

DIDASKALIA 

The Journal for Ancient Performance



photo: P. Winters/Theater of War

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

The Women of Troy—New and Old

Michael Ewans

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This article begins by examining the relationship between the version of the text which Kosky used for his 2008 Sydney Theatre Company production and the original Euripides; I then assess some aspects of the production itself which are relevant to my argument, and finally I contrast the performance context of Euripides' original production in Athens in 415 BCE with that of Kosky's version, performed starting in September 2008 at the Wharf Theatre by the Sydney Theatre Company. This contrast raises significant questions about Kosky's aims and achievements as a director, which I consider in conclusion.

Euripides' cry of angst against war was almost bound, sooner or later, to attract the attention and the talents of Barrie Kosky. Plotless, episodic, *The Trojan Women* is a sustained and intense outcry against the horrors which war inflicts upon women and children. *Troades* is arguably one of Euripides' finest plays, alongside *Bakchai* (a version of which Kosky incorporated into *The Lost Echo*), and *Medeia*.

But of course, being a classical text in regular patterns of Greek verse, it had to be Koskyized! As the first stage in their work, Kosky's collaborator Tom Wright prepared a version of the whole text, based on consultation with a number of existing translations. This was a version of the whole text, even though Kosky and Wright had already decided to cut Euripides' choral lyrics and replace them with songs of lamentation; in the actual production these were sourced from a wide variety of musical styles and genres, ranging from John Dowland to Slovenian folk song. Already in this first version the measured cadence of Euripides' iambics had been replaced by short sharp lines, and in the much shorter performance text the ideas and thoughts in the original Euripides can only be described as having been 'sexed up'—or, to be more precise, sexed up and violenced up, with the intensity considerably raised. I thought it would be worth looking at an example of this process in some detail, so here is Menelaus' first speech on entry in my own accurate version of the Greek, and in the Wright/Kosky version (there is in this passage only one change from Wright's first version); additions to Euripides are marked in bold.

Passage 1: a close rendering of the original Euripides by M. Ewans

MENELAUS
 860 Oh beautifully shining sun of this, the day
 on which I get my hands on her, my wife.
 I came to Troy, not as they think
 to get that woman, but to get the man who came and took
 (treacherous guest) my wife out of my home.
 Well, with the gods' help he has paid
 the penalty; his land has fallen to Greek spears.
 And I have come to take the Spartan woman (I can't speak
 870 her name with any joy)—my former wife;
 I know that she's here in the prisoners' quarters,
 counted along with all the other Trojan women.
 The men who won her by their labour with the spear
 gave her to me to kill, or if not to take
 her back to Argive soil.
 Well, I decided not to kill Helen
 in Troy, but to take her back by ship
 to Greece and there hand her over to die,
 the penalty for all the good men who perished at Troy.
 880 Servants, go into the house

and bring her—drag her by her bloodstained
hair; and when winds come that blow
our way, we'll send her back to Greece.

Passage 2: Wright/Kosky version (invented additions to Euripides in **bold**; alteration between first version and performed version in *italics*)

Feel that sun!
Some days you are glad you're alive!
I get my hands on her again
Helen
Still my wife
After all this
Still mine.
Everyone
Greek, Trojan
Man Woman
Living, dead
And probably those not yet born
Think I waged this war for her
To get back in those loins
But I didn't
I came here to get him.
The insinuating worm
The effete smarming boy
Who slept under my roof
Abused my hospitality
Stole my property. My wife.
He's paid
With his blood. The gods made sure.
Not just the man,
His people
That nation
Skewered on Greek spears. [*shredded by Greek blades.*]
Now, at last,
I claim my Helen—
I still can't say that name
Without feeling sick.
She's my property again
Bound and tied up
With a nice little tag
Just like all the rest of my prizes.
Men died—
My men—
To get her back.
So I can just dispatch her here
Quick slit of the neck-vein
In the blink of an eye
Or I can ship her back to Greece.
Yes, she'll be a moist little piece of cargo

Trussed up with a ribbon
Like a present
A gift to my poor people
They can watch her writhe in agony
 As I kill her there
 At home.
 Drag her out.
 Bring her out here.
 All that golden hair matted and caked in the blood of men.
 Soon as the winds change for the good
 We sail.

