DIDASKALIA

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 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.

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Didaskalia is an online journal. This print representation of Volume 13 is an inadequate approximation of the web publication at didaskalia.net, which includes sound, video, and live hyperlinks.

Sophocles' *Philoctetes*

translated by Peter Meineck
Directed by Desiree Sanchez
Aquila Theatre
New York University, New York

Reviewed by **Tony Tambasco**

In their production of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*, the Aquila Theatre features the Warrior Chorus, a national initiative dedicated to training veterans in presenting "innovative public programs based on ancient literature."[1] Guided by this purpose and a Brechtian stage sensibility, the Aquila Theatre creates an uncomfortable production of *Philoctetes* that reminds us that the healing of veterans is an incompletable process, as it has been since ancient times. Like Philoctetes' wound, the traumas of war may flare up at any time.

Richard Chaves as Philoctetes
(photo: Dan Gorman)

In preparing for the production, members of the Warrior Chorus participated in a 10-week program in which veterans explored personal connections to classical literature. The performance script, translated by Peter Meineck and using Warrior Chorus' words in place of Sophocles' choral odes, was developed through this workshop. The resulting performance focuses more on psychological realism than on heightened language or stage spectacle, and relies on minimalist design choices to reinforce this aesthetic and ground the play in the here and now.

Walking into the theatre, the audience is greeted by an almost-bare stage and a mixture of alternative and punk rock. The set consists of a white square painted on the floor, surrounded by a shin-high white wall, and an outer stage area painted black without any adornment, save for a few chairs upstage, where the Warrior Chorus sits for the duration of the play. Inside the white square is a hospital bed and small nightstand: the sole indications that this white, walled space, which we quickly learn is the interior of Philoctetes' cave, should be understood as a specific locus with modern significance.

John Meyer (left) and Richard Chaves (right)
(photo: Dan Gorman)

The costumes in this production are modern and mostly simple. The Warrior Chorus members wear stage blacks, and while Odysseus' (Ed Walsh) costume looks like a modern army uniform, Neoptolemus (Johnny Meyer) and his sailors (Brian Delate, Caleb Wells, and Michael Castelblanco) wear clothing that is not quite military: a reminder that Neoptolemus is not yet a soldier.

Philoctetes (Richard Chaves) is stripped down, wearing nothing but a loin cloth and a foot bandage, beyond which there is little to indicate that he suffers from a physical wound. His limp comes and goes.

Neither Neoptolemus nor his men seem to notice any of the putrid odor implied by the script, and at the play's conclusion, when the bandage comes off, there is no sign of a physical injury.

At the top of the play, the Warrior Chorus enters, each repeating the line "This is the isle of Lemnos" while images of modern battlefields are projected onto the upstage curtain, with Odysseus debriefing Neoptolemus in the black outer-stage area. This scene is lit in a combination of side- and foot-light that is both stark and murky, throwing bold shadows across both men's faces. When Odysseus leaves, Neoptolemus and the chorus of sailors enter the white, inner-stage area, violating Philoctetes' sanctuary. With the stage now brightly lit, Philoctetes has no place to hide, and he emerges from behind his bed with sounds more like defiant curses than cries of pain.

The Warrior Chorus does not directly interact with the characters in the play: they remain upstage of the main playing area, their words heard only by the audience and Philoctetes. Hearing the voices of his fellow soldiers call out across the ages, Philoctetes is curious, frightened, and anguished, never certain if the voices are coming from the cave or from himself. These choral odes are the clearest divergence from Sophocles' text, but a change in lighting, which returns us to a general darkness where only Philoctetes and the Warrior Chorus can be clearly seen, heightens these moments, stressing the primacy of Sophocles' text as a vehicle for the Warrior Chorus' words.

Chaves' Philoctetes is far from a helpless cripple. His intermittent limp is slight, and his initial defiance of Neoptolemus creates the impression that he would be more than a match for the young prince even without Herakles' magical bow. When at the top of the play Philoctetes faces down Neoptolemus and his men with the bow, he doesn't yet hold any arrows: this opening moment is all the more poignant for Philoctetes' being fully armed later in the play, when he draws the bow on Odysseus, an arrow ready to fire. In the opening, we see a Philoctetes fending off intruders who are still strangers to him, without the full use of his famous weapon, but towards the conclusion, he is *unwilling* to kill the man he hates most, even though he is prepared to do it. It's a neat way to show how Philoctetes, who has been reduced almost to savagery, is transformed by Neoptolemus' idealism and Odysseus' patriotism into something close to the man he was.

Walsh as Odysseus and Meyer as Neoptolemus offer measured counterpoints to Chaves' Philoctetes. Walsh's Odysseus is pragmatic, sometimes dehumanizingly so, but the audience is always left with the impression that he is looking to the greater good. Here is a man who may once have dreamed of glory, but now uses heroic rhetoric to convince Neoptolemus to do his part in bringing the war to a swift conclusion. While Sophocles' Odysseus is often contrasted with Homer's, Walsh's performance is clearly grounded in the epic hero who, above all else, wants to return home.

