

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 9 (2012)

<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 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 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.

2011 Staff

Editor-in-Chief:	Amy R. Cohen	editor@didaskalia.net +1 434 947-8117
		Post: <i>Didaskalia</i> Randolph College 2500 Rivermont Avenue Lynchburg, VA 24503 USA
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Didaskalia is published at Randolph College.

DIDASKALIA
VOLUME 9 (2012)
TABLE OF CONTENTS

9.01	Risk-taking and Transgression: Aristophanes' <i>Lysistrata</i> Today Michael Ewans and Robert Phiddian	1
9.02	Review: <i>Lysistrata Jones</i> John Given	10
9.03	Review: <i>Alexis, A Greek Tragedy</i> Aktina Stathaki	14
9.04	Review: <i>The Complete Works of Sophocles (Rebridged): These Seven Sicknesses</i> George Kovacs	17
9.05	Review: <i>The Women from Trachis</i> at the University of Michigan Amy Pistone	24
9.06	Review: <i>Imagining and Imaging the Chorus: A Study of the Physicality, Movement, and Composition of the Chorus in A.R.T.'s <i>Ajax</i></i> Viviane Sophie Klein	27
9.07	Review: <i>The Oresteia</i> at Carleton College Eric Dugdale	31
9.08	Review: <i>Euripides' Bacchae</i> at the Greek Theatre in Syracuse Ralph Covino and John Serrati	38
9.09	Review: 48th Season of Classical Plays at the Greek Theatre in Syracuse: <i>Aeschylus's Prometheus, Euripides' Bacchae, and Aristophanes' The Birds</i> Caterina Barone	44
9.10	Up Close and Personal: Encountering Ancient Drama through Performance Eric Dugdale	48
9.11	Review: <i>Sophocles' Elektra</i> at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival Ruth Scodel	59
9.12	Review: <i>Sophocles' Elektra</i> at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival Dana E. Aspinall	61
9.13	"First catch your satyrs" — A Practical Approach to <i>The Satyr-Play(-Like?)</i> Anthony Stevens	64
9.14	Review: <i>Euripides' Iphigenia at Aulis</i> (Estonian: <i>Iphigenia Aulises</i>) in Tallinn, Estonia Laura Viidebaum	84
9.15	Interview: Douglass Parker Laura Drake	91

Note

Didaskalia is an online journal. This print representation of Volume 9 is an inadequate approximation of the web publication at didaskalia.net, which includes sound, video, and live hyperlinks.

Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* (Estonian: *Iphigenia Aulises*)

Translated by Anne Lill
 Directed by Lorna Marshall
 Performed by NO99
 March – September 2012
 (reviewed performance: March 20, 2012)
 Tallinn, Estonia

Review by Laura Viidebaum
Cambridge University

On 17 March 2012, a popular and progressive theatre group in Estonia, NO99, under the supervision of the British director Lorna Marshall, premiered their production of Euripides' *Iphigenia at Aulis* (IA) in Estonia. While this is not the first time Greek tragedy was performed in Estonia, it was still a landmark production of Ancient Greek drama in Estonian theatre.

Theatre is a very popular cultural medium in Estonia, which is one of the smallest countries in the EU: there are currently more than 20 professional theatrical groups that are (at least partly) supported by the state. The country practises a form of institutionalised theatre, which recently, in the light of widespread economic problems, has been viewed more and more as a successful model for other countries. Estonia's subsidised theatre companies operate with stable groups (fixed actors) and produce plays in their own theatre buildings (in contrast to a project-based theatre system), often developing thus a clear niche in the field. Because of this policy, most of the popular troupes have acquired and maintained throughout their existence ardent supporters in the contemporary strands in drama they have adopted (e.g., realism in the National Drama Theatre, experimental theatre in the Von Krahl Theatre, etc.).



