

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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**Note**

*Didaskalia* is an online journal. This print representation of Volume 13 is an inadequate approximation of the web publication at [didaskalia.net](http://didaskalia.net), which includes sound, video, and live hyperlinks.

## Sophocles' *Electra*

Adapted and Directed by Kevin Moriarty  
Dallas Theater Center, May 2017

Reviewed by **Thomas E. Jenkins**  
*Trinity University*

Three years ago, the Dallas Theater Company mounted an electrifying *Oedipus El Rey*, adapted by Luis Alfaro and directed by Kevin Moriarty. I'd be happy to report a similarly charged *Electra*—if only for the pun—but, alas, lightning did not strike twice. *Oedipus El Rey* worked, at least in part, because of Alfaro's ingenious re-envisioning of Sophoclean 'fate' as SoCal recidivism; for Alfaro, impoverished Latinos struggle to escape the thumping 'doom' of incarceration. (The physical production of *Oedipus* therefore played out within a claustrophobic cellblock.) For all the technical ingenuity of the DTC's *Electra*, however, the evening falters because too little attention is paid to this fundamental act of *translation*: how do text and conceit work *together*? Moriarty's surprisingly old-fashioned version—replete with lofty epithets and couched in a rather stodgy translation-ese—jibes uneasily with the evening's high-tech staging: what was required was a sleeker, more modern, more *urban* translation that comments implicitly on the political problems emphasized by the production, to wit, the cycle(s) of violence in contemporary American cities.



Abbey Siegworth as *Electra* and Tiana Kaye Johnson as *Chrysothemis*  
(photo: Karen Almond)

As physical design, the production was nothing if not ambitious. Eschewing the two indoor stages of his company, Moriarty opted instead for the great outdoors, or rather, four different configurations of the great outdoors: a sort of walking tour of tragedy, plotted with considerable wizardry by Diggle. The evening's most striking feature was the distribution of over-the-ear headsets to each audience member (supplemented by a mandatory sound check: for Americans, a headset malfunction would be a *real* tragedy!). A revealing program note from the director explains the origin of this striking choice in audio design:

Initially we chose this [the headset system] to allow the Greek Chorus to be experienced as the disembodied voice of the ghost of Agamemnon, crying out from the underworld for revenge. This allowed us to communicate ... in a more personal and direct way.... This has resulted in a fascinating experiment: you are watching a very real and immediate live event, literally sharing space with the actors as they perform and following them to various locations; while, at the same time, you are hearing their voices in your ears without access to the sounds of the natural environment around you.<sup>1</sup>

As Moriarty later argues, this technique mixes the natural and the artificial in a way analogous to the ancient use of masks, which—obviously—mask the actors' natural facial expressions while amplifying, or at least permitting, a full vocal range.

For me, the analogy doesn't quite work; as it turns out, watching a play through headphones is a lot like watching a podcast. And I don't mean that to sound particularly negative: I *like* podcasts. As Ira Glass has explained (in the context of producing his phenomenal show, *This American Life*): "Radio is your most visual medium."<sup>2</sup> That is to say, sounds piped in through the ear force the imagination to create a visual scene, which, guided by text and savvy editing, can be highly compelling. For *Elektra*, however, we already *have* the visual scene, so the "added value" of a headset is readily apparent only during, e.g., a

scene with an unseen, supernatural ghost. Otherwise, the headphones are principally helpful in absorbing the eclectic, cinematic score (by Broken Chord) and for general clarity of diction.

For this production, audiences are guided to four different locations in the immediate vicinity of the theater, including the Annette Strauss Square's vast lawn, an enclosed and fabric-strewn "tomb," a makeshift alleyway, and a nearby reflecting pool. (The social engineering was as elaborate as the audio engineering: tour guides helpfully herded the shambling audience members from spot to spot.) By far the longest stretch was spent at the huge expanse of Strauss Square, a scene that featured Electra at her looniest—with tortured animal carcasses swinging from a tree—and included an intense shouting match between Electra and Clytemnestra. Indeed, one of the curiosities of the evening is that even with audio piped directly into the audience's ears, this was one of the shouty-est Greek tragedies I've ever seen—er, heard. (Did the audio engineers make the decision to equalize the voices at a high volume so that they never drop? In any case, it resulted in a certain flatness of dramatic arc.)

The actors' performances were fine, given the considerable challenges of both the audio and physical design. (The sprints across the Square, in particular, were a grueling exercise in calisthenics: Electra could use a pair of non-classical Nikes.) Abbey Siegworth made for a particularly unhinged and batshit Electra, which Sally Nystuen Vahle used as a foil for her unyielding, coldly logical Clytemnestra. (There was solid support from Yusef D. Seevers and Tiana Kaye Johnson as Electra's siblings.) The evening's star turn came from David Coffee's Paedagogus, with a terrific (and terrifically duplicitous) messenger speech. This was one of the few times in the evening when the technical elements were underplayed and the audience could concentrate on what really matters: good acting and interpretation. The murder scene of Clytemnestra and Aigisthus (Tyrees Allen) was staged quickly and claustrophobically as an alleyway murder at knifepoint: a nifty, politically-charged idea but difficult to pull off. (Other reviews complain of awkward sight-lines,<sup>3</sup> but I had Orestes practically at my elbow. Should I have stopped the murder? I've suffered sleepless nights ever since.)

At a nearby reflecting pool, a final, sentimental scene was staged as a *toro nagashi*, a Japanese sending-off ceremony for souls, as audience members lit floating candles in remembrance of, well, I'm not exactly sure: Clytemnestra and Aigisthus, I suppose, though why the audience was enlisted on *their* behalf was unclear. Over the headphones, the chorus interpolated the Euripidean version of the myth in which Iphigenia is replaced by a deer, and later discovered by her brother Orestes in Tauris; this variation upends the moral implications of the version we just saw, in which Clytemnestra's slaying of Agamemnon is at least partially exculpated by her husband's filicide, and which thus provides a more complicated and nuanced view of the politics of revenge. I couldn't get over the feeling that this concluding tableau was "tacked on," in part to take advantage of a beautiful, downtown pool of water, in part to send the audience off with a feeling of calm and quiet after the agitation of Greek tragedy.

But *should* an audience for a Greek tragedy—*any* Greek tragedy—be sent off serenely into that good night? Jerome Weeks perceptively argues that Moriarty is trying to "Say Something Profound About the State of Dallas in a Tragic, Ceremonial Form."<sup>4</sup> (I'm not a Dallas native, so Weeks' analysis of *Elektra*-as-Local-Metaphor is certainly better than anything I could come up with.) But having staged a politically- and socially-charged *Elektra*—one whose final gangland murder would seem to touch on matters of Texan and even national import—Moriarty seems, at the end, to lose his nerve: the conclusion is elegant, not electric, and certainly not disturbing. Hampered by an overly literal text and an under-commitment to nuance, this *Elektra* will be mostly remembered, alas, for its electronics.

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## notes

<sup>1</sup> Program for *Elektra*, 14–15.

<sup>2</sup> Ira Glass, "[Tips from Ira Glass on making better radio](#)," *Current*, February 16, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> For example, Kyle Christopher West's review in *Broadway World – Dallas*.

<sup>4</sup> The [review](#) by Jerome Weeks is in *Art&Seek*.