

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.

A Conversation About the Aquila *Herakles*

Herakles

by Euripides

Translated by Peter Meineck

Directed by Desiree Sanchez

Film by Miguel Drake-McLaughlin

Aquila Theatre Group Brooklyn Academy of Music

March 30, 2013

Discussion by Amy R. Cohen, Randolph College, and **John H. Starks, Jr.**, SUNY Binghamton.

After seeing the Aquila production of *Herakles* (the Athens production of which is reviewed at *Didaskalia 10.05*), Cohen and Starks sat down for a conversation.

ARC: I'm Amy Cohen.

JHS: And I'm John Starks.

ARC: We both saw the Aquila production of *Herakles* on March 30th at BAM in Brooklyn, and we wanted to talk about it. So, what did you think, John?

JHS: I thought it was interesting, and I would begin with my take on the chorus, which I know has been worked in a couple of different formats nowadays, using interviewing as a way of addressing how to make these plays civic conversations, particularly with veterans. I enjoyed that a great deal. I thought that the different types of dialogue going on among the various veterans were of course personally poignant, but they also came together to create a civic whole, even though they were individual voices.

ARC: Yes, clearly the veterans were recorded in different places.

JHS: Exactly. But because of the editing process that was used, they wound up becoming a unified chorus around themes as the show progressed. And in that sense, this chorus genuinely replicates the way that the chorus seems to operate in so many Greek tragedies. I won't try to make it a blanket statement, but here it served the purpose of the production in ways that were remarkably consistent with the ways that choruses are often constructed. In many ways a Greek chorus can seem distant from its play, and yet winds up still engaging with its content. For example, the "Ode to Man" in Sophocles's *Antigone*: I think how we often want to abstract that from its original context, and yet we see what its whole does as a choral statement independent of the episodes around it.

ARC: I'm really glad you said that. It's helpful to me because I was enthralled by the chorus and those interviews. I was struck by the veterans' openness as well as by their difficulty in being open. I couldn't take my eyes away, but I'm glad you said what you said about those segments' being connected to the rest of the play because that was my difficulty with them: they didn't seem connected at all.

JHS: I had a hard time at first getting into the alternation between the episodes and the chorus. I was having transitional issues in the early stages, but by the end of the show, I was waiting for those transitions.

ARC: But were you waiting to come back to the play in front of us?

JHS: To some degree yes, but I had actually gotten to the point where I was waiting for the chorus.

ARC: I was too, a bit. One of the thoughts I had was that when Mary-Kay Gamel and Jana Adamitis did *Ajax* at Christopher Newport University in 2011, their chorus had read things about veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan and were instructed to make their own characters and come up with their own ways of talking about those wars, so that their production had a feeling very much like that of these interviews that we saw in *Herakles*. It's much the same in *Theatre of War*, the Bryan Doerries project, in which the play is followed by actual veterans—and some of the actors themselves have been veterans—talking in their own words about their experiences. I didn't get to see the *Ajax* in Boston at A.R.T., but I've seen clips from it, and I've read a lot about it, and there, too, the chorus was represented by real people on large-screen video above the action. So I was seeing, remembering all of those different versions of the same thing. I see the power of such a treatment. I wondered at it with *Herakles* because *Herakles* seems to me to be different—he battles monsters, not people. I think that was one of the things, as powerful as it was, that made it hard for me to connect the choral interviews with the play. But I will say that the people who saw the play with me didn't know those things about Herakles and took the assertion that he was a warrior coming home from difficult circumstances at face value, just as it was presented, and found the connections very strong.

JHS: I think the way that I connected the chorus and episodes was in discussion afterward with another audience member on the issue of Herakles—I was having trouble connecting Herakles's madness with his heroic mythology and with the chorus' responses. But the person I was speaking with was addressing it very well, saying that Herakles's struggle with death is brought up so many times that you can move that into many different contexts and that his struggle with his mortality is what we have from the beginning, from the conversation about him before he even enters the stage. Megara and Amphitryon are talking about the fact that he's dead, and then he's not. He's brought back to life. But what kind of life is it? He's gone to hell and back. I'll just use the reference: think of *Apocalypse Now* as the referential point for that kind of war madness that doesn't necessarily in its context look like it has to be war trauma; it's just gone off the deep end of "I've seen death"—

ARC: —"I've seen death, and I'm supposed to be a person again."

JHS: Exactly, and I'm supposed to somehow be a real person, a whole person again, and if that's the reality that Herakles is dealing with in coming back, that's why—and this is again why I was having trouble, until talking after the show—I had trouble sympathizing with Herakles, especially when it looked like Theseus just let him off; but then Theseus was rescued from death by him.