Figure 1: Klytaimnestra (Mirtel Pohla, in black) and Iphigenia (Eva Klements, in white) (photo: Siim Reispass)

NO99 also has a stable theatre house and its own clear niche: socio-political theatre. In 2012 the company reduced their numbers and operates now with seven actors. Since its official establishment in 2004, NO99's repertoire has been very wide, covering original productions, film adaptations, improvisational projects, and close readings of various classics. For instance, in 2005 NO99 adapted Yukio Mishima's work (NO99 *Sometimes It Feels As If Life Is Ending and That There Hasn't Been Any Love At All*),¹ followed by, among others plays, an adaptation of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress* (NO98), McDonagh's *Pillowman* (NO97), Chekhov's *Cherry Orchard* (NO95), Cimino's *Deer Hunter* (NO90), Toompere's *The Death of a Communist* (NO87), and the political and provocative performances (written and produced by NO99's director Tiit Ojasoo and art director Ene-Liis Semper) *Oil* (NO93), *GEP* (NO88), and *How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare* (NO83). More recently, NO99 has brought to the stage Michael Frayn's *Noises Off* (NO73), an adaptation of Stephen King's *Misery* (NO68), and Lauri Lagle's *The Great Tuck In* (NO65), which was inspired by Ferrer's movie *La Grande Bouffe*. This highly selective short list gives a glimpse of the company's distinctive trademark—every production bears a number that counts down from 99 (NO is

an abbreviation of 'number'), which underscores the limited duration of the theatre project. According to some sources, this idea was originally inspired by an essay of Hasso Krull, an Estonian poet and novelist who suggested that time should be counted down from the end of the universe (i.e., from the death of the sun).²

Because of their ambitious projects that often make use of high-quality props and high-tech solutions (e.g., they always launch a trailer to introduce the play, including a trailer for Euripides' *IA*: <http://vimeo.com/41829177>), NO99 usually has a rather expensive budget for their plays. In the case of *Iphigenia*, however, the bare stage and simple costumes probably kept costs quite low. The venue for the production of Euripides' *IA* itself is rather intimate (even in Estonian terms), accommodating only a small audience (164 people at maximum). With roughly a dozen performances, this play was viewed by roughly 2000 people in Estonia.

NO66 (Euripides' *IA*) is the first ancient tragedy performed by this theatre company. In fact, starting from the Estonian Independence in 1991 there have been perhaps half a dozen performances based directly on an ancient play, but Euripides seems not to have been produced in this period before NO66 (there was, however, a production of the *Bacchae* in 1989). A previous performance of a Greek tragedy (Sophokles' *Antigone*) was mounted in 2010, also produced by a foreign director, Homayun Ghanizadeh (Iran). The scarcity of ancient plays on the Estonian stage suggests a lack of interest in such material perhaps best explained by Professor Anne Lill, an expert in Ancient Greek theatre and translator at the University of Tartu. In a 2009 interview she argues that 'the situation in Estonia does not apparently encourage this art form [Greek tragedy]. The cultural background is different [here] and the layers of cultural knowledge scarce. Greek tragedy is a demanding genre and requires profound knowledge and familiarity from those engaged with it. The audience there [in other European countries] is more interested [in this art form], because their education has created a fertile basis for appreciating ancient Greek tragedy.'³

Lill hints here at a dilemma confronting Estonian theatre producers: the lack of a wider and more pervasive tradition in Ancient Greek performance genres, and hence of audience familiarity with them, may make Estonian theatre directors hesitate to introduce an ancient play. Even though the general school system requires most pupils to read at least Sophokles' *Oidipus Tyrannos* during their A-level studies, contemporary cultural life in Estonia is neither built upon nor encourages a familiarity with classics. In other words, a wider interest in Ancient Greek theatre is just not part of artistic and literary



Figure 2: Menelaos (Rasmus Kaljujärv, left) and Agamemnon (Tambet Tuisk, right) (photo: Siim Reispass)



Figure 3: Chorus (Marika Vaarik) (photo: Siim Reispass)

culture in Estonia, where the study of classics is almost unknown to most people, even those holding a university degree. But the evident resonance of NO99's *IA* with the audience demonstrated very clearly the vast, and terribly unused, potential of Greek tragedy on the Estonian stage.

