

The Journal for Ancient Performance



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

# 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 διδασκαλῖαι. *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 double blind, peer-reviewed scholarship on performance as well as reviews of the professional activity of artists and scholars who work on ancient drama.

We welcome submissions on any aspect of the field, and we provide a uniquely friendly venue for publishing sound, image, and video evidence. If you would like your work to be reviewed, please write to [editor@didaskalia.net](mailto: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](http://didaskalia.net).

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## Euripides, *Herakles*

Directed by Caleb Simone

April 4-April 6, 2019

Minor Latham Playhouse

New York, New York, USA

Video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gM4sYJ7hdqg&feature=youtu.be>

Reviewed by Timothy J. Moore

*Washington University in St. Louis*

Euripides' *Herakles* is arguably extant Greek tragedy's most disturbing play. While Herakles is in the underworld performing his final labor, Lykos, who has usurped the throne of Thebes, plans to murder Herakles' wife (Megara), his children, and his father (Amphitryon). Herakles returns home just in time to save his family and kills Lykos. The ensuing celebration is promptly interrupted by Iris, who, at the behest of Hera, orders Lyssa, the goddess of madness, to make Herakles kill his wife and children in a fit of insanity. When Herakles awakens, only the intervention of his friend Theseus keeps him from killing himself. This year's production of *Herakles* by Barnard Columbia Ancient Drama (BCAD) brought out well the play's bleakness and suggested further implications about the difficulty of quelling violence once it starts. It responded in a more subdued way to the play's palliating emphasis on the enduring value of human affection.

The play was performed entirely in Greek, to audiences consisting of some scholars and students of Greek but mostly interested theatergoers. Clear pronunciation of the Greek meant that even those with limited Greek could follow some of the play's language, and supertitles ensured that spectators with no Greek could also follow the plot without difficulty.<sup>1</sup>

Director Caleb Simone and his cast and crew are to be praised for an exceptional accomplishment. Directorial and technical decisions were consistently on the mark, individual performances ranged from strong to outstanding, and the production maintained the audience's interest throughout. Most remarkably, BCAD's *Herakles* incorporated melodies sung in Greek to the accompaniment of an *aulos*, employing ancient Greek scales described by Plato and Aristides Quintilianus and molded to match both the meter and pitch accent of the Greek text. The choices made by the director, actors, and production crew offer valuable insights into the play, its performance in fifth-century Athens, and what it means to perform Greek tragedy today.

Simone's first choice was to make the play shorter. Modern audiences simply do not watch theater without a break for as long as the ancient Athenians did, and an intermission in *Herakles*, when so much depends upon the immediate switches from fear to joy to desolation, would be anathema. Simone thus produced a play of just under one and one-half hours, about the maximum amount of time most modern audiences sit without a break.<sup>2</sup> He accomplished this ideal modern length in two ways. First, he kept the performance moving quickly throughout: the fast pace not only made the play shorter, but it also reinforced the terrifyingly swift changes of fortune, as Heracles' family moves within such a short time from near disaster to salvation to ruin. Second, he cut about 330 lines of the 1428-line play.

I regretted some parts that were left out: absent, for example, was the passage in which Herakles compares Theseus to a tugboat while his friend leads him offstage at the end of the play, after he has killed his children (1423–4). Herakles had used the same analogy earlier of himself and his children as he planned to rescue them (631–2), so the loss of the latter passage deprives the audience of some powerful pathos and irony. Also missing were the final stanzas of the third stasimon (763–814), in which the chorus celebrates after the death of Lykos; in this production the chorus simply danced informally for a short time. The audience still experienced the sharp contrast as, immediately after the stasimon, Isis and Lyssa entered and set in motion Heracles' murder of his children, but the loss of the joyful words took just a bit of "punch" out of the shocking change. All in all, though, the cuts were judicious and had little effect on the impact of the play. Interestingly, the cuts sometimes reflected the differences in societal context between fifth-century Athens and twenty-first-century New York. Cuts, for example, made Megara a much more "modern" wife. In Euripides' text, when Megara thinks she and her children will soon be killed, she laments the plans Herakles had made for his children to rule kingdoms (460–75); then she recalls her own hopes that they would marry princesses (476–9). Simone cut the more "macho" promises made by Herakles, leaving only Megara's own wishes for her children. Later, when Herakles has returned, Megara explains to him what has happened; as she does so, she apologizes to Amphitryon for addressing her husband first: the man and father should take precedence (534–7). The apology is absent from the BCAD version.

