

DIDASKALIA 

The Journal for Ancient Performance



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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 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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Note

Didaskalia is an online journal. This print representation of Volume 8 is an inadequate approximation of the web publication at didaskalia.net, which includes sound, video, and live hyperlinks.

45th Season of Classical Plays at the Greek Theatre in Syracuse: Euripides's *Medea*, Sophocles's *Oedipus at Colonus*

Reviewed by **Caterina Barone**
University of Padova

Medea

The ship Argo, which brought Jason to Colchis in his quest for the Golden Fleece, its sails a harbinger of death; or a temple to *sophia*, the “wisdom” which characterises Medea as a dangerous woman, different from others—these are only two of the possible impressions evoked in this staging of *Medea* by the stately and beautiful set designed by Massimiliano and Doriana Fuksas for the 45th season of classical plays at the Greek Theatre in Sicilian Syracuse. A sort of cast-iron truncated cone, built with inter-bolted geometrical panels, reflects the white space of the orchestra and, for Euripides's tragedy, bears letters of the Greek alphabet and forms of the ancient Mycenaean linear script, among which a red M stands out. The set is a strong technological sign in its proportions, sealing the boundaries of the area in which, by antiphrastic contrast, passions explode. On the left of the stage stands a withered, leafless tree being climbed by an imperfectly erect ape-man: an effigy of mankind in its primordial and savage stage, not yet supported by the *logos* and unable to tame the feral instincts of its nature—foreshadowing the fierce heart of the Colchidean sorceress herself.

Medea is shown from the very beginning as a barbarous and violent woman, indomitable even in her suffering and in her difficult condition as a repudiated wife and rejected foreigner. With shrill and strangled modulations of her voice (which do not always seem calculated), actress Elisabetta Pozzi expresses the offence that burns in the heart of the protagonist and which exposes her to the laughter of her enemies. In this production, Medea's relationship with Jason is carnal, scorching and maddened, reminiscent of the lacerating relationships of Strindberg's bourgeois dramas in the bodily contact of the two actors, consisting of wild embraces and wild blows, and in verbal aggressions driven to the extreme. Beneath this violence glow the smothered embers of a passion that has degenerated into hatred towards the hero of the Golden Fleece. Jason is played vigorously by Maurizio Donadoni, but perhaps with too-frequent reliance on uncontrollable screams to convey the strongest emotions, even in the final cry, when Jason, by now a living corpse devoid of a future after the death of his children, is swallowed by the trapdoor of the Charonian staircase.

In this context, the perfidy of Medea and her malicious cunning, resting more on her extraordinary



Medea

Euripides's *Medea*, Greek Theatre, Syracuse, 2009: Elisabetta Pozzi as Medea; Simonetta Cartia, Chiara Catera, Carmelinda Gentile, Manuela Giangrasso, Doriana La Fauci, Valeria Lombardo, Niriyis Pouscoulous, Katia Principato, Gabriella Riva in the Chorus; set design by Massimiliano and Doriana Fuksas.



Elisabetta Pozzi as Medea; Simonetta Cartia, Chiara Catera, Carmelinda Gentile, Manuela Giangrasso, Doriana La Fauci, Valeria Lombardo, Niriyis Pouscoulous, Katia Principato, Gabriella Riva in the Chorus

intellect than on magical powers, is obscured by the sanguinary traits of her character. Moreover, her relationship with the chorus of Corinthian women fails to convey her status as an outsider, a *xene* within a Greek society highly suspicious of the barbarian. The chorus is too hieratic and detached in its movements around the protagonist; it does not participate in her sufferings or recoil in horror when she decides to kill her children, a decision she executes without concern for the support of other women. "I shall reveal my plans to you, even though you will not like them," states Medea, and in this she is very different from another betrayed heroine, Deianira, who in the *Trachiniae* of Sophocles asks the chorus for counsel regarding the enactment of her plan to regain the love of her husband Heracles.



Giorgio Albertazzi as Oedipus and Maurizio Donadoni as Creon

The overall staging of the play lacks strong direction: Krzysztof Zanussi does not fully explore the theme of the foreigner, shared by this season's plays at Syracuse, nor does he search the depths of Medea's soul or exploit the full potential of the set. The large reflecting surface, on which the protagonist casts a mirror image at times deformed and enlarged into a menacing, dark shape, could have been employed to emphasize the theme of the double, stressing Medea's intellectual duplicity in deceiving Creon and Jason as well as her emotional conflict during her lacerating inner struggle before killing her children. By the same token, the finale, which gratifies the audience's lust for spectacle when Medea appears above the palace among clouds of smoke, riding a chariot / golden disc of light, could have been avoided in favor of an equally effective but less trite solution: simply projecting a light on that glossy surface to represent the shining chariot of the Sun.

