editor's note: Michael Goyette reviews the same production in Number 3 of this volume (pages 6–9).

² On the issue of ancient and later performance of Senecan tragedy, see, for example, Anthony Boyle's monograph *Tragic Seneca* (Routledge, 1997), especially pages 11–12, with accompanying notes; also *Seneca in Performance* (Duckworth, 2000), edited by George W. M. Harrison.