

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

The Complete Works of Sophocles (Rebridged): *These Seven Sicknesses*

Directed by Ed Sylvanus-Iskander
 Script by Sean Graney
 January 29 - March 4, 2012
 Performed by The Bats
 The Flea Theater, New York, NY

Review by George Kovacs
University of British Columbia

We watched the blood run from Oedipus' eyes into the already bloodied water of his mother's bathtub; we saw Hyllus, unable to light the pyre of a scabrous Herakles, slink away with his hot young bride; we cringed as Theseus, coerced by his own council, dragged Oedipus off to the hospital incinerator. And then we had eggplant curry and it was delicious. And then we went back for more.

These Seven Sicknesses, produced at the Flea Theater in New York, was a five-hour theatrical experience comprising renditions of all seven of Sophocles' extant tragedies. It was directed by Ed Sylvanus Iskandar and performed by the Flea's resident company, The Bats. This was the second public run of the play: the first was in Chicago, directed by scriptwriter Sean Graney, and it has already been reviewed for *Didaskalia* by **Teresa M. Danze Lemieux** (<http://www.didaskalia.net/issues/8/20/>). Lemieux's review does much of my legwork for me, and a full analysis of Graney's script can be found there. Changes were made to script and production for the New York run, and I shall comment on these as necessary.

The usual caveat of adaptation: this is not Sophocles. It is Sophocles revisited, extrapolated, and recalibrated. The seven segments stood at various degrees of adaptive separation from their Sophoclean originals. The segments were arranged into three acts: 'Honor Lost' ('Oedipus,' 'In Trachis,' 'In Colonus'); 'Honor Found' ('Philoktetes,' 'Ajax'); and 'Honor Abandoned' ('Elektra,' 'Antigone'). Each scene was tweaked to impose a continuity that does not exist in the Sophoclean corpus: the same messenger ('The Carrier') appeared in six of seven segments, the role of several characters—especially Philoktetes—recurred in novel ways (more on this below), and the decision to end with 'Antigone' after opening with 'Oedipus' lent a satisfying sense of completion to the entire cycle. It is my intent not to review the seven sections serially (this has already been done by Lemieux), but to fix upon highlights of the performance and to consider some of the interpretative issues raised by this production.



Jeff Ronan as Oedipus, photo by Laura June Kirsch



Satomi Blair as Jocasta, photo by Laura June Kirsch

Graney's script is fully self-aware, exhibiting a clear understanding of its Sophoclean heritage. In the Sophoclean originals, for instance, stage properties were few, but charged with a heightened dramatic significance, focal points for the emotional and psychological turbulence of the characters. Such was the case here. Semantic labels, in which you could hear the capitals pronounced, lent them a sacred gravity. And so never just the 'bow,' but the 'Golden Bow of Herakles.' Never Achilles' armor but the 'Unchinkable Armor.' Certain characters and places received the same treatment: 'The Blind Seer of Thebes' was never named, nor was the 'City of the Barren Hills' (Oechalia). These labels of course also served a practical purpose, limiting the foreign-sounding names for the modern, Greekless audience.

But Graney is also happy to subvert the Sophoclean heritage. Throughout the performance, the comic was as much in evidence as the tragic. Characters drop one-liners as they needle one another, comment ironically on the absurdity of their situations, and use colloquial language which frequently belies the tragic. 'I solved the riddle of the Hellbitch!' declares Oedipus in the opening sequence. 'And that was awesome!' replies Creon. High five!

Sophocles is, to my mind, the most relentless of the Athenian tragic poets: his characters are driven inexorably toward their fates and there is little room for any but the blackest of jokes, the most sardonic of musings. The use of a wide range of comic techniques in *These Seven Sicknesses*, from puns to slapstick, therefore raises some interesting questions. When I read (say) *Philoktetes* or *Ajax* with my students, there is snickering, amusement fueled by the absurdity of situation, the high rhetoric, and the blind adherence to obviously self-destructive codes of honor and morality. But this is to read the text with a modern sensibility of irony and realism, and I find myself frequently steering students back to the gravity of the situation. The life of a Sophoclean hero is rarely anything less than horrific, and we, as readers, as spectators, need to acknowledge this horror on the terms set out in this dramatic universe.

