

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

Volume 14 (2018)

<http://didaskalia.net>
ISSN 1321-4853

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 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.

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Didaskalia is published at Univeristy of Nebraska-Lincoln.

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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.

Medea

Premiered on April 5, 2018
Deutsches Theater
Berlin, Germany
Reviewed by Thomas E. Jenkins
June 29, 2018

Production photos [here](#)

Medea. Stimmen (“*Medea: Voices*”), a cutting-edge dramatic reception of Euripides, couldn’t be more timely—or, alas, less theatrical. Adapted from arguably the most barnstorming play of antiquity, this strangely static *Medea* wends its way to Berlin’s Deutsches Theater through Crista Wolf’s celebrated novel of 1996, and is further adapted by Tilmann Köhler and Juliane Koepp to the contemporary stage. In some ways, this production’s inversion of the original narrative scheme—from Euripides’ crisply plotted sequences to Köhler’s dreamy monologues—is a harmonious matching of form and content, as Wolf (and Köhler) turn Euripides’s version inside out. Indeed, in this version, Euripides’ classic plot is presented as rumor—of *Medea* as witch, as fratricide, as filicide—while the “real” plot involves *Medea*’s cumulative misgivings about the royal court of her new homeland, Corinth. (This duality persists even as vicious rumors draw a noose around *Medea* as a barbarian outsider: it’s an obvious gesture towards the monstrosity, and efficacy, of modern “fake news.”) Wolf’s original novel, presented as a series of interlocking monologues by *Medea*, Jason, and the Corinthians, was widely read as an examination of the intersection of rumor and power under a surveillance regime, especially East Germany. The present dramatic version emphasizes a different aspect of the text—of *Medea* as migrant, indeed as refugee—and this mother’s homelessness resonates with current European (and North American) struggles with immigration and borderlands. It’s thus a *Medea* for our times, portraying the plight of a displaced woman, plagued by all of the West’s worst Orientalizing suspicions, and struggling to secure a future for her children. In this respect, *Medea. Stimmen* is a European companion piece to Los Angeles playwright Luis Alfaro’s terrific *Mojada* (2017), a version of *Medea* set in Southern California, which likewise maps contemporary concerns about immigration “back” onto antiquity. It’s also akin to Rachel Cusk’s modern-day and feminist *Medea* (2015), in which *Medea*, as an author and scriptwriter, employs the magic of “narrative” to exact a terrible revenge from her philandering husband.

But, oy. Whereas Alfaro's and Cusk's plays are zippy, propulsive evenings of theater, *Medea*. *Stimmen* is a very leisurely two-and-a-half hours, performed without an intermission. And there's surprisingly little recourse to visual effects, or indeed to much of a set. While Karoly Risz has contributed a striking initial design—the entire stage is covered by a pitch-black reflecting pool of water—the pleasures of that vision soon dissipate. (Yes, we understand that everything in Corinth is a swirling, kaleidoscopic reflection of everything else. Now, more set, please!) Besides chairs, a rope, and some puppets, there's just text—mountains and oceans of text—and here's where the evening falters. Clearly, the adapters have made some effort to convert the novel's eleven monologues into dialogues, and there are nods towards something like real interaction. But all too often characters simply face the audience and declaim, even when there are other characters on stage. And because of the monologic structure, characters often disappear for long stretches of the evening, banished to the rim, or shore, of the stage.

The good news is that the contours of Wolf's complex novel are fairly easy to follow, since so much of the plot is simply expounded to, or at, the audience. At first, the quest narrative seems resolutely classical, even canonical. Details from Apollonius' *Argonautica* provide the mythological backdrop as we follow the gathering of Argonauts to capture the Golden Fleece from the furthest shores of Colchis; we discover as well the fateful elopement of princess Medea with captain Jason—and the equally fateful death of Medea's brother Absyrtus. (Nods especially to Seneca and Ovid, here.) But whereas Euripides' stage play centers on just a sliver of Medea's life—her impassioned altercation with Jason, her curious interview with Aegeus, and the murder of her children—Wolf's narrative covers a far greater swathe of Medea's post-exilic existence among the Corinthians. Even as Jason entertains an affair with Glauce, the daughter of Corinth's King Creon, Wolf's *Medea* investigates an entirely innovated plot, in multiple senses: the previous sacrifice of Creon's daughter Iphinoe, the buried (and suppressed) trauma of the house, whose death causes Queen Merope—an unseen character—to become completely unhinged. That fracture provides further opportunity for political maneuvering, represented by the astrologers Akamas and Leukon, who manipulate both rumor and prophecy as part of a *Game of Thrones*-esque subplot. (Swept up in this plot is Agamedea, Medea's sometime protégée and now bitter foe.) By expanding Euripides' domestic plot into profound Realpolitik, Wolf makes clear the social and ideological sweep of her whisper-filled *Medea*.