Since there was no previous Estonian translation of Euripides' *IA*, a translation was commissioned from Prof. Anne Lill specifically for this performance. The literal translation follows the Greek rhythms closely, in both the choral and the spoken parts of the play. The variation of short and long vowels in Estonian allows a versification that approximates the effect of Ancient Greek meters, which are essentially based on the interplay between the lengths of syllables. The Estonian translation uses iambic trimeters and trochaic tetrameters in the dialogue sections and various Aeolic metres in the choral parts, without distorting the natural flow of the language.⁴

Since the Estonian audience, who is generally unaware of the conventions among Estonian classicists for rendering Greek meters into Estonian, might have expected verses in poetic rhyme, it seemed possible that they would feel estranged by listening to Greek rhythmic patterns in Estonian. This fear, however, was unjustified. Even though the translation followed the original in both wording and content, the performed text was still a recognisable adaptation, substituting archaisms and metrical but difficult passages with more commonly used words and expressions. In other words, the actors attempted to find a good balance between poetic language and clear content, even if it came at the expense of the meter. Hence, though the metrical translation was not always followed with great care in performance, the overall impression of a poetic text was still maintained.

It was also useful that the complete translation of the play was printed in the playbill, along with good photos of the performance and an introduction not only to the play but also to the more general background of the characters and the mythological theme.⁵ Indeed, it was an unexpectedly rich playbill and entirely worth its cost of only a couple of euros.

The advertised fidelity to the original text was, I dare say, unique among (professional) performances of the ancient Greek drama in Estonia. Indeed, one of the most vivid earlier productions of ancient Greek tragedy (Mati Unt's *Brother Antigone*, *Mother Oidipus*, premiered in 2003, published as a text in 2006) was a witty mixture of different plays by Aischylos, Sophokles, and Euripides, inventive not only in the mixture itself but also in its use of language (e.g., neologisms consisting of word pairings of Estonian with Greek). Marshall's engagement with Euripides and the original text was of a different kind: instead of deconstructing and explicitly



Figure 4: *Klytaimnestra (Pohla) and Agamemnon (Tuisk)* (photo: Siim Reisspass)



Figure 5: *Iphigenia (Eva Klements)* (photo: Siim Reisspass)

reinterpreting the underlying text, this production explored the tensions between an apparently stable ancient text and the fluidity of performance and reception. To some extent, in such a shape it seemed even more provocative on an Estonian stage than a modern adaptation or reading (deconstruction) of the play would have appeared, since the Estonian theatregoers who are (mostly) inexperienced in ancient plays were here presented with a performance that had done nothing (or very little) to modernise the original text and bridge the gap between ancient and modern. The focus on the enactment of the text challenged the actors and audience to go beyond the trappings of the theatre and to explore the emotions and conflicts behind words. Here, the simplicity of the *mise-en-scène* forced both the actors and audience to use their imagination to fill in the gaps and to create meaning.



Figure 6: Agamemnon (Tuisk, left) and Iphigenia (Klements, right) (photo: Siim Reispass)

For the Estonian audience, the central issues of Euripides' *IA* are at the same time very familiar and very distant. On the one hand, the distance between the Greek text and the modern Estonian audience is perhaps awkwardly wide in respect to issues of religion (Estonians are usually held to have a notoriously cold attitude to religion), and it was there that the audience was invited to look behind the delivered words and seek equivalents for this experience elsewhere in their everyday life. On the other hand, as the Estonian reviewer Madis Kolk pointed out, Euripides' tragedies in general and *Iphigenia in Aulis* in particular have great potential to be understood and loved by Estonian theatregoers, because their particularly 'Euripidean' aspect—the sceptical shifts of mood and constant doubts of the characters—has perhaps a specific affinity to Estonians who, according to cultural stereotypes, are perceived as constantly in doubt, perpetually undecided about divinity and reluctant to stand up for their ideas with certainty.

