

DIDASKALIA 

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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 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.

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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' *Bacchae* at the Greek Theatre in Syracuse

Directed by Antonio Calenda
 Version by Giorgio Ieranò
 May 11 to June 30, 2012
 XLVIII Ciclo di Spettacoli Classici
 Teatro Greco di Siracusa
 Syracuse, Italy

Review by Ralph Covino

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

and John Serrati

McGill University

The Greek theatre at Syracuse was designed by the architect Damokopos and constructed during the reign of the tyrant Hieron I (478–467 BC). It was dedicated to Zeus, the patron deity of the later Hieron II, and its reconstruction under that ruler is perhaps the greatest monument to the prosperity of third-century BC Syracuse.¹ As a venue, it was the main stage for the famous comedies of Epicharmos, who lived and wrote at Syracuse in the mid-fifth century. Aeschylus' *Persians*, the oldest surviving ancient play, premiered there in 472 BC

before going on to win the Great Dionysia at Athens. The site came to be the home of one of the most vibrant dramatic cultures in the ancient Greek world, and this legacy persists in the modern era.

Mauceri, who wrote the first history of the city in 1924, described the performance of classical drama in the theatre as being 'occasional' during his time.² Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* had been performed there in 1914, his *Libation Bearers* in 1921, and Euripides' *Bacchae* and Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* in 1922. Performances were sporadic until 1948, at which point they became a fixture of even numbered years until 2000, when annual performances began. The 48th season of classical performances at the Theatre of Hieron in Syracuse deployed three ancient plays, Aeschylus' *Prometheus Bound*, Euripides' *Bacchae*, and Aristophanes' *Birds*.

The *Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico's* productions are no strangers to readers of *Didaskalia*. Caterina Barone reviewed the 33rd season of plays (Volume 1, Number 3:

<http://www.didaskalia.net/issues/8/15/>), the 43rd (Volume 7, Number 1:

<http://www.didaskalia.net/issues/vol7no1/barone.html>), the 45th (Volume 8, Number 2:

<http://www.didaskalia.net/issues/8/2/>), and the 47th (Volume 8, Number 15:



Figure 1 (Photo: Ralph Corvino)



Figure 2 (Photo: Ralph Corvino)



Figure 3

<http://www.didaskalia.net/issues/8/15/>), as well as the *Medea* of 1996 (Volume 4, Number 1: <http://www.didaskalia.net/issues/vol4no1/barone.html>),³ while Thomas Pallen reviewed the 1994 season (Volume 2, Number 2: <http://www.didaskalia.net/issues/vol2no2/pallen.html>). Outside of this journal, Di Martino (1993) and Nicosia (2009) have offered directors' perspectives on staging ancient drama in Hieron's theatre. Given this record of attention to the festival, we were especially pleased that a historical and archaeological tour of Sicily with students brought us to Syracuse during this season's performances.

Carved out of the living rock of the Neapolis district, the site in its current form is the achievement of Hieron II (271-215 BC) and of a subsequent major reconstruction effort which took place sometime between 238 and 215 BC. This new theatre was grandiose in scale and, at 138 m. in diameter, was one of the largest in the ancient Mediterranean world, displaying Hieron's benevolence as a Hellenistic monarch. The *cavea* itself is D-shaped, a design still unusual but growing in popularity in the third century BC. Today some forty-four rows are extant, though the ancient structure also featured an extended, artificial *cavea* which was built up beyond the seats carved into the hill itself. This brought the number of rows in the ancient theatre to sixty-seven, allowing for a capacity of no less than fifteen thousand, and perhaps as many as twenty.

Modern productions, as can be seen in the images of the theatre taken on the morning of the performance (figure 1 and figure 2), are more intimate affairs. The erection of wooden benches over the ancient hewn-stone seating has substantially reduced the number of rows and hence the overall capacity. Nevertheless—and as none of the previous reviews has noted—the plays retain a true sense of occasion. Despite the heat of the Sicilian summer, we were pleased to discover that they were selling out nightly. On our arrival nearly an hour before the announced starting time, Hieron's theatre was nearly full to its current capacity.

