

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 11 (2014)

<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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		<i>Didaskalia</i> Randolph College 2500 Rivermont Avenue Lynchburg, VA 24503 USA
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Didaskalia is published at Randolph College.

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All Our Tragic

Written and Directed by Sean Graney

August 10–October 5, 2014

The Hypocrites

The Den Theatre

Chicago, Illinois

Reviewed by **Daniel Smith**

Michigan State University

The Hypocrites' website describes *All Our Tragic* as “a modern Festival of Dionysus,” using the keywords “immersive” and “durational” to establish the production's bona fides as contemporary popular and avant-garde theatre.¹ Immersive theatre experiences along the lines of Punchdrunk's *Sleep No More* (an adaptation of *Macbeth*) attempt to surround audience members with a fully realized stage world. Durational performances bring audiences together for a longer-than-average amount of time; a good example is Elevator Repair Service's *Gatz*, a six-hour stage adaptation of *The Great Gatsby* that includes the entire text of Fitzgerald's novel. *All Our Tragic* is thus pitched more toward contemporary theatregoers than to classicists, though classicists should find much to admire in this accessible and ambitious project. Adapter-director Sean Graney brings a sense of whimsy, a philosophical bent, and a willingness to rewrite myth in a provocative effort to argue for the relevance of Greek tragedy in the contemporary world. The result is a monumental theatrical event that is always engaging, though very likely to confound purists.

A bar in the Den Theatre lobby and tables with food in various corners of the performance space contribute to the festive atmosphere. The durational nature of the performance is indicated by a chart on a chalkboard that is situated near one of the food tables (and on the way to the restrooms). With a stenciled sign inviting viewers to “Please Enjoy Our Food,” the chart lists each of the individual plays and indicates when breaks will happen, and for how long. The chart also notes the attribution of each original Greek play with Aeschylus', Sophocles', or Euripides' initial in a box, using multiple boxes when more than one author treated the same story. Several of Graney's titles elaborate on themes or suggest his restructuring: Euripides' *Heracles* becomes *Rage, Herakles, Rage*; Sophocles' *Trachiniae* is called *Labors and Lies*; *Oedipus at Colonus* becomes *The Crypt*; a section that includes *Ajax* and *Philoctetes* falls under the heading *Old-Fashioned Honor*. At the bottom of the chart is a timeline that starts with Prometheus in the year 0 and proceeds incrementally to the year 75.

An immersive dynamic is established through the placing of audience members in two banks of seating across from one another, which allows for the observation of others' reactions. The many breaks encourage conversation; I sat with a group of classicists from Northwestern University, and we had several spirited discussions throughout the day.



Erin Barlow and John Taflan as *Antigone* and *Oedipus*. Photo by Evan Hanover.



Geoff Button as *Orestes* and Tien Doman as *Klytaimnestra*. Photo by Evan Hanover.

Tom Burch's scenic design draws on Greek and Roman theatre practices, with two raised platforms at either end of the playing space. The set has been painted to create a marbled effect, using blues, greens, and oranges for a vibrant color palette. The lower platform has one metal door and a multilevel playing area composed of wooden slats. A trapdoor functions as a variety of tombs and funeral pyres throughout the course of the day. A ramp inverts the idea of the Greek ekkyklema; instead of wheeling bodies onto the stage after offstage violence has occurred, characters tend to die onstage and be dragged off. The space provides a number of useful hiding places, offering opportunities for theatrical surprises. The higher platform has three doors, with very little space for playing in front of them. The verticality of this platform is used to great effect, notably by Medea.

As the show begins, Odd-Job Alice and Odd-Job Sophie enter through two of the three doors. They are soon joined by Odd-Job Erdie. It is Erdie's first day on the job, a nebulous service-industry position that involves playing various musical instruments and singing. Their costumes (designed by Alison Siple) evoke the image of waitresses or nurses (a holdover from Graney's earlier *Sophocles: These Seven Sicknesses*). As a Greek chorus, the Odd-Jobs generally comment on the action through song, sometimes enhancing the mood and sometimes offering ironic commentary. Their repertoire consists mainly of American folk songs: "When Johnny Comes Marching Home Again," "Shenandoah," "All the Pretty Horses." They also sing excerpts from *The Magic Flute* at one point. These musical choices encourage reflection on the kinds of music that have been popular at different historical moments, reminding us that Greek tragedy provided both popular entertainment and opportunities for political reflection.