Marshall had decided to emphasise the primacy of the text throughout the play, and so the stage was empty, stripped of all decoration, and had to be filled with actors, their bodies and voices alone. This was a huge responsibility for the actors and, as they confessed during interviews afterwards, one of the most challenging aspects of this production. The importance of the text, however, may seem paradoxical in light of the fact that the director, Lorna Marshall, is British and presumably knows very little Estonian (if any).

The audience was confronted with a bare white room with four doors and big windows on the side, stripped of any other decoration. The result was a stage that presents a deeply impersonal, even sterile, space, which is neither public nor private, neither dangerous (war) nor safe (home). All eight characters wore simple but clearly contemporary costumes, exhibiting no real attempt to create the impression of an ancient context. At the same time, the carefully chosen clothing carried clear symbols of status for the contemporary audience. Men involved in war (Agamemnon, Menelaos, Achilleus, messenger) were presented in simple but clearly identifiable casual military clothing (figure 2). The rest wore civilian clothes: Iphigenia was dressed in a white girlish dress, which underscored her child-like appearance and naivety towards his father's plans. Klytaimnestra appeared in a mature/married woman's costume, discreetly brown-white, and her domestic look was emphasised by the only prop of the play: baby Orestes, whom Klytaimnestra wheeled around in a blue baby carriage, thus icing the cake of her overall domestic appearance.

The chorus, composed of young married women in Euripides' original, was here condensed into one single woman (Marika Vaarik), a somewhat ageless figure whose ironic tone and clear, charismatic voice

delivered her stanzas with emphatic power (figure 3). In the hands of Vaarik the chorus' sighing for the Greek warriors seemed to entail implicitly an ironic undertone and a critique of this very naivety. Vaarik was especially impressive in delivering the end of the stanzas in such a fashion that her premonitory voice and expression continued to resonate into the scenes that followed (e.g., 781–3: *Zeusi tütar Helene aga / Tema nuttis ka palju / Kui ta mehe jättis*).

Compared to the original chorus, Vaarik was clearly more isolated and detached from the general action, and no effort was made to integrate the chorus thematically into the play. In fact, every engagement of the chorus with the actors and the action on stage in the original version was cut. The chorus never participated directly in the dialogues, never commented on the arguments of the characters and remained entirely outside the plot, assuming the position of a seemingly objective observer (being more in dialogue with the audience than with actors on stage). Furthermore, most of the delivered choral odes were extensively reduced, so that only the lines most necessary for the advancement of the plot were spoken.

This interpretation of the chorus might have obscured its function from the audience, especially given the potentially perplexing comments of the chorus, ranging from past references to visions of future events. Nevertheless, Vaarik's chorus was powerful, and despite the significant deviation from the original, this was a convincing interpretation of the play and one which resonated well in the theatre audience. In fact, the passivity of the chorus framed and isolated the story even more, so that the open-ended problems of the Greek family (of the Atreid house), which Euripides had proposed for open discussion with the chorus and the audience in the original setting of Athens, were confined in this interpretation to private/individual matters debated only among the closest family members and the immediately interested parties. Neither the audience nor the chorus was any longer invited to participate in resolving the puzzle or making decisions; their voice and opinions did not matter, and instead the audience was offered a brief glimpse of a deeply personal tragedy, which was unfolding in front of their eyes.

