

DIDASKALIA 

The Journal for Ancient Performance



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

DIDASKALIA

Volume 12 (2015)

<http://didaskalia.net>

ISSN 1321-485

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.

2015 Staff

Editor-in-Chief:	Amy R. Cohen	editor@didaskalia.net +1 434 947-8117
		<i>Didaskalia</i> Randolph College 2500 Rivermont Avenue Lynchburg, VA 24503 USA
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Assistant Editor:	Jay Kardan	assistant-editor@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 12 is an inadequate approximation of the web publication at didaskalia.net, which includes sound, video, and live hyperlinks.

Fat Man

Directed by Alex Swift
January 28 – February 15 2015
Move to Stand
The Vault Festival, London

Orpheus

Directed by Alexander Scott
20-24 October 2015
Little Bulb Theatre
The Everyman, Liverpool

Review by **Stephe Harrop**
Liverpool Hope University

It's a bleak night in February, and the vaults below Waterloo station are the Underworld. We hurry out of the pelting rain, down a flight of concrete steps, along a tunnel lined with graffiti, and find ourselves in a series of gloomy chambers, the atmosphere thick with brick dust and chilled sweat. Here in Move to Stand's *Fat Man*, Orpheus is replaying his love life as a stand-up set before an audience of the gods, who're getting their kicks from his misery. The gods are us: "Zeus" over there, "Hades" and "Persephone" the couple just in front of me, and "the Fates" lurking at the back. I'm "Cupid", hailed with strained bonhomie ("you little shit") as the initiator of the whole catastrophe, having indiscriminately showered love darts down on Oxford Street, where (on the top deck of a London bus) Orpheus met Eurydice.

Martin Bonger as Orpheus looks like an overgrown cherub gone to seed, with a drooping mop of sun-kissed curls and a tangle of dark belly hair peeping through his over-stretched shirt front. He's told this tale many times before, approaching the mic with self-pitying complaint, but also with rekindling desire. For this Orpheus is an instinctive showman, as unable to resist the exhibitionist replaying of his doomed love-affair as he is to eat a doughnut without licking his lips. With mic instead of lyre in hand, this Orpheus can summon up lost times and loves, conjuring laughter out of the dark.

This is a show which pretends to be a stand-up gig, but isn't really. Bonger tells a cute, observational tale of boy-meets-girl, and brings a delicately balanced aggression/charm to bantering exchanges with his audience. But we're all being set up for a bigger, darker joke. After all, no-one really believes that the stand-up comic is making up all of his material as he goes along, that each apparent ad lib is really the result of on-the-spot inspiration. Stand-up comedy thrives on the illusion of spontaneity; the performer's skilfully disguised repetition of old material. And so it is with *Fat Man*. As the show progresses, the false assumption of spontaneity epitomised in the stand-up's trade becomes key to understanding this Orpheus.

Fat Man uses the faked spontaneity of the stand-up's art to expose a fundamental tension between that which changes (the comic's informal interactions with each audience) and that which can't: Orpheus' failure to alter the mythic "fact" of Eurydice's premature death. Bonger accosts his audience with a geniality so false it almost rings true: "How y'all doing? Y'all know me, I'm Orpheus...". As he chats to a shy "Persephone", who's made the mistake of sitting with her boyfriend in the front row, elements of the real (her smile, her hair style, her cardigan) get fluently incorporated into the show's script, making the encounter seem fresh and unpremeditated. But as the stand-up's story of disastrous romance progresses,

so the familiar end-point of this mythic narrative begins to assert its presence, curdling the playful atmosphere of the show's early stages. This stand-up can fake spontaneity all he likes, but he can't escape the fixed denouement of his endlessly repeated comic set.

And we gods may not be altogether to blame. Orpheus begins by railing against his audience for forcing him to re-perform his cabaret of misery, but his skill and pleasure in telling his own tale soon complicate matters. As Orpheus journeys deeper into his self-drawn, rose-tinted past, his delight in his own creation betrays his persistent conviction that (despite all the evidence) going back is still possible. After all, Eurydice does live, a little, in Orpheus' mimicry of her London accent, her terrible singing—but only for as long as the stand-up set lasts. And so *Fat Man's* Orpheus ends up relentlessly circling his own misery, insisting (with epic self-deception) that that lost time and love might still be redeemed through the exercise of art. Orpheus' stand-up routine is comic precisely because of its obsessive re-assertion of grief, desire, and inadequacy. But this is a comedy balancing precariously on the edge of self-indulgence, and the grotesque. Just as this Orpheus is physically bloated from the self-inflicted penance of attempting to eat a doughnut without licking his lips, so he is progressively revealed to be hooked on the repetitious emotional gratifications of his autobiographical act.

Orpheus pauses between set-pieces to cross the stage and pour himself a drink. Every time, he tips up the waiting carafe and drains it. Every time he returns it's full again. This minor enchantment is attributed to the presence of "Zeus", but the magic-trick prop reveals a lot about the stand-up's own brand of theatrical illusion, and its dangers. The bottomless vessel might be symbolic of Orpheus' grief: self-renewing, unfinishable business. Yet the trick is also a piece of "stage business", designed to astonish and entertain. This is an effect which relies upon surprise. The first time, it's funny. But the second time, the third, and the fourth? Just as the trick wears out its welcome, so the stand-up's sorrow, endlessly re-performed, risks becoming the stale and insubstantial stuff of showbiz.