For the vast majority of Syracusans in the third century BC, a visit to the theatre would have represented their only chance of viewing Hieron II in the flesh; one can imagine that in the hour or so leading up to the performance, the king was bombarded with personal petitions from people who otherwise had no access to him. That he regularly attended the theatre is attested by a series of inscriptions. In the middle of the rock-cut wall behind the first *diazoma* are the words 'Zeus *Olympios*' in the genitive, implying that the theatre belonged to Zeus. The seats above probably belonged



Figure 4 (Photo: Ralph Covino)



Figure 5 (Photo: Irene Ferro)



Figure 6: Maurizio Donadoni as Dionysos (Photo: Jessica Ackerman)



Figure 7 (Photo: Jessica Ackerman)

either to the priest of Zeus or, more likely, to Hieron himself. Along the same wall are inscribed the names of three members of the king's family: his wife Philistis, his son Gelon, and his daughter-in-law Nereis.⁴ As it would have been in the ancient world, the modern audience was composed of mostly local Syracusans from all social strata, from upper-class regular 'theatre-goers' to *hoi polloi* who were taking in a night at the theatre as a form of mainstream entertainment. Our students thus experienced the Greek theatre for what it truly was: a form of social equalization, a chance for everyday people to interact with the culture of the ruling elite and, if they were lucky, with the ruling elite themselves.

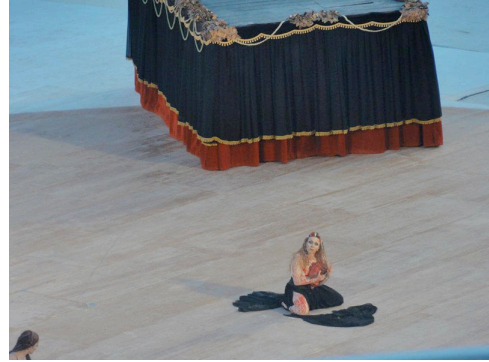


Figure 8: Daniela Giovanetti as Agave
(Photo: Jessica Ackerman)

People had brought food and drink along with them to the theatre and there was quite a convivial atmosphere; this, of course, stands in stark contrast to the usual performance of an ancient drama in a modern university theatre—nearly always far too solemn and respectable. As a result, we believe that the students with us were able to get a much better sense of the theatre's true function as an organ of the state and, more important, of socialization and community-building. Further, a friendly laundress had, on the day of the show, told us that she had already seen the play and that it was something of a treat—not exactly what one would expect to hear about the *Bacchae* at the best of times. From what we could gather, the city was talking about the performances; the place had clearly acquired the requisite 'buzz' which, to our minds, was an excellent example for our students of the ability of performance to embed itself in a civic consciousness.

During Roman times the theatre underwent renovations at various periods. Augustus is likely to have been responsible for the earliest of these. Strabo records that he significantly restored and rebuilt large parts of Syracuse after the civil wars of the first century BC (6.2.4). There was then a major remodeling of the *scaena* in the late first or early second century AD, and another around one hundred years later. The scant and often confusing and controversial remains of the *scaena* which can be seen today are the products of these reconstructive efforts.⁵ Also in the Imperial period, the theatre came to be outfitted to host gladiatorial shows, and in late Roman times drainage channels and a reservoir were put in place to allow the *orchestra* to be flooded for *naumachia*-style games.⁶

As the population of Syracuse steadily shrank during the middle ages and became concentrated on the Ortygia and in the lower Achradina district, over a kilometer and a half away, the theatre unsurprisingly fell into disuse. The upper *cavea* was cannibalized for fortification stone by the Spanish in the first half of the sixteenth century. Whatever was left of the *scaena* is likely to have fallen down in the earthquakes that hit Syracuse in 1542 and 1693; the latter was of sufficient magnitude to destroy significant parts of the city. The theatre was partially filled with rubble and earth when amateur archaeologists arrived at the site in the late eighteenth century. Excavations unearthed the theatre over the course of decades, and by the late nineteenth century it is probable that some ancient drama was taking place at the site. This may be inferred from a c. 1885 albumen print showing two men in classical dress standing in the *cavea*, one of whom is playing a double flute (figure 3).

