

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

The Paper Cinema's Odyssey and The Odyssey

The Paper Cinema's Odyssey

Artistic Direction by Nicholas Rawling
Musical Direction by Christopher Reed
February 14 – March 19, 2013
Battersea Arts Centre, London

The Odyssey

Directed by Tim Carroll
February 22 – 23, 2013
Creation Theatre and The Factory
47/49 Tanner Street, London

Reviewed by **Stephe Harrop**

Rose Bruford College of Theatre and Performance

In the past two decades (since the production of Derek Walcott's *The Odyssey* by the Royal Shakespeare Company in 1992) the UK has experienced a significant re-engagement with the *Odyssey* as a dramatic story and as the basis for theatrical performance. Multiple versions of the epic's narrative have been presented and contested (in what Taplin dubs 'versions and reversions and metaversions and paraversions of Homer')¹ in stage productions as varied as *The Odyssey* (Footsbarn Travelling Theatre, 1995), *A Ramayan Odyssey* (Tara Arts, 2001), *The Odyssey* (Lyric Hammersmith, 2006), *The Penelopiad* (Royal Shakespeare Company, 2007), *The Odyssey* (Theatre Ad Infinitum, 2009) and *Penelope* (Druid Theatre, 2010).² Other companies have elected to explore the ancient epic in alternative ways, treating the *Odyssey* as a stimulus for collective, multi-media creativity (*Shetland Odyssey*, *Tête à Tête* and *CHROMA*, 2006), peripatetic, multi-cultural storytelling (*An Island Odyssey*, Scottish International Storytelling Festival, 2011) or the immersive, participatory exploration of a particular locale (*The Odyssey*, Teatro Vivo at The Albany, 2012).

This latter group of projects highlights an increasingly important aspect of the contemporary performance reception of the *Odyssey* in the UK, with growing numbers of practitioners and companies moving away from the straightforward dramatisation (or revisionist dramatic contestation) of Homer's epic tale, and towards a deepening engagement with epic storytelling as a distinctive category of performance practice. These projects have increasingly foregrounded the techniques and practices, and the active audiences, of epic storytelling, as well as the tales being told, opening up new landscapes for the exploration of ancient epic in live re-performance. Two productions currently playing in London may be taken as typifying this trend, demonstrating a developing focus on the flexible narrative structures and in-performance composition of Homeric epic, as well as the ripping yarn of the *Odyssey's* plot.

The Paper Cinema's Odyssey, returning to Battersea Arts Centre after a nationwide tour, is an almost-wordless cinematic evocation of Odysseus's wanderings and homecoming, its spiky hand-drawn protagonists and their atmospheric world sketched, assembled and animated in the course of each live re-performance. It is a virtuoso feat of live creation, with a team of two puppeteers and three musicians conjuring an ancient epic from a heap of cardboard cut-outs, a series of hand-sketched images, and a motley array of instruments including piano, violin, crisp packet, musical saw, melodica and power drill.

The musty, crumbling gloom of a former Council Chamber provides a fitting backdrop for the unassuming, deceptively ramshackle and always provisional character of this re-animation of ancient epic. To the left of the dimly-lit performance space, Nicholas Rawling and Imogen Charleston crouch, intent, beside a pair of cameras, manipulating a dizzying sequence of hand-drawn black-and-white puppets and cut-out backdrops, while to the right the band (Christopher Reed, Quinta and Hazel Mills)

move from instrument to instrument, producing a series of melodies and motifs by turns jaunty, sinister, witty and haunting. At the heart of the performance space is the projector screen, upon which these disparate elements merge with uncanny precision and skill to create a seamless, dream-like synthesis of sound, image and motion.

What's particularly striking about this spatial configuration is the choice it offers to the show's audience: do you watch the animation developing on the screen—ostensibly the finished 'product' of *The Paper Cinema's Odyssey*—or the team of artists whose real-time work is producing this narrative of Odysseus's homecoming? Or do you observe some combination of the two? As Rawling explained in a 2010 interview:

The audience sees us scrabbling around at the front making a film with the sound effects and musical score taking shape right in front of their eyes. It's about placing the audience in a dual world where they witness both the real-time construction of the film and the finished product at the same time.³

In this re-performance of the *Odyssey*, the film's animators and accompanists are always present and visible, physically located between the audience and the projector screen, even walking across the performance space now and then to reach different instruments or animation tables. The real-time re-creation of the ancient tale, the meticulous skill and focus of its makers, and their shared absorption in the rhythms of the story (the animators' heads twitching, and their hands moving, in precise time to the show's atmospheric live score)⁴ are integral and inseparable parts of the visual spectacle of this *Odyssey*.

