

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.

Stink Foot: Review and Interview

Adapted and directed by Jeff James
18 November - 13 December, 2014
The Yard
Queen's Yard, Hackney Wick, London

Review and interview by **Julie Ackroyd**
Open University

How do you convey the physical suffering of a man with a putrid foot, whose smell is so gut-wrenchingly foul that his shipmates abandon him on an uninhabited island? Jeff James, who has adapted and directed *Philoctetes* in London, has come up with a superb way of conveying this premise in a very accessible manner to a modern audience. In his production, Philoctetes' bound leg oozes treacle. This may seem an unorthodox way of representing his affliction, but it really does work. The sweet and slightly sickly smell of the treacle permeates the performance space, and the smeared footprints it leaves behind show clearly that Philoctetes cannot outrun his fate. This trail of sticky, dark evidence interacts with both Neoptolemus and Odysseus as they invade Lemnos, Philoctetes' island. They tread in it, slip on it and track it across the industrial surface of the staging area. Later in the play, when Philoctetes is experiencing indescribable pain from his suppurating wound, the audience is personally bound up in his suffering as Odysseus throws treacle bombs at Philoctetes, which explode in a violent splash of stickiness. The result is that both Daniel Millar, who plays the title role, and unfortunate front-row members of the audience are hit by the unwelcome splatter. A large plastic sheet is given as

protection to those occupants of the front row, showing that the director and his production team have intended this effect. The unpleasantness of the situation is shared in a physical way

with the rest of the audience as they are exposed to ear-splitting feedback, initiated by Odysseus, from the loudspeaker system. These wince-inducing moments are short lived but serve to make the audience share very personally in the suffering of Philoctetes. The review of the production by *The Stage*, the professional paper for theatrical personnel in the UK, has stated that 'The treacle-filled set is somewhat gimmicky', but while there were gimmicky aspects of the production, this application of treacle was definitely not one of them. At this stage the audience begins to empathise with the sufferings of Philoctetes and appreciate his dilemma in confronting the choices he needs to make in order to be cured.

The adaptation and casting of the piece indicate a chamber-play approach to the text. Jeff James, who reworked the play, has used the 1890 translation by R. C. Jebb as his base text. He also acknowledges that he has been influenced and inspired by the work of others such as Seamus Heaney, David Greene and Hugh Lloyd-Jones. What comes through very clearly in this version are the moral choices which an individual has to make in a difficult situation. Neoptolemus, here played by Joshua Miles, seems to be an innocent abroad, ripe for manipulation by Odysseus. He is sometimes swayed by Odysseus, yet still



Daniel Millar as Philoctetes and Joshua Miles as Neo. Photo: Bronwen Sharp



Daniel Millar as Philoctetes. Photo: Bronwen Sharp

manages to hold on to his humanity and moral judgement by acknowledging that his choice to deceive Philoctetes is wrong and must be amended. The initial stance of Neoptolemus—that he cannot take the magic bow from Philoctetes, even if this action ends the Trojan War—is aggressively challenged by Odysseus, who will not let the younger man’s better instincts prevail. Odysseus in this adaptation is not the amusing wily trickster we see in other works. Here he is a bully who will not accept any challenge to his leadership. I say ‘he’, although in this version Odysseus is played by Rosie Thomson, and is addressed as ‘ma’am’ by Neoptolemus. This casting makes little other reference to the gender of the performer, who is costumed in the same-style Nike boxing shorts which Neoptolemus and Philoctetes wear. This uniformity of dress evokes ‘team Greek’. Throughout the play Odysseus acts as ringmaster, managing the lighting, sound, water and treacle within the boundaries of the staging area. In some cases his activity is a little intrusive: the constant changes of lighting (Odysseus plugs and unplugs industrial lights around the acting space) seem unnecessary and at times inappropriate. The lighting works best when it allows the audience to focus on the one-to-one discussions between Neoptolemus and Philoctetes as they make their peace over Neoptolemus’ confiscation of the bow and his decision to return it. At this point a single light on the stage in front of the figures creates a giant shadow behind them which throws their body language into sharp focus.