The 1885 print as well as surviving photographs of the 1922 and 1950 performances of the *Bacchae* in the theatre provided in the *Istituto's* lavish glossy guide to this year's cycle (a must-purchase souvenir, as are the translation of Euripides' text by Giorgio Ieranò being employed this year and the seat cushions, noted in this publication by Patten in 1994) show that modern performances in the theatre initially retained a

sense of simplicity, at least in terms of costume and set, though the photographs also demonstrate how designers have long augmented the setting of Hieron's theatre so as to meet the demands of their plays. The most recent performance was no exception.

On the left of the photograph in figure 4 is the large set of risers on scaffolding which would eventually serve as the Bacchantes' mountain. Outfitted with rollers, it revolved over the course of the play and possessed the capacity to split into two to allow entry and egress for performers and props. The small circular stage visible at the top center was not utilized during this performance, playing a more prominent role in the previous evening's performance of *The Birds*. The walkway behind it, however, was employed, as Pentheus ascended the stairway into the *cavea*, passing the first *diazoma* and the aforementioned inscription bearing the name of Zeus, and then across what would have been the second *diazoma*—now the area above the seating—so as to represent his climbing the mountain. Since he did not climb the mountain directly, the risers represented a space removed from the action taking place on the wooden stage below. Visually, then, it became that transgressive, female-only 'other' space in which normal societal *nomoi* were not applicable.

The artificial mountain, however, came across as being too artificial, even if it did wonderfully offset the costumes of the Bacchantes (see figure 5). It did rather seem to break from the harmony with the natural scenery which is afforded by the theatre's setting, and the lightly-colored wood did not blend at all with the tree line immediately beyond. In the end, it was a curious choice; indeed, with its fancy rotations and transformations, the risers became a bit of a distraction.

The same could be said for the moving platform base which housed Dionysos and, at various points underneath, his Bacchantes and anyone requiring a costume change (figure 6). Rising from the platform's interior, Dionysos began the play formless and undulating. Covered by a black sheet, Maurizio Donadoni, the actor playing the god, actually stood facing away from the audience but with the theatre mask on the back of his head, giving his movements a staccato and ethereal feel. Atop the platform, he transformed himself through the addition of horns at various points, but spent most of the production in the crisp white suit seen in the photograph—an outfit which stood in marked contrast to, say, those of Pentheus, Tiresias, and Kadmos. Pentheus wore a purple cloak, white shift, and standard-issue approximation of a Greco-Roman breastplate; rough grey cloaks were the order of the day for the other two. Our students posited that Dionysos' apparel seemed other-worldly by comparison and, indeed, futuristic, bearing a similarity to the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* character Q, who also, curiously, sits atop a similarly colored moving tribunal in several prominent episodes of that serial. Like Dionysos with his maniacal laughter in this version of the *Bacchae*, Q also enjoys a bit of fun at the expense of mere mortals. Whether deliberate or not, the parallel was an interesting one to ponder in the light of recent discussions about classical receptions in science fiction;⁷ perhaps the traffic between the ancient world and SF is not as one way as we tend to think.

The Bacchantes themselves were the undoubted stars of the show in terms of their appearance—and appear was more or less all that they did, as the chorus' lines were delivered by an individual or via the loudspeaker, save for the communal singing and chanting. Their costumes began as black cloaks covering every part of their bodies, reflective, perhaps, of current scholarly opinion about such things, but more probably in an attempt to evoke the burqa, something viewed as Eastern and exotic by Western audiences, as Dionysos and his Bacchantes themselves are supposed to have been viewed by the ancient Greeks.⁸ As the play progresses, pieces of their outfits are gradually shed so as to reveal beige body suits; these are all which remained when their full-on orgiastic revels were achieved, as depicted in figure 7. It must be said that the dancers were superb, as was the music, which, despite being a cross between the scores of *Zorba the Greek* and *Gladiator* with a few more drums, managed to effectively accompany the

dancers' descent into frenzy. Later they wore black gowns lined with scarlet, which worked perfectly to highlight their dancing and revelry, both onstage and on the mountain, with the blood red of the interior a haunting sign of the danger to come.