In this sense, *The Paper Cinema's Odyssey* might be described as a very 'oral' re-visioning of Homeric epic. Although this may seem a strange claim to make for an animation almost devoid of the spoken word (the odd monosyllable – 'splaash' or 'sssh' – being the limit of the show's verbal score), this is a re-performance of ancient epic myth built upon the creative, real-time interplay between fixed and fluid components of epic narrative. The show's prologue, for example, skilfully combines pre-fabricated text-blocks and live, hand-drawn visuals. A shadowed hand sketches the contours of a rugged, bearded face, while the words 'Odysseus, King & Hero' are shakily projected alongside, followed by the phrase 'Penelope, Faithful Wife', accompanying a second free-hand line-drawing of a woman's face, framed by long black hair.⁵ This live re-combination of the pre-fabricated and the free-hand echoes some of the distinctive characteristics of oral epic performance identified by Parry and Lord in the early twentieth century, and elaborated by later scholars of oral poetics.

Parry and Lord's major insight, derived from the close study of modern epic-singers working within living traditions,⁶ was to identify Homer as 'a poet singer among poet singers',⁷ and to interpret the distinctive metric, linguistic and structural patterns of Homeric epic as signs of oral-poetic composition, characterized by the flexible, in-performance combination of traditional compositional units and the individual singer's real-time poetic invention.⁸ Considered in this light, the opening of *The Paper Cinema's Odyssey* reveals some intriguing kinships with oral-poetic readings of ancient epic practice. Its pre-fabricated textual legends ('King & Hero', 'Faithful Wife') function like the inherited poetic formulae of traditional epic performance, economically and authoritatively evoking character archetypes assumed to be familiar to the assembled audience, while the artist's free-hand drawing recalls the individual, in-performance crafting of an epic tale by each successive oral artist.⁹

Echoes of ancient oral-poetic construction can be found elsewhere, too. The familiar Homeric epithet is gently parodied in a repeated sequence depicting the rising sun adorned with an aureole of little fingers (each complete with fingernails), accompanied by a tremulous and piercing musical motif which the soundtrack CD knowingly labels 'The Rosy Fingered Dawn'.¹⁰ Like the oral-poetic *Odyssey* outlined by Parry and Lord, *The Paper Cinema's Odyssey* is an original artwork created from a collection of pre-existing

images and archetypes, deployed in sequence and re-sequence by the skilled hands of knowledgeable and intensely-concentrated artists, whose own creativity operates within the inherited contours of traditional epic narrative to construct a singular re-performance of a well-known tale. Like the inherited compositional units of oral poetry, the emergent film's cut-out puppets are lifeless, meaningless, a heap of inanimate cardboard, until they are deployed within their appropriate epic context.

A picture of a teenage boy taping a 'Missing' poster to a lamppost (Telemachus advertising for news of Odysseus as if he were a lost cat), greeted with laughter at its first appearance, becomes (upon repetition) a shorthand signifier for years of loneliness, frustration and fear. Poseidon's trident, tattooed (along with the word DAD) on the arm of a blinded giant, looming threateningly from the heavens, or forcing an unconscious Odysseus beneath the rising waves, comes to stand for all the dangers of Odysseus's homeward journey, while a cartoon owl, pictured on a brooch or on a ship's sails, snuggled in the luggage rack of a bus, or helpfully pointing directing wings from a tree-branch, reminds watchers of the unseen, benevolent presence of Athene. The image of Penelope encircled by her wolfish suitors' snarling, sharp-toothed muzzles is echoed in the curve of the waves which repeatedly threaten to overwhelm the returning Odysseus, while a small wolf swinging from a chandelier (another audience favourite, greeted with laughter—though possibly darkening laughter—upon each iteration) comes to symbolise all that's amiss in an Ithaca minus Odysseus.¹¹ To draw on the terminology developed by Foley, these are the individual 'words' (a 'unified utterance' or 'word-group' possessed of idiomatic significance—a larger-than-literal responsibility—within the context of oral poetics)¹² which, deployed cumulatively and in skilful combination, come to constitute the meaning of this particular epic performance.¹³

