

DIDASKALIA 

The Journal for Ancient Performance



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 12 is an inadequate approximation of the web publication at didaskalia.net, which includes sound, video, and live hyperlinks.

Euripides' *Medea*

translated by Diane Arnson Svarlien
Directed by Laura Lippman

The Johnny Carson School of Theatre and Film
University of Nebraska–Lincoln

Reviewed by **Amy R. Cohen**
Center for Ancient Drama, Randolph College

Laura Lippman's *Medea* profoundly evoked the foreignness and aloneness of Medea in Corinth by setting her and the play in a suburban McMansion milieu where her South-by-Southwest sensibilities clashed with the pastel and florals of her neighbors. It seemed that boho Medea had tried valiantly to fit in with the country club set that Jason so admires: the house was well-kept, the garden furniture was sociably set with refreshing water to offer visitors, and Medea clearly had a friendly relationship with the neighbor ladies who came to see her. But their mildly colored spring dresses, ballet flats, and identical high pony tails clashed wildly with Medea's jeans, black multi-buckled boots, and spiky buzz cut, the effect of all of which was heightened by her dangly multiple necklaces and a cropped kimono shrug in deep red and gold (**figure 1**). She belonged in a different world, no matter how much the Chorus might sympathize with her at times. The fact that things were amiss here was underscored and symbolized by the dead ivy attached to the walls of the house.

As the lights went down in the black-box theatre, Aretha Franklin's "I Never Loved A Man" set the tone of passionate disappointment, and Otis Rush's "I Can't Quit You Baby" turned that feeling towards despair and destruction. Both songs come from a blues tradition that is as alien to the white suburbia of the production as Medea was to Corinth. The playing space was rectangular, with audience along the two long sides and back. The other end of the quasi-runway set-up was dominated by the windowed double door of an upscale house. Its number—431—was a generous nod to those who could congratulate themselves on knowing the play's original performance date, but it also signaled the ordinariness of a house with a number on a street somewhere, even if we were meant to imagine that street as a very nice one. In the semi-elliptical arched window above the doors was a stained-glass sunrise, calling to mind the relationship with Helios that Medea had brought to the family (**figure 1**). When we hear Medea inside, before we see her, she's amplified from the heavens—another early suggestion of divinity.



Figure 1: Thomas Boyle as Jason, Kirstie Smith, Hunter McDonald, Candace Nelson, Lynn Twarowski, and Julia Utter as the Chorus and Jesse Debolt as Medea. (photo: Doug Smith)



Figure 2



Figure 3

The set design was minimal. The stage was subtly whitewashed. The buildup to Medea’s entrance was anxious, with worried music and a worried Chorus. The five women of the Chorus—Kirstie Smith, Hunter McDonald, Candace Nelson, Lynn Twarowski, and Julia Utter—sometimes spoke together and sometimes as individuals, but they were unified by their costumes and by the striking movement choreographed by Kayla Klammer. That movement ranged from fluid and reassuring to frantic and frightening. The Chorus did not sing, but they did add some music, often accompanying shared lines and individual speeches with unison humming. All of these elements combined to give the chorus a clear and consistent identity as women of the community whose sympathies and reactions mattered ([figure 2](#)). When Medea first addressed them, individually, each signaled her assent by a simple but strong movement that was then echoed by the next woman. The choreography and staging of each song were handled according to sense—a “confusion of rivers run backwards,” for instance, had the chorus confused and running around—but somehow the interpretations were never over-literal.

The children (Eliza Bohart and Belle Rangel) and their world were quietly ever-present: their toys were left untidy in the yard for them to play with at any time. And they often did come to play, building with blocks and using chalk to express, on the ground, their feelings about their too-absent father: “I love you daddy.” Lippman, though, wasn’t just looking for excuses to give the kids more stage time. The imperative to focus on children, to cater to their needs, to shape the household around them, is a defining feature of the housewife suburbia that the Chorus represented, and the children’s quiet presence underfoot for much of the play kept that ideal before us as a measure of Medea. Two particular moments with the children show Lippman’s clever and subtle underscoring of the text with her staging. The children were happily setting up a cityscape with their blocks when the pedagogue came on to explain to the nurse what was happening with Jason. Just when the Nurse (Brenna Hill) said “we are destroyed,” the children smashed the city with their Godzilla toy ([figure 3](#)). Later, an avuncular Aegeus (Will Voelker) showed up with a monster remote-control truck for the kids, who played with it

immediately. The Chorus helped the children with the toy, momentarily becoming neighbor moms looking after the kids

next door. This addition of the children to the Aegeus scene underlined his desire for children, and highlighted the upper-middle-class world that Medea can’t succeed in joining.