The production offered a contrast between visual aspects that moved far from fifth-century practices and sounds that sought to recreate such practices. Visual elements of the play responded effectively to the conditions and opportunities of the performance space. Minor Latham Playhouse is a relatively small proscenium-arch theater. Facial expressions in BCAD's maskless performance could thus have considerable impact: the smirks of Lykos, for example, which were ironically echoed first by Amphitryon and the chorus as they sent Lykos to his doom, and then by Iris as she prepared to instigate Herakles' madness. Striking as well were the impassivity of Megara's expressions, which reflected her self-restraint even in the direst circumstances, and the shocked devastation on Herakles' face when he realized what he had done.



*Photo 1*



*Photo 2*

The set, designed by Cate McCrea, was simple: at the back of the stage was a curtain beside a set of vertical posts (photo 1)<sup>3</sup>. Most characters who entered the house disappeared behind the curtain, but Lyssa, while she directed Herakles' madness, was visible behind the posts. To underscore the chaos brought to the household by Herakles' madness, the posts were rearranged during a blackout, so that some were no longer vertical (photo 2). Changes in the color of the lights behind the posts reinforced different moods throughout the play: with Herakles' entrance the background color changed from somber blue to hopeful reds and yellows, but Iris and Lyssa brought ominous purples, which led in turn to a blood-red background.<sup>4</sup>

Other lighting effects directed focus. When the play opened, Megara and the children were in the dark, so that the audience saw only Amphitryon as he delivered his opening monologue. After the massacre, Amphitryon, singing the play's only monody, remained in semi-darkness while Herakles slept under a faint spotlight. At play's end, the lights darkened around Amphitryon, surrounded by the chorus after the final exit of Herakles and Theseus. Lighting thus reinforced a feature of the play easily missed as the text is read but conspicuous in performance: the importance of Amphitryon. Though the play is named Herakles, Amphitryon is in many ways the central character, as he responds first to the threat to Herakles' family and then to the murders. A central theme of the play is an emphatic contrast between the unreliability of the divine and the loyalty of humans. The almost continuous presence on stage of Herakles' mortal father, supporting his son and his family unswervingly while Herakles' divine father, Zeus, appears to be indifferent, is thus of great significance.



Photo 3



Photo 4



Photo 5



Photo 6

The costumes of Megara and the children (photo 3), Amphitryon (photo 4), the chorus (photo 5), the messenger (photo 6), and the accompanying auletes (photo 7) were understated and given an air of antiquity: brown, white, and beige tunics with little or no adornment.<sup>5</sup> This simplicity brought to the fore each of the other costumes. Lykos' bright-red, fur-lined cloak, along with the military garb of the silent soldier who accompanied him on stage, emphasized both his regal power and his villainy. As befitted their divine status, Iris and Lyssa had the production's most elaborate costumes: glistening, highly adorned robes (photo 8). The contrast between the two goddesses' appearances underlined the irony of their role reversal, as the beautiful Olympian Iris forced her abominable actions on the chthonic Lyssa, whose snake-filled headdress would lead anyone to expect her to be the instigator of evil.