The sound decision to omit the chorus enabled the audience to focus entirely on the three characters of Philoctetes, Neoptolemus and Odysseus. Many of the Choral segments essential for plot development were re-written and allocated to Odysseus, who also takes on the role of the Merchant and Hercules. These multiple roles clarified the trickster nature of Odysseus, making more apparent his active attempts to dupe Philoctetes and manipulate his actions to ensure that his bow, essential for the Greeks’ conquest of Troy, was sent there with or without its owner. In the opening of the play Odysseus assumes the bored tone of a tour guide introducing Neoptolemus to the island of Lemnos and its inhabitant, thus quickly informing the audience about the characters and the backstory to coming events. When Philoctetes and Neoptolemus first meet, the former seems to have lost the ability to verbalise when faced with another human being after ten years of isolation. His guttural attempts at speech are tortured and halting, obviously costing him much effort. As he gains familiarity with Neoptolemus his verbalising becomes quicker to the point of garrulity at times, his words falling over each other to come out.

Philoctetes has not often been produced by professional theatre companies in the UK. According to the records held by the Archive of Performances of Greek and Roman Drama, *The Cure at Troy: A Version of Sophocles’ Philoctetes* (1990) by Seamus Heaney seems to be the most popular version, having been performed in 1991, 1996, 1999 and 2003. Then all goes quiet. The adaptor’s decision to replace the original title with a more accessible, Anglicised one is understandable. There is little point in alienating the ticket-buying public with a title they may be hesitant to pronounce. Here the choice of *Stink Foot* clearly encapsulates the central motif of this staging.

Interview with Jeff James about *Stink Foot*:

Jeff James, the director and adaptor of *Stink Foot*, studied for a B.A. in English at Jesus College, Cambridge, where he was awarded a double first. His previous work includes time as a staff/assistant director at the National Theatre, Young Vic, Residenztheater Munich, Minerva Chichester, The Globe, Trafalgar Studios, and West Yorkshire Playhouse. In addition to *Stink Foot* he has directed *One for the Road / Victoria Station* at the Young Vic and the *Print Room* and *Swan Song* at the Print Room. Our discussion about *Stink Foot* is reproduced in full below. In it he outlines his choices in adapting the play’s text as well as the images he brought into its staging.

INTERVIEW

Julie Ackroyd: The treacle motif worked really well to show the audience that Philoctetes is never free of the puss in his foot. The gluey footprints worked to demonstrate that the stink literally follows him, and the treacle bombs worked a treat as they made the audience recoil from him. How did you come up with this idea and why do you think it works?

Jeff James: One of the challenges that Alex Lowde (designer) and I first saw in the show is the rotting foot – its horror is so extreme in Sophocles’ description, and we knew to deliver the play we had to find an exciting form to express it. At a very early stage (before we’d decided we wanted to stage the play, but were exploring it in workshop), Alex found two references that we both really liked. One was the Richard Wilson installation 20:50, where oil fills an entire room. This piece is much calmer than our aesthetic, but I liked the way black gunk had taken over an entire space. The other reference was a photograph of Stuart Brisley’s 1975 action ‘Moments of Decision/Indecision’, where the artist is in a room full of black and white paint, and tries to climb the wall. The figure is covered in black paint, and the paint is smeared up the wall. These two images led us to think about what black gunk could be used in production, and we decided to use treacle. Maybe one could find a complex metaphor about the sugar industry and islands and colonialism, but when we thought of it it was just a dark viscous material. What I discovered when exploring this further in workshop was that the treacle not only expressed the disgusting nature of the foot, but also showed very clearly the moral corruption of Neoptolemus, which for me is at the heart of the play. Neo starts the play ethically clean, but gets progressively muckier as his moral choices become murkier. He tries to atone for what he has done at the end of the play, but I don’t think redemption is possible for him. What the audience in Athens would have known, which I guess most of my audience don’t notice, is that this is the war criminal who is this offstage menace in the Trojan Women, and is the ‘painted tyrant’ Pyrrhus who murders Priam in the player king’s speech in Hamlet. Conveying to our audience the outrageous nature of Neoptolemus’ crime was important to me, and the treacle helps this.

Julie Ackroyd: I can't ever recall seeing the play being performed professionally over the last twenty years in London. Why do you think that might be? Is it a difficult text for the audience or difficult for the actors? Why did you select it? How did you come across it?