Figure 4



Figure 5

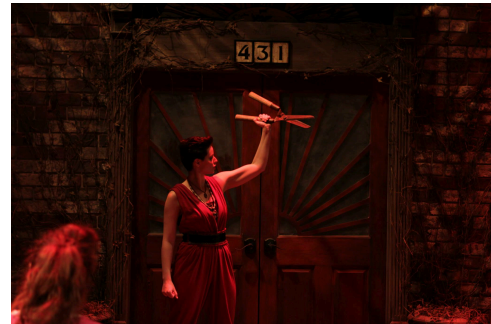


Figure 6



Figure 7

Smug Jason (Thomas Boyle) in robin's-egg blue was carelessly representative of that world, and he was helpless to foresee or prevent the disaster upon him. Lippman staged Jason's isolation against the joined feminine forces of Medea and the Chorus ([figure 1](#)), a choice that had the welcome effect of showing us a world in which Medea and the neighbor ladies could be a united force, even though that world is never quite reachable.

The production could have taken more advantage of the close proximity of the audience by making the actors speak to it directly. The intimacy of the space would have lent itself to implicating the audience more as witnesses of and neighborly participants in the action. Diane Arnson Svarlien's fine translation would have bridged that gap ably.

Still, over and over again, Lippman made magnificent use of the words, the space, and her actors to tell the story of Medea's triumph. During Jason's first scene, Medea dominated the area in front of the doors and protected the entrance to the house. There was never any question of his belonging to that house or gaining entrance. Again, when Medea made Aegeus swear to give her sanctuary in the future, she stood in a position of power, physically dominating the acquiescing Aegeus and making clear that she was in control of her fate ([figure 4](#)).

Credit goes to Jesse Debolt, who consistently brought depth and power to the role of Medea. Her small moments were detailed and clear, as when she sat at the door waiting for the Messenger (Trey Martinez) and then leaned in with a smirk to hear of her triumph ([figure 5](#)). And her large gestures were just as effective: Debolt's heroic stance as she told us "This is the way to win a glorious reputation" underscored Medea's understanding of herself within the heroic imperative that insists that a man treat "friends with kindness, and come down hard on the heads of my enemies."

In the moment of decision, Medea, with "Arm yourself, my heart," was briefly in physical formation with the anxious chorus. But then she broke away, finally and utterly, from any possibility of conformity, and with "Take up the sword," she grabbed the hedge trimmers that had been visible from the beginning of the play, thrust into the planter of dead ivy, a latent threat ([figure 6](#)).

The children's death, when it finally came, was horrifying. We heard their indoor protestations in the same other-worldly amplification that Medea got offstage. They died in silhouette against the double doors of #431, smearing the frosted glass with blood, leaving childish handprints ([figure 7](#)). At the end, instead of flying Medea away in a chariot of the Sun, Lippman had her appear triumphant in front of the headlights of a fancy pick-up truck, another symbol of suburban values, now taken and co-opted by Medea, holding her dead children by the scruffs like lion cubs ([figure 8](#)). The shocking effect was almost other-worldly, as if the shining vehicle were not an out-of-place automobile, but rather an alien ship sent to retrieve its devastated and devastating lost traveler ([figure 9](#)).



Figure 8

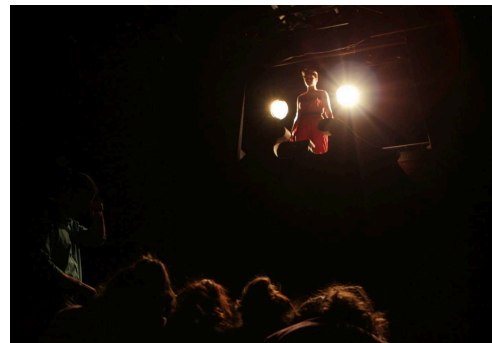


Figure 9