

The Journal for Ancient Performance



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 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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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.

A Conversation About *Deus Ex Machina*

Deus Ex Machina

by Liz Fisher and Robert Matney

Directed by Liz Fisher and Robert Matney

Whirligig Productions, Fusebox and Shrewd Productions

The Long Center for Performing Arts

Austin, Texas

January 3–18, 2015

Liz Fisher, Whirligig Productions and Texas State University, **Robert Matney**, Whirligig Productions, **Paul Woodruff**, University of Texas at Austin, and **Lucia Woodruff**

Excerpted and edited by **Sophia Dill**, Randolph College

Deus Ex Machina was born from the scheming of Liz Fisher, Robert Matney, Beth Burns, and Rob Turknnett. Each showing's audience was invited to participate in the plot by voting via text message each time a character appealed to the gods for guidance. The following is a conversation that took place with Liz Fisher (LF), Robert Matney (RM), Paul Woodruff (PW), and Lucia Woodruff (LW), recorded on February 7, 2015, at the Woodruff home.

The parts of the conversation excerpted here—edited for brevity and clarity—explore the challenges of making an audience divine while telling a coherent story.



Katherine Catmull as Clytemnestra
(photo: Will Hollis Snider)

Liz Fisher reimagined the the Oresteia as a choose-your-own adventure with the plotline selected by audiences at specific junctures between scenes. While she gave the audience power and enough information to make a choice at those moments, Fisher retained enough control to keep her actors on script instead of running off into improvisation. She held back select information regarding characters and consequences that could then be a surprise to the audience: her interpretation of the freedom ancient playwrights had to introduce unexpected characters. With a plethora of pathways and several possible endings, *Deus Ex Machina* could hardly be confined to just one genre and Fisher's recognition of this fact allowed the show to push at the expectations and boundaries of modern theatrical convention.

'What if we were able to create a show where audience members got to be gods and tell characters what to do?' (LF)

LF: Because that's what so many of those great Greek myths are about: gods tell humans to go off and do things, and then they have to, otherwise they get smoked. And we kind of laughed about it, like, 'Oh that would be really funny,' and then walked away from it....After reading all of the [Greek] plays I could get my hands on and a couple different translations, I realized there was this really interesting pattern that emerged that I'd already kind of known about: gods telling humans what to do through the oracular intervention. And I thought, 'Well that might be a really interesting way to frame that,' because audience participation in theatre can be a very tricky subject. How do you manage that in an effective way? How do you give the audience power? But not too much power, because if you give them too much power, then God only knows what you're going to end up with.

I started thinking about how could we frame that in a way that does allow for complete control over a

narrative, but doesn't make that narrative into something that is improvisational, where actors would actually have a script that they would have to learn with all of this different branching. After revisiting the *Oresteia*, which was always one of my favorite ones, I realized that of all of the Greek plays that I'd read that that had the highest frequency of, as I like to call it, 'the gods fucking with humans' ratio, because there are so many instances of gods stepping in and saying, 'You must kill your daughter if you want to go to Troy,' or 'You must kill your mom because she killed your dad because he killed your sister.'

There were these different variations of it already with the different playwrights tackling the story, and it seemed like, 'Well this might be a really interesting way to start thinking about it because there's already a natural multi-verse that exists, and, because it's a story that I've always enjoyed, this might be an interesting place to start figuring out how could we do a branched narrative where we let the audience decide what happens to these characters.'

Avoiding the theatre-maker's nightmare: audience control

PW: It's reminded me of *The Night of the Burning Pestle*, where the audience hijacks the play and the actors are at least represented as not prepared for it. But the audience knows just what it wants.

LF: And they make it happen.

PW: And they make it happen. Actors comply and allow this.

LF: I think that's a really great example of a lot of theatre-makers' nightmare when you talk about audience participation. Rob and I both did Shakespeare at Winedale, and a lot of the philosophies around performance there center on the idea that the audience is your scene partner. That's why the direct address is so prevalent out there. They're (the audience) in the scene with you, and you want to share that moment with them.

PW: And in Shakespeare, they would have been on the stage with you.

LF: But audience members can be totally unpredictable, more so than dogs on stage. You never know what they are going to do. And of course audience members have their own wishes and desires, and if you say, 'You get to decide whatever this character wants to do,' they could tell a character to do something that is against any rational or emotional objective that that character might have. So we had to find—and, again, this is why the Greeks are such a great example—a good scenario where an audience member can say, 'I want you to go jump off a cliff. Why? Because I said so.' The Greek gods, unfortunately, have that reputation of asking humans to do absurd things because they said so. It matched very well with this literary device.