It is a fairly minor change to add one line to Menelaus' introductory words. Much more interesting is the rhetorical expansion on 'everyone' (in the original an anonymous 'they') who thought he waged this war just for Helen—

Greek, Trojan
Man Woman
Living, dead
And probably those not yet born

—the sort of exaggeration on which Kosky thrives. Thereafter the sexuality of the speech (almost non-existent in the original) is sharpened up:

[they] think I waged this war for her
To get back in those loins

And in the same vein Paris ('treacherous guest' in Euripides) becomes

The insinuating worm
The effete smarming boy

to convey the extent of the new contempt.

Kosky's production memorably uses the image of woman as commodity, literally packaged in cardboard boxes (see below), and this directorial vision is foreshadowed (presumably deliberately) in another expansion on the original Euripides:

She's my property again
Bound and tied up
With a nice little tag
Just like all the rest of my prizes
 Then comes graphic violence:
 So I can just dispatch her here
Quick slit of the neck-vein
In the blink of an eye.

Finally the themes of packaged woman, sex ('moist'), and violence are combined together in the last addition:

Or I can ship her back to Greece.
Yes, she'll be a moist little piece of cargo

Trussed up with a ribbon
Like a present
A gift to my poor people
They can watch her writhe in agony
 As I kill her there
 At home.

In these ways the text becomes a suitable vehicle for the production which Kosky created; it is clipped and elliptical compared to the relatively leisurely flow of Euripides' rhetoric, and it contains additions which emphasize three central themes of Kosky's production—sexuality, violence, and the commodification of women.

Similarly elsewhere:

MALE VOICE
 Cassandra was not a straw.
 Agamemnon had already chosen her.

HECUBA
 To be his wife's slave.

MALE VOICE
 No, to be his.
 His...
 Hole.

Euripides is not euphemistic about what function Cassandra will serve in Agamemnon's house ('the dark mating-rites of the bed', 252), but he is certainly not this direct. The Greeks preserved an absolute separation between tragedy, in which obscenity has no place, and comedy in which it was uninhibitedly displayed. Nor is his Cassandra, the special prize of the king, raped (as in Kosky) in a cupboard by a lowly guard and next seen with bloodstained panties.¹

One final example: Andromache on Helen. Euripides (or as close as I can get in English) first:

Child of Tyndareus, you are not Zeus' girl.
 I say you had many fathers—
 an avenging Fury, Jealousy,
 Slaughter and Death and all the evils earth brings forth.
 770 I'll never say Zeus was your father,
 you who killed so many Greeks and Trojans.
 Die! Your lovely eyes so shamelessly destroyed
 the famous plains of Troy.

Wright and Kosky render this (far more melodramatically than in the original, but in highly evocative, almost poetic language) as follows:

Helen
 Daughter of god
 So everyone calls you.
 But who are your real fathers?
Shit-stinking creatures of night

Whirlwinds of hate**The lust of blood in the mouth,**

Death himself—

These fathered you.

Zeus never fathered you

You turned your whore eyelashes to us

And death was smeared on our faces.

There is to no doubt that what Wright and Kosky have created, in this and a number of similar places in their script, is far more vivid and powerful than Euripides' original text. The third of the 'big three' Athenian dramatist simply lacks, at climactic moments like this, the immense verbal power of Aeschylus and Sophocles; their language is tighter and richer, and their imagery is far more intense.

This translation is, as Jason Blake rightly remarked in the *Sun Herald* review, 'brutally eloquent'.² And the brutality is almost all Wright and Kosky; see especially the extended, vivid and violent invention in Hecuba's description of the entry of the wooden horse and the sack of Troy in Scene 6, far more brutal—and poignant—than the chorus' lyric account in the original Euripides. Are modern audience sensibilities too scarred for the restraint with which Euripides portrayed, in my first example, Menelaus' hollow rhetoric, and his weakness? Or are there other reasons for the heightened levels of sex and violence in the Kosky / Wright performance version of the text? I shall return to this question after considering the production.