But this is not parody (though the reference in the title of my review may hint otherwise). The humor of Graney's script, even when it involves characters effacing themselves or each other, is fully complementary to the tragic moments, providing highs through which we may more fully appreciate the lows. The success of this juxtaposition, often accomplished within a line or two, is due in part to the very hard work of the Bats themselves. Where Graney shared his roles among twelve actors in the Chicago production, Iskandar marshaled 38 players. It would have been interesting (and impressive) to see the roles shared by a small company—what roles are doubled and how that might generate added



Grant Harrison as Ajax (among the sheep), photo by Laura June Kirsch



Seth Moore as Philoktetes & Alex Herral as Neoptolemus, photo by Laura June Kirsch

meaning—but the one-actor-per-role policy allowed for some deeply introspective performances, even in the smaller roles of Iskandar’s production.

Once or twice, I felt the counterpoint of comic and tragic did not work. When Elektra is presented with the offering found on Agamemnon’s tomb, Orestes’ Tickle-Me-Elmo (blindfolded to recall the incest of Oedipus and to foreshadow the coming incest of Elektra and Orestes), she is understandably devastated. But when she starts smashing Elmo’s head beneath her army boot, the hilarity of the moment eclipses too far the depth of her grief. But these clashes of tone were few and far between, and it was manifest that the Bats took their Sophocles very seriously.

The commitment of the Bats was on display from the moment I walked into the theater. Actors, in and out of costume, mingled among the crowd during preshow and intermissions, showed them to their seats, and served up the dinner and dessert—delicious minicupcakes!—during intermissions. I was struck by the openness of the actors, ready and able to discuss the show and their contributions to it. Our opinions before, during, and after the show were solicited on a variety of subjects. Cast and crew were visibly proud not only of the production, but the improvements they reported had been

made over its run, motivated in part by audience feedback. The Flea’s resident company is an informed one—everyone

was sporting a degree from Yale, Columbia, NYU, or beyond—and the value of Sophocles was not lost on them. For me it was a refreshing nexus between the oft-separated worlds of the classical philologist and the theater practitioner.

The result of the Bats’ engagement with their audience was an inclusive theatrical environment, drawing its spectators into the world of the Flea and the world of Sophocles. This was a unique echo of the theater experience of Classical Athens, itself a tight-knit community (despite its notorious politics). Members of the fifth-century audience surely knew some of the performers (even if only among the more than one thousand dithyrambic singers). Ancient performances were long (three tragedies plus a satyr play probably made for a slightly longer performance than the five hours we saw) and punctuated by intermissions, which surely enabled a great deal of socializing. It is a source of frustration for me that we know so little of the extraperformative aspects of Athenian theater: did the actors come out after the show? Were audience members free to cross the *orchestra* and mingle with



Erik Olson as Orestes & Betsy Lippitt as Elektra, photo by Laura June Kirsch



Stephen Stout as Creon & Satomi Blair as Jocasta, photo by Laura June Kirsch



Allison Buck as Tekmessa & Grant Harrison as Ajax, photo by Laura June Kirsch

cast and crew? Or was the space still sacred?

The Flea's orchestral space was inclusive and intimate, at once open and sacred; indeed it was part of the *mise-en-scène*. Audience members (a full house of 72) walked down the aisle of a dark, Arkham-like hospital and sat in low bleachers on either side of that aisle. This placed almost all the action in a visual crossfire, with actors moving between sections of the audience. The hospital setting, our first marker of the sicknesses theme, came and went, conceptually: at times the chorus of Nurses came forward to mop up or tend wounds, making the infirmary inescapable, while at other times the Sophoclean setting—Thebes, Trachis, Athens, Troy, or Argos—overrode it. But in the best moments the two settings of contemporary hospital and Sophoclean Greece, conflated, existed simultaneously. In the 'Trachis' segment, for instance, Dejanira retreats to her bedroom to commit suicide by drinking some industrial-strength bleach she finds under the sink, and the moment is both private and public.

The chorus consisted of six nurses and a guitar-playing orderly. Throughout the play they clean, they operate, and they sing. Music was an important feature of this production. Short odes, adaptations of modern rock from The Beatles to Springsteen to Coldplay, all reconfigured into ballads of lament, with elements of soul and gospel, punctuated the action (arranged by David Dabbon). The chorus of female voices recalled for me especially the Sirens of the Coen Brothers' *O Brother Where Art Thou?* The renditions and the vocal talent behind them were beautiful, and all the more impressive because, as I am told, most of the chorus had not sung in public before this production. These choral odes were abetted by a rich variety of tracks culled from popular bands and films. As of this writing, searching 'These Seven Sicknesses' on YouTube will yield several samples, including trailers produced for the show.