Photo 7



Photo 8



Photo 9



Photo 10

The large lion head and pelt worn by Herakles throughout his first scene made him look uncanny, almost comic, and provided a striking contrast with the humanity of much of his dialogue in that scene, as he expressed his affection for his family (photo 9). The costume, combined with his language as he prepared to attack Lykos, called attention to Herakles' extraordinary potential for violent action. It did not suggest, as some scholars have argued, that the seeds of madness lay in Herakles before Lyssa's attack, but it did make clear why Herakles is such an effective tool for Hera to use against himself.<sup>6</sup> It also contrasted emphatically with Herakles' costume after the murders, when, like most of the other human characters, he wore a humble tunic, but the garment was tattered, revealing much of his blood-splattered flesh (photo 10).



*Photo 11*

The most surprising costuming was for Theseus (photo 11). As he comes leading an army to help Herakles' family, one might have expected him to look like a travelling general. Instead, his costume was emphatically regal: an elaborate purple robe, including fur disturbingly reminiscent of Lykos' costume, and a crown. The production thus underplayed the common humanity of Herakles and Theseus and instead called greater attention to the difference in their positions. On the one hand, the conspicuous dissimilarity in the two men's visual status made Theseus seem even nobler when he did not shy away from touching the polluted Herakles. On the other, the costume, combined with cuts to some expressions of affection between Theseus and Herakles, made more disquieting the imperious and almost cold language Theseus uses as he admonishes Herakles not to indulge in self-pity. The audience was left to question just how much the friendship of Theseus redeems the play from complete darkness.

At several moments, stage movement provided promising potential answers to questions posed by the text. What, for example, does Lykos do during his long silence while Megara discusses with Amphitryon the steps they should take to avoid being burned alive (278–326)? This production had him anxiously watching offstage for the arrival of wood for the pyre. Staging drew attention to the oddity of the moment when Herakles incongruously delays his entrance into his home to explain what has happened to Cerberus. Again, we see the centrality of Amphitryon, representing the human and mundane in opposition to the supernatural: Amphitryon stopped Herakles just as he was on his way into the house, asking “Did you really go into Hades’ house, my son?” (610). Creative staging was especially effective in the Iris and Lyssa scene. After she was bullied by Iris into agreeing to drive Herakles mad, Lyssa described what she would do. As she did so, she gestured, standing in front of Iris, who performed the same gestures. Because we know Iris acts at the behest of Hera, the unusual staging called attention to the unseen force beyond both goddesses that was leading Herakles to disaster. Meanwhile, the chorus did not just cower, as they must have done in the orchestra of the theater of Dionysus, but instead disappeared completely into the wings. Their absence came at the cost of the visual contrast between the helpless, frightened mortals and the terrifying goddesses, but it allowed the audience to focus completely on the latter and to feel they were entering a different, divine world as Iris and Lyssa spoke. The chorus’ absence also helped to compensate for the lack of a skene roof, on which Iris and Lyssa probably appeared in ancient productions.



*Photo 12*



*Photo 13*

Choral movement is inevitably a challenge in a production of this nature: when amateur performers must sing odd melodies in a foreign language, elaborate dance steps are exceedingly difficult to carry out. Simone and his choreographer, Jon Froehlich, responded to this dilemma in several ways. Sometimes the chorus remained still while they sang. More often they moved with simple but effective steps. Most notable was their abstract recreation of Herakles’ labors as they sang the first stasimon (photo 12). The removal, mentioned above, of the last stanzas of the third stasimon allowed the chorus to move frenetically without having to sing as they celebrated the death of Lykos. The chorus also included a statuesque non-singing dancer, who moved in more elaborate and athletic ways throughout extensive portions of the choruses (photo 13). This solo dancer was sometimes distracting, but, appropriately given the importance of dance in tragic choruses, he allowed the spectators to see more motion than simple movement by the singers could provide.

In one respect the production’s sounds, like its sights, moved well beyond what one would have experienced in ancient Athens: sound designer Matt Rocker employed electronic sound effects at various points. Most significant was the ominous sound of wind, begun in the first

scene, as Megara and Amphitryon awaited death at the hands of Lykos, then renewed, with additional electronic noise, at the entrance of Herakles, and then intensified and further supplemented when Iris and Lyssa entered. This crescendo of sound underlined the continuities in the play's chain of violence even as the context for the violence differed.