ARC: That's true.

JHS: And so both of them were dealing with the trauma of "I was dead," and in Theseus's case, "you saved me." And "I owe you everything that I've got now to try to make you better."

ARC: And to bring it back to the reality of the interviewed chorus, "The only other person who's going to understand what I've been through is someone who's been in the Underworld and come back, because there's not anybody else in the group."

JHS: No, it's a very small group. To face down death and actually come back, to survive it. And maybe that's what *Herakles* is about.

ARC: In that respect—moving away from my "he doesn't go to war" criticism—I think, then, the chorus really resonates with his experience.

JHS: And it becomes more poignant of course when you see Herakles's reaction to Lykos, because then it has more of a possible war context, because Lykos has been engaged in the usurpation, and then you put

in an element of war, and there is reference to the soldiers of Thebes as being part of this reality all around it. Herakles's own—even if we take it outside of Euripides's context—his own relationship with Thebes is so fraught with issues, he's always battling to connect himself to anywhere.

ARC: That's true.

JHS: And so, Herakles is in many ways a constant warrior. If he sees, as the madness comes on, that Eurystheus and Eurystheus' family are his problem, that's a constant battle of his; they're his physical reality. It's Hera too. He's got that issue with the gods that he's addressing at the same time, but there is a physical reality of Eurystheus being an oppressor. And if you just shift that slightly away from the monster context into the human context, then it starts to take the approach of *rationalizing* the monsters, for want of a better word. The monsters are not monsters; they are our demons. And he has demons that, in this particular play, get the better of him.

ARC: I love where you've brought me about the chorus, but let's talk a little bit about some of the other staging choices. I loved the use of the children—that Iris and Madness inhabited the children. What other things did you see that you liked or wondered about?

JHS: I'll take the ones that I really liked first, starting with Herakles. One thing that pulled Herakles into that war mode for me, that *did* make it work, was the way he entered the stage each time, especially when he was alone. He was always stalking; he was always in military mode. He was always rifle-ready, and the moment that struck me the most is when he just gets caught off guard asleep, and then all of a sudden his son shows up to him and is babbling as Iris, and that winds up putting him in that other reality. So that transposition really worked very well. And then you've got the chorus, and all of a sudden you have moved into the next episode, and you weren't paying any attention to the fact that your actor just got into position very gradually, exactly where he needed to be, usually downstage and near the audience. Those actors were not there every single moment, but they were there at exactly the moment they needed to be and had gotten there through their own character appropriateness.

ARC: It wasn't just getting into position.

JHS: Exactly. As an audience member, but also as a director, I'm very conscious of movement that pushes the show forward. Herakles always did that. Amphytrion always did that. Their entrance onto the stage was always exactly right, and Amphytrion had to change it so much. He had to go back and forth between his admiration and affection and fear and concern, say, from the top of the show; the fear of returning in the end; the admission that this was his son, even after all the madness had taken hold of him, and that he needed to be restrained. And there Herakles is with his father, and his father still feels that absolute need to acknowledge the bond that he had. It's extremely moving. So Herakles, in spite of creating a distance—I had a real distance with him—I can see how another audience member might feel a real compassion, a much stronger compassion because of that blankness he presented. I think that's the ambiguity of how each audience member is going to respond differently to any individual characterization. It can draw you in, or it can repel you. You're going to respond: one way or the other you're going to be responding to Herakles.

ARC: I think I was struck by his size. I've been thinking a lot about size, but, especially with the giant video screen, he seemed small, which is not how you think of Herakles. He seemed small, but I think that works with all the other things the play was trying to do about how to come back and be a human being after you've done these things that are too big or beyond. And so, I think ultimately his smallness did make me sympathize with him more; it made me connect with him a little bit more, even as I was thinking, "but I expect my Herakles to be big," and he wasn't; he was human sized and coming back to a family, and that was fitting with that family. And I think that—I noticed this in the clips I've seen about

the A.R.T. *Ajax* and in this production to a lesser extent—there’s a scale problem with the giant video and the people, and it makes the people not as big as they should be. So it’s not just Herakles who wasn’t as big as I expected him to be, although he was perhaps the right size for this production, as I said before.

JHS: He wasn’t hurting in the muscle department . . .

ARC: No, he wasn’t. He was a strong guy, well-cast on that point, but there’s a problem: we’re so focused on screens, and especially a giant one, that we kind of automatically think—or maybe *I* automatically think—that’s the real thing, that’s the thing you’re supposed to be looking at, and then it sometimes makes the actors, who are really there, smaller and less present and less important than I want them to be, than I know they can be. And so that’s my sort of inherent trouble with the mixing of the two.

