

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.

## The 51st Season of Classical Plays at Syracuse's Greek Theatre: Aeschylus's *The Suppliants*, Euripides's *Iphigenia in Aulis*, and Seneca's *Medea*

May 5 to June 28, 2015  
L Ciclo di Spettacoli Classici  
Teatro Greco di Siracusa Syracuse, Italy

Reviewed by **Caterina Barone**  
*University of Padova*

Discussing the present with words from the past, in a theatre rich in ancient memories: this is what The National Institute of Ancient Drama (Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico – INDA) stands for and what it has traditionally done since its inception. The theme chosen for the 51st season of Classical Plays (onstage at the Greek Theatre from May 5 to June 28, 2015) is the sea: a particularly meaningful choice at a time when the Mediterranean is a focus of socio-political turmoil.

Aeschylus's *The Suppliants*, Euripides's *Iphigenia in Aulis* and Seneca's *Medea*, the three plays chosen for 2015, indeed share a common horizon: the sea, which broadens geographical and

cultural borders while at the same time bringing destabilisation and conflicts. This thematic link is rendered visually explicit by the sandy expanse covering the orchestra and functioning as a base for the three different stage settings. The set of *The Suppliants* is characterised by nine stylised Cycladic idols, standing erect on their pedestals in front of the monumental gate to the city of Argos. In *Iphigenia in Aulis*, three black hulls pulled up on shore and two golden

figureheads abandoned on the sand suggest the unnerving wait of the Greek army on the beach at Aulis. In *Medea* a telescopic cylinder (a home-lair) near a labyrinth of grey bulkheads creates a wasteland-atmosphere, a metaphor for the ethical and emotional desertification of human relationships.

This season of plays, suggested by Superintendent Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi and by the recently nominated Board of Directors and Managing Director Walter Pagliaro, has set a new course for the INDA and led to unprecedented choices that confirm the role of the institute in promoting research and experimentation in the classic theatre. Three directors who had never worked in Syracuse were chosen: Moni Ovadia, Federico Tiezzi and Paolo Magelli. *The Suppliants* had not been staged in Syracuse since 1982 and *Iphigenia in Aulis* not since 1974, while *Medea* marks the debut of Senecan tragedy on the slopes of the Temenite hill. Moreover, for the first time ever, the 2015 production featured a text translated into a dialect: Moni Ovadia, director of the Aeschylean play, presented a free rendering into



Lucia Lavia as Iphigenia in *Iphigenia in Aulis*. Photo by Franca Centaro



Choir of Danaids in Aeschylus's *The Suppliants*. Photo by Maria Pia Ballarino



Valentina Banci as Medea and Filipp Dini as Jason in *Medea*. Photo by Maurizio Zivillica



Sicilian.

Ovadia created a staging with strong ideologico-political connotations, and himself acted the role of king Pelasgus, provident host to the Danaids as they flee a forced marriage to their Egyptian cousins.

Ovadia's text and interpretation rest upon three focal issues: gender-based violence, the welcome given to foreign immigrants who ask for hospitality and protection, and the democratic framework of the Rechtsstaat and of the just exercise of power.

To support the ideas he dearly wishes to promote, Ovadia did not hesitate to put aside Guido Paduano's accurate and sensitive translation, launching instead into a radical rewriting of the play. He intervened not only with the introduction of Sicilian dialect and modern Greek, but also by cutting and expanding the text in order to stress the elements of the original play that seem functional to his view of current events. These practices may seem atypical of INDA's tradition, and may attract criticism from those who believe in the untouchability of classical texts, but they resulted in a coherent show that was able to withstand the contextual test of the Greek theatre in Syracuse. It must however be remarked that Aeschylus's tragedy in itself is rich and deep enough to make Ovadia's display of ideological emphasis seem redundant.

The play opens with an expository prologue, providing the audience with the mythic coordinates of previous events. These are narrated by a *cantastoria*, with the recognizable style of "cuntu", the typical narration-form of the Sicilian tradition, strongly rhymed and with a rhythmical percussive beat. The role is played by singer-songwriter Mario Incudine, who together with composer and singer Pippo Kaballà collaborated with Ovadia in staging the adaptation of the play. Incudine was also in charge of the music, played live by four instrumentalists (clarinet, accordion, guitar and drums). The resulting sound-texture is pervasive and captivating, turning the show into an epic *cantata* and propelling the movements of the Chorus (led with physical and interpretive vigour by Donatella Finocchiaro). The melting-pot of races and cultures typical of the *The Suppliants*, with its juxtaposition of the Greek and the African world, is effectively expressed by a multifarious score with musical influences from different backgrounds, unified by their common origin in the Mediterranean area.

A similar approach was chosen in designing costumes: the women and their father Danaus (Angelo Tosto) are dressed in colourful ethnic clothes; the Egyptians wear drab menacing attire; Pelasgus is dressed in clothes inspired by classical antiquity, with azure tones and decorations reminiscent of Greek temple architecture.

The men escorting the king stand out from the rest of the cast: they are wrapped in white costumes suggesting biohazard suits, maybe with the intent of stressing the mistrust and the initial defensive attitude exhibited by the people of Argos when dealing with the foreign women.

Federico Tiezzi chose a philologically faithful approach to Euripides's text (translated by Giulio Guidorizzi with a language that is both agile and attentive to semantic nuances) for *Iphigenia in Aulis*: the director opts for an array of suggestions that start from the classic myth and reach all the way to bourgeois tragedy.

