

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

48th Season of Classical Plays at the Greek Theatre in Syracuse: Aeschylus's *Prometheus*, Euripides' *Bacchae*, and Aristophanes' *The Birds*

May 11 to June 30, 2012
 XLVIII Ciclo di Spettacoli Classici
 Teatro Greco di Siracusa
 Syracuse, Italy

Reviewed by Caterina Barone
University of Padova

The conceptual core of the XLVIII edition of classical plays at the Greek Theatre in Syracuse (May 11th – June 30th 2012) is the theme of power, both human and divine, and the closely related motif of the relationship between man and god.

The works being staged are Aeschylus's *Prometheus*, Euripides' *Bacchae*, and Aristophanes' *The Birds*, directed by Claudio Longhi, Antonio Calenda, and Roberta Torre, respectively. These are three "uncomfortable" texts, teeming with difficulties at the levels of content and dramaturgy, and at the same time dense with stirring features, further highlighted by the compact nature of the cycle.

Prometheus is a static tragedy: its peculiarity lies in the forced immobility of the protagonist, chained to a rock by tyrannical decree of Zeus. Staging this play is a challenge for both directors and actors, and the challenge is increased exponentially by the massive nature of the venue in Syracuse. During the latest editions, the INDA has chosen a single set design for all plays on the bill at the Greek Theatre; this year the geometric creativity of Rem Koolhaas (Studio Oma) has produced an artistic solution of spectacular efficacy, providing the Aeschylean tragedy in particular with a fundamental architectural support. The wooden stage, touching the area for the orchestra, stands as a dais rotating on a circular base and consisting of large steps. The stand is divided into two opening-and-closing halves, and reveals to the audience the mighty structure of scaffolding pipes that supports it. As the show begins, the mobile metal plate emerges from the bowels of this platform, bearing the bound Titan who incurred the wrath of Zeus by bestowing fire upon men. Thus director Claudio Longhi opens the play with a surprising idea: he bestows mobility on the figure of Prometheus by having assistants move the structure within the area of the orchestra. It is but a deceptive mobility, however, as the changes in the position of the protagonist mark only a shift in the visual perspective of spectators, and not real movement of the immobilized Titan. It is as if the audience could move around the cliff, and by standing behind the protagonist see things and people from his point of view, achieving an effect of participating identification. This effect is further amplified by the conjunction



Massimo Popolizio as Prometheus in Aeschylus's Prometheus, Greek Theatre, Syracuse, 2012.



Maurizio Donadoni as Dionysus and Massimo Nicolini as Pentheus in Euripides' Bacchae, Greek Theatre, Syracuse, 2012.

of stage and cavea, united by a ring-like catwalk going from the central aisle in the terrace (*diazoma*) to the stairway structure: a feature which allows the directors of each of the plays to create meaningful scenic solutions.

In *Prometheus*, the circular nature of the Syracusan venue evokes, as stressed by the director, the model of the anatomical theatre, which exalts a visual dimension focused on the display of the mangled body of the Titan, who is neither able nor willing to hide, but employs his own torment to denounce divine oppression. This effect extends to the whole community the value of Prometheus's heroic attitude against the tyranny of Zeus over mortals and immortals, as well as the Titan's sarcastic contempt for all those who choose to serve the mighty: a message with a strong political aspect, stressed by Guido Paduano's insightful translation, and rendered powerfully by actor Massimo Popolizio.



The chorus of Aristophanes' The Birds, Greek Theatre, Syracuse, 2012.

The chorus of the Oceanids supports the Titan: they are compassionate and empathic spectators of his sufferings. Their sinuous movements and the shiny clothes of green and blue scales covering their bodies evoke the eternal flow of the seas, the very origin of the nymphs, mysterious hybrid creatures who inhabit two different dimensions. Their father Oceanus is similarly clad, but profoundly different in his deference to the king of the gods and in suggesting the way of compromise to Prometheus. But the Titan remains inflexible, disdainfully rejecting Oceanus's slimy attempts at mediation.

The episode of Io further consolidates the portrayal of a merciless Zeus who despises mankind. The young maid is capriciously loved by the king of the gods and then turned into a cow by a jealous Hera. Io is an icon for the suffering of mankind at the capricious hands of the gods. The successful portrayal of her character in this production begins with transformations in her outward appearance, which were pitiful without ever becoming ridiculous: the bovine snout and hooves, the horns rending her skin. The actress (Gaia Aprea) wears very high-heeled shoes of a peculiar shape, which give her an unsteady and convulsively limping gait. Io falls and stands up again distressfully; she writhes in the spasms of her torment; she falls prey to madness and delirium. Everything in her character transmits a feeling of suffering and despair to the point of paroxysm.

Andrea Piermartire's live music contributes meaningfully to the production, giving the mythical tale a dynamic and insistent rhythm, as does the performance of the chorus, which is made up (as in the *Bacchae*) of dancers from the Martha Graham Dance Company and students of Syracuse's Accademia d'arte del Dramma antico. The geometry and figurative elegance of choreography inspired by the works of Martha Graham, under the artistic direction of Janet Eilber, exalts the visual dimension of *Prometheus* and appropriately highlights the role of the Oceanids, who as the tragedy unfolds evolve from mild consolers of the Titan's suffering into cognisant and active witnesses of his tenacious resistance, to the point of ultimately succumbing with the Titan in the final earthquake unleashed by Zeus.