Jeff James: I came across it when I was studying English at university. I went to Cambridge, and there’s this compulsory and scary exam on ‘Tragedy’ where you have to compare the Greek tragedies to Shakespeare and others. I thought Philoctetes was really interesting, and kept thinking about it. A couple of years ago I was thinking what play to do next, and couldn’t stop thinking about it. I resisted it, because I thought it was really tough, but in the end I decided I had to do it. I think one of the reasons the play is rarely done is that it’s dramaturgically very difficult. The merchant scene seems to me a particularly difficult scene – I’ve interpreted it that the merchant (obviously Odysseus in my version) comes in because Neoptolemus is having a wobble, and (s)he decides to intervene to put him back on track. I know this isn’t the only way of reading it, but that was a way I made sense of it. I think the play seduces you with questions of detail, and it’s hard to keep coming back to the simplicity of the main story – three people on an island who want to go in different directions. It’s easy to get lost once Neoptolemus starts lying about being in Troy – we don’t quite have time to clock that this is not the truth, and it’s not really an important lie – the real point is that he is (supposedly) Odysseus’s enemy, and it’s hard to keep focussed on this.

Julie Ackroyd: You used Jebb’s translation, yet your version is very different from his – Jebb never used ‘fuck’ for a start... Were you deliberately challenging Jebb and those polite translations? What do you feel the use of colloquial language adds to the performance?

Jeff James: If I’d had the money, I would have commissioned a literal translation from which to work. I didn’t, so I used Jebb’s as a basis for my version as it’s not in copyright. I’ve pretty much changed every word, so I don’t think there’s much of Jebb’s tone or style in there, although my play follows his line for

line, pretty much. Hercules actually speaks Jebb's text at the end of the play – I was interested in the *deus ex machina* being a different form. I haven't deliberately tried to challenge other translations, but I wanted my version to get to what I thought I could see at the heart of the play. I didn't want to write in verse as this seemed too polite, and I was interested to see if I could realise the play in colloquial language. I wanted to make the play immediate to an audience now, and to avoid it feeling like a museum piece or like something you had to have a particular kind of education to understand. I think there's a received way of staging Greek tragedy in this country, that for me doesn't allow those plays to be as exciting as I find them on the page. I don't use the word 'fuck' to shock, more because it's a central word in my everyday vocabulary.

Julie Ackroyd: You cast Odysseus as a woman. Do you feel that adds a different dynamic to the relationship between the characters which might be absent if the casting was all male?

Jeff James: It's partly a political decision, in that I really like lots of plays that were written a long time ago. If one directs a lot of these plays, you end up with a very great gender imbalance as the canon obviously tends to have more parts for men: that's part of our inheritance of thousands upon thousands of years of oppression of women. I don't want my plays always to have more men than women, so I'm keen to find ways of casting in other ways. I think it works really well having Odysseus as woman, because there's this erotic subtext in the Neoptolemus/Philoctetes relationship, and I think in our contemporary understanding (or at least my take on it), it's easier for her to have this slightly ironic relationship to it than if she was a man. Women are powerful in our society, and I think that makes the role make sense as a woman.

Julie Ackroyd: Your Odysseus does very little to ingratiate herself with the audience. Was this a deliberate play? If so why? Odysseus is often seen as being wily and just a little bit funny...

Jeff James: I'm equally sympathetic and unsympathetic to all three characters. I think what's exciting about her is that she's very powerful (particularly in our production, where she controls all the light and sound) but she's powerless in the only thing that matters – confronting Philoctetes.

Julie Ackroyd: Is Neo a character to be cheered on, since he has such a well-defined idea of right and wrong? Or is he really just that little bit simple?

Jeff James: I don't think he's unintelligent – he's a person who, like lots of people, formed a view of the world while growing up that is challenged when he lives in the real world.

Julie Ackroyd: When Philoctetes has his pain episode you made the audience share it with him by creating feedback on the loud speakers. Where did this idea come from and what has the audience reaction been to it?

Jeff James: It's part of Odysseus' control of the production – sometimes the audience put their fingers in their ears, but I don't think anyone's actually complained about it. I wanted the pain to be part of what Odysseus does to Philoctetes, so it made sense for her to use the theatrical tools at her disposal.

Julie Ackroyd: The venue appears to have a really young audience base who seemed very into the play – it can be a gamble working in a fringe venue. What has this venue brought to the play which a larger venue wouldn't have?

Jeff James: I love the mix of classical and contemporary in the venue – a Greek amphitheatre built in the middle of a modern warehouse. That seemed to fit very well with the piece. The Yard is a space where one can experiment and the audience support that – this show was certainly an experiment for me.