*Iphigenia in Aulis*, with its alternation of contrasting tones, does not lend itself to simple approaches in direction, shifting as it does from the tragic element of the virgin sacrifice to the complex figure of Clytemnestra and the moving loyalty of the elderly attendant. An additional challenge is giving a credible shape to a Chorus that is only superficially participating in the action. One must moreover consider the difficulty of rendering the protagonist herself, with her swift transformation from a frail maiden afraid of dying to a heroine sworn to sacrifice her own life: an apparently unjustified change in

her mental and emotional state that Aristotle stigmatised in his *Poetics* (1454a 31–33) as an expression of a tragic character lacking coherence.

Tiezzi worked by way of compartmentalisation, characterising in a heterogeneous manner the different components and phases in the drama.

The direction and costuming of the long initial part of the tragedy are inspired by the classical world: the Greek soldiers wear armour and bear spears and shields according to traditional iconography, as does Achilles; Agamemnon and Menelaus are burdened, symbolically, by black cloaks embellished with silver decorations.

In this context, the women of the Chorus make an unsettling entrance in their colourful clothes, perhaps suggestive, like the rakes they later use to trace wavy lines on the sand, of Russian or Balkan peasants.

But from this possible allusion to a contemporary theatre of war involving Slavic ethnicities, the play moves towards oriental references in its concluding part, as the very same women then wear bright orange saris (suggesting the vexed condition of women in India, or perhaps evoking, by means of the chosen colour, the idea of Buddhist monks and their aspiration to peace?); in the final scene, after the sacrifice, their veils are replaced by deer-antlered headgear.

Clytemnestra and Iphigenia instead wear Alexander McQueen's haute couture, thereby creating a further visual dissonance in the scene where the bitter confrontation between the queen and Agamemnon takes place, as they face each other in a flaming enclosure: this is an arena for family conflicts, anticipating with original insight the lacerating conflicts portrayed by Ibsen and Strindberg.

The interpretive line chosen for all actors is unitary, so as to leave no room for any of the possible pathetic implications, and to render in a credible manner the behavioural meanderings of the characters: from Agamemnon's painful uncertainty (played by Sebastiano Lo Monaco, moderate and touching in his performance), to Menelaus (Francesco Colella) and his cruel and egoistical disdainfulness, to Achilles (Raffaele Esposito) with his comical machismo, and the elderly attendant (Gianni Salvo) showing signs of authentic affection. Elena Ghiaurov's Clytemnestra is effective in manifesting the abyss of hate agape within her, while Lucia Lavia plays Iphigenia in an exemplary manner, managing to portray naive enthusiasm, dismay, and finally heroic determination, without imperfections and with believable changefulness. In the finale, a black figure wielding a dagger ends Iphigenia's existential journey in a snapshot reminiscent of sadly familiar images of current fierceness: the director entrusts the narration to the two coryphaeae (Francesca Ciocchetti and Deborah Zuin), who commiserate with Clytemnestra as they hang garlands around her neck in an atmosphere of sympathy that does not, however, duly take into account the doubts expressed by the queen regarding the true fate of her daughter.

For Seneca's *Medea*, Paolo Magelli aims with both stylistic and conceptual coherence at a modern but not banally modernised rendition, setting the play in the decadent zeitgeist of the early 1900's, as if to stress an ethical crisis that is overwhelming society as a whole, as well as individuals. After having removed from the protagonist any link to the orphic connotations of Seneca's sorceress, Magelli focuses on the enormity of the violence that Jason and Corinth's inhabitants, led by a cynical Creon, perpetrate against Medea: a woman regarded with disfavour because she is a foreigner and rendered vulnerable because of her repudiation by a man for whom she has sacrificed her homeland and her family of origin.

To emphasize Giusto Piccone's pithy and visionary translation, in which the director introduced lexical grafts that create fractures and linguistic deviations, Magelli inserted verses from Euripides's *Medea* into the text, and added to the finale extracts from Heiner Müller's twentieth-century rendition of the tragedy, in which the interplay of passions reaches into the deepest abysses of human suffering. The result is a

zoom-in perspective, which, albeit not rigorously faithful to Seneca's work, preserves its force and shattering power.

Medea, as played by Valentina Banci, is a woman in love who still hopes to win back her man and offers herself to him, body and soul, attempting one last seduction. The pain of betrayal thrusts her into a vortex of unstoppably progressive madness, as revealed by her feverish movements and her gait of small and convulsive steps. Her new family, built on the ashes of her father's, is undone by her own hand: all that is left of the happy past are the children's toys, kept in an old chest.

The men and women of the Chorus, dressed in clothes reminiscent of Pirandello's atmospheres, with an allusion to the dynamics of a hostile and conditioning society, marginalise Medea from the very beginning: they deride her and mistreat her, siding with Creon, played by a merciless and scornful Daniele Griggio.

Their gestures appear at times elegant and fluid, at times exaggerated, accompanied by Arturo Anecchino's music, which blends the fascinations of tango with techno roughness and electro sounds.

Not even Jason (Filippo Dini, who struggles to play the role convincingly because of the excessive shouting) shows Medea any compassion: he rejects her with cruelty and roughness, and is devoid of the vulnerable traits he has in Seneca's work. Medea receives her only emotional support from the elderly nurse (Francesca Benedetti), but it is insufficient to treat the wounds of a soul tormented by betrayal and marginalisation.

The tragic epilogue is expanded by Medea's monologue: she has by now fallen prey to delirium and hallucinations, and she is subjected to yet another act of contempt by the women of the Chorus, who pour buckets of sand on her in a supreme gesture of annihilation.