As with all tragic choruses, these Nurses were the implicit survivors of the tragedies, survivors who have witnessed past atrocities and expect many more. In the short prologue, the chorus induct a new Nurse into their ranks, telling her, 'Just work . . . don't get involved and work.' And work they do, mopping up blood, sickness, ashes, and all the other detritus left behind by the self-destructive principals, exhibiting always a concern, but striving to keep that concern detached, clinical: they know what happens to those who get involved.

The interweaving of the seven plays into one narrative strand creates new dramatic opportunities, some along the creative continuum established by Sophocles, and others that deviate from that standard. The script is snappy and, of necessity, paced very quickly, entailing a few creative casualties. Most notable was the role of Dejanira. Though played well (by Kate Michaud), Dejanira is immediately the shrill, suspicious housewife, already deeply poisoned by her failing self-esteem. We are never given any glimpse of what Herakles saw in her. Iole's role (Liz Tancredi) is correspondingly increased, and this too comes at Dejanira's expense. Brought on stage alone, Iole need not be spotted in the crowd by Dejanira (as in Sophocles), and her replies to the questions of Dejanira make it clear that she is innocent but in a very awkward situation not of her making. Dejanira's actions are thus far more vindictive than in the Sophoclean original, and I found myself unsympathetic. When the shade of Herakles (Victor Joel Ortiz), at the end of the 'Philoktetes' segment, walks off into the afterlife, we see Dejanira waiting for him, but it is difficult to see why he smiles, since he died trying to replace her. Hyllus (Miles Jacoby), too, is deprived of his Sophoclean gravitas. He proves incapable of lighting his father's pyre, but cannot get off stage to his bedroom fast enough when he gets a look at the *négligée*-clad Iole.

But the integration of the seven segments has dramatic beneficiaries too, and none greater than Creon and Philoktetes. These two characters more than any other, I thought, supplied a moral compass to the world of *These Seven Sicknesses*. It did not hurt that, in a crowd of polished performances, actors Stephen Stout and Seth Moore put in the star turns of the evening. But these two characters demonstrate the

adaptive extremes of Graney's script. Both characters find a humanity beyond the scope of their Sophoclean antecedents, but the former accomplishes this by following the trajectory set for him in antiquity, while the other rejects it and forges a new path.

Creon (Stout) appears more or less where and when he should. His evolving costume in the Theban segments, from leather jacket in 'Oedipus' to academic tweed in 'Colonus' to formal tuxedo in 'Antigone,' signals clearly his developing complexity and political prominence. Creon, who appears in the opening scene and whose suicide at the onset of a fatal heart attack caps the evening's mayhem, understands more than anyone else (except perhaps the chorus) the cost of involvement in this tragic world ('Avoid excitement,' advise the chorus, but who can in Sophocles?). When confronted by Oedipus in the opening segment, the youthful Creon presents his well-known defense: why would he want the crown, when he is already provided for? Creon is no saint, of course. In 'In Colonus' he is just as cynical and manipulative as in the original. Throughout, he is arrogant, and he is not above kicking someone who is down. 'So you don't want me to rule Thebes?' asks Oedipus, as he learns of the full extent of Creon's deception. 'No, you can't even rule your bowels, Old Man. I just want your body,' is the harsh reply. But each time we meet Creon, we sense a deepening sadness in him, an increasing awareness of the inevitable cost of his involvement in family doings, of the consequences of his actions, and a niggling sense that perhaps things could have been done differently.

By the time he arrives on stage to confront Antigone (Katherine Folk-Sullivan), Creon is resigned to the inevitability of his fate: he has resisted power, knowing its cost, but he can resist no more. He approaches Antigone, who, in her bridal gown, is preparing a makeshift coffin for Polyneices, as yet untouched. They discuss the mechanics of her project, awkwardly avoiding its purpose. The two of them sit down to share a bag lunch he has brought (some sandwiches, a soda, a few cookies), and the scene is truly heartbreaking: two individuals who are family and love each other as family should, dressed for a wedding and sharing a meal, yet who know exactly what is going to happen. Antigone will touch the corpse of Polyneices and Creon will kill her for it. The scene is all the more painful for our having met Polyneices in the 'Colonus' segment: a drunken frat boy, too irresponsible to rule and obnoxious to his family.

