

DIDASKALIA 

The Journal for Ancient Performance



photo: P. Winters/Theater of War

Didaskalia is an electronic journal dedicated to the study of all aspects of ancient Greek and Roman performance.

DIDASKALIA

Volume 8 (2011)

<http://didaskalia.net>

ISSN 1321-4853

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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Didaskalia is published at Randolph College.

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Note

Didaskalia is an online journal. This print representation of Volume 8 is an inadequate approximation of the web publication at didaskalia.net, which includes sound, video, and live hyperlinks.

47th Season of Classical Plays at the Greek Theatre in Syracuse: Euripides's *Andromache*, Sophocles's *Philoctetes*

Reviewed by **Caterina Barone**
University of Padova

The three latest productions of ancient plays at the Greek Theatre in Syracuse are connected by a thematic continuity of sorts. After *Medea* and *Oedipus at Colonus* in 2009 and *Phaedra* (*Hippolytos Stephanophoros*) and *Ajax* in 2010, the XLVII season presented Euripides's *Andromache* (directed by Luca De Fusco) and Sophocles's *Philoctetes* (directed by Gianpiero Borgia), echoing the past two seasons' emphasis on female characters, passionate emotion, marginalisation and loneliness. These two arduous and seldom-staged works had not been seen in Syracuse for many years, *Andromache* having last been produced in 1964, *Philoctetes* in 1984.

Philological studies often remark on the fragmentary structure of *Andromache*, a work consisting of three different episodes and lacking a character whose presence on the stage spans the entire play. The title character, in fact, disappears halfway through the tragedy (v. 765), although it is her vicissitudes that set in motion a chain of events cogently connected by links of causality. These events concern the dynasty of the Aeacids: the conflict between the now-enslaved Andromache, Neoptolemus's concubine and mother of his son Molosso, and Hermione, Neoptolemus's young and barren wife; the violent altercation between Menelaus and Peleus; the meeting between Hermione and Orestes, who is conspiring against Neoptolemus; Neoptolemus's death as he is waylaid by the young Atreides; and the final consolatory apparition of Thetis as a *deus ex machina*.

Luca De Fusco's production is a successful synthesis of spectacularity and finesse, popularising communication and analysis of the contents. It finds a possible unifying element in the goddess, making her somehow always present as an "*a latere*" figure of the Chorus, as she delivers the *stasima* in speech and song, standing out from the group only at the ending, in order to reveal her divine nature. Hers is a spectacular apparition, clad in a long green-azure cloak that expands her size so that she occupies a large portion of the scenic space. With her bald and shiny head, her slight body and her odd movements (at times creeping, at times rolling), Thetis appears supernatural and human at the same time, an "existentialist" goddess. She has suffered for the untimely deaths of her son and nephew, and now comes to console Peleus, who has been stricken by the deaths that have befallen his house to the point of annihilating it. The final scene, in which the goddess embraces the old king who once was her husband, effects a semantic shift from Euripides's conclusion, nullifying polemic criticism of the mythico-religious tradition, opting instead for an "intimistic" interpretation.

The stage settings themselves—with the mirror-like floor of the Orchestra, emanating different reflections as the lights and the movements of actors change—evoke the marine nature of the goddess, her shifting and metamorphic essence; they create a watery landscape, punctuated by the towering remains of a ship broken in two. The gestures and dances of the Chorus are also reminiscent of waves: at times stormy and



Laura Marinoni as Andromache
Photo: Maria Laura Aureli.



*Massimo Nicolini as Neoptolemus and
Sebastiano Lo Monaco as Philoctetes*
Photo: Maria Laura Aureli.

at times placid, they seem to immerse the characters in a fluid and all-embracing matter.