Meyer, for his part, gives us a Neoptolemus who never seems completely convinced that glory is worth its cost. Neoptolemus needs military conquest to rule successfully and to stand out from under the shadow of his famous father, but his disillusionment with Odysseus' trickery only grows when confronting a Philoctetes who is clearly capable of fighting, but chooses not to. By the play's end, Meyer's Neoptolemus is genuinely concerned for Philoctetes' wellbeing, which seems more important than his hunger for reputation in motivating his desire for military glory.

Director Desiree Sanchez (who is also the Aquila's artistic director) explores Philoctetes' wound as psychological in nature; in a particularly clever piece of staging, Philoctetes recovers a bottle of pills from a drawer where the text has him retrieving herbs that soothe his pain, and the bottle is promptly pocketed by one of the sailors at Neoptolemus' instruction. Philoctetes is addicted to self-pity and his own victimhood as much as he may be addicted to pills, and this move nicely prefigures Neoptolemus' command that he leave his exile, which by the end of the play we understand is self-imposed. Philoctetes can only be healed once he is willing to allow it.

But Sanchez's casting has left us to wonder exactly what kind of healing and reconciliation Philoctetes *can* find. Both the merchant/spy and Herakles are played by Odysseus: the minimal costume changes and the program make clear that this is not merely Ed Walsh doubled in the roles, but the character Odysseus in disguise. Herakles' promise that Philoctetes will be healed and given a hero's welcome rings hollow as a result. In this moment, Walsh stands on a chair, down left, and the lighting again becomes steep, stark, and murky, as at the beginning of the play. But here, with arms spread wide, Odysseus casts a shadow over not only the characters on stage, but the Warrior Chorus as well. Just as the 21st-century voices spoke to Philoctetes before, the shadow of Odysseus, willing to say or do whatever it takes to convince Philoctetes to return to war, falls over these 21st-century veterans.

Of course Odysseus is also a soldier, and though he's deceiving Philoctetes in this final moment, he's not necessarily lying: whatever the source of these words, Philoctetes' return to health and dignity at play's conclusion hints that their healing effect is real. As Philoctetes accepts the destiny that Herakles/Odysseus offers him, one of Neoptolemus' men enters with a uniform, helping Philoctetes remove his foot bandage and dress himself as a soldier again. Once more in his military uniform, Philoctetes stands upright for the first time in this play, and even as the Warrior Chorus' final ode makes it clear that his path ahead won't be easy, Chaves' posture gives us the sense that Philoctetes has moved beyond the self-pity on which he has nursed his pain. Odysseus may be deceiving Philoctetes for the sake of his own interests, but the deception benefits Philoctetes too. Philoctetes' tall, proud stance is hard to reconcile with shadow that Odysseus as Herakles casts over the Warrior Chorus, but this dialectic of images demands considerations without neat resolutions—appropriately enough for this kind of performance.

Though deprived of Sophocles' lofty lyrics and lacking the heightened language of a poetical translation, the play still tells its story well, even cut down to a 70-minute running time. There are few moments of soaring passion, but the all-veteran cast's well-grounded performances invite a consideration that more heightened acting would not, especially when coupled with the images of modern war zones at the beginning of the play and the words of the Warrior Chorus as choral odes. The audience engages all of *Philoctetes*' contexts, antique and modern.

When one of the Warrior Chorus members shouts out "Baby killer!" for example, one can't help but think of Neoptolemus' future self: throwing the infant Astyanax from the walls of Troy. We know what the noble and even *kind* young man before us will become. And the mercy that we now applaud will yield to bloodshed of the sort that, as Herakles' speech makes clear, was considered a war crime even in the ancient world. And how can we begin to talk about it—we who have no knowledge of the ways in which mercy, kindness, and love may be coupled to that level of brutality?

Don't expect any easy answers from *Philoctetes*. Sophocles doesn't offer them, and neither does Aquila's production. True to their mission, Aquila re-frames Sophocles' questions for our own state of continuing war, offering a glimpse into the difficulty some service members have in coming home, but also into the bond they share with their fellow veterans. In so doing, the Aquila lets us see Sophocles, himself a veteran, struggling to reconcile himself to his own wars and to his role after the fighting was done. As Chaves said in a post-show talk-back, "We have all experienced war in one way or another." In light of Aquila's performance, the perfunctory "Thank you for your service" seems like a way of shutting down the necessary conversations that we all need to have about what that experience means, and that Sophocles posed with this play.

Philoctetes, by Sophocles, translated by Peter Meineck. Presented by the Aquila Theatre. Directed by Desiree Sanchez. Lighting by Peter Meineck. Technical direction by Robert Rogers. Stage Management by Abigail Strange. Featuring Ed Walsh as Odysseus, Johnny Meyer as Neoptolemus, Brian Delate as Phoenix (a sailor), Caleb Wells as Leukos (a sailor), Michael Castelblanco as Alcimus (a sailor), Richard

Chaves as Philoctetes, and the Warrior Chorus (Dar Lily, John Manley, Philip J. Milio, Dan Murphy, Jenny Pacanowksi, and James P. Stanton). Presented at the GK Arts Center in Brooklyn, NY on April 6th, 7th, 13th, and 20th 2016. For more information please see www.aquilatheatre.com and www.warriorchorus.org.

notes

[1] "The Program." Aquila Theatre NYU. Accessed May 10, 2016.