When Ismene arrives, Creon and Antigone are no closer to resolution than in Sophocles. But in *These Seven Sicknesses*, familial love can coexist with political tension, and the three-way scene among Ismene, Antigone, and Creon is something of a reversal from Sophocles, as Antigone and Creon, rather than treating Ismene roughly, collude to keep her from the coffin and corpse, collaborating on an almost subconscious level to save her, to exclude her from the doomed path on which they find themselves. It is all for naught, however, as Ismene commits suicide, taking the place of Eurydice in the family tragedy. Haemon shoots himself in the head and Creon, attempting to pull the dead Antigone from the coffin after a visit from the Blind Seer, induces a fatal heart attack. He shoots himself before it can take him. Creon probably deserves his fate: aware of the family's destructive patterns of interaction, he still participated. But he is no less tragic for his inability to break free of those patterns.

Philoktetes, on the other hand, takes on a much-expanded role in the world of *These Seven Sicknesses*, appearing thrice in the cycle, first as a substitute for Lichas in 'In Trachis,' where he receives the Golden Bow of Herakles, then in his own segment, and finally at the conclusion of 'Ajax,' where he joins Odysseus as advocate for the burial of Ajax. At first, Philoktetes' appearance in the Trachis segment appears to be simply a clever bit of recasting for continuity purposes, but in the Philoktetes segment, it becomes clear that Graney has far greater plans for this character. For one thing, the trauma suffered by the warrior is far beyond anything his Sophoclean ancestor experienced: when he is overcome by the sickness of his wounds, the Nurses see no other option but to amputate, with much blood and sound

effect. The severed foot, wrapped in bloodied gauze and sealed in a ziplock bag, becomes almost as important a prop as the bow itself. Philoktetes hurls it at Odysseus (it makes a very disturbing thunk when it lands) and eventually disposes of it in the hospital incinerator. Philoktetes is reduced to such a state after the feigned departure of Neoptolemus and Odysseus that he determines to commit suicide, but when he cannot finish the job his shame is palpable.

As he recovers from this lowest of moments, however, Philoktetes achieves a moral complexity beyond the original. Before a repentant Neoptolemus (who takes an arrow in the hand when he tries to shoot Odysseus), he relents and agrees to go to Troy. He forgives Odysseus his former transgressions. At first, this is done for the sake of stability at Troy and to secure his eventual return home. But then the Shade of Herakles arrives, exhorting Philoktetes to find the strength to make his forgiveness genuine. 'And when you are a shade like me, you will know you lived for honor and love, for virtues greater than revenge, or spite, or laziness. The only life worth living is one that leaves people better.' This is not the help-your-friends-harm-your-enemies philosophy normally espoused in the plays of Sophocles. Philoktetes forgives, and it is at this moment that he transcends the moral boundaries of Sophocles' drama. Philoktetes has felt the horror of his sickness and it has been amputated from him, both physically and psychologically. He sets out on a mission to free others from their own sicknesses. In the arrangement of *These Seven Sicknesses*, the judgment of arms is still pending at this point, and Philoktetes heads to Troy, knowing that only doom can await Ajax if no one is there to save him.

And it's true. Ajax is doomed. This is clear the minute Ajax enters. The divine is always held at arm's length in this world (not a single Olympian name, or even the word 'god' is heard in Graney's script), and so the Athena-Odysseus exchange of the original is omitted. But we are treated to the madness of Ajax, and it is surely the centerpiece of the entire performance; it is simply incredible theater. The madness is totally immersive, both for the warrior and for us. The 'sheep' are the warriors at Troy, a dozen of them, with sheep's heads and ears. When they kneel they are sheep, when they stand they are warriors (taunting Ajax with bleating voices as he [re]lives the moment of judgment), but always they are both. Ajax slays them repeatedly, as they stand, as they kneel, in several sequences of martial arts fighting, underscored by aggressive, colored lighting and music tracks culled from a variety of films. The repeated sequences are necessary: no matter how many times Ajax kills them, the sheep keep getting back up to bleat and taunt. When it is finally over, Ajax stands over a dozen corpses (completely filling the narrow playing space) and over Tecmessa, whom he has accidentally stabbed, fatally as it will turn out, when she tried to calm him. When he realizes the extent of his shame, Ajax commits suicide, propping his sword not in the earth but in the dead hands of Tecmessa.