The white effigy on one of the two pieces of the wreck marks the temple of the goddess, where the supplicant Andromache seeks refuge, adrift in the existential shipwreck of a woman who once was queen and is now a slave. The ship brings the mind of the audience back to the dominating image of the Trojan war, the expedition of the thousand Greek ships and its devastating effect on the *oikoi* even in times of peace. Even years from its conclusion, the Trojan War impacts the existence of youths such as Hermione and Orestes, who grew up as “orphans” lacking firm and reliable guidance. It is also a metaphor for the “shipwreck” of heroic ethics, replaced by the logic of power, violence, arrogance and money, embodied by the capricious and humanly fragile Hermione and by the vile and conceited Menelaus, who is forced to retreat by Peleus. The clash between the Atreides and the ruler of Phthia is rendered by the director with the slow and implacable advance of the elderly king: sceptre in hand, he charismatically towers above his unwarlike opponent, who is vainly armed with a sword.

The logic of power and the ruthless pursuit of ends is the theme connecting the two tragedies of this edition of the Syracusan event. This theme is embodied entirely in the masculine in *Philoctetes*, in which the wounded warrior, abandoned by his companions on the isle of Lemnos during the voyage to Troy, is cruelly deceived by the Greeks who need him and his bow to conquer the enemy city. Here too the perverted usage of language, an instrument of deception as it is in *Andromache*, seems to reflect the degraded reality of Sophocles’ times: in 409 B.C. Athens was on the verge of defeat. Odysseus’ astute device of using the young Neoptolemus to deceive Philoctetes with a false story is a cynical expedient for achieving his purpose. In this regard, the translator Giovanni Cerri acutely penetrates the structure of the drama when he speaks of a meta-theatrical text, in which he individuates a complex mechanism of “play within the play”, with Odysseus as the secret director of a staged fiction, a show on a second level for the spectators of the tragedy.

The director stresses this meta-theatricality with ironic movements of the Chorus and the percussionist (the only musician on stage), and with the red mask and the gestures of the false merchant, both derived from the *Commedia dell’Arte*. This choice in direction contrasts with the naturalistic interpretation of the main characters, Odysseus and Neoptolemus, and with the performance of the female protagonist: there is no estrangement in her expression of the bodily and moral torment oppressing her, only a search for sympathy from the audience. The evident stylistic fracture is however mitigated by the *a cappella* rendition of the songs of the Chorus—featuring embedded fragments in the original language—and by the stylised stage settings, consisting of an imposing central block, sombre and rocky, on which the unhappy Philoctetes pitifully creeps.

The contrast of acting codes creates a chasm in the relationship between the characters and the Chorus, resulting in a partial and insufficiently profound rendition of the themes of incommunicability and the loneliness of the individual. These themes—which concern, in different ways, all of the three heroes in their relationship with the world around them—in Philoctetes’s case evolves into an utter refusal to partake of the dynamics regulating social living. His dehumanisation by the hand of his Greek comrades-in-arms, who have abandoned him to the mercy of a hostile and savage nature that makes him savage too, becomes radical in the hero through his voluntary marginalisation and his refusal to operate for the common good. From the marginality of the isle of Lemnos, Philoctetes is called to the centrality of the social gathering, an act of resolution associated with recovery from his disease, the affliction which excludes him from relations with others. The meaning of Heracles’s intervention rests thus in the recovery of the human dimension of the hero as a member of a community—a saving act for Philoctetes and a pedagogic exemplum for the author’s Athenian audience. On the Syracusan scene this complexity of interwoven meaning risks being lost in the wholly exterior spectacularity of the *deus ex machina*, as it appears from the bowels of the stony island among lights and puffs of smoke, exciting the audience into

enthusiastic applause.

This is the final image of a visually elegant staging, artfully exploiting the interplay of the black scene settings—the ship and the rock—with the whiteness of the classical-style garments of the actors and the members of the Chorus, reminiscent of the traditional iconography of Greek warriors with helmet and spear: an appositive chromatic effect which is multiplied by the reflecting surface of the mirror-like flooring.

The texts used as scripts are faithful to the originals, in the robust tradition of the Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico. Davide Susanetti's translation of the *Andromache* is frank and cutting, without evasion or softening of the violence implicit in the original, while Giovanni Cerri has produced a more classic translation of *Philoctetes*, displaying philological acuteness in its analytic exploration of the text.