RM: And it also allows us to confine with quite a lot of clarity what choices are available within the freedom that we're giving to the audience. To give that sense of agency while structuring it. Of course, in the case of *The Night of the Burning Pestle*, it's all structure. There's no actual agency; it's a theatrical sleight of hand. So where do you drop the needle? Of course we didn't want it to be a theatrical sleight of hand, though indeed we faced accusations or suspicions throughout the whole process, that, in fact, it was all a fabrication. So, how do you give the agency, reveal convincingly that you have done so, make the agency meaningful, but then structure it within enough boundaries that you can prepare and craft something that will be...finished and artful?

Limiting the audience—more like human beings than gods

PW: The Greek gods are represented as always knowing way ahead all the consequences of their

actions... Zeus planned this long ago, you know, relax, this was all planned. At the end of the *Philoctetes*, one of Sophocles' great plays, Zeus' plan for Philoctetes has been known by oracles, but Philoctetes is reluctant to fall in line and his best friend, who is dead, Heracles, comes back to tell him that he really should do it and why he should do it, but one of the main reasons why is that this was Zeus' plan. But the audience in your play makes decisions without knowing where they're going to lead. They are more like human beings than they are like gods in that way. Because we don't know—we know a little bit, because you were completely honest when you gave us a choice, the thing we chose happened, but a whole lot of stuff we didn't choose and didn't know also happened.

LF: That's true. At the beginning of the play, when Zeus invests the audience with their god power, he does make it clear that the power isn't absolute, because it's only about two hours and he does call them demigods. That says, from a playwright perspective I'd argue, Zeus always knows. And when he comes back a couple of times, he delights in the fact that he's not the one picking, but he's enjoying this process and gets to watch over everything. But he's not the one having to make those decisions.

One of the things we struggled with in the development of the show, and we definitely swung back and forth on this, was how much should we make clear when the audience is faced with a decision what's going to come of that. Whether to drop that prophecy line on 'kill him' or 'don't kill him' and make it very explicit what's going to happen. Or, the other side, shroud it in a bit more mystery so it is that double-speak that you see with some types or oracles or dramatizations of oracles. Initially, I'd had it much more vague.

RM: It's way more transparent than it used to be. And interestingly, we have received great honest feedback critiquing it from both sides. One which wanted it to be less clear, that it was too literal. Or one which was of the opinion that, 'No, actually I didn't get any agency because I didn't know what I was picking. And if I don't know what I'm picking, can you say that I have agency?' Both of these are good points.

PW: Right. If I don't know what I'm picking, I'm not really playing the part of a god. But I love being surprised.

'Well if the Greeks did it, then I can do it, too!'—the precedent for unpredictability

LF: When Clytemnestra goes to the oracle, there's a whole cast of characters, no matter which way you go, that then suddenly get introduced after her decision is made. Aegisthus suddenly shows up; Cassandra shows up. But part of that was also a structural issue that I was facing. For example, when you look at the *Orestia*, Aegisthus—if you've never read the play before—comes out of nowhere. And at the end of *Agamemnon*, if you don't know the story ahead of time, all of a sudden at the end you realize Clytemnestra's got a lover and he only comes in at the last ten pages or so of the play. And then all of these other characters suddenly start popping up, and I felt like, 'Well, if the Greeks did it, I can do it, too!' So that turned out to be quite a bit of the logic: 'If they did it, I don't feel so bad doing the same thing.' And I was trying to keep some of those original relationships and some of the original character decisions that were made by that mythology, bringing that forward into *Deus* so that, you know, Aegisthus at the beginning is never going to get along with Agamemnon. There's too much back history for them to be best friends.

PW: Well, they have a family history as well as a personal one.

LF: Exactly. So they are trying to maintain some of those initial relationships and then of course actions happen that can adjust them, but they are never going to stray—hopefully, at least what I thought was—too far from those original relationships that existed in that source material.

PW: One thing that struck me about the production was, as various and as unexpected as the scene shifts were, they were never improbable.

LF: That's good to hear.

PW: It was not surprising to see Agamemnon kill his children—his other children. He'd done it to Iphigenia with a different kind of reason—and that was just the version I saw, in which he killed his children.