The set (by Alice Babidge, with input by Barrie Kosky) is a modern, indoor equivalent to the timeless, placeless nowhere in front of the captive women's tents which was Euripides' original setting. Filing cabinets, cupboards, lockers, and shelves occupy the entire rear wall of the stage, creating an oppressive effect even before the cupboards and lockers are used to torture the prisoners. Terrifyingly loud bursts of live gunfire are frequently heard from offstage, to supplement the violence which takes place onstage, and masked male functionaries cross the playing area seemingly at random, taking no notice of the female prisoners trapped there unless they have a reason to do so. The visual imagery of the show is all too familiar to western audiences from the exposure of practices at Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo Bay; the prisoners, who bear visible signs of having already been tortured, are hooded, forced to stand on boxes,³ and in a cruel touch they are even made to help their captors: as the hooded Hecuba is stripped of her crown and robes, she is made to hold the plastic bags into which her jewellery is placed as it is removed from her. She ends up clad only in a shift.

In all these ways the internal agony of the prisoners is externalised—a familiar expressionist move, of a kind which Kosky uses many times during the production. At the end of the play the chorus of three and Hecuba are all forced brutally into the lockers, after which the women of the chorus are summarily shot so that only Hecuba survives; in our overpopulated modern world, the victors have no need for a workforce of foreign female slaves, and so Euripides' original ending, in which the chorus depart sorrowfully for the Greek ships, would be inappropriate for Kosky's contemporary production.

Some scenes are stunning—in particular the gibbering madness of Cassandra, as portrayed by Melita Jurisic (who also plays Andromache and Helen—an inspired tripling of roles). All three of these royal ladies end up being packaged, sealed inside boxes (of different shapes) with an over-the-top amount of packing tape: woman literally as commodity. Other scenes are simply puzzling—why on earth is Menelaus, who in Greek mythology was still young enough at the end of the war to be seriously tempted by Helen's sexuality (he is not more than 40 years old, by any reasonable count) portrayed by Arthur Dignam as a grey-haired, impotent-looking old man in a wheelchair?

Kosky's *The Women of Troy* is overwhelmingly and murderously violent. (I especially liked the touch of

the torturer who crosses right to left empty-handed, and a moment later crosses left to right carrying a giant corkscrew. And there is the tableau of the totally bloodied corpse of Astyanax—of course, in his box). Does Kosky create effects like these simply because he can and because he wants to? Or was the extreme intensity of the production a sign of a certain despair about his ability to communicate effectively with the audiences which his work has attracted in Australia—audiences which he was soon to leave for a major post in Europe?

The venue was the largest stage in the Wharf Theatre of the Sydney Theatre Company, which bills itself as 'Australia's Premier Theatre Company'. So their productions ought to be in some sense central to Sydney's—and indeed Australia's—cultural life. But when we examine the STC audience they are, crucially, nothing like Euripides' audience, which comprised around 14,000 people—the majority of the adult male citizens of Athens, together (almost certainly) with women and children at the back.⁴ The ancient playwrights had, conferred on them by the festival, the right of *parrhesia*—the freedom to speak to their fellow-citizens and tell them what they wanted to about the issues which were currently affecting Athens. And this is what Euripides did. As Tom Wright correctly writes in his program note:

The year before *The Women of Troy* premiered, Athens had defeated the city of Melos [which had refused to join the Athenian alliance] and had controversially put the entire male population to the sword before enslaving every woman and child. In the audience for the first performance of the play would have been many members of that great democracy who had, less than twelve months earlier, lined up Melian men and slit their throats one after the other. The audience would have been littered with good citizens who had Melian women and children as slaves in their homes and businesses. None of this can have been far from the mind of anyone listening to Hecuba's descriptions of war, or its aftermath.

