

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

49th Season of Classical Plays at the Greek Theatre in Syracuse: Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Antigone*, and Aristophanes's *The Ecclesiazusae*

May 11 to June 23, 2013
XLIX Ciclo di Spettacoli Classici
Teatro Greco di Siracusa
Syracuse, Italy

Reviewed by **Caterina Barone**
University of Padova

Sophocles's *Oedipus Tyrannus* and *Antigone*, directed by Daniele Salvo and Cristina Pezzoli respectively, and Aristophanes's *Ecclesiazusae*, directed and performed by Vincenzo Pirrotta, are the plays in the 49th cycle of classical performances staged from 11 May to 23 June 2013 at the Greek Theatre in Syracuse. This year marks the 100th anniversary of the theatre's Organising Committee, founded by Mario Tommaso Gargallo in 1913 to promote the production of theatrical works from antiquity. The common denominator of the texts chosen for this cycle is the political dimension of their content, expressed to different degrees and with different outcomes.



Photo by Franca Centaro.

It is always difficult to square the circle between the sacred intensity of tragedy and the theatricality required by the sheer size of Syracuse's ancient theatre. With *Oedipus Tyrannus*, Daniele Salvo once again took up the challenge after tackling *Oedipus Coloneus* (2009) and *Ajax* (2010), and he did so by continuing along the lines he had traced in those previous productions: full use of scenic space, meticulous choreography of the chorus, and use of special effects.

His *Oedipus* starts with a bang. As music played at full volume through speakers around the theatre makes its impact, suppliants crowd onto the stage and, guided by the priest, plead with the king to intervene against the devastation of the plague. They are distressed, covered in rags, and stumbling; piles of bodies are being taken away on a cart. In their midst looms the disturbing silhouette of the winged Sphinx, its face ghostly, its presence threatening. A semi-circular wall in grey stone (used in all three plays, the work of Maurizio Balò, who is also the designer of the rigorously black monochrome costumes in the *Oedipus*) defines the area of the action where three staircases disappear into a metaphysical void. Above it all there dominates an enormous head: hollow, with empty eye sockets from which blood will drip at the end of the play. It is the head of the Sphinx, a symbol in our eyes of the double meaning of the tragedy: on the one hand Oedipus' desire to dominate reality and his rational search for the truth, and on the other a descent into the depths of the protagonist's psyche, a journey into the meanderings of the subconscious.

Oedipus penetrates these depths as if seeking refuge and emerges to unknowingly pronounce the curse against himself. In the end he will be broken in body and soul. Daniele Pecci, as the protagonist, embodies a man at the peak of his strength, proudly confident in himself, violent in the exercise of his powers to the extent of assaulting those who oppose him, and sensually attached to his wife-mother Jocasta (played by Laura Marinoni with commitment and sensitivity), in whose arms he seeks a comfort that is also maternal. But his Oedipus remains superficial and does not succeed in fully rendering the

character's complexity, despite the penetrating accuracy of the translation by Guido Paduano, a knowledgeable scholar of the Sophoclean hero. The figure of the enlightened sovereign, who comes to the aid of his people at the beginning of the tragedy, turns sour when he comes into conflict with Tiresias and then with Creon, to the point where his relationship of trust with the community breaks down. Oedipus is left alone in search of his own identity, and is transformed from a guarantor of the common good into his own implacable persecutor. But in this production, the outward appearance of strong images seems to prevail, as in the scene where Oedipus, with clear Shakespearean references, is tormented by the ghosts of those who have crossed his path, from the old man that saved his life to his wife-mother.

Better suited to their conflicting roles are Ugo Pagliari playing the part of Tiresias and Maurizio Donadoni as Creon, both actors putting to good use their past experience in this difficult theatrical space. The cast is completed by Melania Giglio (whose magnificent voice gives life to the ghost of the Sphinx), Mauro Avogadro (who plays both the priest and Laius' servant), Francesco Biscione (first messenger), and Graziano Piazza (second messenger).

The most interesting and original part of the direction is the chorus of Theban elders, conceived by the director as a sort of double of the protagonist, with mixed effectiveness. The precise choreography by Antonio Bartusi wove a subtext which consistently matched the chorus' words, unveiling their hypocrisy and cowardice. But the tendency to paroxystic gestures and a constant search for horrific effects (for example, the latex masks with monstrous features, reminiscent of Freddy Krueger, protagonist of the *Nightmare* films) offset these successes. These and other special effects, particularly in the finale, take the play into a Hollywood dimension, supported by Marco Podda's music, a mixture of different impressions that suggest the torments and movements of the soul.

Despite its limitations, Daniele Salvo's direction has the merit of making tragedy more enjoyable to the large audience for Greek theatre, in particular young people, who responded to its visual language with convinced and enthusiastic applause.