The Italian translation by Giorgio Ieranò was solid and did not depart in any fantastic way from the original; the actors, for the most part, stuck to the script, though there were more than a few occasions where either through fault or design they truncated some of the longer speeches and devolved into paraphrase. None of this, of course, was noticeable to those without the translation in front of them. The slips and elisions did nothing to detract from the story or its plot. But the sound effects, such as the howling winds, were a curious addition rather than a support to the actors, always feeling forced and out of place.

In the performance which we saw, there were few things, overall, with which to quibble. It might be said that Daniela Giovanetti's portrayal of Agave's grief on her discovery that she had murdered her own son lacked believability (figure 8). The howl and heart-wrenching agony that one would expect to have echoed throughout the ancient theatre and beyond never really rang out; she moved from shock to sobbing and tears entirely too quickly, bypassing any sense of self-directed anger and culpability for her actions as she retreated with Pentheus' mangled body through the gap in the mountain.

While watching the performance, we found it easy to understand the reasoning behind the location of the great theatre, as the surrounding areas are richly steeped in tradition, history, and symbolism. Behind the audience, now as in classical times, stand reminders of the most distant past as well as of the other great influence, along with culture, that bound the ancient *poleis* together as communities: religion. The Belvedere terrace immediately to the north of the theatre featured multiple temples, grottos for mystery rites, and an L-shaped *stoa* that housed the oldest tombs in the vicinity, some going back as far as the twelfth century BC, and others belonging to some of Syracuse's previous tyrants, venerated in hero cults.⁹ In the other direction, clearly visible, is the sea, which not only provided and continues to provide many Syracusans with their livelihood, but is also means by which their ancestors, Greek colonists from Corinth, first arrived.

Specifically, however, as we reminded our students, the ancient audience would have been staring directly at the Great Harbour, the *raison d'être* for the city's location. This not only served as Syracuse's economic lifeblood and link to the outside world, but was also the site of her greatest military victory, over the Athenian fleet in 413. The prisoners from this war, the mighty Athenian sailors, were placed in the limestone quarries which lie immediately east of the theatre—unless, of course, they could recite Euripides, in which case they were freed, for such was the power of the theatre during that era. Syracusan economic and military force were in plain sight of those watching any performance in the theatre of Hieron. The venue acted as a repository of institutional memory for the local populace, much as the theatre itself today acts as a symbol of the city's glorious past as well as its cultural present for Syracuse's modern citizens.

notes

¹ Bernabò Brea 1967; Lehmler 2005, 132–133; Serrati 2008, 86; cf. Palacco and Anti, 1981; Palacco *et al.* 1990; Wilson 1990, 60–63. The original theatre was probably dedicated to Demeter and Kore (cf. Kowalzig 2008).

² Mauceri 1924, 60.

³ Editor's Note: Barone's review of the 48th season appears in this volume, Number 9

(<http://www.didaskalia.net/issues/9/9/>).

⁴ Lehmler 2005, 143; Serrati 2008, 85–6; on the priest of Zeus cf. D.S. 16.70.6.

⁵ Bernabò Brea 1967, 136, 142; Coarelli and Torelli 1997, 247–253; Foertsch 1987; Palacco and Anti 1981, 20, 204; Rizzo 1923, 139, 153–157.

⁶ Palacco and Anti 1981, 167–78; 213–4. *Contra Wilson* 1980, 2221–5, who rejects the notion that the theatre was ever used for gladiatorial combat.

⁷ See, for example, Rogers and Stevens 2012.

⁸ On women's dress, see Llewellyn-Jones 2003.

⁹ Serrati 2008, 88–9; Voza 1984–1985, 675.

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