But this stage adaptation, by including so many characters but so few real “scenes,” also makes for an overstuffed and occasionally exasperating evening of theater—which is a shame, because the cast is nothing if not game. As Glauke, Creon’s epileptic daughter, Kathleen Morgeneyer steals the show by floundering literally in the water, and then floundering metaphorically as she realizes the grim intrigues that destroyed her sister—and her own childhood. Maren Eggert is a sympathetic Medea who holds her own and the stage: no mean feat through so long an evening (and in so much water). Eggert well conveys Medea’s sheer doggedness in probing the death of hapless Iphinoe. Her detective work reignites the suffering in both Glauke and her mother Merope, and indeed, Medea seems figured here not a witch, but as an oh-so-German psychoanalyst, uncovering the repressed secrets of a pre-Oedipal family. Jason (Edgar Eckert) comes off as an affable doofus, too thick to notice the nefarious machinations in his own fiancée’s house. The two astrologers and the prodigal daughter Agameda (Helmut Mooshammer, Thorsten Hierse, and Lisa Hrdina) represent the political threats both within and without the immigrant Colchian community.

In many ways, the actors are dwarfed by the overarching production design, which features some surprising overlaps with other receptions of classical antiquity on the stage. The omnipresent pool recalls Mary Zimmerman’s use of a swimming pool in her famous Broadway adaptation of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*, a particularly effective setting for myths in which water is often a catalyst for change, whether into flora (e.g., Narcissus), flesh (Midas and his daughter), or, most chillingly, a corpse (Ceyx). Risz’s more sprawling yet shallow pool—about ankle-deep—is clearly intended to reflect the barrier of the (literally) Black Sea, and it works well in that respect. Its secondary purpose—to reflect and distort the images of the characters—works well for a few scenes, but eventually loses its efficacy: a little sloshing goes a long way. The production’s incorporation of puppets likewise glances at trends in contemporary reception, especially Julie Taymor’s puppet-filled *Oedipus Rex* (1993), an astounding adaptation of Stravinsky’s oratorio. In Taymor’s version, puppets function as archetypes of “primitive” myth (for instance, Jocasta-as-Cycladic-figurine, or a Sphinx disintegrating into moldering flesh); sometimes, the puppets represent the all-too-horrific “real” world, such as vultures that pick at the corpses of the dead. For Medea, puppet designers Franziska Stiller, Karen Schulze, and Andreas Müller have opted to present the unheard children as articulated puppets, who appear at various moments as the doomed offspring of both Colchis and Corinth, including Iphinoe, Medea’s boys, and Medea’s brother, whose *disjecta membra* lie scattered over the Black Sea. (It’s the best moment of the evening: the sprinkled limbs float like breadcrumbs leading to a murky, primordial crime.) This visual design is complemented by a newly composed soundscape by Jörg-Martin Wagner; though full of percussive effects, including drums and chimes, it seemed insufficiently motivated by the dramatic action, and could have been cut without injury.

There was a moment in the first hour of the evening when I thought that *Medea. Stimmen* might really capitalize on its current political moment, as *Medea*, refugee and mother, notes that the thriving Corinthians are content to welcome the foreigners as long as brown-skinned folk mingle with those already on the outskirts of the polis—in other words, as long as the population swells, but its political power doesn't. It's a cynical take on barbarism and oligarchy, I think, but a perceptive one, as the immigration debate plays out in the United States and beyond. I just wish that the rest of the production had made a more persuasive case for the dramatization of Wolf's book. However novel the stagecraft, *Medea. Stimmen* remains, even on stage, a novel.