LF: You saw what we nickname 'the darkest timeline' because of course in that timeline he (Agamemnon) kills both of his children, his other children, in a fit of madness. And it wasn't an intentional death like Iphigenia's.

PW: That's right. But you can understand how he gets to that point.

LF: Absolutely.

PW: And, of course, those of us who know Greek plays know about Herakles coming back from the wars and killing all of his children.

LF: You identify one of the things that I tried to do very intentionally with all of the timelines. I tried to keep any story that happened in that world of Greek drama, where you see these tropes, so that you never ended up with a timeline where all of a sudden there's aliens. That doesn't make sense. You can have Furies because Furies existed in that world. You know, it's actually quite an intentional mimic: the killing of Electra by Agamemnon is straight out of *The Bacchae*, but all of the genders have been flipped. So instead of a mother killing her son, it's a father killing his daughter.

PW: In a state of madness.

LF: In a state of madness. And then somebody pointing out, 'Look at what you've done.'

PW: Well, of course, that's also in the *Herakles*: he doesn't realize it's his children he's killed until somebody points it out to him and he recovers from the madness. Aristotle and other ancient and modern critics have said, with some reason, that the *deus ex machina* when it's used in a play is a dramatic flaw, that it shouldn't be used. And Aristotle says the miraculous should be, I would say, off-plot. If there's going to be a miracle, it should happen before the staged part of the action. And so, people praise Sophocles because there's no *deus ex machina*. And Sophocles is very careful to sequester the mythical miracles out of the plot so that they're nothing to do with the action shown on stage. So, for example, Orestes in Sophocles' version has not been told to kill his mother. He has gone to the oracle before the play begins, and he has said to the oracle, 'How can I kill Mom?' And the oracle gives him some advice—'Do it by stealth; don't go with an army.'—and that's how Orestes does it, but the god didn't tell him to do it. He was determined to do it already.

RM: Interesting.

PW: And so, Aristotle, and again, these other critics, have admired this style of playwriting that doesn't have a *deus ex machina* because it's more humanistic. Because the scenes all grow out of human interaction and are humanly explained. But the difference between, say, Sophocles and Euripides, who uses the gods a lot, is like the difference between Thucydides, who writes utterly godless history, and Herodotus, who has gods running through it all the time. So the Persian Wars are explained, in Herodotus, by Zeus. Zeus was determined they would happen, and so he sent dreams to the Persian king, and they kept coming. And the king had his counselor sleep in the same room, and he had the dream. Zeus was determined that

the Persians would come to grief in this war. He was going to make sure it happened. But there is nothing like that in Thucydides. He's got it all at a human level. And I think for Aristotle and those critics, the criticism of *deus ex machina* wasn't so much humanistic as it was about plot. Aristotle wanted the plot to be plausible, and he focused on that. It all had to be plausible, which is why he hated the *Iphigenia in Aulis*. He criticizes *Iphigenia in Aulis* because in the first half of the play Iphigenia is opposed to being slaughtered for the sake of the army, and she goes off stage, and she comes back a bit later having totally converted, now she wants to be slaughtered for the sake of the army, but there's no explanation. How did this happen? Well, maybe the gods visited her. Who knows? But she's almost a different character when she comes back on. Aristotle thinks this is very bad playwriting.

LF: It's cheating.

PW: Well, it seems to be cheating, though I imagine Greek audiences accepted it because it was considered one of his (Euripides') better plays, and it's a very interesting play. (You have two Iphigenia plays, one in Aulis and one in Tauris. The one in Tauris Aristotle liked a lot. That's the one where she is reunited with Orestes.) I don't know whether you thought of this as a problem, but you didn't allow the audience 'ex machina'—we were appearing out of technology; we were 'ex machina' with the technology—but you didn't allow the audience 'ex machina' to do anything improbable. You had it designed in such a way that, I think, no matter what choices we made, the resulting play would have had a structure which made dramatic sense. And that's a tour de force of writing. I don't know how you quite managed to do that. It was very impressive.

LF: Thank you for saying that. I think you're right, because personally I prefer Sophocles. I think of all of the playwrights, I prefer his plays, and especially his *Electra* was a huge influence for me on how to think about those characters, and that's always going to be my favorite play.

Genre fluidity and power of the audience

PW: I get the sense that modern audiences and therefore directors, producers, and so on, don't want anything that pushes against the lines of genre. They want to know what kind of play they're going to see. And they certainly want to know what kind of movie they are going to see. You can't play around with their expectations. People will come out of a Terry Malick film absolutely furious because it didn't fit their genre expectations. Had they just watched, they would have seen something beautiful, but they're not willing to do that. They want it to be of a certain kind.

