DIDASKALIA

Didaskalia is an electronic journal dedicated to the study of all aspects of ancient Greek and Roman performance

DIDASKALIA
Volume 13 (2016–2017)

http://didaskalia.net
ISSN 1321-485

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.

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.

2016–2017 Staff

Editor-in-Chief:	Amy R. Cohen	editor@didaskalia.net +1 434 947-8117 *Didaskalia* Randolph College 2500 Rivermont Avenue Lynchburg, VA 24503 USA
Associate Editor:	C.W. (Toph) Marshall	
Assistant Editor:	Jay Kardan	assistant-editor@didaskalia.net
Interns:	Gabriel Kuhl Sophia Dill	intern@didaskalia.net

Advisory Board

Caterina Barone
John Davidson
Gary Decker
Mark Griffith
Mary Hart
Kenneth Reckford
Oliver Taplin
Peter Toohey
J. Michael Walton
David Wiles
Paul Woodruff

Editorial Board

Dorota Dutsch
Allison Futrell
Mary-Kay Gamel
John Given
Mike Lippman
Fiona Macintosh
Willie Major
Dan McCaffrey
Peter Meineck
Paul Menzer
Tim Moore
Nancy Rabinowitz
Brett Rogers
John Starks

Copyright

Readers are permitted to save or print any files from Didaskalia as long as there are no alterations made in those files. Copyright remains with the authors, who are entitled to reprint their work elsewhere if due acknowledgement is made to the earlier publication in *Didaskalia*. Contributors are responsible for getting permission to reproduce any photographs or video they submit and for providing the necessary credits.

Website design © *Didaskalia*.

***Didaskalia* is published at Randolph College.**

DIDASKALIA
VOLUME 13 (2016–2017)
TABLE OF CONTENTS

13.01	**Review - Apollonius' *Argonautika* at Gustavus Adolphus College** Eric Dugdale and William Riihiluoma	1
13.02	**Review - Sophocles' *Philoctetes* at Aquila Theatre** Tony Tambasco	10
13.03	**Review - *Trachiniae* at Minor Latham Playhouse, New York** Claire Catenaccio	14
13.04	**Review - *Rhesus* at Aristotle's Lyceum** Scott Andrew Cally	18
13.05	**Review - 52nd Season of Classical Plays at the Greek Theatre in Syracuse: Sophocles' *Electra*, Euripides' *Alcestis*** Caterina Barone	20
13.06	**Conversation – A Conversation about *Deus Ex Machina* at the Long Center for Performing Arts, Austin, Texas** Liz Fisher, Robert Matney, Paul Woodruff, Lucia Woodruff	24
13.07	**Gamel Panel - Performance, Politics, Pedagogy: a Tribute to Mary-Kay Gamel** C.W. Marshall	31
13.08	**Gamel Panel - Raising the Stakes: Mary-Kay Gamel and the Academic Stage** Amy R. Cohen	34
13.09	**Gamel Panel - Navigating Tricky Topics: The Benefits of Performance Pedagogy** Christopher Bungard	39
13.10	**Gamel Panel - Sophocles after Ferguson: *Antigone* in St. Louis, 2014** Timothy Moore	49
13.11	**Gamel Panel - The Authenticity of Mary-Kay Gamel** Ruby Blondell	69
13.12	**Review - Two Tragic Worlds of Soldiers: Not Man Apart Physical Theatre Ensemble's *Ajax in Iraq*** Yuko Kurahashi	74
13.13	**Imperial Pantomime and Satoshi Miyagi's *Medea*** William A. Johnson	76
13.14	**Review - Sophocles' *Electra* at the Dallas Theater Center** Thomas E. Jenkins	91
13.15	**Valedictory from the Editor** Amy R. Cohen	93

Note

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.

Raising the Stakes: Mary-Kay Gamel and the Academic Stage

Amy R. Cohen
Randolph College

In the spring of my first year at Stanford, I somehow got myself to the University of California Santa Cruz to see *Iphigenia at Aulis.* I remember sitting on a hill, feeling the urgency of the actors' entering and exiting through the audience, and the sense that Euripides was suddenly talking to us all about the Gulf War, even though it was with words from 2,500 years ago. That May day in 1991 solidified my determination to make the realities of Greek drama the center of my work, and on that day graduate school came alive, even though I wasn't at my own institution. Mary-Kay Gamel and her students were showing me what could be done and what *should* be done with ancient drama: stage it.

