

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

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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](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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### 2013 Staff

Editor-in-Chief:	Amy R. Cohen	<a href="mailto:editor@didaskalia.net">editor@didaskalia.net</a> +1 434 947-8117
		<i>Didaskalia</i> Randolph College 2500 Rivermont Avenue Lynchburg, VA 24503 USA
Associate Editor:	C.W. (Toph) Marshall	
Assistant Editor:	Jay Kardan	<a href="mailto:assistant-editor@didaskalia.net">assistant-editor@didaskalia.net</a>
Interns:	Grace Gardiner Kiaorea Wright	<a href="mailto:intern@didaskalia.net">intern@didaskalia.net</a>

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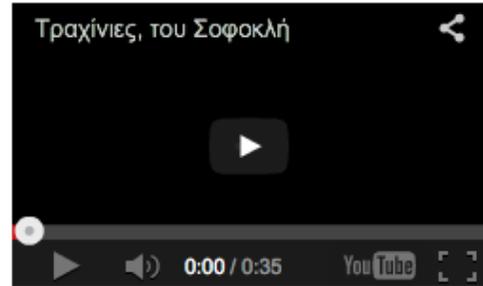
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## Sophocles's *Trachiniae*

Adapted and directed by Thomas Moschopoulos  
The National Theatre of Greece  
Festival of Epidaurus, Ancient Theatre of Epidaurus  
August 9–10, 2013

Reviewed by **Vicky Manteli**  
*Hellenic Open University*

Sophocles's *Trachiniae* is commonly regarded as a tragedy of late learning, knowledge derived from experience, the realisation of how oracles are fulfilled, ignorance opposed to tragic pathos, love contrasted to physical pain, the mutability of human happiness and the inevitability of human death. All these are themes underlying the structure of the play. Sophocles's play can also be viewed as a *nostos-tragedy* in which exodus is awaited as "the focus and conclusion of the tragedy"<sup>1</sup>, an elaborate study of the reversals that Heracles must experience. Despite being a play of subtle irony,



*Trailer from Εθνικό Θέατρο*  
[youtube.com/watch?v=GGzpuY4dM7o](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GGzpuY4dM7o)

*Trachiniae* clearly manifests two opposed worlds of different values, the world of civilisation and *oikos* represented by the waiting Deianeira and the outside world of ruthless barbarism represented by the wandering Heracles. Between these two extremes, aware of the destructive power of *eros* which led to the demise of the tragic heroes, the chorus calls attention to reason rather than to the myth.

In the 2013 production of the play by the National Theatre of Greece,<sup>2</sup> this point was accentuated through a perfectly skilled and energetically choreographed 16-member chorus (music coach Melina Peonidou, movement by Christos Papadopoulos). The text adaptation (by the director himself)<sup>3</sup> also gave prominence to the vicissitudes of fortune imposed upon mortals by Zeus. For example, lines in the parodos that emphasize the constant alternation between joy and sorrow were repeated. Repetition could also be sensed in the odes praising Heracles. The director (Thomas Moschopoulos) provided a prose translation hampered by quite a few awkward anachronistic choices. However, the text was rendered in a variety of stylistic conventions. For example, all characters deliver their speech in domesticated prose except for Heracles, who interprets the opening lines of the exodus as a libretto. As for Lichas, he recites the story of Heracles and Eurytus in hip-hop style.

This was only the second time that the National Theatre of Greece had staged Sophocles's *Trachiniae*,<sup>4</sup> the first having been in 1970. Another Modern Greek staging of Sophocles's rarely produced play was in 2004 by the State Theatre of Northern Greece. In the 2013 production, the director offered a didactic, quite explanatory approach to the play, in what I assume was an attempt to communicate the background and the myth of *Trachiniae* to the large uninitiated audiences of the Greek open-air theatres. For example, before the play opens the audience watches the women of the chorus taking turns to narrate Heracles's twelve labours amidst the discomfiting loudness of percussion and flutes. The director also gave lighting a central role (lighting design by Lefteris Pavlopoulos), thus accentuating the 'diptych' structure of the play. In the first part, in a dimly lit orchestra reminiscent of the mystery and serenity of night, Deianeira (Anna Mascha) unfolds the story of her youth and the anxieties of her marital life, exposes feelings of everlasting concern, and receives advice about her decision-making and the importance of deliberation from the young women of the chorus. In the exodus abundant spotlights bathe the mourning women of Trachis, perched on the felled oak tree in the allusive scenic space next to the pain-stricken

hero (Argiris Xafis).

