



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 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 305 Louise Pound Hall Lincoln, NE 68588-0037 USA
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Luis Alfaro, *Mojada*

Directed by Chay Yew
July 2–August 8, 2019
The Public Theater
New York, New York, USA

Reviewed by Emily Jusino
niversity of Rochester

Mojada is Luis Alfaro's powerful and moving adaptation of Euripides' *Medea*. It follows his earlier adaptation of the same material, *Bruja*, which (like Euripides' play) stressed Medea's persona as a sorceress who has access to supernatural powers. However, with *Mojada*, Alfaro has largely moved away from the supernatural elements of Euripides' play and *Bruja* to focus on Medea as an immigrant and outsider who is unable to adapt to her new homeland and yet also unable to return home. Medea is a Mexican immigrant in the United States without legal status, a fact reflected in the title Alfaro has chosen, *Mojada* – in context, a derogatory term for an undocumented immigrant that means, roughly, "wetback." The title highlights an aspect of Euripides's *Medea* (who is also an immigrant and an outsider) that does not always receive emphasis in modern productions of Euripides' play.

The play opens by establishing that Medea (Sabina Irga Varela) and other members of her household – her common-law husband, Jason (Alex Hernandez), their son, Acan (Benjamin Luis McCracken), and Medea's childhood nursemaid, Tita (Socorro Santiago) – live as undocumented immigrants in New York City. While her husband and son have begun to assimilate to American culture, Medea keeps herself isolated from the world and tries to maintain her Mexican traditions. Although she is befriended by a local Puerto Rican woman, Luisa (Vanessa Aspillaga), she otherwise has little interaction with people outside her household. As the play progresses, growing tensions between Medea and Jason come to a crisis when he marries his boss, Pilar (Ada Maris), as a way of securing legal status for himself and his son, and Pilar uses her power to evict Medea from her new home. In her desperation Medea kills Pilar, Acan, and (depending on how one reads the ambiguous ending) perhaps herself.



Jason, Tita, and Medea: Jason (Hernandez) takes a call while Tita (Santiago) watches and Medea (Varela) sews in the background.

The entire cast delivered strong, compelling, and believable performances. McCracken's youthful positivity and almost chirpy voice highlighted Acan's innocence and vitality. Aspillaga's Luisa was a non-stop ball of energy, even during her character's sad moments. Santiago's Tita demonstrated the resilience, wit, and wisdom that comes with age and years of coping with difficult circumstances. Both Tita and Luisa give the early scenes a light-hearted, even humorous air. Maris played Pilar with a hardened, feminine edge that reflected both her determination and the arguably cutthroat attitude that enabled her success. Hernandez rose to the challenge of Jason by making him likeable and sympathetic throughout the play despite his betrayal of Medea. (On an amusing note, there were murmurs of appreciation from the audience when Jason took his shirt off.) Finally, Varela is well seasoned in the role of Medea, having played her before in the Oregon Shakespeare Festival's and Getty's productions of *Mojada*, and it shows. Her Medea is simply heart breaking. These performances created two moments which elicited gasps of shock from the audience: when Jason revealed that he had married Pilar and when Medea appeared onstage covered in her son's blood.

The play is quite consciously set in the immediate present, in both time and space. Alfaro, who regularly situates his plays in the here and now, has tailored it to its current production location, New York City. Jason and Medea live in Corona, a majority Hispanic neighborhood in the borough of Queens, between Jackson Heights and Flushing. The play also incorporates references to Bill De Blasio, the current mayor of New York City, and to Coney Island. To reinforce the specific location, the play opens with the sounds of an elevated subway train – presumably the 7 train, which creates a distinctive soundtrack for the neighborhoods it passes through, including Corona.

The set itself is the back of a two-level, slightly worn-looking house, with elements of everyday life scattered around and a sewing machine on one side. Events in the home's yard are confined to the platform on which the house sits. During the flashbacks to events which happened before the play's beginning, the action ranges across the full width of the stage beyond the platform's boundaries. At one point, this demarcation is used effectively to explain Medea's inability to leave her home: she steps off the platform in an attempt to leave, but turns back immediately, because she is overwhelmed by the memories of her traumatic border crossing. To convey her internal experience to the audience, as soon as she steps off the platform, the lighting dims and the audience hears audio from Medea's memories, as if the audience is sharing her internal experience.

