

DIDASKALIA 

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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

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Aristophanes's *Lysistrata*

Directed by Sheila Daniels
 Summer 2013
 Intiman Theater, Seattle, WA

Reviewed by **Brett M. Rogers**
University of Puget Sound

This past decade of continuous warfare in Afghanistan and Iraq has left an indelible mark on contemporary American theater, its turmoil and death breathing renewed life into re-performances and adaptations of ancient Greek drama in particular. A decade ago, The *Lysistrata* Project promoted thousands of public readings of the drama (on March 3, 2003) in opposition to the (then-planned) invasion into Iraq. Numerous productions of Greek tragedies, such as Euripides's *Trojan Women* and *Iphigenia at Aulis*, have cropped up in response to reporting about the costs of war. Long-

standing government-supported theatrical programs, such as Theater of War and Ancient Greeks / Modern Lives, have used staged readings of Greek drama to facilitate dialogue

among soldiers, veterans, and civilians about the experience of warfare and its consequences across the United States and abroad. For as much as Greek drama has shaped the history of theater in the West, it is perhaps not a stretch to say that events in the Middle East have significantly shaped much of this present generation's understanding of Greek drama.

Into this climate came the Seattle-based Intiman Theater's recent production of the ancient Greek comedy *Lysistrata* by Aristophanes (first produced in 411 BCE). *Lysistrata* was produced as part of Intiman's four-show repertory theatre festival for summer 2013, its final performance on September 12th, 2013. As director Sheila Daniels noted in the program and iterated in a talk-back held after the final performance, her initial impetus was to stage a production that addressed the war in Afghanistan, inspired both by her experience growing up in a family of military veterans and by interviews she had conducted with veterans of Afghanistan and Iraq two years earlier. While many directors choose to produce a Greek drama in the mythic past, or in an unreal time and space, in order to invite comparison to and reflection on contemporary warfare, Daniels's *Lysistrata* remained adamantly fixed on our present day, making it impossible throughout the performance to lose sight of the current war in Afghanistan.

Nowhere was this clearer than in the production's choice of setting. As the audience first entered into the theater, they found the stage designed to look like a modern military base camp. Actors of both sexes, dressed in fatigues, were already moving about on stage – preparing large pieces of equipment, doing push ups and other exercise drills, playfully rough housing. In one vignette, after a short inspection of the "soldiers" onstage, a "Commanding Officer" (Charles Legett) dismissed the soldiers, then called to the audience: "As you were." Through this twenty-minute prelude, the audience was drawn into life on a base camp in Afghanistan. (It is noteworthy that Daniels enlisted two military consultants for this production, one of whom, Carole Lynn Castillo, contributed writing to the play's program. As Daniels noted in the talk-back, she wanted to make sure actors followed proper protocols; for example, "soldiers" were taught not to salute the "CO" onstage, since such a gesture is prohibited in base camp, lest an enemy sniper be able to identify a high-ranking target.) Finally, the "CO" re-emerged to welcome the



*Company of LYSISTRATA. Photo by
 Chris Bennion*

enlisted audience to this performance, inviting them to turn off communication devices (“cause the enemy might be listening”), then drawing them into a call-and-answer routine. Through all this, the audience came to the realization that *Lysistrata* itself is not the play, but rather a play within a play, a “Soldier Show” being put on by “soldiers” in the midst of life on an Army base in Afghanistan. For an hour and a half, the real-life audience was thus invited to view itself as being on active duty in the U.S. Army.

Similarly, costumes worked to keep the audience in the present day of the fictional base camp rather than in *Lysistrata*'s 411 BCE. The costumes for the Greek comedy had been designed to look as if they had been cobbled together from the camp's leftover supplies, a bricolage of helmets, protective vests, and patches from military fatigues. Even the many phalluses flopping about invoked life on the base, made up of random machine parts, oil filters, and brightly colored water guns. Interestingly, some costumes invoked contemporary cinematic ideas about what constitutes an “ancient Greek warrior.” Hence the Spartans looked like they have just stepped off the screen of Zak Snyder's *300*, scantily clad in bright red like militaristic Vegas show girls, while the Archon (Matt Reed) looked more like a mid-century caricature of an Eastern potentate than an Athenian official. Every character wore standard-issue military boots and socks, as if these were the cothurni or buskins of the modern theater of war.

I discuss the set, setting, costumes, and pre-show vignettes at such length because, with these external frames added to Aristophanes's script, Daniels and company turned the comedy into not merely a display to be laughed at, but a communal experience to be laughed with. *Lysistrata* invited the audience, as “soldiers,” to laugh with its fellow “soldiers.” Such a shared experience became crucial to the success of this *Lysistrata*, since the concluding scenes in the production relied upon this sense of belonging in order to turn Aristophanes's comedy into a tragedy that refused to let audiences escape the human costs of war (more on this below).

