

DIDASKALIA 

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 διδασκαλῖαι. *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 double blind, peer-reviewed scholarship on performance as well as reviews of the professional activity of artists and scholars who work on ancient drama.

We welcome submissions on any aspect of the field, and we provide a uniquely friendly venue for publishing sound, image, and video evidence. 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.

Current Staff

Editor-in-Chief:	Mike Lippman	editor@didaskalia.net +1 402 472-2460
		Post: <i>Didaskalia</i> Department of Classics and Religious Studies University of Nebraska-Lincoln 237 Andrews Hall Lincoln, NE 68588-0037 USA
Emerita Editor:	Amy R. Cohen	
Associate Editor:	C.W. (Toph) Marshall	
Assistant Editors: Interns, 2018:	Ethan Ostdiek Douglas DeBose II	assistant-editor@didaskalia.net intern@didaskalia.net

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Note

Didaskalia is an online journal. This print representation of Volume 14 is an inadequate approximation of the web publication at didaskalia.net, which includes sound, video, and live hyperlinks.

Review: *The Aristopanesathon*

Adapted and directed by Sean Graney
April 6 - May 27, 2018
The Hyocrites
The Chopin Theater
Chicago, Illinois

Reviewed by **Lizzy Ten-Hove**
Stanford University

Sean Graney's previous foray into Greek drama, *All Our Tragic* (reviewed by [Ruth Scodel](#) and by [Daniel Smith](#) in *Didaskalia* 11), was an adaptation of all surviving Greek tragedy into one twelve-hour marathon event. In the *Aristopanesathon*, he takes on a corpus that is both more and less unified. On the one hand, Graney is dealing with the work of a single author; on the other, the comedies lack the shared universe and web of family ties that are so integral to Greek mythology. In order to tie Aristophanes' heterogeneous works together into a cohesive four-hour theatrical event, Graney makes two major interventions. First, he takes a handful of the most prominent characters in the best-known comedies and makes them family members. Our heroine for the show's three acts is Praxagora (Kate Carson-Groner) of the *Ecclesiazusae*, daughter of the *Lysistrata*'s Myrrhine (Sasha Smith) and Cinesias (Breon Arzell) and niece of Lysistrata herself (Aja Wiltshire). Second, he transports the comedies into a hybridized mythological/historical space, an Athens ruled by Theseus (Arzell), engaged in the Trojan War, and entertained by Euripides (Kurt Ehrmann). Versions of Aristophanes' eleven surviving comedies play out across three acts and nearly forty-three years, resulting in a thoroughly entertaining evening, even if it lacks much of Aristophanes' characteristic bite.



Sappho (Tina Muñoz Pandya) enters to introduce the show.

(Credit: Lizzy Ten-Hove)

The performance takes place in the Chopin Theatre, an intimate, historic space with plenty of nooks and crannies to explore in the intermissions. The set, designed by Tom Burch, features the oversized, brightly colored word "Athens" — "in case you forget," as our master of ceremonies Sappho (played by Tina Muñoz Pandya) drily comments. The set offers a jaunty twist on the traditional skene building by nestling a central pair of double doors within the letter H. Even before the show starts, Burch makes clear that the show will combine the absurd and the historically grounded: a ludicrously large rack of shoes hangs to stage right, while a road sign informs us that Thebes is 89.7km to stage left. Both these frames loom larger as the play continues, with more shoes added to the rack to represent characters who have died, and Thebes' nebulous military and economic rivalry with Athens taking up increasingly more thematic space.

The show, as Sappho explains in song, is divided into three acts, each about 70 minutes long and adapting three or four of Aristophanes' plays, grouped according to thematic resonances. Each act is further punctuated by a shorter interval during which audience members are encouraged to stand and stretch while Sappho sings a stretching son and offers a different —terrible!— joke about shoes. Sappho's ukulele strumming, puns, and playful rapport with the audience offer a preview of the whimsical strain of humor to come. It's more silly than savage, and even the most politically pointed sections of the show are softened by a heightened optimism about humanity's potential.