I would suggest that the lighting as well as the set design and costumes (both designed by Elli Papageorgakopoulou) contributed to the director's accentuated interpretation of the female and the male heroes and the values they represent. Consequently, lights were dimmed and soft spot-lighting was used during particularly dramatic scenes in which Deianeira controls the dramatic action. The idea of the play as a homecoming drama was enforced through the night atmosphere of the opening scene in which Deianeira, the Nurse, and the women of the chorus all enter carrying storm-lanterns. By contrast, intense lighting provided visual cues to the rivalry between the male characters and the portrayal of decay and disease in the scenes between Lichas and the Messenger, Hyllus and Heracles, and the exodus. An allegorical scenic object, namely a huge split tree trunk lying center stage on the orchestra floor, functioned variously during the performance. It served as a corridor for Deianeira to enter from the house and a site for her confessions to the chorus. In addition, male characters (the Messenger, Lichas, and Hyllus) stood on the tree trunk while making important announcements. In the end, this symbol of barren nature became Heracles's last recourse as the chorus first carried him on it, then helped him stand on it – his back to the audience, arms stretched open wide, eyes fixed on the sky — and supported him towards his exit.

However, other scenic objects were either not fully exploited in the performance or had a vague and ambiguous symbolism. A case in point was the neon-lit frame which stood in the background and was occasionally used as an entrance/exit door. Another odd choice was the yellow flokati rugs unfolded and scattered on the orchestra floor by the women of the chorus praising Cypris in the first stasimon. In fact, the rugs, which filled the stage of the open-air theatre, could be viewed as ambiguous props in the hands of the women of Trachis in certain lively choreographed parts or as a decorative set for them to roll on. In the exodus they covered the focal scenic object of the performance, namely the felled tree.

As for costuming choices, these allowed for visual differences to underline two distinct aesthetic and acting styles. On the one hand, the grey knit dresses for the female chorus and the Nurse's tight, wholly black hooded costume were suggestive of sombreness and simplicity. In particular, the chorus's costumes with their commonness and suggestiveness of school uniformity stressed the conventional and balanced view of the young women of Trachis toward some of the play's key ideas (action, knowledge, experience). Contrasted to Deianeira's tight gown and red scarf, which highlighted class and a subdued sexuality, Iole's absolute nakedness manifested the blossom of youth. On the other hand, Lichas's and Heracles's costumes (see below) were rather obtrusive, jarring the eye and quite disruptive of the tragic atmosphere.

In discussing interpretation issues of the play, Easterling focuses on Heracles's ambiguous representation and the exodus, which does not conclude with the hero's apotheosis on Mt. Oeta. She also discusses the play's core theme in terms of the elements that unite the male and female tragic heroes rather than set them apart.<sup>5</sup> The director made some bold decisions in relation to these questions, and some of them seemed off-key. First of all, it seems to me that Moschopoulos failed to block effectively the dialogic scene between Hyllus and Heracles. The representation of the hero's son was so fragile and human that it drew a sharp contrast to the grotesque rendering of a monstrous Heracles: Hyllus's (Thanos Tokakis) weak rhetorical skills as well as awkward movement and expression presented a clear antithesis to a loud-mouthed and unrestrained Heracles (Argyris Xafis). This weakened the tragic dimension of the confrontation between the two men and the intimacy of the father-son relationship. Hyllus's overt pain and grief also kept him from being a symbol of reconciliation or a new-age hero.

Most important, in Moschopoulos's direction, Heracles's symbolic status as a demigod was subverted by a rather parodic representation of the hero. Argyris Xafis played his part for laughs, and his antics undermined the gravity of Heracles's public persona, making him a hero more suited to manga comics

than to tragedy. His rhetoric was particularly weakened by his operatic delivery in the opening lines of the exodus. This acting did not convey Heracles's renewed heroism acquired through his tragic interpretation of the oracles. The performer's grotesque appearance was substantiated by means of a conspicuous bloodstained wedding dress featuring a padded muscle chest and arms, cothurni, and make-up more appropriate for heroes of action-adventure comics and sci-fi films. A long, shaggy wig further lent Heracles the quality of an unkempt figure going into decline. All these features produced a feeling of embarrassment among the viewers, who, unable to empathize with a grotesque hero's pain, sooner or later started chuckling. In sharp contrast to Heracles's representation, the rendering of Deianeira (Anna Mascha) bordered on the style of medieval fairy tales. A barefoot delicate queen dressed in a grey gown of fine wool and red scarf, she was full of refined emotions about the captives sent back home by Heracles, "too sensitive and lacking a defense against misfortune,"<sup>6</sup> pregnant with unwavering love for her husband and constant anxiety about his absence. The strength of her performance grew as she managed to depict Deianeira's self-composed and regal manner, a compound of inexperience, compassion upon seeing Heracles's mistress Iole, vulnerability in her love for her husband, resolution to take action in order to regain Heracles's love through the charm given to her by the centaur Nessus, foreboding as she realizes too late that she was fooled by Nessus and the robe she sent as a gift to Heracles is poisoned, and despair upon being informed of Heracles's suffering. Mascha's acting was a careful study of the role, with emphasis on Deianeira's predicament rather than her moral dilemma. That was, perhaps, the director's point in getting the performer to approach Iole (Eleni Boukli), strip her naked by removing her grey felt blanket, and cover her nakedness with her own red scarf. On the performance level this initiative underlines the themes of passion, sexuality, and revenge rather than deliberation and caution. It seems to me, then, that on seeing Iole Deianeira becomes motivated through passion. Since the act of stripping someone in public is cruel and humiliating, Deianeira's resolution should be seen as an act of revenge against Iole. In addition, stripping her husband's lover and covering her with her own scarf could symbolically mean that Deianeira is sacrificing her own sexuality.

