

DIDASKALIA 

The Journal for Ancient Performance



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

DIDASKALIA

Volume 10 (2013)

<http://didaskalia.net>

ISSN 1321-485

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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Didaskalia is published at Randolph College.

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Note

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Seneca's *Thyestes*

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

Review by **Michael Goyette**
The Graduate Center, City University of New York

This production marks the Barnard Columbia Ancient Drama Group's thirty-seventh consecutive annual performance of a Greek or Roman drama in the original language, and it is one of the few performances of Seneca's *Thyestes* in the United States in recent years.¹ While there have been recent performances of *Thyestes* in France, Italy, Germany, Belgium, England, and other European countries, the most recent U.S. production of the play, according to the *Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama*, is a 1988 performance by Harvard University's Classical Club. Given Seneca's current popularity among classicists, and the appeal of this play in particular, it is surprising to find such a gap in performance history. What is clear, however, is that this production heralds a welcome and engrossing return to the stage for *Thyestes*.

Beyond the novelty of being performed in Latin (with English supertitles, translated by director Clare Catenaccio and fellow Columbia graduate student Ursula Poole, and projected on a screen above the stage), what is most striking about this production is its creativity, which is evident in all aspects of the production. Having attended the Barnard Columbia Ancient Drama Group's 2012 production of Euripides's *Alcestis*, I came to the performance with high expectations for creativity, but these expectations were exceeded. The

innovation of this year's production is perhaps most obvious in its playing around with the idea of the magician. For starters, the cover of the program depicts Atreus and Thyestes as kings facing each other, superimposed onto a king-of-hearts playing card. This unexpected imagery prepares us for a fresh take on Seneca's play even before we step into the black-box theater. The juxtaposition of the two kings on the playing card emphasizes, of course, the dualistic and dichotomous nature of the royal brothers, well known to readers of Seneca's play. The symbolism of the playing card also gives a nod to the magician persona that Atreus assumes, along with other facets of magical performance in the production. Atreus's attendant, for instance, is presented as a modern magician's assistant, manning a magic table covered by a velvety red garment. Atreus later incorporates this garment into his costume when his duplicity is finally revealed in the final act of the play. In the second act, the attendant also furnishes Atreus with a wand-like staff and a collapsible magician's hat, underscoring the subterfuge at work.

The production is well served by minimalist set design, consisting only of a group of long, rectangular



From left to right, Joe Sheppard, Talia Varonos-Pavlopoulos, Lantie Tom, and Cristina Perez puppeteering and playing the children of *Thyestes*. Photo by Joseph Henry Ritter.



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

banners hanging at the back of the stage. Seven of the banners hang vertically, flanked on each side by a banner hanging diagonally inward. Together they vaguely suggest the form of pillars and a roof for the palace of Mycenae. The banners are decorated with splotches of pinkish-red and yellow paint, perhaps invoking notions of bloodshed and digestive juices apropos to the play. Throughout the duration of the performance, a four-piece musical ensemble sits at stage left—a saxophonist, a percussionist, and two pianists.

The performance opens with an eerie saxophone prelude. This haunting introduction sets the tone for the often somber and unnerving music throughout the play. This mood is partly established by the generally subdued composition for the percussion and piano parts. I found the saxophone particularly expressive, especially at the very beginning of the play and also at the climax, when Thyestes discovers the true nature of the feast as the saxophone blares wild, jarring trill notes. Also notable is the ensemble's repeated playing of the melody to "Pure Imagination," a tune from *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory* (1971). This tune can be heard as Atreus plots his revenge at various points in the play, apparently in keeping with the portrayal of Atreus as an eccentric magician type (although he is obviously far more devious than Willy Wonka). The playing of this melody and certain light-hearted musical effects help bring a little mirth to the performance.

One of the most impressive aspects of this production is the acting. Ridge Montes's convincing embodiment of the pitiable Thyestes and Gavin McGown's menacing Atreus stand out among the exceptional performances all around. Because of their physical resemblance, Montes and McGown are well-cast as brothers. McGown plays a derisive, disturbed Atreus who can elicit both horror and hilarity, as he does with his maniacal laughter near the end of the play. Montes's acting skills are also on full display in the final act, which begins, to the audience's amusement, with his singing like a drunken buffoon following his "reconciliation" with Atreus. After taking a sip from his wine glass, Thyestes spits out his drink and undergoes an abrupt change in mood as feelings of unease set in. This rapid transition from buffoon to tragic figure is not easy to accomplish, but Montes does it convincingly. This production at times treads the line between moods of comedy and tragedy, and a major reason for its success in doing so is the talent of the actors. One could easily believe that they are full-time professionals, not a cast composed of undergraduate students, graduate students, and professors.

Regarding the pronunciation of the Latin, much credit must be given to the actors for accurately memorizing large passages of text. From the very first act of the play, which features Tantalus's shade (Matthew McGowan) and the Fury (Katharina Volk), it is clear that the production has high standards for the delivery of the Latin. Both actors' pronunciation is remarkably clear and expressive, and one never has to strain to make out individual words. This excellence in elocution is sustained by the other members of the cast, as well as by the chorus, throughout the duration of the performance.