The costumes, inspired by the iconography of ancient Greek vases, were expressive and marked by refined elegance, ranging in color from the pastel tones of the chorus to the brown and golden of the royal mantles: garments designed to define the role rather than the *physis* of characters. Medea's clothes are an exception. A broad, austere, black mantle, covered by a halo-headpiece, hides and progressively reveals the true nature of the sorceress, employing the strong colours of her homeland, the east: petroleum green, blue, gold, and burnished silver.

Intense and notable music accompanied the key moments of the play in a crescendo: a fusion of the echoes of Mediterranean musical traditions, North African monophonic music, and the modalities of Gregorian chant and plainsong, blending with chilling metallic background sounds from the stage.

Oedipus at Colonus

In the *Oedipus at Colonus*, the stage set designed by the Fuksases is rather more livid and disquieting, deprived of the black letters and faced by a low barren little hill: a place consecrated to the Eumenides, a final destination after the long and painful exile of the Theban king, the involuntary assassin of his father and husband of his mother, now an outcast suppliant, but still charismatic in his proud endurance of undeserved sufferings.

The whiteness of the scene, rendered dazzling by the play of reflections on mirror surfaces, is broken by the colours of the costumes: mainly black or various hues of grey, as seen in the humble rags of Oedipus and his daughters, Antigone and Ismene, the clothes worn by the chorus of elderly inhabitants of Colonus who advance leaning on staffs with their faces covered by masks, and the mantle and armour of King Theseus. A significant chromatic variation is provided by the Erinyes—slender maidens with long black hair, wearing skin-coloured body suits—and by Creon and his red-and-black-cloaked thugs.

Oedipus's old age is characterised by the weakness of a body maimed by blindness and enfeebled by deprivations, but still capable of expressing the energy necessary to carry out the final act of his existence, to face Creon's violence and to answer Polynices' request for help. Both Creon and Polynices wish to obtain Oedipus's body as a defence against their enemies: not from any feelings of compassion, love or respect for the old king, but only from a desire to exploit the power of his lacerated *soma*. It is King Theseus who, with calm magnanimity, offers rightful hospitality to the foreign suppliant, remembering his own past as an exile and his human condition. "I am a man, and my power over the days to come is no greater than yours," he says to Oedipus.

Daniele Salvo's direction is analytical and well aimed, managing to give dynamism and interest to a tragic play rather poor in events and based on the philosophical interpretation of Oedipus's destiny, on the ultimate meaning of his suffering and of the atrocious twists of his fate. The motionless centrality of the old king is relieved by the revolving chorus, which in this tragedy is a deuteragonist of sorts, in slow but constant motion through well-planned choreographic trajectories and graceful tableaux reflected to great effect by the set.

This search for dynamism runs through the whole play, producing results which are at times necessary and plausible but at others purely showy. In the scenes of Creon's arrival and of the abduction of Antigone and Ismene, the brutality of the aggressors is set against the violent but impotent reaction of the old king, who furiously and desperately swings his staff in a crescendo of dramatic tension before falling to the ground, exhausted and defeated. On the other hand, scenes such as the arrival of Theseus on horseback or the irruption of the soldiers bearing torches to light the braziers on the sides of the orchestra, seem to pander to the crudest expectations of the audience, who greeted them with enthusiastic applause. The final scene, the death of Oedipus, narrated in the text by means of the *rhesis anghelikè* of the messenger, was staged with particular vividness of colors and iconography. In the supreme moment of his passing, the hero stands in a whirl of reddish reflections before the trapdoor of the Charonian staircase, which is lit from below among plumes of smoke. He goes to die on the low hill, supported and eventually engulfed by the redeeming embrace of the Eumenides: a closing image so orderly and intense as to render the previous visual effects superfluous.

With his stately old age and his perfect control over voice and gesture, always measured but powerful, Giorgio Albertazzi incarnates Oedipus rather than simply playing him. The director's choice regarding the expressiveness of Antigone, on the other hand, is not fully convincing. While surpassing the emotional impact of traditional performances by stressing the young woman's suffering and her feeling of being lost (rather than her heroic courage), the gestures adopted to render her distress and that of her sister Ismene are excessively reminiscent of mental alienation, and sometimes almost of daemonic possession. The same can be said of the chorus: its members, their masked faces creating an atmosphere of death in apparent allusion to the work Tadeus Kantor, are sometimes shown in a state of trance to signify the ritual and sacred aura surrounding the events.

The Fuksases' stage setting is used to its full potential; Daniele Salvo compares it, for its density of meaning, to the monolith in Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*. It is a radioactive place where the individual goes astray, similar to an ancient sacred *temenos*. It reflects the movements of the characters and of the Chorus, and is deliberately designed to create mysterious and disturbing images. Thanks to a skilful play of light, the "monolith" shifts in appearance and in meaning, becoming livid and gelid as it represents the cold northern landscapes in the touching third stasimon, where the hopeless reference to old age and the ideal of never being born culminate in the image of the old man beaten by the waves and storms of life like a sunless northern cliff.

The music ranges from ritual rhythms to "romantic" melodies sometimes reminiscent of Hollywood soundtracks.