RM: There's even public-funding, grant-winning punishment given for pushing at some of these boundaries. For example, if you were a theatre company that doesn't know who you are and basically does the same thing every time, you were seen as a company that doesn't know who you are and you'll get punished in grant-giving. So the more narrowly you define yourself, the more successful you'll be in terms of funding, which seems to me a bit of a tragedy behind the scenes that we're not nourishing vital, challenging, and elbow-throwing outside of your comfort zone.

LF: But I think about works of art in any genre that do that and people's reaction to that: they tend to be delighted. A movie like *Birdman*, what is that movie? It's cleaned up how many different types of awards?

PW: But it hasn't cleaned up in the box office.

LF: No, but that's going to be the movie that everybody is talking about, and closer to home, we were talking about them earlier, the Rude Mechs [the Rude Mechanicals, an ensemble-based theatre collective from Austin, TX]. How could you possibly categorize the type of theatre they're doing? And they are getting accolades from all over the world and actually traveling around the world doing that kind of art.

And sure, I don't think you could actually replicate that special magic that they have, but there's something in it.

LW: Why do you think that's happening right now?

RM: In terms of Rude Mechanicals and *Birdman*?

LW: Yes.

LF: There was also a special kind of reaction that we were getting at *Deus* as well from audience members. Even people who thought that they knew what they were walking into, I don't think expected what they got. Some people would ask me beforehand, 'Well, is this what you're doing a drama, right?' And I would say, 'Well, it's very funny and there's quite a bit of dance and music and all kinds of other things, but I don't think I would want to categorize it as a drama.'

PW: You know, just to get back to Greek tragedy, Greek tragedy very often has comic scenes. And a number of Greek tragedies have happy endings or endings that the audience would have thought were happy. So in Sophocles, both the *Philoctetes* and *Ajax* essentially have happy endings. Problems are resolved in the way that we want. In the *Antigone*, there's a hilarious scene with a guard making fun of Creon. *The Bacchae*, which is the most grisly of Greek tragedies, has more than one comic scene in it. And I'm sure the audience laughed. They didn't say, 'I came to see a tragedy, this scene is funny, I'm walking out!' But I wonder, in considering the various possibilities for the *Oresteia*, did you think of introducing comic scenes or did you think of one possible outcome that you might regard as happy?

LF: Well, we had a couple of happy endings.

RM: And before you talk more about that I just want to mention that, in fact, so we did a few beta tests to both trot out Liz's writing ... but then also for different approaches to the technology just to see what it could bear, and one of the primary pieces of feedback we got in reading number two out of three was, 'Hey, that flair for the comic you've got in this version, more of that.' And so between that reading and the subsequent versions, Liz really consciously started at intervals within the story, saying, 'This needs a punch of comedy here.' And so it became a structural adjustment that you were making.

LF: That was a very wonderful piece of feedback that I'd forgotten about. There was a very conscious shift towards comedy.

LW: The more comedy you have, the more people can bear to hear.

LF: The really terrible things, yes. But to get back to your question about happy endings, on a closer timeline to where the night you saw ended, Cassandra and Orestes get married. That was one of our happier endings. Electra survives as well.

PW: Did Agamemnon and Clytemnestra reconcile?

LF: Unfortunately, no. That was something that structurally I was never able to get around because of where that choice fell.

PW: Yes, I can see that.

LF: One must fall no matter what happens, but there were some very happy endings, that one being what I thought of as always one of the happiest. In that timeline as well you get to see Pylades. Pylades and Orestes would arrive back in Argos, and we actually spent a lot of time talking with the actor who played Orestes, Chase Brewer, because of course Orestes shows up about two-thirds of the way through the

story and in all of the timelines, his character was very different, sometimes a very, very dark, very moody, very angry young man. But on that side, because of the other events that had to happen, it was one of the happier versions of Orestes because we had set him in a world where he wasn't sent away and alone for a long time or he had been raised with a friend and companion in a happier environment. So then he came back not by himself but with a friend who he had grown up with and thought of as a brother. So then we were able to have some happier endings on that one, including one where he is able to reconcile everything that has happened to his family and to Cassandra's family, and the two of them get married and become king and queen of Argos.

RM: And end holding hands in this almost coronation moment of glory. It's quite a beautiful moment.