All of this marks *The Paper Cinema's Odyssey* as an accomplished instance of modern performance which, in developing its own distinctive style of epic storytelling, creates parallels with some of the central principles of ancient oral-poetic composition. Some of the 'words' which contribute to the accumulating meaning of *The Paper Cinema's Odyssey* have their roots in Homeric imagery. The film's lupine suitors, for example, would seem to derive from English translations of Athene's description of the eager aspirants to Penelope's hand as a 'wolf pack'.¹⁴ Others are borrowed from contemporary popular culture (the cast of *Easy Rider* make a cameo appearance at one point), while some seem to belong specifically to *The Paper Cinema's* own idiosyncratic, oddly endearing re-visioning of the *Odyssey*. But all contribute to a powerful sense of this *Odyssey* as an emergent entity being created before our eyes, in a cumulative process of combination, juxtaposition and accretion, a sophisticated layering of 'words' which (in the context of epic performance) come to convey much more than their literal meanings.

If *The Paper Cinema's Odyssey* is a re-making of ancient epic that recalls some distinctively Homeric modes of in-performance composition, then *The Odyssey* (co-produced by Creation Theatre and The Factory) represents a comparably process-focussed approach to the live re-performance of ancient epic narrative. The Factory has previously devised irregular, pop-up performances of *Hamlet* and *The Seagull*, in which revolving casts of actors, allotted their roles via pre-show games of chance, make unfamiliar spaces their stage, and incorporate random props (brought along by the audience) into each one-off re-staging of a classic text.¹⁵ Unsurprisingly, then, this is an *Odyssey* which places the live acting company, and their interactions with a particular, co-present audience, at the centre of the evolving performance. Collectively, they improvise a new version of Odysseus's story each time, in response to a series of challenges and constraints generated by audience members pulling shards of pottery (each inscribed with a specific instruction) out of a passed-around hat. It's tempting to read these shards as emblematic of both the fragmented tradition of ancient epic performance, and of this performance's creative premise that even such fractured remnants might be re-combined and re-configured in order to create a new and cohesive narrative artwork.

In a 2010 text explaining the genesis of this approach to Homeric epic, Tim Carroll (director of *The*

Odyssey) draws clear connections between ideas of ancient oral-poetic practice and his aspirations for this new, theatrically experimental re-telling of Odysseus's homecoming:

This principle of the fixed and the flowing is manifested in every part of the poem. Just as the formulas are fixed while their use is flowing, so Odysseus's journeys flow around the Mediterranean while Penelope remains fixed on Ithaca.

And this, I hope, is how it will be with our performance. The events of the story we have to tell are fixed; the circumstances in which we tell them will flow unpredictably. We have learnt some fixed elements, especially of song and dance; but how these 'formulas' combine to tell the story will change from one performance to the next. Like 'Homer', we will have to decide in the moment which stories to tell and which to leave out; and, like 'Homer', we will have to adapt the telling of our stories to many different circumstances.¹⁶

The resulting work is a self-consciously protean *Odyssey*, which explicitly challenges its actors (recruited from a flexible, constantly-evolving pool of participants) to draw on an unpredictable combination of pre-rehearsed elements (songs, dances, memorised poems) and spontaneous improvisation in their re-presentation of ancient epic tales. The work is minimalist and peripatetic: it has recently 'popped-up' in a bookshop in Oxford, and at the Bristol Old Vic theatre, and is now temporarily occupying a converted South-London warehouse, in which rows of spectators, arranged on four sides of an empty floor, make uneasy, expectant eye-contact across the playing-space, while the laid-back, un-costumed company wander, warm up by rolling hoops or throwing and catching sticks, smile, chat, greet friends, and make jokes.

This is an *Odyssey* which explicitly aims at making 'a connection between the material, the story, and our own lives, and the lives of the audience'.¹⁷ At regular intervals, audience members are charmed or cajoled into offering characters advice, entering the performance space to become actors or live puppets, sharing autobiographical stories, and loaning personal items which will come to define the story's major characters. On this occasion, for instance, Odysseus (the role split among several company members) is identified by the fact that he or she wears a woolly hat, and carries a toy owl (happy accident or knowing symbolic offering?) borrowed from a front-row spectator. Actors occasionally pause in their re-telling of the Homeric *Odyssey* to recount their own tales of struggle or sorrow. The effect is complex, unstable, multi-layered, multi-vocal; sometimes frenetic, opaque or chaotic, sometimes shocking, sometimes touching.

