

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

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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](mailto: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](http://didaskalia.net).

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**Note**

*Didaskalia* is an online journal. This print representation of Volume 12 is an inadequate approximation of the web publication at [didaskalia.net](http://didaskalia.net), which includes sound, video, and live hyperlinks.

## Oedipus the King

Directed by Amy R. Cohen  
 October 10-12, 2014  
 2500 Rivermont Avenue  
 Lynchburg, Virginia

Reviewed by **Cristina Pérez Díaz**  
*City University of New York*

There are infinite ways to approach the revival of an ancient drama. Two challenges in particular confront modern productions of Greek tragedy: the chorus and masks. A recent staging of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (*OT*) made full use of both. It was directed by Amy Cohen and produced by the Center for Ancient Drama (CAD) on the beautiful campus of Randolph College in Lynchburg, Virginia. I had the opportunity to see the show in the context of the Third Biennial Conference "Ancient Drama in Performance" on October 12, 2014. In this note, I focus on the bold and compelling decision to keep the masks and the tragic chorus, with all their oddity.



*Daisy Howard as Teiresias. Photo by Mirah Sager.*

The masks were made out of linen, crafted by the director and the actors using the innovative technology of 3D printing, and were truly beautiful pieces of work, enjoyable in and of themselves. After years of research on the ancient craft of the mask, Cohen conceived the clever idea of printing three-dimensional models of the actors' heads, in order to create lifelike masks. The result was impressive. These masks contributed greatly to the distancing effect of the play. Distance is, in fact, an essential attribute of masks, but those crafted and used by the performers of this production had two distancing effects, in my opinion: on the one hand, they looked very much like the masks we see depicted in ancient vases and Roman mosaics, thus transporting us to a distant aesthetic place; on the other hand, they were painted with light but bright colors and, together with the vivid colors of the costumes, they contrasted with the density—perhaps even obscurity—of the events and with the often heavily pathetic lines of the characters. In this way, the visual aspect of the production did not add horror to an already painful plot (*mythos*). On the contrary, it allowed the audience to focus on the words and the utterance of the text, while looking at images in motion that were aesthetically pleasing.

Now I shift my attention to the chorus. It was composed of nine members (eight college students and one recent graduate) who danced the choral songs to live music composed for the occasion. The masks allowed this young chorus to represent a group diverse in age and gender. Faithful to the Greek text, the chorus remained on stage during the entire play, speaking with the characters in the episodes and breaking into song and dance between scenes (*stasima*). In this sense, the revival did not try to "modernize" the original version or to make it "easier" for the members of the audience to relate to a form of theatre that, at least in its formal conventions, is remote from our sensibilities. Instead, it made the effort to explore the possibilities of the ancient form.

The chorus of a Greek tragedy is indeed strange, a collectivity that expresses a single voice, a sort of character that does not really take an active role in the events. But is nevertheless pervasive and serves as an interlocutor for the characters, a witness and companion amidst the unhappy circumstances. What is more, at other times it has the poetic freedom to sing and dance, jumping to general reflections on human

life, as if transported to a dramatic reality somehow different from that of the action of the plot (*mythos*), or at least parallel to it. For all of these reasons, the chorus is perhaps the most challenging component of ancient tragedy for a contemporary spectator or reader. It asks us to accept premises that are rather difficult for us (the unity of voice, for instance) and that the rest of the play does not ask us to accept (the occasional detachment from the plot, for instance, is not shared by any other character).

It is thus understandable that recent adaptations tend to “modernize” the original chorus, if keeping it at all, in order to make the play “speak” to the contemporary world—where such an entity is certainly foraneous. But, precisely because of that, the decision to keep the chorus exactly as it appears in the original text—singing and dancing, and speaking with a single voice to the characters—can feel today more experimental and risky than conservative. Especially for those of us in the audience who are particularly interested in ancient drama, the challenging decision to keep the chorus *as such* is commendable. When well used, as in this case, the disturbing presence of the odd entity which the chorus represents for a contemporary spectator can provide the play with a rather enjoyable distance. In this staging of *OT*, the choral songs and dances were soft and graceful, serving as a counterpoint to the dramatic upheavals. As the truth of Oedipus’ misfortune unfolded through the plot, these interludes balanced the emotions of the audience. Their interruptions also helped to provide a well-known story with the tension necessary to keep the audience interested, featuring lovely original music and choreography that the audience could not anticipate at all, since these aspects of tragedy are not transmitted in the Sophoclean manuscripts, but particular to each production of the play.