This is not to say that this modernized version of *Lysistrata* did not also, in true comic spirit, “bring the fun.” Several significant modifications to the script made jokes accessible to the modern audience. (As Daniels declared in the talk-back, the script itself was stitched together from multiple translations, each scene drawing from a different translation depending on its fit for each “beat” in the show.) References abounded to contemporary technologies of hygiene (i.e., the use of tampons as weapons) and recent political slogans (e.g., shouts of “Yes we can”). This *Lysistrata* made especial use of popular culture as a vehicle for humor and song in place of the choral odes in the Aristophanic script. In one choral ode, the men's chorus offered, in the spirit of David Letterman, a deliberately offensive list of “Top Ten Reasons Why Whiskey is Better Than a Woman.” Most of the choral odes, however, were swapped out in exchange for karaoke performances of modern pop songs – including the use of a wireless microphone, along with its flat amplified sound – treating audiences to renditions of hits by such artists as Beyoncé (“Single Ladies”), the Cranberries (“Zombie” for the women's oath), and Green Day (from *American Idiot*), among others; particularly inspired was the choice of “Add It Up” by the Violent Femmes, capturing the adolescent sexual frustration of literally blue-balled Cinesias (Tim Gouran) and the men's chorus before the ‘resolution’ scene with Peace (Benjamin Wippel in drag). Sometimes the drive to make a tired pop-culture reference came at the expense of the flow of the performance, such as an awkward light-saber fight between the Athenian and Spartan ambassadors using their phalluses – a gag handled more deftly by Mel Brooks in *Spaceballs* (1987) – and the abrupt use of film scores in the play's final scenes, including the Superman theme and the majestic “Throne Room” score from *Star Wars*. Perhaps the only obviously ancient joke to have survived in the script revisions was the infamous reference to the sexual position known as the “lioness on a cheese-grater” – a joke whose very obscurity must have been so funny to Daniels and company that it is repeated later in the play (as opposed to Aristophanes's single use at lines 231–2).¹

Perhaps the most impressive aspect of this *Lysistrata* was its handling of contemporary social issues, in particular gender and sex. *Lysistrata* is a notoriously difficult play from a twentieth- and twenty-first-century perspective; some audiences see *Lysistrata* as offering the possibility for the empowerment of women's voices in politics, while others read *Lysistrata* as a male-identified fantasy that ends in sexual objectification and the reification of traditional gender norms. Daniels's production dealt with this complexity in several ways. First, this production made playful use of drag, featuring not just male actors as female characters, such as Opisthenia the Corinthian (Brian Culbertson) and the aforementioned Peace, but also a female actor as the male character who sports the biggest phallus onstage, the Spartan Herald (Chelsea Callahan); in the talk-back, Daniels claimed this was done in the spirit of gender equality. Such egalitarian ideals were intriguingly reinforced in the external frame of the play, wherein uniformed male and female soldiers appeared mostly androgynous, emphasizing the importance of regimentation in physical appearance among soldiers. Second, the earlier scenes featuring the two hemi-choruses of women and men, in particular the long debate between Lysistrata (Shontina "Tina" Vernon) and the Archon, had been deftly rewritten and performed so as to resonate with contemporary debates about the sexes; prominent and skillful use of modern slurs against women in turn amplified the poise and resoluteness of Vernon's impressive and strikingly modern-sounding Lysistrata. Midway through the production, it seemed as though this *Lysistrata* might have been boldly taking what one might call a pro-feminist stance far beyond what we find in the Aristophanic script. Fuller exploration of this stance in contrast with the troubling reconciliation scene, however, was ultimately foreclosed not by the events in the Aristophanic script itself, but rather by the stark re-emergence onstage of the war in Afghanistan.

The final scene, then, offered the single most significant alteration to the Aristophanic script. In Daniels's production, the final celebratory exodos of the Greek play was abruptly interrupted by an assault on the base camp. (In anticipation of the end, there was a similar interruption of the camp show about halfway through the play, during which we heard gunfire; order was quickly restored and the play recommenced.) In this final sequence, the actors in the camp show quickly evacuated the stage, running to fortify the defenses in the camp. The lights went out, the audience heard explosions and confused radio chatter. As the soldiers return to the stage, we discovered that the female soldier who had played Myrrhine (Kamaria Hallums-Harris) in the camp show had been killed during the attack. Myrrhine was carried onstage, at which point Lysistrata held her in her arms, singing the ballad "Scarlet Ribbons (For Her Hair)" as she kneeled over the body. As Lysistrata lamented, the other soldiers onstage came to a standstill and began chanting the U.S. Soldier's Creed in unison.² The resultant effect was both powerful and disconcerting, bringing into sharp relief the contrast between a classical Greek woman or civilian's experience of warfare (lamentation, care for the dead) and the soldier's experience of battle (the call to discipline in the face of confusion, destruction, and death). This ending thus rejected Aristophanes's celebratory *exodos*, both a reminder that the Peloponnesian War did not in fact end in 411 BCE and a strong assertion of Daniels's initial vision that this be a play about the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Thus while this *Lysistrata* might have searched for comic relief in the midst of warfare and suffering, it was hard to see Daniels's ending as anything other than a tragedy that, as one line from the Soldier's Creed reminds us, "will always place the mission first."

notes

¹ On this infamously obscure reference and the complexities involved in its interpretation, see Cashman Kerr Prince (2009), "The Lioness and the Cheese-Grater (Ar. Lys. 231-232)," *Studi Italiani di Filologia Classica*, 4th series, 7.2.149-175.

² Here is the full text of the Soldier's Creed, taken from the official website of the U.S. Army (www.army.mil/values/soldiers.html, accessed October 12, 2013): I am an American Soldier. I am a warrior

and a member of a team. I serve the people of the United States, and live the Army Values. I will always place the mission first. I will never accept defeat. I will never quit. I will never leave a fallen comrade. I am disciplined, physically and mentally tough, trained and proficient in my warrior tasks and drills. I always maintain my arms, my equipment and myself. I am an expert and I am a professional. I stand ready to deploy, engage, and destroy, the enemies of the United States of America in close combat. I am a guardian of freedom and the American way of life. I am an American Soldier.