Video clip 1: youtu.be/o7lC3shMCQ8 from the opening scene of **The Ajax Project** *at Christopher Newport University, 2011*

Image 1: Flyer for **The Julie Thesmo Show**

Mary-Kay and I like to marvel at the ways we sit in different corners of the ancient theatrical playground while both making claims to lively authenticity. We both came to directing as part of our teaching, and we both have done most of our work on college campuses. I do original-practices, outdoor, masked productions in a large Greek theatre. I tend to hew closely to the original texts, in the best translations I can find or commission, in the belief that following the rules the playwrights followed gets us closer to understanding what they had to say to their audiences and what they have to say to ours. Gamel, on the other hand, plays in a different mode: she finds a modern take on the ideas that an cient plays suggest, adapts the plays to modern staging conventions, and engages her audience with a modern message. Sometimes her productions use elements of ancient conventions, but often they do not.

In the version of Sophocles' *Ajax* that Mary-Kay Gamel devised and directed with Jana Adamitis at Christopher Newport University in 2011, Ajax was seen (in silhouette) [video clip 1] to slaughter not sheep and cattle but rather human prisoners of war. With that change, and by setting *The Ajax Project* in the twenty-first-century American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Gamel and her collaborators changed the terms of the play and reframed its issues of honor. When asked at a talkback the reason for the different victims, Gamel exclaimed, "Raise the stakes!" Those words expressed the theatrical philosophy she embraces, but also her effect on academic productions of ancient drama.

Image 2: reporters accost Helen in **Helen of Egypt,** *UC Santa Cruz, 2008*

Her answer irked me at the time, and the reframing of the play's issues of honor was and is a problem for me. Mary-Kay and her company departed from Sophocles' subject. The show was a powerful play, but it

wasn't Sophocles. Even though the production was called "The Ajax *Project,"* the audience went away thinking that they'd seen *Sophocles's* play, not an adaptation. Making Ajax a wanton killer of people instead of cattle turns him into a war criminal and implicates Athena in the crime. The human victims change entirely the terms by which we judge Ajax's suicide and by which his soldiers and the other generals judge him. "Raise the stakes" does not satisfy me as a sufficient rationale for such a change. In a published interview, however, Gamel says that her "main mission is to experiment with t hese plays."[1] From that point of view, the experiment was clearly successful: the audience was entranced, the company was entirely invested, and we all left the theatre unable to stop thinking about the play, because it spoke in Sophoclean terms to modern anxieties, if not to Sophoclean ones.

Image 3: the divine look down on the mortal mess in* Orestes Terrorist *at UC Santa Cruz, 2011

The Ajax Project developed ideas seen in Bryan Doerries's Theatre of War series: both projects used Sophocles, and *Ajax* in particular, to address the hardships of the modern warrior.[2] *The Ajax Project* also used techniques that appeared later in Aquila Theatre Company's *Herakles*:[3] Gamel, Adamitis, and their students used the words of modern veterans to rewrite the choral passages of the play, and Aquila used video interviews of veterans to form the choral parts of their production. Both performances succeeded, with much the same thought and technique, in insisting that we understand the tragedies in terms of our modern world, and both performances also insisted that fifth-century Athenian drama still gives us ways to confront human realities.

Video Clip 2: youtu.be/tD9hgCJ3i0c The concluding scenes of Effie and the Barbarians

Video Clip 3: youtu.be/t7_GZyCE4gA the concluding scene of Alcestisperformed at Feminism and Classics VI, 2012

Although I remain troubled by Gamel's using Sophocles as a jumping-off point rather than staging *his* play, I admire *The Ajax Project* as part of a continuing conversation with , and influence upon, the professional stage. While Gamel has educated generations of students by having them *do* Greek drama (experiential learning at its best), she has also made academic productions of ancient works vital to the continuum of modern thinking—artistic, practical, and philosophical—on theatre. She has raised the stakes—or shown how high the stakes are—in academic drama. In this realm, even if we don't follow her specific path, we should follow her lead.