The empty space played a pivotal role in highlighting the importance of the actors' bodies. This was emphasised, for example, in the first meeting of Klytaimnestra, Iphigenia, and Agamemnon (607–690). The audience had already witnessed the personal struggle of Agamemnon and were informed of his final decision to sacrifice his daughter. In this scene, the clearly melancholic and disturbed Agamemnon was juxtaposed to his exhilarated daughter Iphigenia and his wife Klytaimnestra, who had no clue of Agamemnon's internal battle and agony (figure 4). The contrast was presented through a clever teasing game (making use of a pause between lines 639 and 640): Iphigenia kept running towards her father, wanting to hug him (figure 5), but Agamemnon managed to avoid her by moving away every time she came close to catching him. Agamemnon was chased by Iphigenia and they both ran around and bounced against the walls (much as in a boxing ring), creating a very potent picture of the hopelessness of the situation, in which Iphigenia is rushing towards her destruction unawares and Agamemnon beguiling her unwillingly into it. The walls symbolised the inevitability of the events and the running out of options for stopping the approaching disaster. The space was simple but symbolic, underscoring the sense of claustrophobia and fear that characterised their situation.

Similarly, Iphigenia's final song (lines 1467–1487) took the shape of a ritual. Klytaimnestra helped Iphigenia take off her white dress, so that she soon stood on stage wearing only her petticoat. Then she started running in circles and suggestively repeating verses 1471–1474. This trance-like song, accompanied with circular movements, was the culmination of the play: the helpless mother, despite her efforts, was witnessing the walking/running of her daughter towards death. For the first (and last) time in the play, Iphigenia occupied the centre of the stage, whereas Klytaimnestra was reduced to a minor figure, helpless before her daughter's decision as she was helpless before her husband's.

IA has been labelled a play of changes, starting from the beginning scenes in which both Menelaos and Agamemnon change their minds about the sacrifice of Iphigenia, and finishing with Iphigenia's own (unexpected) change of heart and decision to die for Greece (figure 6). Klytaimnestra seems the only figure who deviates from this general pattern: expressions of her emotions take different forms, from loud cries and lamenting to supplication and, eventually, to a silent hatred which hints clearly at the future events of this/her hapless household. Yet with all this variety of emotions, Klytaimnestra never changes her mind: her condemnation of Agamemnon's decision regarding the fate of her daughter neither diminishes nor is supplemented by any degree of empathy with Agamemnon. Perhaps because of this uncompromising nature of hers, alongside the powerful emotions of maternal love she represents, Mirtel Pohla's Klytaimnestra emerges from the play as one of its most unforgettable characters (figure 1). To be fair, Klytaimnestra's persuasiveness stems also from her narrow focus: throughout the play she refuses to take the wider context of the problem into consideration and decides to emphasise her maternal love and to blame Helen and Agamemnon for the unfair sufferings they have caused her. In the light of Klytaimnestra's straightforward and uncompromising nature, all other characters, while much more multifaceted and so 'Euripidean' in their vacillations, appear less vivid and colourful.

Pohla's powerful Klytaimnestra triumphed, for example, in the very last scene (1621–6). This is a poignant exchange between Agamemnon and Klytaimnestra, the last one demonstrating their complicated relationship and pregnant with tensions between the two characters. Agamemnon enters with the intention of delivering good news to his wife: their child is among the gods and he is thus inviting Klytaimnestra to rejoice about it. Agamemnon orders her to take Orestes and sail back home, as the ships are unmooring. He then pauses and examines his wife. It seems that he is looking for a sign from her that would assure him of her support and forgiveness, but Klytaimnestra's silence is dismissive, hatred is turning in her stomach and her heart is closed to any attempts at reconciliation. She gives Agamemnon a curt look, and from this moment on it is clear that there will never be a warm, submissive wife, waiting for Agamemnon's return. Agamemnon realises this and suddenly remembers his position—the king of Argos will never be anything but a master in his household and kingdom. He accepts the challenge, and his last cold verses to Klytaimnestra highlight the detachment of the couple. This was a very forceful coda to the entire play. The extended pause between Agamemnon's verses expressed poignantly an uneasy tension between the two, significantly advancing my own understanding of the various potential layers of the verses.