JHS: Yeah, I can see that. I didn’t personally have that issue.

ARC: I think perhaps this one worked; it didn’t have that problem in the same way as the A.R.T. *Ajax* (which, again, I didn’t actually see).

JHS: And I was struck by how the actor playing Theseus was our link between the two aspects of the play: how in that actor (who was also a member of the chorus) the choral separation and Theseus as war veteran and victor over the Underworld were pulled together in a single actor. I was really glad that the actor did not appear as a character until after the last time we had seen him as a chorus member. And in that sense, his veteran experience started to make more sense of Theseus’s final scene, even though at the time I wasn’t fully there: it took me a while to absorb it. I was struck by his stepping out of the chorus.

ARC: Right, which you really don’t expect because of the giant video and then the regular-sized people.

JHS: Right, but he tied the two pieces together. Although then it becomes disconcerting that Theseus winds up reminding Herakles of all those things—how to come back and be a human being—in order to shake him back into his real purpose. And I think that’s what I found jarring (and it’s cultural, I think), like the discussion that happened in the talkback afterward about his weapon being returned to him in the original. His weapon was not returned to him in this production, and if we take that original reading, you can see exactly how that would work into the original as “you really must be yourself again, you must.” Theseus tells him he’s too important. That constant reminder that he is too important is supposed to get him back to his greater civic duty, and that’s what I found disconcerting when I had been drawn in some ways into his personal affection, then broken by his trauma.

ARC: Maybe that’s where some of my difficulty with this play and these ideas trying to fit together comes from. But I’m still worrying over them, which I think is a good sign about the play. I think that means the play is doing really interesting things.

JHS: I think so too.

ARC: What did you think was going on with this masks? Of course this would have been my question if I’d been able to stay for more of the talkback.

JHS: Framing device.

ARC: I’ve been trying to think if there’s a way they fit with some of these other things we’ve been talking about, about who you are in different places, since the actors started with masks and then removed them.

JHS: I saw it as a way of moving us out of our cultural assumptions—for instance, our dismay at seeing the gun given back to the damaged warrior—into another set of cultural assumptions. If we have that

kind of reaction, then we may find ourselves thinking it's too much about us and not enough a replication, a conversation that's going on among Athenians. And the masks at the beginning and very end wound up framing the play as "other" while at the same time there's no sense within the whole construct of the play that we were supposed to be separated from it entirely. Now, what's unfortunate, I suppose, is that I have now made the comment that the mask winds up distancing us.

ARC: Unfortunate because you're talking to *me*, a proponent of masked performance?

JHS: Yes, exactly!

ARC: Right, because when I use masks in my productions, we wear them the entire time, and we do find that we draw people in. But I think when you use masks as this *Herakles* did, it *is* distancing, because it's saying that this a separate thing, it's not the real part.

JHS: Exactly. It's striking. We've started, and we're in a different reality than you might have expected.

ARC: I think you just said, then, that mask puts us in a different cultural expectation, but then the play and the chorus expected us to be thinking about our culture now.

JHS: That's true.

ARC: But maybe it gave us a slightly safer distance from which to do it, which is when we're thinking about these different projects and productions that are trying to encourage us, 21st-century Americans, the ones who don't have to go to war, to think about what our military people have to deal with. Is mask part of the way to make it feel okay at all to be dealing with those ideas of war and death that we are so uncomfortable with?

JHS: Are you asking if mask starts the play off with a sense of distance and discomfort that you then have to start addressing at some point?

ARC: Or maybe distance and therefore buffer.

JHS: Oh yes, exactly. Distance from a war that's ongoing that we're not actually having to really do any suffering for.

ARC: Then the masks would put us in this other space, sort of let our guard down about what we're seeing because it's foreign.

JHS: But when the mask comes off, we've entered the house.

ARC: We've entered the house; we're already there, we're stuck now.

JHS: Right.

ARC: I think it might work on that level.

JHS: But why does it go back on? At the end?

ARC: To let us put our coats on. . . ?

JHS: Tell us the play's over. . . ? But *Amphitryon's* final line said the play was over; you knew that was the final line.

ARC: I don't think it's about the playing being over; we know when the play's over.

JHS: Is it about “Who’s going to bury me?” I mean, that was his last line.

ARC: No, if it’s something to do with giving that particular audience buffer space to let us be in the house and deal with these issues, maybe putting it back on is letting us put enough of our protective “not paying attention to these issues” back on to go back out in the world and get on the subway again.

JHS: And function.

ARC: Function, which is of course what a lot of the play and especially the chorus was about.

JHS: That all those people ultimately realized they had to function. Or were brought back by somebody to function.