No less important is the role played by the choreutae in Antonio Calenda's *Bacchae*. They are clad in long black dresses that surprisingly reveal purple-red insides and cover bodies wrapped in flesh-coloured leotards. The women combine in their figures the mournful epilogue of Dionysus's epiphany with the bloody component of the *sparagmós*, the dismemberment of the sacrificial victim. Their half-naked bodies emanate an aggressive and bestial femininity: faces, hair, feet, arms, everything seems to be possessed of

a primitive and sensual force, the force intrinsic in the close encounter between Pentheus and the sacred Dionysian rites he has accused of being an occasion for women to indulge in perverse and unrestrained behaviour. The dances of the choreutae in the area of the orchestra, and their placement on the large steps of the stage, create dynamic pictorial effects of infectious emotional power. The movements of the Bacchae are accompanied by Germano Mazzocchi's music (which harmonises archaic echoes with suggestions from the 1900s as it supports the multifarious and shifting language of the tragedy, aptly rendered in Giorgio Ieranò's translation), and they constitute a contrasting counterpoint to the contained mobility of Dionysus. The god enters the stage standing erect on a gloomy catafalque; clad in a black cloak, he speaks with his back to the audience and a white mask on the back of his head. This directorial device makes his movements look disarticulate and creates a peculiar effect of estrangement; it is a perfect image to set the tone for the actions of the elusive hybrid god with a thousand faces.

From high above on the carriage, Dionysus governs the unfolding of the events which will lead to the tragic death of Pentheus (rather uncertainly acted by Massimo Nicolini), the ruler hostile to the new cult and ultimately killed by the unwitting fury of his mother Agave (played by a fierce Daniela Giovanetti). Maurizio Donadoni embodies with his physique a stately and vigorous god, a merciless deity who conceals his violence behind a scoffing and mocking demeanour, at times resembling more an enchanting wizard, a mystifying charlatan skilled in the use of the tools of his trade: tools picked from that carriage of Thespis of sorts on which he is enthroned. From this vehicle the women will take the womanly clothes in which the ill-fated Pentheus is dressed as he is brought to the sacrifice. From the very same place the god himself will retrieve the mask and the ample garment which enfolds his divine nature in mystery. The show is hence rendered on the edge of meta-theatre: the sophisticated direction chosen for Dionysus spans various registers, from the tragic to the comic—although at times the characterisation of the god chosen by Calenda is unbalanced and shifted by the actor's interpretation towards a behaviour befitting a strolling player-illusionist, subtracting subtlety from the figure of the god and thereby reducing the ambiguous and explosive extent of his punitive action.

A triumph of fantasy and unbridled creativity marks Roberta Torre's colourful and anti-classic rendition of *The Birds*. Torre's background is that of a film director, and she has exploited to the maximum the potential of the stage sets and of the Syracusan context by placing the choreutes in every available area: from the wooden structure at the back of the orchestra—where the only scene elements are stylized mobile red trees—to the catwalk and the cavea itself. The actors are thus brought to interact with the audience. The filmy and fluffy costumes are striking: with their surreal eighteenth-century fashion, complete with multicoloured wigs, they allude to the "carnavalesque" aspects of the texts, as does the "over-the-top" tone characterising the whole show, bordering at times on what would befit a curtain raiser. The character of Hoopoe, for instance, wearing an orange leotard with frills of all kinds and dark sunglasses, moves and expresses himself in a bizarre manner. The overall effect, however, is pleasant and theatrically effective.

The alternation between recited parts and sung arias is compelling, almost creating an *opera buffa* of sorts as it follows the furious rhythm set by the director. Different styles and kinds of music follow one another and overlap, shaping a soundtrack (an original creation by Enrico Melozzi) which combines live singing with recorded birdsong and immerses the audience in an invisible aviary of sorts, with a cinematographic surround effect. At the same time, the whirling parade of suspicious and opportunistic characters in the comedy assumes grotesque and disquieting overtones as it portrays a world without a future. The utopia of *The Birds*—the escape of the protagonists Pisthetaerus and Euelpides towards an ideal city envisioned among the clouds, free from an abject, avid, and corrupt society, where men can finally achieve emancipation from the egoistical rule of the gods—never becomes a concrete reality in Aristophanes's play, despite the seemingly happy ending.

The original text is already marked by bitter disillusion, and Roberta Torre fittingly stresses this aspect: the seeming bonhomie of Pisthetaerus (effectively played by Mauro Avogadro, more at ease here than in the role of Oceanus in *Prometheus*), punctuated by clothes reminiscent of the colourful canonical costume of a clown, conceals a tyrannical and cruel disposition. Having got rid of his friend-associate Euelpides (an amiable Sergio Mancinelli, comically wearing a skirt similar to a bird's cage, complete with a perching yellow parrot), whom he sent away to build the walls of the new city ("Castellinaria degli Allocchi"¹ in Alessandro Grilli's brilliant translation), Pisthetaerus also rids himself of the dissidents among his bird allies, sentencing them to death and having them well cooked for his wedding banquet.

Among references to characters from movies, cartoons, and the Italian comedy TV show *Zelig*, as well as allusions to contemporary news items and various pleasantries, how much is authentically Aristophanean in this production? Perhaps not as much as strict philologists would like, but surely enough to convey the substance of the sharp and pitiless political message of the Athenian comedigrapher.

note

¹ *Castellinaria* is reminiscent of several common Italian toponyms beginning with the prefix *castell-*. "Castelli-in-aria" is the Italian idiom corresponding to "castles in the air" in English. *Allocco*, the Italian word for the tawny owl (plural: *allocchi*), is also the idiomatic term for "dunce, easily fooled person".