I make a short excursus here to give my interpretation of the Greek chorus, in order to contextualize my special appreciation of its use in this performance of *OT*. According to Aristotle’s well-known lines in the *Poetics* (1456a 24–26), “the chorus should be treated as one of the actors; it should be a part of the whole and should participate, not as in Euripides but as in Sophocles.” It is not clear how Aristotle understands this “participation” (μόριον εἶναι τοῦ ὅλου καὶ συναγωνίζεσθαι).<sup>1</sup> This is certainly not the place to discuss such a complicated subject, but I would like to use instead some narratological concepts, which seem to me to capture well the complex reality of the chorus.<sup>2</sup> The chorus has a double temporal and spatial reality, both diegetic (on the level of the events the characters are experiencing) and extradiegetic (on a different level from the events advancing the plot).<sup>3</sup> The reality of the chorus is diegetic when the chorus shares the same spatial and temporal reality with the rest of the characters and its action is part of the plot, as in the dialogues that take place in the episodes; its reality is extradiegetic when its action is not properly in the chain of events of the plot but has its own spatial and temporal reality, as in the choral songs. This double reality is an advantage that the characters do not enjoy unless they break the fourth wall and address the audience directly, but this does not happen in tragedy. The chorus, however, without breaking the fourth wall, is able to pause the diegetic movement of the plot in the *parodos*, *stasima*, and *exodos* (entrance, choral songs between episodes, and final exit). The chorus of *OT* is particularly concerned with prayers and laments. Thus in the choral songs it is concerned with particular speech acts that are complete in and of themselves.<sup>4</sup> Not only is the time of these speech acts somehow different from that of the plot, but their space is also different, transformed by the act of singing and dancing. In fact, the ancient theatre made this spatial difference conspicuous by situating the chorus in a separate part of the stage, the orchestra. But this sort of disruption does not break the fourth wall: the spectator is not taken out of the fictional world of the play and driven back to his own historical present. On the contrary, a different level of fictionality is added; we are forced to accept that within the fictional world of the play there is both the diegetic spatio-temporality of the characters and the extradiegetic reality of the chorus. This extradiegetic reality is the moment of intensified lament, of reflexive doubt, of the delaying in thoughts, of the pondering of the emotions; it is the moment/space where the action can find more density. Because it uses music and song, the density of the *pathos* encompasses the audience, even if the fourth wall is not broken. In fact, even without the resource of metatheatricity, the moment of music and dance somehow brings the audience to the “same” time and space as the chorus.

In the CAD's production of *OT*, I found myself enjoying in particular the extradiegetic interventions of the chorus. The motives of dance and song are integrating rather than distancing. It was in these moments of prayer and lament that I, as a member of the audience, felt closer to the time and space of the play. I was in fact sharing the moment of the songs, in the very space of the theater, extradiegetically shared by chorus and audience. I was part of a feast that elevated songs for the diegetic events, releasing in a communal way the *pathos* for the misfortunes of the characters. In a time when metatheatricity and irony are pervasive in the theatre, even in contemporary revivals of Greek tragedy, and amid the pervasive current fear of slipping back into all-too-metaphysical extradiegetic narratives, it is refreshing to encounter a staging that fully embraces the challenge of the Greek chorus. With their masks, their costumes, and their truly youthful enthusiasm, this chorus brought to the production a certain lightness and joy, even in a story that is terrifying and uncanny. They set aside any aim at realism, but also escaped the already-anticipated metatheatricity of much contemporary drama. Instead, they allowed us to enjoy without pain, but also without irony, the performance of a text that has never stopped moving us deeply.

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#### notes

<sup>1</sup>The first stasimon (151–215) of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus* definitely seems alien to the events taking place in the episodes. The content of the song repeats information that we already have, and in this way it does not move the action forward in any sense, but provides density to the pathos of what has recently been said by the characters. The way in which it is delivered, namely by singing and dancing, is completely different from the delivery of the dialogues. Thus it is not the content of the song which makes it different, but its delivery. Accordingly, to say that the chorus "participates" in the plot at all times is, at the least, ambiguous. In what I briefly propose here, the choral songs "participate" extradiegetically in the plot.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Ricoeur (1983), *Temps et récit*. Tome I: *La configuration dans le récit de fiction*, in the chapter "La mise en intrigue. Une lecture de la poétique d'Aristote," has argued for the possibility of understanding both epic and drama as "narration," if narration is defined by what Aristotle called "mythos," or disposition of the events (cf. 62–65). For a defense of the applicability of narratological categories to the analysis of drama, see Peter Huhn and Roy Sommer (2009) "Narration in Poetry and Drama" in Huhn et al. (2009), *Handbook of Narratology*, 238 ff.; and Ansgar Nunning and Roy Sommer (2008) "Diegetic and Mimetic Narrativity: Some further Steps towards a Transgeneric Narratology of Drama" in Pier John et al (2009), *Theorizing Narrative*. Irene de Jong (1991), *Narrative in Drama: The Art of the Euripidean Messenger-Speech*, has used narratology to interpret messenger speeches in Greek tragedy.

<sup>3</sup> I am borrowing these concepts as used by Gerard Genette (1983) in his seminal *Nouveau discours du récit*.

<sup>4</sup> I refer to Austin's (1969) famous analysis of speech acts in his *Speech Acts: An essay in the Philosophy of language*.