Sasha Smith and Breon Arzell as Myrrhine and Cinesias

(Credit: John Taflan)

Our heroine, Praxagora, is the clearest proponent of this optimism from her first appearance as an eleven-year-old in act one ("The Flies"), adapting *Lysistrata*, *Peace*, and *Wealth*. Clad in a pussy hat, Lysistrata convinces her reluctant sister Myrrhine to join her in a sex strike protesting Athens' continual war against Thebes over some orange groves. Unlike Aristophanes' Lysistrata, Graney's version of the character is sexually innocent to the extreme, resulting in some painful attempts to seduce Cinesias ("Oops! My bweast crevasse is showing!"). Theba, queen of Thebes, is on board with Lysistrata's plan, and Cinesias and the king of Thebes find themselves needing to tote strategically placed pillows. Praxagora, meanwhile, makes her first foray into public life by persuading the Athenian treasurer, Purser Plutus (Ehrmann), to redistribute all the money intended for the war to Athens' poor, who promptly quit their jobs and allow Theban immigrants, led by America (Arzell), to buy up their businesses. In a finale drawn from the *Peace*, Lysistrata, Myrrhine, and Praxagora ride a pet dung beetle to defeat the ancient Lord of the Flies, whose demands for human blood have perpetuated generations of war.

The theme of anti-Theban sentiment provides a useful analogue to many contemporary manifestations of xenophobia. The emphasis on the fact that the Thebans are refugees recalls the ongoing Syrian refugee crisis, while Cleon's insistence on identifying and deporting Thebans (including, bizarrely, a tortoise) echoes the rise of ICE and anti-immigrant rhetoric in the United States. The denouement of the middle act, which involves the revelation that Cleon himself was born in Thebes, is a jarring quasi-affirmation of birtherism. At the same time, the conflation of Socrates with the Thebans struck me as a missed opportunity to comment on the currents of anti-intellectualism and the rejection of expertise that have accompanied xenophobic and racist movements in the US and abroad. Overall, the strong political engagement and particularly energetic performances from Wiltshire and Ehrmann during this act made it the most engaging of the show.

The final act, "This Ends Now" (*Frogs*, *Birds*, *Thesmophoriazusae*, and *Acharnians*), sees a weary fifty-four-year-old Praxagora coming to terms with a terminal illness. Euripides commits suicide after the council bans performances of his misogynistic play—the *Helen* in particular comes under frequent fire—and Myrrhine, well into a second career as an actress, journeys to the underworld to rescue him. While Omega and America fight over America's shady pay-for-play deal with the anti-regulation Acharnian Brothers, Praxagora dreams she has traveled to a particularly dark version of Cloudcukoaland in search of a cure for her illness. Where Aristophanes' birds learn to prevent sacrifices from reaching the gods, Graney's birds have been preventing human wishes from being fulfilled for thousands of years. Moreover, the "cure" Praxagora seeks is, in fact, another form of death. An uneasy tension between the bright silliness of Graney's style and the seriousness of his themes and messages are especially visible in the final act; I was left wishing that this tension had been more comprehensively resolved.



Muñoz Pandya as Agnodike

(Credit: John Taflan)

A small scene towards the end of "This Ends Now" encapsulates Graney's approach to the Aristophanic corpus and the limitations of that approach. In the underworld, Euripides has access to all future adaptations of his work—he mentions Sarah Ruhl and Carol Churchill, and enlists Myrrhine and Eurydice (Muñoz Pandya) in an ad hoc performance of part of Yara Travieso's *La Medea*. Euripides views these reimaginings not as derivative but as improvements on his own work, bringing especially his female characters more vividly to life than he was able to. The pathos of the scene is undercut by the cartoonish innocence that characterizes the whole play: Eurydice applauds delightedly and hopes in a childlike voice that she will remember it, before the scene shifts to America citing Euripides' "penis play" (the *Cyclops*) as a defining moment in his cultivation of the self-promoting, Odyssean hustle. Graney has skillfully updated Aristophanes' references and woven pieces of his plots together into a cohesive series of playful adventures. But he has also tamed the comedian's sheer cussedness into whimsy, and blunted the personal immediacy of the plays by transposing them to a quasi-mythological landscape.

Despite playing more goofball than hardball, *The Aristophanesathon* was a thorough delight, both for this Aristophanes nerd and for my companion, who was not familiar with any of the eleven plays. The falafel and donuts between acts weren't bad, either.