And thus enter, staring across the corpse of Ajax like a pair of high school debate teams, Agamemnon and Menelaus, Odysseus and Philoktetes. By this time, the reconciliation of Odysseus and Philoktetes is complete, and the two display the strength of friendship, the unspoken bond of two men whose relationship has survived near-total ruin. Odysseus, ever the wordsmith, perhaps hits closest to home: 'Our hatred is only a dressing over the wound of our guilt. We must rip clean the dressing and expose our guilt-wound to harshness of the elements.' 'Only then can it heal,' adds Philoktetes as he stands on his remaining foot. After Agamemnon grants permission to bury Ajax, Philoktetes voluntarily hands over to him the Golden Bow of Herakles. He hoists Ajax over his shoulder and carries the corpse away—no mean feat on just one foot.

But such a positive note cannot be held long in a world grown from Sophoclean tragedy. If Philoktetes represents the moral potential of the Sophoclean hero, the opposite is true of Orestes and Elektra (whose belligerent, punk-rock grieving was more than a little discomfiting). When the shade of Agamemnon appears, critical of his children's bloodthirsty anticipation of the matricide, they are temporarily abashed.

But over the corpse of Clytemnestra, the violence of the murder and their sexual tension are conflated, and the children of Agamemnon (twins in an earlier manifestation of the script, and here cast to look very much alike) passionately act upon their incestuous urges. They are interrupted by Aegisthus, whose gory castration serves only to stoke the fires of their passion further. Aegisthus offers Orestes the Golden Bow, which he has taken from Agamemnon, as a token of ransom. Orestes smashes it over his knee, bringing to an end Philoktetes' legacy. We then admire the determined maternal instincts of Clytemnestra (played by Akyiaa Wilson) all the more. As Elektra breaks down in her grief, it is Clytemnestra who holds her to her breast, accepting her, forgiving her. Her defense of her actions—that she was retaliating for the death of Iphigenia—is convincing. Her death, when she is strangled onstage by Orestes, is the single longest moment in the entire performance and, eventually, the quietest. It was not easy to endure.

These are some of the highlights of this wonderful production, but there were many more. I might have dwelt further on the stunning Jocasta (Sitomi Blair), whose reaction to the death of Polybius is very nearly to seduce Oedipus. Or Crysothemis (Charlotte Bydwell), the Valley girl who ultimately exhibits a far more humane understanding of the world than her sister Elektra. Or the Blind Seer of Thebes (Holly Chou), appearing in each of the Theban segments, bitter and disgusted with the behavior of its royal family—partly because Oedipus violently pulls a tooth when she refuses to talk. And there is the Carrier (Tommy Crawford), so cheerful on his first appearance, delighted to relieve Oedipus' anxiety: 'The people who raised you are not your parents . . . guess I am just full of good news!' But each time he wheels on his scooter, it is with greater trepidation. In the final scene, Creon hands the Key to Thebes to the Carrier, who is about to be the night's only onstage survivor. Creon shoots himself and the Carrier tosses the Key into the coffin after him. 'Smartest thing he ever did,' quip the nurses. It is not at all clear whom they mean.

Throughout, Graney's dialogue is crisp and clean, as cutting as it is funny. Iskandar and his Bats have set a very high bar for whoever may follow, but we can only hope this script sees future performances. This is not Sophocles, but it is a great deal of what Sophocles was and what Sophocles could be. Simultaneously respectful and innovative, *These Seven Sicknesses* brings us a world of hope and misery, of beauty and violence. It is a reminder, as the plays of Sophocles must have been to their original audience, to tread carefully in this life, as so many of the paths open to us are far darker than they might seem, and as death awaits us all in the end. And minicupcakes.

[I would like to express my thanks to Ed Sylvanus Iskandar, Sean Graney, and the Bats, all of whom were ready and willing to discuss this powerful script and the challenges of producing it. I would like to thank too my companion for the evening, Liz Scharffenberger: at least some of the ideas expressed here germinated in our spirited post-production conversations.]