Recent discourses in the performance reception of ancient tragedy have led to a heightened awareness that performance can only take place 'in and through the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators', and that each distinct, individual performance arises 'out of their encounter and interaction'. Fischer-Lichte describes this interaction as 'an *autopoietic* process, which is characterised by a high degree of contingency'.¹⁸ And what's true of tragic performance is even more the case for the un-fixed, un-scripted re-performance of ancient epic, as evoked by Jensen:

It is direct; addresser and addressee are face to face. They can see hear, smell and touch each other, and they mutually influence each other as the performance proceeds. The experience is shared, and joy, melancholy, fear, or aggression is contagious among the participants. The success of a singer depends on his ability to catch the interest of his audience and keep it. He is intent on meeting their demands and is all the time attentive to their reactions. If they show signs of being bored, he introduces something exciting or, on the contrary, abbreviates his narrative and hastens to the end.¹⁹

In this model of in-performance epic composition, 'the spectators generate meaning in a performance by

virtue of the peculiar fact that they themselves partake in creating the process they wish to understand.²⁰ Creation Theatre and The Factory's *The Odyssey* similarly aims to be a performance event which engages and explores the *autopoiesis* of epic storytelling, making audience choices and provocations a prominent feature of the evolving drama, forcing performers to respond rapidly to an ever-changing set of conditions and challenges.

Inevitably, this doesn't always come off. Sometimes, a key segment of narrative gets rushed, fumbled, or simply drowned out among too many competing ideas and voices. At other times, the sheer complexity of the task in hand seems to be pushing the company into an inwardly focussed, self-absorbed style of improvisation, which lacks the direct audience address of ancient epic storytelling. Occasionally the pressure of compressing the whole twenty-four 'books' of the *Odyssey* into a two-hour performance (despite Carroll's awareness that a putative oral-poetic 'Homer' would rarely, if ever, have attempted to perform a 'whole' epic)²¹ is evident, with critical details getting skipped, crucial introductions being rushed, and an action's causes or consequences overlooked. But, then again, there are the magical moments when, somehow, it all works beautifully.

Amid *The Odyssey's* plethora of surprises, gags and (occasionally) gimmicks, the best moments are often those of relative stillness and simplicity, a handful of uncluttered utterances and exchanges which allow the show's performers the space to combine real depth of artistry, and sustained personal engagement with the ancient poem's themes, with flashes of improvisatory wit. A wary, earthy, weary Laertes, pictured in snapshot among his vines, or a snatch of Demodocus's song casting a momentary spell of grief over a robustly comic Phaeacia, plunges the performance into an intensely imagined world which transcends the superficial jokiness of much of the show's more frantic on-the-hoof devising. When Penelope, holding fiercely tight to her returned husband, begins to recount an audience-member's personal tale of being on an aeroplane caught in a storm, and insists this happened to 'me', the worlds of here and there, the mundane and the epic, the real and the imagined are tangled into a single tight, taut knot of fear, love and longing. Perhaps paradoxically, it is in these moments (rather than in its more obviously participatory segments) that *The Odyssey* most successfully achieves the kind of intense imaginative and emotional interplay between performers and audience which characterises the intensely *autopoietic* oral-poetic performance of ancient epic.

Neither of these productions aspires to be an accurate representation of ancient epic practice, even supposing such a thing were possible. *The Paper Cinema's Odyssey* makes full use of modern film technologies in the sophisticated achievement of its charmingly hand-made aesthetic, while Creation Theatre and The Factory's *The Odyssey* draws on the skill-sets and vocabularies of contemporary actor-training, devising and physical theatre. However, both deploy these disparate modern techniques and technologies in order to engage with the principles (as much as the narrative subjects) of epic storytelling, developing versions of ancient epic in which the gradual, real-time emergence of a unique and unrepeatable performance becomes part of the spectacle and pleasure of epic spectatorship.

In both cases, the dramatic 'product' emerges in the course of a performance which does not repeat, but rather re-generates, an epic narrative. And both are engaged in an exploration of ancient epic which goes beyond re-telling the stories of the *Odyssey*, experimenting with modes of in-performance creation which highlight the epic's status as unfixed, flexible and emergent, and embracing the potential of epic performance for accident, surprise, interaction and transformation. Both highlight a developing engagement with some of the key practices, processes and techniques of epic performance, and in making these a visible component of the emerging theatre event, suggesting that contemporary creative artists (across a range of disciplines and genres) are increasingly concerned with showcasing the mechanics and dynamics of epic performance, as well as re-telling the much-loved (and much-contested) tale of Odysseus's homecoming. Perhaps most importantly, both provide an exhilarating, unpredictable and (at

times) unexpectedly moving evening's entertainment, re-inventing the ancient, oral-poetic *Odyssey* as a site of contemporary theatrical experiment, exploration and innovation.