At the close of his set, Orpheus begs the gods for one more chance to re-run his failed redemption of his beloved, and through a beautifully simple trick of the light, Eurydice appears. But, rejecting the anticipated romance of this moment, she greets her would-be rescuer as "Orpheus, you dick". Eurydice is tired of her former lover's self-regarding theatrical angst. She wants out of the ever-repeating loop of his re-performed sorrow. Her demand, though, is paradoxically framed. Does Eurydice speak in the fictional present, or is her plea, long ago ignored, even now resounding thorough the echo chamber of Orpheus' obsessive re-performance? Maybe this is the first and final time this scene is played. Maybe Orpheus will break out of his endless loop of self-gratifying grief. But there's another show scheduled for tomorrow, and by the end of the gig Orpheus' trick box of doughnuts has been mysteriously replenished. Like Ovid's Orpheus, perpetually looking back, still singing his dirge for Eurydice after his own dismemberment, this stand-up doesn't seem likely to relinquish either his centre-stage mic or his crowd-pleasing shtick of perpetual heartbreak anytime soon. This show is destined to go on. And on. Orpheus' attempts to regain his love vainly seek to undo the petty mortalities and minor metamorphoses of time, experience, and loss. And the familiar, false spontaneity of the stand-up act allows the show's makers to interrogate, with fierce emotional intelligence, the desire to repeat—and the impossibility of ever regaining—the ephemeral lived (and lost) moment.

And now half a year has passed, and it's a wide-skied, ink-blue October evening, the leaves pale gold and shaken by wind off the Irish Sea. A different night, a different city, a different Orpheus, the myth this time as idiosyncratically re-interpreted by Little Bulb Theatre. This young devising company is a ferociously talented musical ensemble with a penchant for oddball character comedy, and a generous desire to make their audiences happy. Our hostess for the evening is Yvette Pépin (Eugénie Pastor), a gawky, imperious chanteuse (all elbows and toothy smile), her powerful singing punctuated with a

rolling French “r” you could use to slice week-old baguette. Think Joyce Grenfell channelling Edith Piaf. Yvette is mistress of a cabaret which tonight presents the woeful tale of Orpheus and Eurydice, the myth re-set to the mingled strains of Debussy and Monteverdi, Bach and Fauré. And in the coveted role of Eurydice—“half woman, half tree”—she has (of course) cast herself.

Opposite her, legendary guitarist Django Reinhardt (Dominic Conway) will play Orpheus, an enterprise which calls for much mock-epic gathering of his “tragic forces”, and for the wide-eyed, mute intensity of a Rudolf Valentino (or a Charlie Chaplin). In this (to quote the programme notes) “lovingly fictionalising” portrait of the great guitarist, Reinhardt is a sublime musician, but a lousy actor; this Orpheus’ grief is a silent-movie paroxysm, his longing a myopic gaze of half-focused melancholy spilling languidly from kohl-lined eyes. Falling into extravagant arabesques of overacted misery, he’s oblivious to the much-enduring scene-shifter who places a stool, just so, where the great artiste’s posterior will come to rest (before deftly finishing the picture with table, red-and-white checked cloth, and a glass of wine). Django’s Orpheus has a knack for striking the right romantic poses, but his enraptured glance is more likely to stray to his gilded guitar (Hermes’ gift after his lyre is lifted by a Parisian thief) than to Yvette’s garlanded and gambolling Eurydice. Even in the show’s poster—another loving pastiche, with Tudor Humphries channelling Belle Époque Parisian style—he (sharply suited, instrument in hand) turns a sardonic eye towards his audience, while she (wrapped in whorls of Art Nouveau hair and classical draperies, entangled deeply within the image’s multiple frames) can only gaze mistily at him.

In fact, throughout this show it’s often the female characters who bear the myth’s weight of loss and longing. In the final tableau of the cabaret’s play-within-a-play we see a veiled nursing sister, turning back, still smitten, to watch the corpse of her musical idol being borne away. In a show-stopping, heart-stilling cameo, Tom Penn’s Persephone unleashes a honeyed howl of rage for a life stolen, a grief past healing. And inevitably, Yvette loves Django. Her vivid, unlovely face is a St. Vitus’ dance of hope, doubt, and longing as she watches him play. With habitual anxiety she reaches up to pat her hair as he gazes intently—straight past her. In this *Orpheus*, it’s the cabaret’s own absurd and undesired Eurydice who understands that love, unrequited, can pave a path to hell. Her solo numbers, “Hymne à l’Amour” and “Mon Dieu” (poured out with throbbing, nasal intensity), are paeans to the compulsive, obsessive love which consumes her, bestowing upon this ludicrous would-be heroine a forlorn touch of grandeur. (Instantly undercut with a return to the comic: “Thank you, Charles” she growls soulfully to her pianist, “I needed that”, as if he’d handed her a clean hanky.) Framed in this way, the tale of Orpheus—ardent and heroic rescuer, fallible (in the company’s reading of Ovid) only in loving too impatiently—becomes Yvette’s own piece of fervently metatheatrical wish-fulfilment.

2.5

This is another show which fuses an ancient love story with a shrewd eye for the follies of artists who masquerade as mythic figures, flirting with sublimity onstage while serenely screwing up their real lives and overlooking offered loves. But Little Bulb’s *Orpheus* inhabits a more benevolent play-world than *Fat Man*, in which Django and Yvette can be blissfully reunited, post-mortem, in a red-curtained afterlife that morphs into a post-show hot-jazz session. In this *Orpheus*, high-energy conviviality and ensemble music-making will always win out over tragedy, the company cheerfully abandoning the impassioned pretence of classical grief for the more convivial shared pleasures of performance, right here and right now.