Over the course of the play, the audience gradually learns why Medea and her family left Mexico, what happened on their harrowing journey across the border, and how they created a new life for themselves in New York. Instead of one character narrating these events like a Greek chorus would, the backstory is recounted variously by Medea, Jason, and Tita in a series of monologues interspersed throughout the play. These monologues are extraordinarily effective, in part because the characters re-enact the stories as they are narrated. These flashbacks are indicated to the audience by simple lighting and staging changes, and are evocative in their minimalism. Their content is equally compelling. According to Alfaro himself, in his lecture at the *Society of Classical Studies* Annual Meeting in January 2019, he based the events of the family's border crossing from Mexico on a real woman's story, including one of its most awful elements, Medea's gang rape by soldiers. Alfaro's Medea has clearly been traumatized by her journey, and as a result suffers from what appears to be a form of agoraphobia that prevents her from leaving her home. Although her trauma is easy to understand, the play never explains why it did not manifest itself earlier in their journey, or when they first arrived in New York before settling in Corona.

Partly because of her trauma, Medea is unwilling and/or unable to integrate into her new world. In the meantime, Jason is embracing his new home and is willing to take advantage of any and all opportunities to achieve some security for himself and his family. The tension between Jason and Medea is manifested through their interactions with Acan. At the beginning of the play, Medea is teaching him traditional rituals to recall their homeland.¹ Jason, however, encourages him to use English and call him "Dad" rather than the Spanish "Papi" and to wear a USA soccer jersey instead of a Mexican one, a change with which Medea clearly disagrees, even if she does not push back against it. Whereas Medea is fearful that Acan will forget their homeland and traditions, Jason sees more value in looking forwards.

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Medea and Acan: Medea (Varela) teaches Acan (McCracken) the ritual to summon the sounds of their homeland in the backyard of their house.

The play repeatedly emphasizes the struggle of the immigrant, while also tacitly acknowledging that the struggle is greater for some than for others. One character comments that immigrants work hard for little money and destroy their bodies in the process. Both of the major characters outside Medea’s family, Luisa and Pilar, have also been displaced from their original homes. Luisa is from Puerto Rico and was compelled to leave because of the hardships caused by Hurricane Maria, while Pilar fled Castro’s Cuba on a harrowing boat journey. Significantly, however, neither woman has had to navigate being undocumented as Medea has: Puerto Ricans are citizens of the United States, and Pilar immigrated at a time when any Cuban, documented or not, who arrived in the United States was eligible to apply for legal residency after one year.

Despite Medea’s isolation and trauma, she is not without useful skills. In Euripides’ play, Medea is a sorceress of sorts. In *Mojada*, her magic lies in her remarkable talent as a seamstress, which enables her to earn a little money as a garment worker by sewing clothing in her backyard at a piece rate. (Although this characterization is an intrinsic part of Alfaro’s script and not an adjustment made to ground the location in New York, it dovetails with the fact that

garment working has been one of the most important jobs for immigrant women in the New York City from the 19th century onwards.²⁾ Moreover, her sewing skills facilitate her revenge against Pilar: Medea sews a beautiful dress for her under the pretext that her son has asked her to do so, but in it she hides a straight pin laced with a deadly poison.

Medea’s sewing skills help draw attention to how costume choices, particularly for Medea and Pilar, reflect the play’s focus on the tension between tradition and assimilation. Although the play establishes that Medea has the skill to create beautiful clothes, she herself always wears the same outfit, a plain white dress with a simple bodice and loose, mid-calf-length skirt. Her hair is worn long and loose. Her appearance creates a striking visual contrast with Pilar that illustrates the tensions that underlie Jason’s betrayal, between tradition and homeland on the one hand and assimilation and ambition on the other. We first meet Pilar as she comes to Jason and Medea’s home for dinner. In this scene Medea wears her white dress, but she has wrapped a colorful shawl around her shoulders, which reads as simultaneously festive, self-protective, and traditional. On the other hand, Pilar presents herself as a chic American businesswoman. Her hair is short and smartly styled, and her outfit is structured and tailored to her body.



Medea, Pilar, and Jason: Medea (Varela) and Jason (Hernandez) invite Pilar (Maris) over for dinner.