Euripides' play is a scathing critique of war, and of what we would now call human rights abuses, delivered directly to an audience which included many perpetrators—men who had committed the atrocities, and men who had voted for them. And he needed no onstage violence, no repeated loud offstage explosions, and no near-visible rape to make his point.⁵

At the STC, Kosky staged Euripides' drama for a very different audience, which is hardly representative of the population of Sydney, let alone of Australia as a whole. At the matinee which I attended, approximately 48% of the audience were schoolgirls from private secondary schools, and 48% were blue rinse old ladies. (The remaining 4% mainly comprised me and one of my students, together with a few elderly gentlemen). The church schoolgirls are (I presume and hope) wholly innocent of violence; and the North Shore and eastern suburbs old ladies have no complicity in modern warfare, unless you count having voted for John Howard and the Coalition as making those who did so complicit in Australia's small and token contribution to the war in Iraq. (Though this viewpoint is possible, it would be unfair, since Howard committed Australia to the so-called 'coalition of the willing' without a mandate from the electors.)

So why does Kosky inflict this undeniably powerful expressionist intensity on his audiences? Does he believe that after two World Wars, a thermonuclear Cold War, and innumerable smaller but no less dirty wars in the last 100 years (not to mention the violent, mostly American TV shows which dominate commercial television from the moment they are permitted to be screened, at 8:30 pm), the STC audience is so coarsened that violence needs to be presented on stage with the utmost intensity to awaken their jaded palates? Or is there a totally opposite reason for Kosky's practice—that modern western societies (especially Australia) are almost totally cosseted and shielded from real-life violence (it is possible to live a whole life here and never see a corpse), and deserve—perhaps even need—to be pulled as vigorously as possible out from our shelters of complacency? In discussion after the original delivery of this paper, Tom Wright claimed that Kosky considered neither of these alternatives, since his theatre pursues strategies that are deliberately illogical and beyond access to this kind of reasoning. But if a choice had to be made

then in Wright's view Kosky would most probably incline towards the second position. Euripides did not need to show overt violence on his stage: every man in his audience had fought for his city, and many of the women would have lain out and lamented the corpses of men who died in battle, and of women who died in childbirth. Perhaps Kosky sees modern life as simply too easy.

As Kosky's reputation mounts, and with his recent appointment as Intendant of the Komische Oper in Berlin, there is a danger that his role will be simply that of a (middle-aged) *enfant terrible*, hired, in a way characteristic of the contemporary German cultural scene, for his ability *épater le bourgeois*. He needs to proceed far more subtly than in *The Women of Troy*, if he is to succeed in staging complex modernist masterpieces like Janáček's *From the House of the Dead* and Bartók's *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*. These two operas are ideal vehicles for Kosky's remarkable power as a director; but neither will give up its secrets if he only seeks to bludgeon his audience into subjection.⁶

footnotes

¹ In Euripides she had already been raped by the lesser Aias, as Athena states in the prologue, which Kosky and Wright cut.

² Jason Blake, 'Tragedy Pulls No Punches', *The Sun-Herald*, 28 September 2008, p. 21.

³ There is special pathos when little Astyanax valiantly stands on his own little box.

⁴ It is true that the presence of women has been much debated; but to my mind the question was settled in 1991 by J. Henderson, 'Women and the Athenian Dramatic Festivals', *TaPhA* 121, 133–47. Neither the anecdote in the *Life of Aeschylus* about the appearance of the Furies in *Eumenides*, nor the joke at Aristophanes *Peace* 962ff., make any sense if women were not present.

⁵ The nostalgic and escapist choral lyrics, which Kosky and Wright cut, make a poignant contrast in the original Euripides with the brutality of the dialogue scenes.

⁶ Remarkably, Kosky managed to direct Berg's *Wozzeck* for Opera Australia in 1999 with only one Grand Guignol excess. Marie did not have her throat cut with a knife, as in Berg and Büchner's text; instead *Wozzeck* wielded an axe!