ARC: And as we talk about it, it seems to me that it’s mask in the other sense of a cover persona, and one of the things I think was so powerful about the interviews—the chorus interviews with the veterans—is that they had taken those masks off. At that point they have to function as human beings with a normal life; they have to take that protective persona mask off. And for those interviews they did, some with great difficulty, show us what was underneath.

JHS: Indeed, they did.

ARC: So perhaps the masks at the beginning and at the end had something to do with that. If that’s the case I wish the same thing had been done with Herakles. If it was about that, Amphytrion didn’t need to be hiding what was underneath. He’s the one who most had the mask. Megara had it. . .

JHS: Briefly. And the children.

ARC: And the children.

JHS: But just for walking on silently. They never said anything from the mask, as far as I can remember.

ARC: No, they didn’t speak until later.

JHS: I think the way the masks were removed in the first scene partially explains why masks were used. We were definitely being led through a process of “this is something other, and yet now we’re personalizing it,” because the moment the mask was taken off, it was quite clear why. This was the family unmasking itself.

ARC: That’s true. They had to be on their guard against Lykos.

JHS: Exactly. So that made sense; you’re right, so what does the framing device do for us as a whole?

ARC: And for the rest of the play.

JHS: For the rest of the play, once the masks are off, never to be returned until Amphytrion puts a single mask back on at the end. Maybe it is his final line that actually does inspire that. That is, he really doesn’t know who’s going to take care of him now; there’s no one left to take care of him, and so as a result, he does have to put that back on, but that’s us using the mask in a modern sense as a mask.

ARC: Well, yes.

JHS: And so is it then appeasing our sense of what a mask does? Like I said, causing a sense of otherness, a cue that “this is not what you’re accustomed to.” So were we being drawn into something other, or were we being told, as you suggested, to be on the lookout for masks up and masks down?

ARC: It could be both.

JHS: It could be both, absolutely.

ARC: I think there was more potential there, that they could have done more with it.

JHS: As I said before—and this is not the production’s issue—in many ways I found the most difficult character to take in as a whole was Theseus. And mostly because I know he was the reintegration of Herakles back into society. I guess in some ways I wasn’t yet ready for him to do that. He was a *deus ex machina*.

ARC: You wanted more play.

JHS: I needed more time to introduce Herakles back into society. By the time I had gotten him to that point, I realized he’s gone through a lot, but we haven’t had enough time to digest what he’s done culturally and that he may be dangerous again. In fact, he acknowledges that: he says himself that he fears what he might be. Well, if he fears it, then why are we going to reintroduce him, or why is Theseus going to reintroduce him? Is that really going to be his salvation? Or as Theseus said, is it really much more about the greater good that you do being so much grander than your destructive power?

ARC: So is that a need you felt again because of who we are as Americans now?

JHS: To just give him back his sense of being through the heroic deed that he actually engaged in, if we were talking about war trauma. Isn’t that part of it? To feel that what you did meant something rather than nothing? If what you did meant nothing, then I would think you’re going to have a harder time integrating because you’ll feel scorned or ashamed or blamed or misguided. But if you feel a patriotic sense of duty, that you did accomplish everything that you were tasked with, in spite of the fact that it tore you apart to this level, you would have a different reaction. Because I haven’t experienced that, maybe I was being drawn by Theseus’s response into a world that I needed to be drawn into. To think about that aspect of the warrior’s reintegration.

ARC: Instead of whom he’s going to threaten now.

JHS: Exactly. I was worried about his threat potential instead of his healing. I think that’s a very real response that we have to that person. Theseus probably had the rare response as the one who’d experienced it.

ARC: Bringing it back even to modern warriors, how do we take care of this warrior? What do we need to do for this warrior so he becomes a whole person again?

JHS: Right.

ARC: And can be part of society and cannot be a threat.

JHS: But notice that he doesn’t want to be a threat. He wants to be safe, but more than anything else he is concerned that his family be buried properly, so culturally he winds up handing off the duty of son to his father, and notice how this abdication causes real problems with his sense of the duty between father and son as well. He realizes he has now not been able to fulfill his duty because of his pollution and his actions, and he’s left that pain once again to the people that are at home.

ARC: I think the production was really successful in communicating that pain, which is not always our foremost concern in our modern society. We don’t deal with death very well; we don’t think about those things all the time, and I think the production was really successful in making us attend to those issues.

And my discomfort at the end was very much about the things left undone and unable to be done. I wasn't particularly worried about Herakles's becoming a threat; that's not where my feelings went. I was more moved by that pain of "Who's going to bury me?" and the pain of Herakles's not being able to do his duty.