As announced by the Odd-Jobs, *All Our Tragic* is divided into four major sections entitled "Physics," "Politics," "Patriotics," and "Poetics." "Physics" focuses primarily on Herakles and Prometheus, but also includes the stories of Medea, Phaedra, and Alcestis. "Politics" covers the Theban cycle, giving pride of place to Antigone. The Trojan War is the main topic of "Patriotics," while *The Oresteia* serves as a centerpiece for "Poetics."

All Our Tragic streamlines character relationships by creating new familial bonds among several figures. Graney's revision of Aeschylus' *Danaides* is instructive with regard to his principles of adaptation. Retitled *Seven Sisters*, this version enumerates the unwilling brides, who are betrothed to seven Cyclopes, and recasts Herakles in the role of Danaus. Herakles gives each sister an umbrella as a wedding gift and suggests that they use the sharp points of the umbrellas to kill the Cyclopes. After the husbands have been murdered, their father Eurystheus the Necromancer curses Herakles and the seven sisters. The sisters then become an organizing principle for the entire production, as one by one they die in a variety of tragic circumstances, some in supporting roles (Glauke, Agave, Asterope) and others in more central parts (Alkestis, Klytaimnestra, Helen).

Graney's production strives for immediacy, filtering the Greek myths through later European versions and American popular culture. This mediation is apparent in the listing of character names in the program: telltale diacritical marks on Phèdre and Médée indicate the appropriation of these characters in a French literary and operatic canon. Médée's costume and make-up are reminiscent of the fashion choices of the teenaged witches in *The Craft* (1996). Herakles carries a *Little Golden Book* that features himself as a hero, and constantly expresses the hope that he will merit inclusion in stories for children. Portrayed as dim-witted and sweet, Herakles pursues an existential quest to create himself. Another of Graney's interventions is the plight of Alkestis after she is raised from the dead. In a nod to the horror genre, particularly the mythos of "The Monkey's Paw" or *Pet Sematary*, Alkestis becomes a zombie-like Mormo.

The section titled "Politics," mainly devoted to Oedipus and his descendants, combines twentieth-century French versions of these stories with American political and cultural references. A focus on irony and an interest in playing the incest narrative for humor suggests a debt to Cocteau's *La Machine Infernale* or

Gide's *Oedipe*, while a stripped-down aesthetic of theatricality evokes the spirit of Anouilh's and Giraudoux's classical adaptations. The majority of costumes in this section are the contemporary business suits of the political class; Jokasta strongly resembles Hillary Clinton. The conflict between Eteokles and Polynikes for the throne of Thebes emphasizes their adolescence. Polynikes' band of insurgents, called the Comptrollers, indulge in the pleasures of hacky sacks and energy drinks. Graney's adaptation is also infused with political theory that postdates the Greeks: expanding on Machiavelli, Creon asks Antigone whether it is best to be Faithful, Friendly, or Feared. She replies "Faithful;" Creon vacillates between "Friendly" and "Feared."

The language in *All Our Tragic* is generally simple and direct, though with a flair for alliteration. Some characters speak in a childlike manner. Graney has previously used childlike language to both comic and tragic effect in his play *The Fourth Graders Present an Unnamed Love-Suicide*. In *Antigone*, Haemon's dialogue indicates his emotions at the end of his lines, as though he were speaking internet chat-speak or emoticons aloud. Other characters tend to speak more sparsely, though some have catch phrases (Herakles: "Ha-Hey!") or employ incantatory speech ("Orestes, Orestes, who is this Orestes?"). The following excerpt from Antigone's speech to Creon gives a sense of how Graney handles the more serious moments: "We are all fools chasing around toy trains of other fools. We kill one boy to get his train and that train gets stolen by another boy so we kill again to retrieve it. We are idiots killing idiots because we've got nothing else to do and we can. We make nations that say it's okay to kill other nations. And we say that our patriotics is better than the patriotics of other nations, when in truth our nation is nothing more than a few poetic words on an old piece of paper."²

