

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

Performance, Politics, Pedagogy: a Tribute to Mary-Kay Gamel

C.W. Marshall

University of British Columbia

Performance, politics, and pedagogy represent key themes that resonate through the theatrical productions of Mary-Kay Gamel, who retired from teaching at UC Santa Cruz in 2015. These concerns have informed her creative work as director and translator since 1985. Mary-Kay is indefatigable, and her profound collegial support, particularly of younger scholars, has been deeply appreciated by many, myself included. This and the four articles that follow (*Didaskalia* 13.07-11) originated in a panel intended to celebrate her and her body of work, held at the annual meeting of the Society of Classical Studies in San Francisco in January, 2016.

I first learned of Mary-Kay's productions before I met her. Jim Svendsen, Professor of Classics and Theatre at the University of Utah and director of the Classical Greek Theater Festival, told me about her 1990 production of Euripides' *Electra* (part of *The Elektra Project*, in which she staged both Aeschylus' and Euripides' accounts of the story within a few months). The Euripidean play was set in a kind of trailer park, with the trailer of the *autourgos* (a man who works on his own, without slaves) to whom Electra has been married surrounded by the cliff walls of a granite quarry. The trailer—old, rusted, and implicitly as far from the palace of Argos as the modern American West—instantly suggests something of the class differences and economic uncertainty that inform Euripides' mythic innovation. This stunning mental image still resonates with me as emblematic of what Mary-Kay works to accomplish in her productions. In this case, it offered a spectacular re-interpretation of Euripides while also revealing a deep truth within the play. The moment represents the spirit of the text (as she sees it) in a contemporary American idiom.

Mary-Kay has recently provided her own account of her emergence as a theatre artist (Gamel 2017): what she refers to as her "call from Dionysus." Prior to that call, she worked on Roman epic and elegy. In 1972, she completed her PhD dissertation at UC Berkeley in Comparative Literature, "Playfulness and Seriousness in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*", and she established herself as a teacher and a scholar at her beloved UC Santa Cruz. The conversion that began with her first translation for the stage, *Medea* in 1985, created an irresistible theatrical force. She has been involved in more than 40 productions, translating and directing all the extant ancient playwrights.¹ These include *Effie and the Barbarians* (1995; her version of Euripides' *Iphigenia in Tauris*, remounted in 2010), *Eye on Apollo* (1996; her version of Euripides' *Ion*, remounted in 2009), and *The Buzzzzz!!!!* (2006; her version of Aristophanes' *Wasps*). Her performances typically involved student actors, providing them with a grounding in and a love for ancient theatre. This substantial body of work was recognized when she won the 2009 Outreach Prize from the (then) American Philological Association for her theatre productions.

In time, as her theories of adaptation developed, Mary-Kay's performances became more independent of their source material. She has also begun to document her changing attitude toward adaptation of classical material in publications (see Gamel 2002, 2010, and 2013). A special issue of the *American Journal*



Mary-Kay Gamel

of *Philology* in 2002 celebrated *The Julie Thesmo Show*, her adaptation of Aristophanes' *Thesmophoriazusae* to the context of an American television talk show. Her distinctive approach to ancient theatre has meant that she has been invited to re-mount several of her productions at academic institutions as far away as New Zealand. For many scholars of classical theatre, Mary-Kay Gamel has modeled the integration of performance into teaching and into research.

Additionally, Mary-Kay grounds her productions in a wider academic context, somehow finding money to invite scholars for a mini-academic festival. It is through such occasions that I have been able to see several of her productions. When I was working on my book on Roman Comedy, she invited me to attend her 2003 production of *Eunuchus*. As the male characters left the stage at the play's conclusion, the walls of Thais' house were backlit to reveal silhouettes of the women left behind inside. Later, when I was working on Euripides' *Helen*, I was invited in 2008 to see her production of that play (*Helen of Egypt*), which sticks to the Euripidean text almost line-for-line until the appearance of the final messenger, when the text swerves wildly, with the escaping lovers caught and brought back for a final encounter with Theoclymenus. The jarring effect twisted the mythic variant in an unexpected direction, keeping even the savviest Euripidean scholars guessing at where the play would turn next. Finally, I was able to see her 2011 production of *Orestes Terrorist*, which coincided with a discussion of New Music that Mary-Kay was organizing with Mark Griffith at Berkeley (and was reviewed at [Macintosh 2011](#)).

As an actor, I have been privileged to be directed by her twice, first as the Young Housman in a rehearsed reading of Tom Stoppard's *The Invention of Love*, performed at the meeting of the American Philological Association in Philadelphia in 2002. It was the first such conference performance in what has now become a tradition at the annual meetings. I went on to direct the Canadian premiere of the play in 2009, which wouldn't have happened without that earlier experience. I also played Einstein (Plautus' character Sagaristio) in rehearsed readings of Amy Richlin's version of *Persa*, called *Iran Man* (Richlin 2005), initially staged at the fourth *Feminism and the Classics* conference in 2004, held in Tucson, Arizona, and then again at the 2005 APA in Boston. Mary-Kay's productions can be revelatory, challenging their audiences to re-assess elements and unveiling new ways that actors can make ancient scripts compelling.

In this tribute we have four papers on Mary-Kay's productions and the themes they evoke. In the first essay ([Number 8](#) in this volume), Amy R. Cohen explores Mary-Kay's 2011 production of *Ajax* in the light of the need for student productions, which are often still omitted from published accounts within reception studies.² Next in [Number 9](#), Christopher Bungard examines Mary-Kay's production of Terence's *Eunuchus*, which was produced in conjunction with Hrotsvit of Gandersheim's play, *The Conversion of Thais*. In the third contribution ([Number 10](#)), Timothy Moore explores a recent political performance of *Antigone* produced in the light of the 2014 Ferguson Riots. Finally, Ruby Blondell offers a response ([Number 11](#)) to the previous papers, returning to the nature of "authenticity" within Gamel's work. In different ways, we have all benefitted from the friendship and theatrical vision offered to us by Mary-Kay Gamel.

notes

Thanks are due to the contributors, to Didaskalia, to the anonymous readers, and above all to Mary-Kay, friend and inspiration. Thank you, Mary-Kay.

¹ The *Medea* translation was published originally in 1995 (with subsequent reprints), but other scripts have yet to be published.

² Marshall 2010: 174-75 identifies Mary-Kay's work as an exception in this tendency. The two major studies of modern American productions of ancient drama do not engage with university or amateur productions at all, even though it is these that often engage most fully with the ancient text (see Hartigan

1995, Foley 2012).

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