JHS: I think that's what the script winds up suggesting should be our concern by that point, and I think that's where I was not making the cultural leap the way that I might have, the way I should have been guided to it—because certainly the chorus was taking it in those directions—and it's not as if they weren't leading me toward the conclusion that this warrior needs support and help. One example of audience discomfort, a discomfort with a plausibly uncomfortable topic, was the ranger. After his first conversation, his profanities increased rapidly and were then constant, and they are the dialogue of pain.

ARC: Right, yes.

JHS: And what I found at the same time disconcerting and exactly the way it should have been is that people's nervous laughter at that became part of the difficulty of digesting exactly what is going on with this person in a great deal of pain. He was just trying to put the next image either out of his head, through his head—he was just trying to express himself. . .

ARC: Right, and profanity was the only way he could get it out.

JHS: The words, they just were too hard. Every word was a struggle.

ARC: But you're right that the laughter in the audience, which did finally dissipate—

JHS: A little bit.

ARC: A little bit. The laughter in the audience was a real sign of how distant we are from that experience.

JHS: Exactly. That's what I felt too.

ARC: And that the production was extremely successful at scratching away at that and making us have to deal with it.

JHS: In some ways, didn't we wind up, then, ultimately thinking, "Oh, most of these other veterans in the chorus, they're fine," in spite of the horrors that they have just described to us rather calmly? Now, we think, "*they're* fine." But we look at *the ranger*, and we think, "there's something wrong there." And we want the person reintegrated, but we want him to seem normal.

ARC: Right.

JHS: If he seems out of the norm, then it jars us back into having to think about the realities that he dealt with. And that's where I was: I was hearing his pain and therefore sympathizing with him instead of feeling the alarm, but the alarm itself winds up being part of the absorption of what he said. Some people may not have gotten past that at all. That is, they just thought he's some "other," and maybe they turned away from him, whereas they might have felt more sympathetic toward the older veteran who winds up talking about the horror he's seen and seems to be slowly proceeding through it and describing it in ways that are tortured at some level, certainly, but seem calm enough for us to take them in.

ARC: He's had time.

JHS: But he [the ranger] didn't have the time. He hadn't had the time to deal with that.

ARC: But still different from the veteran filmed in the diner, who was of the same generation.

JHS: That's true. And he seemed jolly and responsive.

ARC: He seemed to be handling it differently.

JHS: Exactly. He had a very different reality.

ARC: I think this must be one of the places where the fact that I knew [the ranger personally] made me not feel threatened by him. I think I was more torn up by his pain because I know him, and I hadn't seen that side of him. But it hadn't occurred to me that the brokenness—in the way that you're talking about it—didn't strike me in quite the same way because I've seen him in other situations. So you know, in a way, I didn't experience the same reaction to him as the rest of the audience.

JHS: Right. But since the people in the original production were civic warriors and civic chorus members, fifth-century Athenian audience members might have known them, even though they were masked. We don't really know how well known the identities of the performers must have been. Surely the chorus was assigned to a show, so if there was an awareness of who was in the chorus, the audience might very well have been able to connect in the ways that you're talking about.

ARC: And maybe also in the way that I connected, where I knew a couple of them, but not the other ones.

JHS: Exactly.

ARC: That's interesting. I never thought about that.

JHS: Whereas I was maybe the foreigner, attending the Dionysia!

ARC: Is there anything else we should discuss?

JHS: I think I heard in the talkback and from Helene [Foley] some concerns about the portrayal of Megara, and I concur with them. I think that her heroism was there, but it was hard for it to come out.

ARC: She was always already crying.

JHS: She was so weepy. Yes, there was a lot of weepiness. I'm not saying she couldn't be like that, but I agree with Helene that it's a shift from the original that in some ways does take away from the woman that Euripides developed.

ARC: Yes, whom I would like to see some time.

JHS: Right, because otherwise it left all the strength and the back and forth between strength and weakness to Amphitryon.

ARC: That's true.

JHS: It really left Amphitryon as the core, which I agree is his function, but Megara's actions are so very appropriate for the context in which she's responding to the violence of her husband and the potential violence of Lykos.

ARC: Yes.

JHS: So she's the one who's trying to figure out how to do the right thing.

ARC: I think she could have been cast that way; her performance could have been along those stronger lines and added to all the other things we've been talking about and not taken away from them. She could have been more clearly a strong protector of her family in the context of a returning husband who might be dangerous himself, and such a role would have emphasized some of the things the rest of the play was doing. I agree.

JHS: It's always so great to see a play that you haven't had a lot of preconceived thought about.

ARC: That's true. It leads to great conversations. Thank you, John.

JHS: Thank you, Amy.