It is fascinating how topics from ancient tragedy that have not been taken up in Estonia before, presented in their original 'bare' form, start resonating in the audience. While it was perhaps slightly difficult for members of the audience to understand the very first couple of scenes—the complexity of context, difficulty of the foreign-sounding names and bad acoustics were tangible—it was soon clear that none of the debates played out on stage were unfamiliar to Estonians: issues of war and peace, domestic space against the public, soft power vs. strong power and so on are still very much part of people's everyday life. I wonder whether it was precisely the lack of decoration or ambition to create an impression of fifth-century-BC Greece that worked so successfully in establishing a timeless zone where ideas pervading all eras of history emerge and cannot leave the audience untouched.

The war theme, supported by the contemporary military clothing of the male characters, might have had another association for the Estonian audience, something that was pointed out by an Estonian critic in one of the first reviews of the play.⁶ NO99 happens to share its rooms with the Estonian Ministry of Defence, and the importance and/or necessity of war for a (small) society and its impact on families were being discussed in the same building where decisions on these matters are actually made. Since 2004 Estonia has been a member of NATO, and its men and women are currently represented in military operations in Afghanistan (previously also in Iraq and elsewhere). Even though the personal struggle of

Agamemnon or any other character of the play may not be comparable to the decisions of contemporary Estonians (regarding war, religion, etc.), and despite the fact that their moral dilemmas might not be straightforwardly clear or comprehensible to the contemporary audience, the basic context of the issue was intimately familiar to contemporary Estonians. Indeed, Estonia has had a difficult past filled with numerous wars and a constant struggle to assert its right to independence. The question of what one would be willing to give up in the personal domain in order to maintain the national community is as relevant to the contemporary Estonian theatregoer as it probably was, in another sense, to the fifth-century-BC Athenian.

notes

¹ Here and in the following, the English translations from Estonian are mine.

² Additionally, between big-scale productions that take an integer number, NO99 has also initiated smaller 'performances', or, as they prefer to call them, 'actions' (Estonian: aktsioon) that tackle some particularly fascinating problem/event of the political present or reflect on perennial questions such as 'what it means to be an actor/man/old/politician, etc.', and are labelled with non-integer numbers (e.g. NO66.8).

³ The original interview in Estonian appears in *SIRP*.

⁴ To give a brief example, the Estonian translation of the trochaic tetrameter in verses 320–1 reads as follows: Heitlik meel, kui kindlus puudub, võlts on, ohtlik sõbra jaoks, / soovin veenda sind, ei peaks sa raevu tõttu loobuma (— u — u — u — — || — u — u — u — / — u — u — u — — || — u — u — u —). (In fact, it is perhaps more useful to describe the verses according to the accent on the words: *Heitlik méel, kui kíndlus púudub, v'õlts on, óhtlik s'õbra jáoks, / sóovin véenda sínd, ei péaks sa ráevu t'õttu lóobuma.*) The Greek original reads: νοῦς δέ γ' οὐ βέβαιος ἄδικον κτήμα κού σαφές φίλοις. / βούλομαι δέ σ' ἐξελέγξαι, καὶ σὺ μήτ' ὀργῆς ὕπο.

The iambic trimeters in lines 49–51, for instance, are translated thus: Kord Leda thestiaad kolm tütart sünnitas: / Phoibe, Klytaimnestra, kes naiseks mulle sai, / Helene ka, kel' kosja paljud ilmusid (u — u — u — u — u — u — / — — u — u — u — u — u — / u — u — u — u — u — u —). (According to the accents: *Kord Léda théstiáad kolm t'ütart s'ünnítás* etc.) The original Greek: Ἐγένοντο Λήδα Θεστιάδι τρεῖς παρθένοι, / Φοίβη Κλυταιμίστρα τ', ἔμη ξυνάρορος, / Ἑλένη τε: ταύτης οἱ τὰ πρῶτ' ὠλβισμένοι (...).

⁵ The playbill is still accessible on the NO99 website (http://no99.ee/images/files/NO66_kava.pdf).

⁶ The review in Estonian appears in *Eesti Päevaleht* (<http://www.epl.ee/news/kultuur/sottaminejad-ohverdavad-sakala-tanaval-inimest.d?id=64134951>).