If Mascha's acting bordered on the tragic and managed to elicit a certain feeling of empathy among the audience, the portrayals of the Messenger and Lichas were parodically exploited. I wonder if the point of this contrast was to highlight the ideological differences between the male and female characters, making the latter more attractive. In his double role as the Messenger and the Old Man, Kostas Berikopoulos's combination of self-sarcasm and self-confidence provided comic relief in the dialogic scenes with Deianeira and in the confrontation with Lichas (Giorgos Chrysostomou). Heracles's herald was coarse and streetwise as he mischievously touched the faces of a couple of Trachis women. In his confrontation with the Messenger he stormed. His macho portrayal was on a par with his conspicuous outfit and look: an off-green fur waistcoat, tatoos on the arms, half-shaven scalp, and heavy make-up around the eyes.

I have discussed above two distinct aesthetic lines in the representations of Deianeira and Heracles in the National Theatre's production, which embodied the conflict between them and, to my mind, seemed rather off-key. Nevertheless, in a different vein, Moschopoulos's direction opted for emphasizing passion in the play, as a unifying element between the female and male tragic heroes. Consequently, instead of foregrounding the venomous garment which proves fatal for both heroes, Moschopoulos makes the presence of the silent Iole as audible as possible. In her first encounter with Deianeira she is left naked on the foreground of the scenic space and has to exit all the way back half-covered in the queen's scarf. Then just before the end of the play Iole enters again – this time in a long, see-through white dress – solemnly walks barefoot along the circle of the orchestra, and disappears leaving Heracles in agonizing pain. In this way, winning the objectifying gaze of the audience, Iole projects herself as the absolute object which connects (but also destroys) Deianeira and Heracles.

If there is a concept underlying Moschopoulos's direction of *Trachiniae*, it seems inspired by the chorus of the vibrant young women acting as narrators and guides to the dramatis personae and the audience. The

production made clear that the chorus observed the drama of the heroes critically while at the same time putting their faith in the myth. The message resonated strongly: as the collective body of the city, the chorus painfully experiences the debunking of its heroes and their myths and vehemently engages in the dispute over divine protection and love. Since the women of the chorus were never posed merely decoratively during the scenes, their poses and proximity to the actors brought meaning to the drama as they depicted real reactions of sympathy and stressed the importance of common sense. They also demonstrated a variety of movement and gesture. Clear in their recitations of the odes and melodious in their singing in unison or separately, the sixteen young women of the chorus did an admirable job. To this end they got support from the atonal music (composed by Kornillios Selamsis), a quaint mixture of primitive and artistic sounds, orchestrated with sax, percussions, and flutes (performed live by Guido de Flaviis, Thodoris Vazakas, and Giorgos Skrivanos).

In short, the 2013 National Theatre's production of *Trachiniae* can be viewed as an interesting revival of one of Sophocles's most obscure tragedies. My only objection is that, mainly because of Heracles's caricature, it did not provide a true depiction of man's limitations and mortality. I would have also welcomed a closer connection between the chorus and Hyllus, posing them as the alternative heroes of a new generation in a world of reason (*logos*) rather than myth.

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#### notes

<sup>1</sup> Oliver Taplin, *The stagecraft of Aeschylus* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1977), 84.

<sup>2</sup> Images and a promo video clip are available from the National Theatre's website at <http://www.n-t.gr/en/events/trachinies/>.

<sup>3</sup> In discussing the recent tradition of the translation of classical tragedies produced by the National Theatre of Greece, Stephanopoulos (2011: 309) remarks that during the last decade translations have been more than not often commissioned to directors, playwrights and poets, rather than to classical philologists as earlier. Theodoros Stephanopoulos, "Modern Greek Translations of Ancient Greek Tragedies: Some Observations and Questions," *Logeion. A Journal of Ancient Theatre 1* (2011): 307-317, accessed June 27, 2012, [http://www.logeion.upatras.gr/images/Stephanopoulos\\_Metaphrase\\_tragwdias.pdf](http://www.logeion.upatras.gr/images/Stephanopoulos_Metaphrase_tragwdias.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> The production premiered on August 9, 2013 at the ancient theatre of Epidaurus and received a second performance on August 10, 2013. It then went on tour and was performed in ancient theatres and other outdoor venues across Greece. See the official site of the National Theatre of Greece: <http://www.n-t.gr/el/events/trachinies/>, accessed September 11, 2013.

<sup>5</sup> Patricia E. Easterling, ed., *Sophocles Trachiniae* (Cambridge, London, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 'Introduction'.

<sup>6</sup> J. Michael Walton, *Living Greek Theatre. A Handbook of Classical Performance and Modern Production* (New York- Westport, Connecticut-London: Greenwood Press), 73.