Academics tend to feel defensive about the stakes of our dramatic endeavors. We work with newly trained or untrained actors and often with inexperienced designers and other young collaborators. We worry that our productions will be amateur not only in the technical sense: that our shows lack professional polish and therefore must be merely pedagogical exercises for our students. We are anxious that their wider importance fades as fast as the cram notes for a chemistry exam. In other productions, we have a different anxiety: we are collaborating with much more experienced artists, and if we have been trained outside of formal drama programs, we feel like imposters with little to contribute. Theater professionals can treat us as hobbyists or raise an eyebrow at our freedom from their commercial

concerns about box-office receipts, salaries, and survival.

Mary-Kay Gamel's extraordinary career as a director, translator, adapter, and dramaturg, however, has proven that the adventurous work being done in colleges and universities cannot be dismissed as mere class projects. Her bold adaptations have always spoken to their times, addressing the social and political issues of their day in clear and direct terms. To name just a few: In *The Julie Thesmo Show* [image 1], she addressed women's issues; in *Helen of Egypt*, she foregrounded the role of the media and celebrity culture [image 2]; in *Orestes Terrorist*, she explored exultation in revenge in a ruined world and the gods' indifference to our troubles [image 3].

She has an instinctive suspicion of masked, ancient-dress productions, detectible in the assumptions behind her *Didaskalia* review of a Getty double feature of *The Woman from Samos* and *Casina* (emphasis mine):

> Such careful attention to archaeological detail might suggest that this production was just an exercise in antiquarianism. But shortly after the show began any doubts about its theatrical effectiveness vanished. The combination of authenticity and theatricality made for dynamic tension, not lifeless formalism, and this fruitful tension ran throughout the shows.[4]

She insists that a play has more going on than correctness:

> The plays are complex and have hugely important themes— democracy vs. tyranny, gender conflicts, conflict between the generations. I think it's important for all the participants to feel invested, too, in what's going on, and that some issues are being addressed. . . . I'd rather have the audience be annoyed, offended or indignant than simply entertained.[5]

She provokes, and in doing so strikes us hard with the realization of what theatre, and ancient theatre, can do. My objections to her choices in *The Ajax Project* are a result of that provocation: she annoyed the originalist in me and so provoked me into an indignant articulation of what I think Sophocles was doing that her production did not. The stakes raised for me were different from the stakes for less-initiated members of audience, but Gamel's choices still made me engage with the ancient work at a heightened level.

The Ajax Project is one among many productions demonstrating Gamel's awareness that the ancient playwrights were "famous for offering alternatives to traditional narratives" and that she feels comfortable taking "a step further in interpreting Euripides' script."[6] She framed her *Iphigenia Among the Taurians*—renamed *Effie and the Barbarians*—with the events of *Iphigeneia at Aulis*: Agamemnon's daughter begs for her life, and the soldiers begin to take her away. But when, in a freeze-frame moment, we were transported to her other world, her other play, we rooted for her and her brother Orestes to recognize each other and then, when they did, cheered on their escape plan. I forgot all about the dreadful forces that had landed her among the barbarians. When the frame seemed to freeze again, and the escape became suddenly the conclusion of the sacrifice [video clip 2], the shift took my breath away by undermining the happy ending in a way that struck me as quite Euripidean indeed. In her 2012 adaptation of *Alcestis* in collaboration with Mark Damen, Allison Futrell, and John Given, Gamel grabbed the famously troubling end of the play and wouldn't let go: Admetus appeals to Alcestis to return home and be happy, while Death silently invites her to go back with him. [video clip 3].

In the performance at the Feminism in Classics VI conference, the audience was asked to weigh in on what Alcestis should do. The question was, brilliantly, both a clear acknowledgement that Alcestis has no choice and an ironic continuation of that withholding of agency, since Alcestis still had no voice. Until, that is, the moment she broke into song with her decision—left up to the actor, Jenna

Chrol—and chose to "defy the normative" and start a new life on her own. I think any audience would be thrilled by hearing Alcestis's voice at the end of the play, but for that specialized classics audience it was certainly the perfect way to raise and resolve the stakes of Euripides' strange drama.

In these examples, Mary-Kay Gamel trusted that the ancient playwrights' works are strong enough to survive her conversation with and conversion of them for her time. I believe she also knows, trusts, and hopes that other scholar-practicitioners will engage with and enact those works in entirely different ways for their times and with their own performance philosophies. She enables that engagement and the continuing strength of the ancient works, in fact, by making performance opportunities a priority with colleagues as well as with students.