In her first essay in directing at Syracuse, Cristina Pezzoli says she favours steady intonation and measured gestures in her *Antigone*, resisting the temptation to have actors howling and racing from one part of the stage to the other that sometimes afflicts newcomers to Greek theatre. Her intention is to approach the myth without indulging in the excessive emotion and preconceptions which have gathered over time around the figure of Sophocles's heroine. Pezzoli prefers instead to examine the deep sources of the antagonism between the two main characters, and she therefore makes a controversial choice: the introduction of a prologue from Euripides's *Phoenician Women*, spoken by Jocasta's ghost (Natalia Magni). Meant by the director to shed light on what has happened before, and in particular the roles of Etocles and Polynices, the prologue has a didactic purpose that in practice seems redundant: Creon's first intervention is in this sense sufficiently explanatory.

Focusing on the political weight of Polynices, this production aims to investigate and interpret the motivations of the tragic conflict without taking a pre-conceived position in favour of Antigone, whilst at the same time giving multi-faceted expression to the behaviour of Creon, a role to which Maurizio Donadoni brings accents of vibrant humanity and which Anna Beltrametti's lucid translation suitably highlights.

Ilenia Maccarrone's Antigone is rational and determined. She confronts first her sister and then Creon himself with a firmness that yields neither to the pleading of Ismene (Valentina Cenni) nor to the King's threats. She is also resolute in challenging the chorus of Theban men, and denounces its connivance and guilty silence, sharply reminding it of its responsibilities. She gives way to emotion only at the end, when faced with the inevitability of death.

By comparison, Creon's attitude is not stubbornly inflexible: he embraces Antigone as a father would when he discovers her guilt, and then desperately questions her. He is distressed but argues logically. He wants to bring the young girl to reason, just as, after her sentence, he will seek to persuade his son Haemon (Matteo Cremon), justifying his harshness by a politician's need to do his duty. From steadiness to anger, the director draws out his painful trajectory until his meeting with Tiresias, powerfully performed by Isa Danieli, whose prophetic warnings destroy the sovereign's self-assurance. In the finale, the weight of his own guilt crushes the King, even visually, as, too late, he realises the negative consequences of his inflexibility.

In the complex economy of the play, the weakest element is the chorus, which, beginning with its Islamic-type clothes (designed by Nana Cecchi), does not fit the context, and whose function seems uncertain. Even Stefano Bollani's score for piano with percussion (played live by Michele Rabbia), although commendable, is in places dissonant. The cast is completed by Gianluca Gobbi (whose performance brings a comic touch to the subservient terror of the guard), Paolo Li Volsi (the messenger), and Elena Polic Greco (Eurydice).

Vincenzo Pirrotta has given a good account of himself in the difficult double roles of director and performer of Aristophanes's comedy, *Ecclesiazusae*. His decisive focus on modern-day politics was aided by Andrea Capra's translation with its numerous references to the names (twisted) of well-known party hacks and incursions into the pseudo-juridical language practised by those who wish to influence their audience. Altogether, the wordplay is colloquial, journalistic in parts, scattered with neologisms, and frankly vulgar.

The theme of power to women—chosen by the playwright not as a feminist gesture but in order to attack the political instability of his Athens—becomes in the play an icon of today's debate on the role of women in politics and, broadly speaking, in society itself. This is the meaning of the chorus' address on violence against women (written from scratch by Pirrotta), of the feminist slogans shouted out by the leading characters (Doriana La Fauci, Carmelinda Gentile, Elena Polic Greco, Melania Giglio, Simonetta Cartia, Sara Dho, Antonietta Carbonetti, Clelia Piscitello, Amalia Contarini), and of the burqas that hide their colourful and vibrant clothes (designed by Giuseppina Maurizi), whose revelation, after the women take power, translates into an explosion of positive energy. Luca Mauceri's score, which combines archaic and contemporary echoes, is inseparable from the chorus' action, as lively and explosive as the women's dances. The whirling movements choreographed by Alessandra Razzino merge various cultures—Mediterranean, Oriental, Russian—into an all-embracing vision of the female condition.

The protagonist is acted with distinction by Anna Bonaiuto, who puts her artistic maturity to the service of Praxagora's critical awareness and pragmatism. She is dynamic and wise, cunning and constructive in driving the action, maternal and seductive towards her husband. Bleepyrus is the comical hero who acts as her counterpart, suspicious but then ready to follow his wife's political programme with genuine enthusiasm. Pirrotta portrays him with virtuosity in a finely measured balance between bodily solidity and liberating laughter, as in the exhilarating scatological dialogue with Cremen, cleverly resolved with the help of music and song. He is supported masterfully by the male actors Enzo Curcurù (a neighbour), Alessandro Romano (Cremen), and Antonio Alveario (escapee, dishonest citizen, boy).

The result is an exhilarating and flavoursome performance that positively combines tradition and modernity, and succeeds in balancing Aristophanes's merciless satire and political commitment with the civic relevance that can strengthen contemporary theatre.