

DIDASKALIA 

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

Combat Veterans, Neuroscience, and the Tragic Mask: Euripides's *Herakles*

Translated and adapted by Peter Meineck
Directed by Desiree Sanchez
July 22–24, 2012
Aquila Theatre Group
Michael Cacoyannis Foundation
Athens, Greece
(reviewed performance: July 23, 2012)

Review by Natasha Mercuri

Euripides's *Herakles* is the play Peter Meineck and Aquila Theatre chose to adapt to the American contemporary reality of war. In the Euripidean original, Herakles, the mythic hero, returns home after the completion of his last labor: descending into the Underworld and bringing the guard dog Cerberus up into the light. During his absence at Thebes a civil war was raging and Lycus came to the throne. Herakles's family was condemned to death. Herakles, against all odds, came back to Thebes to protect his family and restore order. But Iris and Lyssa, under Hera's command, drove Herakles mad and made him kill his family. When he came to his senses, his father Amphitryon explained everything and Herakles left the city only after his committed friend Theseus offered help and hospitality. Amphitryon was assigned the task of burying the dead.

This performance is part of "Ancient Greeks / Modern Lives",¹ a national program of the National Endowment for the Humanities that has been led since 2010 by the Aquila Theatre and includes several events. Ancient Greek texts are stage read and followed by open discussions. The aim of the program is to engage modern audiences in a dialogue with the classical texts about issues relevant to American society. The combat trauma experienced by Iraq and Afghanistan veterans stands at the forefront of America's contemporary reality. Families, friends and communities around the U.S.A. have been facing difficulties in helping veterans rehabilitate. Soldiers are diagnosed with PTSD symptoms such as social withdrawal, isolation and suicidal tendencies, depression, insomnia or fragmented sleep, hyperactivity, alcohol and drug abuse, rage, acts of violence, etc. It is vital for combat veterans to feel welcome and to be encouraged to tell their stories, to speak their truth, to communalize their trauma.

Ancient Greek drama becomes the medium that facilitates the communication between the traumatized and their environment. Jonathan Shay's book *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* provides a theoretical framework for the project. The author argues that a primary purpose of ancient Greek theater was to reintegrate warriors into a democratic society. Ancient Greek drama is a form of storytelling and healing. The same is true of Aquila Theatre and this adaptation of *Herakles*. The



Arthur Bartow (right) as Amphitryon and Sophie Wright (left) as Daughter of Herakles. Photo by Miguel Drake-Mclaughlin.



Nathan Flower (left) as Lykos and Elizabeth Wakehouse (right) as Megara. Photo by Miguel Drake-Mclaughlin.

project intends to make American audiences “war literate,” to inform people about war and its consequences and to heal “The painful paradox [...] that fighting for one’s country can render one unfit to be its citizen”.² “Herakles may be an extreme mythic example but we must all live with the consequences of sending young men and women away to fight, whether or not we agree with the reasons for the wars or the politicians who sent them. Herakles is an ancient message from a society traumatized by years of brutal war. In this respect the Greeks still have much to teach us.”³ In our case the reception of Ancient Greek drama becomes a political interpretation of a wounded modern society and acts as a

means of social intervention.

It is worth describing how veterans’ voices and physical presence were used in the performance. Instead of using a chorus, Peter Meineck drew questions from each choral ode, addressed them to World War II, Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan veterans and filmed their answers/testimonies. The screening replaced the chorus. Although the videos were quite extensive and at times detrimental to the rhythm of the performance, the communication of the ancient message to a modern audience became explicit. It was strikingly obvious that older veterans had deeply processed their war experience; therefore they could narrate and also come to conclusions in articulate thought and speech. On the contrary, the youngest veteran present, although a university graduate, could not form a well-structured sentence, a failure typical of a man who has not come to terms with his traumatic past. Theseus’s part was assigned to a Vietnam veteran, Brian Delate, whose testimony was also filmed and integrated into the performance.

The performance used masks especially made for the occasion, designed according to the research of Peter Meineck.⁴ In his paper “The Neuroscience of the Tragic Mask” he proves that the tragic mask functions properly only if its expression is *ambiguous*, so that it “challenges normal human neural responses and produces a higher cognitive experience.” Study of the Pronomos vase⁵ led him to conclude that tragic masks do not have fixed characteristics. On the contrary, their ambiguity is what activates the viewer’s mirror neurons. The angle from which the mask is seen and its manipulation by a skilled actor engage the spectator’s foveal and peripheral vision, urging him/her to “make emotional and situational judgments.”⁶

The use of mask dictates the actors’ movement, their location on stage, their speech (voice and spoken word), and the accompanying music. It favors frontal acting and demands an amplified way of acting in order to communicate emotion and *mythos* effectively. Meineck believes—and this was strongly supported during the workshop—that when wearing the mask, one can speak only the truth of the emotions. When an actor uses the mask, he/she is “forced” by it to tell the truth with his body. For



Elizabeth Wakehouse as Megara. Photo by Miguel Drake-Mclaughlin.



Nathan Flower as Lykos. Photo by Miguel Drake-Mclaughlin.



Brian Delate (left) as Theseus/Chorus. Photo by Miguel Drake-Mclaughlin.

example, anger in words and facial expressions looks milder to the audience than anger bodily enacted. The mask frees the actor from cerebral activity, urges him/her to use the “raw material” of his/her body so as to make the truth of the characters and the text visible. In order to follow the dictates of the mask, the director used physical theatre techniques to enhance corporeality and build up enactment.

The Modern Greek audience, although unfamiliar with war culture and combat trauma (Greece’s last conflict was the Civil War that ended in 1949), and especially with the way American soldiers suffer from it, received the experiment of Aquila Theatre very well. After the performances there were vivid discussions in which spectators made challenging remarks, for example, on the concept and the efficacy of the project, its reception within American communities, American audiences’ knowledge of the play and of ancient Greek drama in general, etc.

To sum up, *Herakles* was an innovative production, orientated to the interaction between the past and the present, classic authors and modern spectators, narrators and audiences, individuals and community, art and life.

notes

¹ Ancient Greeks–Modern Lives <http://ancientgreekmodernlives.org/> [accessed 28/4/2013].

² Shay, Jonathan, *Achilles in Vietnam: The Undoing of Character* (New York: Scribner, 1993), p. xx, <http://www.enotes.com/achilles-vietnam-salem/achilles-vietnam> [accessed 28/4/2013].

³ See webpage(http://www.mcf.gr/en/whats_on/?ev=iraklis_mainomenos_toi_eiripidi_se_metafrasi_diaskeii_toi_peter_meineck_aquila_theatre_apo_ti_nea_iorki) for more information on the production. See also uploaded filming of the press conference and the promo [accessed 28/4/2013].

⁴ Meineck, Peter, “The Neuroscience of the Tragic Mask”, paper presented at The Athens Dialogues, 24–27 November 2012, Athens, The Onassis Foundation, 1.2, <http://athensdialogues.chs.harvard.edu/cgi-bin/WebObjects/athensdialogues.woa/wa/dist?dis=82> [accessed 28/4/2013].

⁵ <http://cir.campania.beniculturali.it/museoarcheologico nazionale/thematic-views/image-gallery/RA84/view> [accessed 28/4/2013].

⁶ Meineck, 6.7.