Antigone's use of "patriotics" as a neologism meaning "ideology of patriotism" provides the title for the next section, which incorporates *Iphigenia in Aulis*, *Rhesus*, *Philoctetes*, *Ajax*, *Hecuba*, *The Trojan Women*, and additional material from the Iliad into a narrative of the Trojan War. In contrast to some of the violent material here, the costumes in this section maintain a sense of play. Achilles' impenetrable armor is a long knit sweater. Mockery continues to be made of Philoctetes' lucky fur cap. The frenetic movement of Ajax's "sheepies" brings a moment of joyous levity that heightens the pathos of their eventual demise. Cassandra gives out knitted hearts to those who are marked for death. Neoptolemus is particularly affected by what he sees and does in the war. Agamemnon learns little. Odyssea (a female Odysseus) speaks into a tape recorder, but ultimately decides to destroy this journalistic evidence. The last part of "Patriotics" is called *Troyfall*, and the way the characters use this phrase makes it sound like a video game.

A significant aspect of Graney's adaptation is the absence of the gods. While religion and the supernatural are present, no gods appear as characters and few are mentioned by name. This approach is remarkably successful in some cases. For instance, the sacrifice of Iphigenia is rendered all the more shocking because of its senseless basis in mob mentality. Of course, the overarching decision to remove the gods has implications for dramatic structure, particularly with regard to the plays of Euripides. When gods are important characters in the original, the version in *All Our Tragic* tends toward brevity. In these cases, the omission of the gods is less effective. Without Aphrodite and Artemis, *Hippolytus* is told almost entirely in a monologue by Phèdre. Similarly, Graney removes Dionysus from *The Bacchae* and turns the eponymous maenads into a women's political group called The Foxes. The lack of goading by Dionysus leads to confusion about why Pentheus decides to put on a dress.

Moving into the *Oresteia* near the end of the performance, the omission of the gods emphasizes chaos and existentialist angst. With no Apollo to purge his guilt and no Athena to reintegrate him into the community through legal justice, Orestes wanders the earth in a hell of his own making, pursued by "Furies" who exist only in his mind. On his journey he encounters his sister Iphigenia in a gory Grand Guignol version of *Iphigenia in Tauris* (which appalled some of my classicist friends). He also takes

Hermione hostage and later stalks her to her home with Neoptolemus. Hermione and Neoptolemus engage in therapeutic reenactments of the Trojan War. Orestes calls Klytaimnestra back from the dead to help assuage his guilt, but is unable to follow her instructions. She sings a song to comfort him, and the rest of the actors enter in street clothes to create a ritual ending for the performance.

That this last section is called “Poetics” works on multiple levels. Graney has included the one extant trilogy, juxtaposing it with some of the weirder surviving tragedies. This section also includes *Elektra*, which was treated by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Graney layers on the evidence of Elektra’s recognition of Orestes, including a footprint, a scar, a lock of hair, and his own intervention: a stuffed animal named “Bearistophanes.” Finally, there is an explicit conversation about why we tell stories and why we make theatre. “Poetics,” for Graney, is not merely a method of analyzing and adapting Greek tragedies, but raises living, breathing questions for our world today. It is certainly worth the effort to take twelve hours out of our busy lives to reflect on these aesthetic questions as well as on the political, moral, and philosophical questions raised by Greek tragedy.

notes

¹ Editor’s notes: Ruth Scodel reviews the same production in [Number 2](#) of this volume. A remount of the production is planned for next summer during June 20–August 9, 2015.

² Transcribed from Johnny Oleksinski, “A Speech from ‘All Our Tragic,’” *Chicago Tribune* August 19, 2014. <http://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/theater/video/chi-antigone-all-our-tragic-erin-barlow-story.html> Last viewed November 8, 2014.