For much of the play, neither Medea’s nor Jason’s love for one another and for their son is deniable. Their bonds emphasize the tragedy in the destruction of this family, which results from the stresses of being undocumented immigrants. Although we can see some rifts in Medea and Jason’s relationship, she clearly feels it is secure until he reveals his marriage to Pilar. Her confidence makes Jason’s betrayal seem all the more harsh and difficult to justify, especially after he tacitly admits to having sex with Pilar despite his protestations that the marriage is purely a business decision. It is also difficult to miss the selfishness of Jason’s claims that this marriage helps them all. It will enable him and their son to gain legal status, but not Medea, whom it leaves in an even more precarious situation than before. From the audience’s perspective, it is unclear whether Jason anticipated Pilar’s demand that Medea leave, but he has clearly made no provisions to protect her. This lack of clarity invites the audience to speculate that perhaps he

himself feels equally threatened by Pilar's power and his own undocumented status, even if he never admits to that.

Similarly, Medea's obvious love for her son makes her murder of him all the more tragic. Her decision to kill Acan, difficult as it is to understand, flows from the impossible position in which she finds herself. She is a woman who has reached the end of endurance and literally has nowhere left to go. Her journey to the United States has left her isolated and traumatized, without the money or health insurance to seek treatment for that trauma. She is being driven from a home that she cannot leave without relapsing into a state of paralyzing fear. Moreover, she finds herself wholly ostracized because Pilar not only takes away her husband, son, and home, but also attacks her relationships with the community, symbolized by Luisa. Earlier in the play, Luisa repeatedly seeks Medea's help and refers to her as "Sister." However, Luisa will now do nothing for her, because she does not want to antagonize Pilar, who has offered her space to open a churro shop. Most importantly, Pilar uses Medea's undocumented status against her by threatening to call ICE if Medea tries to take Acan with her, saying that ICE will deport her and throw Acan into a cage (another example of Alfaro updating his play to reflect contemporary circumstances). This threat played to great effect in the audience because it references the United States' real and ongoing violations of Latin American immigrants' human rights. Medea's undocumented status heightens her vulnerability among those people who are willing to use it against her for their own ends.

Even so, Medea's decision to kill her son is shocking because it is wholly unexpected. Up to the murder itself, the play has remained focused on how Medea herself will survive, and does not imply that she will be a threat to her child. Unlike Euripides' Medea, Alfaro's heroine does not debate or even mention her decision out loud before acting on it. Instead, despite her inability to leave the house, she tells Tita that she and Acan will return home to Mexico. It is initially unclear whether she will actually try to leave or is delusional: at this moment her emotional state appears unstable, and it seems plausible that she has lost all sense of what is real. She proceeds slowly up the stairs to the house's back door and on her way picks up the machete that Tita used earlier to kill a rat. After she enters the house, the sounds of the train drown out the noises of the offstage murder. The question of Medea's mental state is never resolved: are her choices rational or is she unaware of what she is doing? Whereas the audience of Euripides' *Medea* knows exactly Medea's reasoning behind her decision to kill her children, Alfaro's Medea is much more enigmatic in this moment. She could be delusional; she could be rational; she could be reacting without thinking as a result of her trauma, the intractability of her situation, and her desire to return home with her son, metaphorically if not physically.

The ending itself is ambiguous. After killing her son, Medea emerges covered in blood onto the second-story back porch and performs a ritual with banana leaves, which she had taught to Acan at the beginning of the play and is supposed to recall the sounds of home. As Medea drops the banana leaves to the ground, there is a blackout and Medea disappears from stage. We assume she jumps from the balcony. When the lights come up, Tita is showing a new couple around the house and hears the call of a guaco (the laughing falcon), which is, as the play established earlier, a call Medea herself would imitate. Tita looks around, simultaneously haunted by it and unable to find it. The audience can see Medea off the house's platform, where she makes the bird call in growing distress until the show ends. We are left to wonder whether Medea actually committed suicide and Tita is haunted by guilt or if, as Medea jumped, she turned into a bird, in keeping with the outcome of so many Greek myths (although not that of Euripides' Medea). In the end, it is difficult for the audience not to feel at least some sympathy with Medea and her sufferings – especially since we can see and almost feel her visceral pain in the final scene – even as we struggle to accept her final choices.

NOTES

¹These rituals seem to be the strongest holdover from the earlier *Bruja*. The play implies that Medea can use the ritual to summon the sounds of their home in Mexico. The audience can hear these sounds, but the play is ambiguous as to whether we are to interpret them as real or if we are hearing what the characters imagine in their minds (as in the flashbacks), since the play uses audio effects in both ways.

²For more information on women and the garment industry in New York City, see Chin's book in Further Reading.

FURTHER READING

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