In other respects, however, this production's sounds were its most innovative and exciting attempt to approach the experience of fifth-century tragic performance. In speaking, the actors did not attempt a formal, precise reproduction of the Greek pitch accents or of the quantitative meter, but spoke in natural tones, largely as if they were speaking English, with extra stress given to accented syllables. This meant that the Greek was clear and unaffected, and that tone of voice could contribute well to characterization (the sarcasm of Lykos, for example, and the histrionics of the messenger). One could nevertheless still appreciate the patterning of pitch accents, because of the element of pitch in English stress; and the distinction between long and short syllables produced naturally by vowel length and extra consonants was usually enough to express the rhythm of the iambic trimeters.

Vocalization by the chorus, and by Amphitryon in his monody, was far more elaborate. Anna Conser composed the melodies for these songs, using insights she has gained while writing a dissertation at Columbia on antistrophic patterns in Greek tragedy.<sup>7</sup> For her rhythms she followed the meter closely, using with very few exceptions a binary opposition between long syllables equivalent to quarter notes and short syllables equivalent to eighth notes. Rhythm alone thus allowed the chorus to produce many significant effects designed by Euripides: the stately, repetitive aeolo-choriambics as they recounted Herakles' labors, for example, and the frenetic dochmiacs, abounding in short syllables, with which they expressed first their joy at the death of Lykos and then their horror at the murder of Herakles' family. For her musical scales, Conser turned to the "old scales" described by Aristides Quintilianus, which may well correspond to the modes discussed in Plato's *Republic*, and she responded to the ethical attributions given to modes by the *Republic's* interlocutors.<sup>8</sup> Thus for the parodos, in which the old men of Thebes want to challenge Lykos but realize their inability to take any meaningful action, Conser mixed the Dorian mode, which the *Republic* and other sources say was manly, with the Syntonolydian, which our sources describe as mournful.

Most intriguing was Conser's response to Ancient Greek's tonic accent. Because accents do not correspond between responding stanzas, it has been widely assumed either that the pitch accent was largely ignored in Greek tragic lyric, or that melody, unlike rhythm, changed between strophe and antistrophe. Conser believes that this need not be the case. In the nonstrophic melodies of the Hellenistic period, where pitch accent definitely played a role in melody, that role involves several principles, the most important of which is that except in rare cases where a special effect is desired, no syllable in a word receives a higher pitch than a syllable with an accent. Often, however, non-accented syllables are sung at the same pitch as the syllable with an acute accent.<sup>9</sup> The existence of syllables sung at the same pitch, Conser believes, means that melody and pitch accent could work together and responding stanzas could have identical melodies, even when accents did not correspond between strophe and antistrophe. When a word in the strophe had an accent on a syllable other than the accented syllable of the corresponding word in the antistrophe, the composer would simply repeat the words' highest note on more than one syllable. Thus, for example, when the word βαρύτερον (*Herakles* 639) is in responsion with the word δίδυμον (*Herakles* 657), a higher note on the first two syllables of

both words will allow the melody to be the same on both words without violating the rules of correspondence between melody and pitch accent. Following these principles, Conser wrote identical melodies for responding stanzas, repeating notes when accentual patterns demanded. Significantly, these melodies were not at all monotonous, but sounded lively and interesting. The exact nature of melodic response remains a matter of speculation, but this production has demonstrated that melodies following principles both of response and pitch of accent are compatible with effective musical performance.