The omission of the *Alcestis* I just mentioned (as well as *The Invention of Love* at the 2002 meeting of the American Philological Association) from the list of Gamel's productions provided to me again bespeaks our anxiety about claiming importance for the plays we produce in academia: we don't include the theatre work we do with each other as part of our dramatic effect on the larger world, because we imagine the stakes are low. We sometimes think of these performances as the comic relief for our too-serious conferences, or as inside jokes made to amuse one another, but they are much more than that. These shows make waves, not just ripples, through us into our classrooms, our students' understanding, and the world. I guarantee that they reach more people and provoke more thinking on the issues they raise than any paper panel does. Mary-Kay brought that understanding to the APA with *The Invention of Love*, which prompted the whole series of CAMP shows.[7] *Alcestis*, in both its 2012 performance and its restaging at SCS in 2013, posed questions that could not be posed otherwise. Yes, our special insider audience allowed us a deep conversation with the play. But that's a conversation that we then share with our students, year after year, giving them a stake in the interpretation of the plays that will inform our next productions and those in the wider world.

What Mary-Kay has done is vital for the ripples and waves it has sent into the world, and she has raised the dramatic stakes of academic work on ancient theatre. By recognizing the critical importance of performance, not just the idea of or study of performance in the ancient world but the *actual performing* of the ancient world, she has helped to foster generations of students and collaborators who have become teachers and directors and actors and translators in their own right, passing on those values to yet more descendants. But not just teachers and directors and actors and translators: her productions have given the power of the plays to students who never again acted in a play or hammered together a flat, but whose understanding of the world is forever changed by the experience of working on a Greek or Roman play.

And then there are the audiences. Modern professional drama certainly produces ancient plays often, and in ways that Mary-Kay has influenced or would celebrate. But her student audiences and ours may never see one of those shows: they are too expensive, too distant, too little a part of their adult lives. Academic production is sometimes the only theatre that Americans will see, and often the only ancient drama Americans will see. Sometimes the effect of those encounters is the result of specific modern issues evoked by our take on a play. A perhaps more frequent or more important message is the very idea that art can speak to life and that life should listen. The ancient playwrights have something to say to us: old words have meaning, and all the more when brought to life.

Gamel's work and the academic theatre she has inspired bring life to American theatre's engagement with the ancients: as much as anyone, we in the academic theatre discover new meanings, new resonances, new life in the plays. The academic theatre makes some of those discoveries perhaps *because* it is free from commercial exigencies. Because we reach audiences no one else can, audiences that may never have the opportunity to see professional theatre, the stakes of academic theatre are very high indeed.

We may never know all the lines of influence from Mary-Kay Gamel's work at UCSC to drama being produced in other colleges and on the professional stage, but I am both witness and evidence that her work—even when I wrangle or disagree with it—has been and will continue to be a foundation and inspiration for the vitality of ancient drama on the American stage. I call on others to celebrate the critical importance of academic performance, to stake their own claims of engagement with the ancient playwrights, and to raise the next generations of scholar-practitioners to inherit Gamel's legacy.

notes

Many thanks to Mike Lippman and Toph Marshall for their advice on this piece. The infelicities and inconsistencies that remain are all mine.

[1] Gamel, quoted in www.sju.edu/int/academics/cas/resources/effieandbarbarians/source/Effie_Article.pdf (accessed January 2016) She goes on to say, "...and show the world how great they are," and I continue to doubt that you're showing how great the play itself is if you feel you much change something central about the play to make it great.

[2] See Didaskalia, 8.17 and the Theater of War website.

[3] See Didaskalia 10.5, Didaskalia 10.6, and the New York Times review.

[4] "Casina and Samia in Malibu, California, U.S.A." Didaskalia 2.1 (1995)

[5] Gamel, quoted in www.sju.edu/int/academics/cas/resources/effieandbarbarians/source/Effie_Article.pdf (accessed January 2016)

[6] Program for Effie and the Barbarians. https://www.sju.edu/int/academics/cas/resources/effieandbarbarians/source/Effie_Program.pdf (accessed January 2016)

[7]Another indication that we devalue these performances is the lack of a public repository for their records. The members of the Committee on Ancient and Modern Performance pass down a list from chair to chair, but neither the committee nor the Society for Classical Studies has established a way to share that information.