The choral performances are divided into singing and dancing parts, with each choral ode featuring varying numbers of singers and dancers. The first choral ode, for example, features three singers and three dancers, while the second features four dancers and one singer. As with the acted parts, the Latin in all of the choral songs is clearly articulated—no small feat given the chorus' experimentation with various vocal effects. The very long third choral ode, for example, involves two singers synchronized in highly staccato singing that gradually builds in intensity—a well-coordinated performance that heightens the anticipation of Atreus's fulfillment of revenge. The chorus also performs parts of certain odes in rounds, another commendable and successful experiment in this production. One of the chorus members, Caleb Simone, merits special praise for his lucid enunciation and mellifluous voice. Simone's talents are on exhibit in the second choral ode, a solo performance that vibrantly accompanies the four dancers on stage.

Building up to the climactic act of the play, the final choral performance is the most grand in scale, with

all six dancers and four singers on stage. This chorus, which also has sections performed in rounds, brings Matthew McGowan on stage for the first time since he played Tantalus's shade in the first act. For me, this appearance serves as a clever reminder of Tantalus (the grandfather of Atreus) immediately before his family experiences a gruesome feast very similar to the one served up by Tantalus. As for the dancers, their body movements and gestures consistently convey the appropriate emotions, and meld well with the singing and musical accompaniment.

Color is an important aspect of this production, especially in the costumes. The hues of red and white are predominant from the first act, in which Tantalus's shade dons a white tunic that is tattered and stained with blood-red streaks. I take it as no accident that these streaks match the splashes of crimson on some of the banners hanging over the stage. In the first act Tantalus's shade is joined on stage by the Fury, clad in a spectacular gold dress and a diadem. The diadem is an especially dazzling accessory, with rays projecting outward as if to suggest a rising sun, and serpentine coils dangling below in the form of locks resembling those of a Medusa. Both Atreus and Thyestes are outfitted in white jackets and black pants, with the brothers subtly distinguished by the different types of ties they wear (Atreus sports a bow tie, and Thyestes a long traditional necktie). In addition, Atreus wears his jacket tight to his chest and fully buttoned, whereas Thyestes's jacket is open, with a red rose pinned to the left breast pocket. As stated earlier, Atreus acquires his own red accessory in the final act, when donning the velvet garment that was draped over the "magician's table"; I take this to imply that he becomes literally clothed in his bloody vengeance. The color red is also seen in the snazzy suspenders worn over all-black clothing by the four members of the musical ensemble.

Like many modern presentations of ancient drama, this production uses face painting on its actors, rather than masks as in ancient drama. The styles of face painting still manage to evoke masked countenances, and the painted faces effectively highlight the disposition of the characters. Thyestes, for instance, is further differentiated from his brother by the tear painted under his left eye, while touches of gray on Atreus's face accentuate his grisly nature. In addition, the faces painted on the brothers and on the group of messengers in the fourth act vaguely recall the visage of a mime or even a medieval court jester. This effect, along with Atreus's magician persona, calls attention to notions of court entertainment—perhaps a creative way of reflecting how the plot of this play revolves around Atreus's deceptive "entertainment" of his brother.

Also highly creative is the use of stage props. Especially noteworthy are the wooden puppets that represent Thyestes's children in the fourth act of the play. These puppets, whose arms and legs are controlled by a group of skilled puppeteers, underscore how Thyestes's children are manipulated very much like pawns in the plot. In this sense, Atreus is portrayed not only as a wayward magician, but also as a puppet master directing the action of the play. One can appreciate not only how the artistic medium of puppetry is used as a metaphor for Atreus's role in the play, but also the technical craft and execution of the puppetry routines as well.

In addition to being represented by puppets, Thyestes's children are also represented by a group of messengers. In the fourth act of Seneca's text, a single messenger reports how the children were slaughtered and served up to Thyestes in a feast; in this production, three separate actors, each wearing a red vest, represent the messenger's part collectively. During the messenger speech describing Atreus's horrific acts of killing, two of the actors playing the messenger begin to act out the deaths of the children as described by the other messenger actor. The fate of the children is thus given special weight and is depicted in multiple ways. Playfulness in both the puppetry routine and the scene with the group of messengers also adds a bit of levity to the terror of the situation.

The constantly building sense of anticipation reaches its zenith in the final scene, when the ill-fated feast is brought out for Thyestes to consume. A large, three-tiered cake is rolled out onto the stage on what

looks like a stretcher or hospital bed, which I take to foreshadow Thyestes's impending feelings of sickness. When the cake is brought out, Thyestes sings in his buffoonish way while wearing a large wreath of white lilies. These lilies carry on the theme of white in the play's color scheme, and may also symbolize innocence and safety (or a false sense thereof). These were some of the connotations of lilies in the mythology and cult worship of Hera/Juno. As for the cake itself, Atreus finally reveals the true nature of the feast by exposing the interior of the giant confection, which is constructed in two halves attached by a hinge. The laying open of the cake dramatically reveals what look like entrails, organs, and even skulls stuffed inside. When the stage fades to dark at the end of the play, some of these body parts emit a neon glow, leaving the audience with a final haunting image.

On the whole, this interpretation of *Thyestes* is full of artistic subtleties that cannot be fully appreciated with only one viewing, as was my experience. With regard to its creativity, and its occasional blurring of the line between moods of tragedy and comedy, the production takes on an almost Euripidean spirit of inventiveness. These imaginative elements are refreshing, yet at the same time they never steer too far from the sense of the Senecan text. The use of the original Latin helps maintain this faithfulness, and makes the high standards of performance all the more impressive. One only wishes that a theatrical run longer than three nights were possible, as I am certain that repeated viewings would reward the viewer with new insights and continued enjoyment.

note

¹ Editor's note: Timothy Hanford reviews the same production in Number 2 of this volume (pages 3-5).