

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.

DIDASKALIA

Volume 8 (2011)

<http://didaskalia.net>

ISSN 1321-4853

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 διδασκαλίαι. *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.

2011 Staff

Editor-in-Chief:	Amy R. Cohen	editor@didaskalia.net +1 434 947-8117
		Post: <i>Didaskalia</i> Randolph College 2500 Rivermont Avenue Lynchburg, VA 24503 USA
Associate Editor:	C.W. (Toph) Marshall	
Assistant Editor:	Jay Kardan	assistant-editor@didaskalia.net
Intern:	Gage Stuntz	intern@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 8 is an inadequate approximation of the web publication at didaskalia.net, which includes sound, video, and live hyperlinks.

The Brothers Menaechmus

Translated by Douglass Parker
 Directed by John Given
 January 28–30, 2011
 East Carolina University

Review by **Amy R. Cohen**
Randolph College

John Given's production of *The Brothers Menaechmus* began with a subtle nod to the great legacy of Plautus's play: the overture from *The Boys from Syracuse*, the Rodgers and Hart musical based on *The Comedy of Errors*, which in turn was based, of course, on *Menaechmi*. It was a fitting way into a production that took full advantage of both modern and ancient comedic potential.

The second play to be produced by the East Carolina University classics program, this bare-bones student *Menaechmi* was staged in a recital hall at the Fletcher Music Center on the ECU campus.

The set consisted of painted banners on the sound baffles at extreme stage left and stage right. Although there were times when I wished for side-by-side doors upstage of all the action (for Dovey's perfectly-timed, through-the-door bird-flipping, for instance), the cross-stage traffic necessitated by the side exits

made for appropriately frenetic action.

Director Given introduced the show and spoke the prologue, successfully subordinating his own persona as confident lecturer to that of the "Great Digressor" of Douglass Parker's translation, a script he used with very few changes. Given quickly established the permeability of the fourth wall by telling us most of the backstory of the twins from in front of the stage, at audience level. Meanwhile the cast acted out the story behind him, a technique I usually dislike because it shows disrespect for the talents of the speechmaker. In this case it was an effective way to set the terms of the show for an audience mostly unfamiliar with Plautus or any conventions of the Roman stage.

We saw at once that we were being invited to use our imaginations and to delight in the absurd. The cast appeared in modified modern dress: jeans and t-shirts, some adorned with bright, toga-like garments, others with tunics topped off with modern white navy hats. The look assured the audience that it



Darrell Purcell as Menaechmus Two



Kelly Hunnings as Menaechmus One and Darrell Purcell as Menaechmus Two

would have an easy trip to its foreign destination. The prologue action also featured an extremely successful bit of special effects: as characters crossed the sea in a cardboard boat, members of the cast mimed the actions of the sea with long, floppy, blue mittens that rolled or raged as appropriate, a device that displayed the inventiveness of the company and signaled to the audience how much we would be asked to include silliness in our notions of reality.

The twins were played in the prologue by the child Max Jones, who was swept off to different sides of the stage as his identity changed from one twin to the other, his white t-shirt clearly reading "Menaechmus" or "Sosicles" at the appropriate moments. The choice of a young actor who appeared to be of mixed race foreshadowed the production's most unexpected but also most successful casting decision: Menaechmus One was played by a Caucasian woman and Menaechmus Two by an African American man. At first, the extreme unidenticalness of the twins suggested only a visual joke or perhaps a short supply of suitable actors. As the play went on, however, this casting invited the audience to abandon any expectations of realism and join in the imaginative project of making the play. The overt lack of verisimilitude eliminated the question of which Menaechmus was which, allowing the audience to devote our attention to the situations and the words instead. With such emphatically dissimilar twins, the play is less about confusion than about the relationships among the characters and their social and familial expectations of each other.

The prologue also presaged the musical variety of the production. In Tarentum at festival time, everyone danced a rollicking version of "Good King Wenceslas": great shorthand for what festival time might mean, as well as a familiarizing invitation to feel comfortable in a foreign setting. Menaechmus One (Kelly Hunnings) gave a tuneful, clear, and hilarious rendition of "Incompatible" (to the tune of "Unforgettable") that promised an evening full of fun parodies. Smug (Audrianna Frederick) fulfilled that promise with the slave's lament "I Did It His Way," to the tune, of course, of "My Way." Both songs got big laughs of recognition, and both actors delivered them strongly and clearly enough to communicate the plot elements in the parodies.

One of my few complaints about the show was that it didn't follow through on that musical promise at other times. Perhaps because of the short rehearsal period and last-minute cast changes, several songs in the script—not ones with such obvious melodies—got the spoken or rhythmic treatment, despite the availability of talented music director Will Banks. Such spoken lyrics had the effect of slowing the show rather than enlivening it, as the sung songs did.

Some of the performances were top notch, even for a briefly rehearsed student show. Kelly Hunnings' Menaechmus One was a delightfully dry combination of the comic personae of Tina Fey and Woody Allen. Her swagger was just right for the character and called delightful attention to the fact that she was a woman playing a man. Audrianna Frederick as Smug was strong and clear. Obviously more comfortable on stage than some of her fellow actors, she might have seemed too talented for the rest of the cast if her character weren't intended to be cleverer than those around him. Her most crowd-pleasing moments were her song and the great fight scene, in which she took on all comers and convincingly laid them all out.

Colleen Kilcoyne played Dovey (Menaechmus One's wife) in a perfect, permanent state of annoyance reminiscent of Fiona Shaw's Petunia Dursley in the Harry Potter films. But her frustration remained sympathetic, and we all enjoyed the moments when she got the better of either Menaechmus.

Darrell Purcell was charming and clear as Menaechmus Two, though almost too polite in his dealings with those around him, particularly with Dovey, failing to justify the other characters' plot-necessitated annoyance with him. But everything about his performance was big and bright. I particularly liked his almost cartoonish reaction to discovering his twin brother.

As the parasite Diddly, the energetic Brandy Inez was excellent at physical comedy—unafraid to fling herself across the stage or mop the floor with her fat suit—but her muddy delivery obscured what seemed to be a wry take on the character. A standout among the minor roles was Danielle Bryan's Antiquides, sputtering through the fibers of a particularly bad fake beard and making them fly at just the right times. Her comic timing was on display from the moment she entered from the audience with a cane and an attitude.

The whole cast's supreme gameness was exemplified by the unselfconscious kiss between Hunnings's Menaechmus One and White's Loveykins, by Inez's willingness to "apply your nose here" at Hunnings's behind and *sniff*, and by Purcell's tour-de-force mad scene as Menaechmus Two, in which he fearlessly threw himself around and even off the stage. The student actors clearly believed in the project and put their best energy into every choice, testifying to the quality of Given's leadership and direction.

His staging choices were usually strong, and the cast almost always spoke to and engaged the audience directly. This close relationship with the audience, along with superb comic timing—I'm thinking of the moment when Menaechmus One picked out cheating husbands in the crowd—served to erase any distance or reserve that might be expected from a 21st-century student audience faced with millennia-old Roman comedy.

The audience, consisting mostly of students and faculty with perhaps a few community members, responded to the show with uproarious laughter and warm applause. One audience member was overheard to say, with happy surprise, "I didn't know it was going to be a real production!" Real it was, and proof that John Given is building a body of work and a following at ECU that represent both great outreach for classics and an opportunity to show, as he puts it, "the continuing vitality and relevance of classical works of literature."

Double Bind, trans. Douglass Parker, in *Five Comedies*, trans. with introductions by Deena Berg and Douglass Parker (Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing Company, 1999), 108. Given used Parker's English names for all the characters except the twins themselves.