notes

- ¹ Oliver Taplin, "Homer's Wave Machine," *The Guardian*, May 20, 2006. Accessed February 17, 2013. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2006/may/20/poetry.classics>.
- ² See Edith Hall, *The Return of Ulysses: A Cultural History of Homer's Odyssey* (London: Tauris, 2008), 42.
- ³ Lena Corner, "Paper Cinema Interview," *The Knowledge*, September 30, 2010. Accessed February 19, 2013. <http://www.ideastap.com/IdeasMag/The-Knowledge/paper-cinema-interview>.
- ⁴ Rawling comments that 'we riff off the music and they riff off [sic] us'. Corner, "Paper Cinema Interview."
- ⁵ A fragmentary version of this sequence can be viewed via The Paper Cinema's website. See "Trailer for The Odyssey," 2012. Accessed February 17, 2013. <http://thepapercinema.com/gallery/videos/>.
- ⁶ On 'the often cited but still poorly understood comparison between Homeric and South Slavic epic' see John Miles Foley, "Homer and South Slavic Epic," *Didaskalia* 3/3 (Winter 1996). Accessed February 19, 2013. <http://www.didaskalia.net/issues/vol3no3/foley.html>.
- ⁷ Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003. 2nd edition.), 150.
- ⁸ Lord, *Singer of Tales*, 141–157. For an overview of Parry and Lord's 'Oral-Formulaic Theory' see Richard Janko, "Thunder But No Clouds: The Genesis of Homeric Text," *Didaskalia* 3/3 (Winter 1996). Accessed February 19, 2013. <http://www.didaskalia.net/issues/vol3no3/janko.html>. On the theory's genesis, and its limitations, see John Miles Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2002), 109–13.
- ⁹ As Finnegan notes, the oral poet 'can base his composition on these known patterns of phrases, lines and themes, without necessarily restricting himself to them'. Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 65.
- ¹⁰ The Paper Cinema, *Wine Dark Sea: Music from The Paper Cinema's Odyssey*, 2012. Accessed February 16, 2013. <http://thepapercinema.bandcamp.com>.
- ¹¹ The use of some of these "words" can be observed in a short interview with the company. BAC London, "The Paper Cinema Interview," 2012. Accessed February 19, 2013. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TgjDAIqu6-8>.
- ¹² Foley, *How to Read*, 17, 110, 114. Foley uses this term to translate the Serbo-Croatian term reči (singular: reč): Foley, *How to Read*, 11–20. See also John Miles Foley, *Homer's Traditional Art* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania University Press, 1999).
- ¹³ For a more detailed application of Oral-Formulaic Theory to cinematic works see Caroline Eades and Françoise Létoublon, "From Film Analysis to Oral-Formulaic Theory: The Case of the Yellow Oilskins." In *Contextualizing Classics: Ideology, Performance, Dialogue*, ed. Thomas M. Falkner et. al. (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield), 301–16. On the impact of antiquity on the development of early cinema see Pantelis Michelakis et.al. (eds.), *The Ancient World in Silent Cinema* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).
- ¹⁴ Robert Fitzgerald (trans.), *The Odyssey* (London: Vintage, 2007), 4.
- ¹⁵ See The Factory, "The Factory," 2012. Accessed February 25, 2013. <http://www.factorytheatre.co.uk/>.
- ¹⁶ Tim Carroll. "The Odyssey," 2010. Accessed February 25, 2013. <http://thefactory.wetpaint.com/page/The+Odyssey>.
- ¹⁷ Creation Theatre, "Assistant Director, Reuben Grove," 2012. Accessed February 24, 2013. <http://www.creationtheatre.co.uk/shows/The%20Odyssey%202012>.
- ¹⁸ Erika Fischer-Lichte, "Performance as Event – Reception as Transformation." In *Theorising Performance: Greek Drama, Cultural History and Critical Practice*, ed. Edith Hall et. al. (London: Duckworth, 2010), 29–30.
- ¹⁹ Minna Skafte Jensen, "Performance." In *A Companion to Ancient Epic*, ed. John Miles Foley (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 46–7.

- ²⁰ Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, trans. Saskya Iris Jain (New York: Routledge, 2008), 155.
- ²¹ Carroll, "The Odyssey." On the selective incorporation of narrative elements as a characteristic of oral epic in performance see John Miles Foley, "Analogues: Modern Oral Epics in Performance." In *A Companion to Ancient Epic*, ed. John Miles Foley (Oxford: Blackwell, 2005), 204.

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