Contributing considerably to the excitement of that musical performance was the presence of Callum Armstrong, playing the two-piped double-reed *aulos*. In a manner perhaps reminiscent of the cooperation between playwright and *auletes* in Euripides' day, Armstrong adapted and expanded Conser's melodies for the *aulos*, providing accompaniment for the choruses and Amphitryon's monody as well as some instrumental solos. Conspicuous both visually (he stood on the side of the stage, just as ancient *auletai* would have stood in the orchestra with the chorus) and aurally, Armstrong and his playing demonstrated clearly the significance of the *aulos* for ancient theatrical performance. Each chorus began with notes from the *aulos*, which set the tone and established the opening pitches even before the singers began. His two pipes allowed Armstrong, while sometimes playing in unison with the singers, also to use a wide variety of pitches and rhythms 'different from the singers', providing ever-changing rhythmic and melodic reinforcement of their songs.

The *auletes'* contribution became especially important before and during Herakles' rampage. When Lyssa has shown her reluctance to follow Hera's commands, Iris lashes out at her, and the meter changes from iambic trimeters to trochaic tetrameters catalectic. Iambic trimeter is the most common meter of Greek drama, and our sources suggest that it was usually spoken without instrumental accompaniment. The rarer trochaic tetrameter, however, appears to have been spoken, chanted, or sung to the accompaniment of the *aulos*, and it often marks moments of greater excitement, emotion, or suspense. Armstrong therefore began playing with the switch of meter, just as it became clear that Lyssa would be forced to cause Herakles' madness. Lyssa obeys Iris, and she describes how she will drive Herakles mad. As she delivered this speech in the BCAD production, the sounds from the *aulos* became more and more ominous. Finally, Lyssa made an explicit allusion to the instrument, saying to the absent Herakles: *τάχα ἔγω μᾶλλον χορεύω καὶ καταυλὴ ὠφύβω*; "Soon I will make you dance even more and instill fear with the *aulos*" (871). Simone cut two lines of farewell to Iris that succeed this verse, so that the reference to the *aulos* led directly to an *aulos* solo and then an accompanied chorus, both filled with dissonance, trills, erratic rhythms, and shrill high notes produced by overblowing. In a moment of remarkable metatheater, the *aulos*, which Greek thinkers often associated with the irrational, became a powerful representative of Herakles' madness.

BCAD's *Herakles* is an especially clear example of how effective ancient plays can be on the modern stage and how much we can learn about ancient theater from modern performance. Both those who were fortunate enough to see one of the original performances and those who missed them can benefit greatly from watching and studying the online video.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>The supertitles, produced by Caleb Simone and Anthony Chu and included on the video, are the source of all translations in what follows. I attended the play with two friends who know no Greek. Both reported that they could follow the action and dialogue easily except sometimes when lighting made the supertitles hard to read.

<sup>2</sup>As recorded on the video, the play lasts for one hour and twenty-four minutes.

<sup>3</sup>All photos courtesy Pamela Sisson.

<sup>4</sup>Lighting design by Marién Vélez of 22 Lighting Studio.

<sup>5</sup>Costumes designed by Bo Yeon Jang and Allegra Forbes.

<sup>6</sup>On the history of opinions regarding Herakles' innocence or guilt, see Bond 1981, xvii–xxvi and Riley 2008, 6–8, and *passim*.

<sup>7</sup>"Tide of Song: Antistrophic Patterns in Greek Tragedy."

<sup>8</sup>Aristides Quintilianus, writing a work on music (usually identified by its Latin name *De Musica*) sometime between the second and fourth centuries CE, lists a number of scales (*harmoniai*) that he says were used by "people of distant antiquity" (18.5, Barker's translation). The scales are all named after ethnic groups within and beyond Greece: e.g., Dorian, Lydian, and Phrygian. It is widely assumed that the scales he lists correspond to those described and given ethical attributes in Plato's *Republic* (397–401b). For Aristides Quintilianus' scales, see Barker 1989, 419–20. For the opinions of Plato's interlocutors on the ethical values of the scales, see Barker 1984, 128–35 and 163–8. See also West 1992, 177–84.

<sup>9</sup>West 1992, 198–200; Cosgrove and Meyer 2006.

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