

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 διδασκαλίαι. *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 double blind, peer-reviewed scholarship on performance as well as reviews of the professional activity of artists and scholars who work on ancient drama.

We welcome submissions on any aspect of the field, and we provide a uniquely friendly venue for publishing sound, image, and video evidence. 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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Didaskalia is an online journal. This print representation of Volume 15 is an inadequate approximation of the web publication at didaskalia.net, which includes sound, video, and live hyperlinks.

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Aristophanes in Motion: Onassis Cultural Center's The Birds

Fiona Harris Ramsby Assistant Professor of Writing and Rhetoric Bloomfield College, NJ



Image Courtesy of Nikos Karathanos

One might be forgiven for thinking that staging Aristophanes' *Birds* in Trumpian America is perfect timing in the current political climate; after all, Aristophanes was notorious for sending up politicians. So, it was no surprise that some Trump-directed satire crept into the Onassis Cultural Center's May 2018 production of *The Birds* (translated into Modern Greek by Gianni Asteris) at St. Ann's Warehouse in Brooklyn, New York. One of the subtitles even referenced the now-infamous locker-room line. Yet, responding to a talk back question about the

show's politics, director Nikos Karathanos insisted that his *Birds* was actually apolitical. Asked why he cut the oracle collector, decree seller, and other unwanted visitors to Cloudcuckooland from his production, as well as the roasting of the traitorous birds, Karathanos replied that he "didn't want to start a political dialogue." However, depoliticizing Aristophanes' *Birds* in the age of Trump would seem to take great effort. How can a play where a populist leader rises to power effortlessly, exploits sophistic rhetoric (and not the good kind so lauded by postmodernists), and insists on building a wall *not* be viewed as political commentary, at least to an American audience? Despite Karathanos' disavowal, this is Aristophanes, a deeply political playwright. And Karathanos' focus on diversity and movement have added a modern layer to the play's politics.

The political intentions of *Birds* have long been a subject of debate. David Barnett notes that even though it was first produced in 414 B.C., while Athens was still at war with Sparta, it includes very few political allusions. He states, "Current events are hardly referred to at all; the war is not mentioned" (149).¹ Yet, scholars have argued over its political meaning for decades. As Wilfred E. Major states, "The broader context of *Birds* has catapulted the play to the first tier of disputation among scholars."² Does it conjure Alcibiades, that ostentatious and outspoken proponent of the Athenian expedition to Sicily, an ill-fated effort to expand the Athenian empire? Or, does it reference that same politician's defection from Athens to Sparta, given that the *Birds*' hero and his sidekick leave Athens for a better life? Does it suggest a sinister tyranny (after all, the traitors are cannibalized) or a puzzling homage to sophistic rhetoric? Does it betray an uneasy skepticism about democracy? Or should we just enjoy it for its fantasy and the dream of utopian escapism?

Birds, according to Edith Hall (Professor in the Classics Department and Centre for Hellenic Studies at King's College London), has had a distinctly political performance history over the few centuries. The play clearly lends itself to political interpretation, whether Aristophanes intended it to be political or not. Hall states in an essay introduction to the production at St. Ann's:

Goethe starred in his own version at the Weimar Court, satirizing the gullibility of the reading public. In Britain, the famous burlesque writer James Planché used *The Birds* in 1846 at the Haymarket Theatre to attack parliamentary reform and the dangers of the railway train. In the summer of 1959, the world-famous Greek Art Theatre, directed by Karolos Koun, premiered their topical production of Aristophanes' *The Birds*. Branded anticlerical, anti-American and dangerously left leaning, the production was closed down by the government and sparked a far-reaching controversy that was to reverberate throughout Europe and North America during the ensuing two decades of unrest in Greece. In the 1960s, several more-lighthearted productions revealed that the Athenians' disillusioned plan to "drop out" and "get back to nature" was an ancient counterpart of the Californian hippie movement. And in late 20th-century South Africa, *The Birds* (originally part of the curriculum introduced by the colonial master classes, both British and Dutch) was used to address the terrible problem of apartheid.³

This global performance history certainly betrays a modern preoccupation with Birds' partisan potential.

According to Major, *Birds* should ultimately be read as a celebration of social equality, an idea borne out by Karathanos' production. Major notes its expression of the Aristophanic faith in the "core process of Athenian Democracy, even as he sharply attacks its institutions when they fail to function properly." ⁴ Thus Peisetaerus' rise to power (played in this production by Karathanos) signals that he "protects the democracy and has brought success and prosperity to all." ⁵ This inclusivity lies at the heart of Karathanos' *Birds*.



Karathanos as Peisetaerus



Loulis as Tereus/the Hoopoe and the Chorus

I am not the first reviewer to note the similarity of this production to the famous 1960s rock musical *Hair*, ⁶ a gloriously tuneful act of acid-laden resistance with a limited narrative. Karathanos' *Birds* also seems politically motivated in its focus on inclusivity, but its reduced dialogue at first obscured his intentions for me. At the top of the production, Peisetaerus and Euelpides (Aris Servetalis) holler and bicker their way onto a dark and dimly lit stage, and we sense that they aren't entirely on the straight and narrow, given that they've left a few debts behind in

Athens. We gather that they have wandered aimlessly, tired of their native city, and are in search of the Hoopoe (Christos Loulis). Once found, dressed as a hunchbacked old crone in black skirt and sporting combat boots, the Hoopoe demands of Peisetaerus and Euelpides their reason for searching him out. On hearing that they want to establish a city with the birds, the Hoopoe agrees to help the twosome convince his feathered associates. During this exchange, the Hoopoe's black skirt crawls downwards to reveal white underpants. This granter of birdly identity, and former Tereus, King of Thrace, seems in a state of constant disrobing as he grapples with the tiresome garment. This state of undress, as well as the odd couple's squabbling and "yoo-hooing," sets the tone that this *Birds* is going to be a cacophonous and

nakedly wild—not hairy, but feathery—ride.

Once Karathanos' bird chorus emerges, the ethereal lighting reveals a richly sumptuous thicket. The trees, mounted on a small island on which the actors perch and sway, can be plopped in and out of holes in the set, so they are often wielded between cast members too. And at an opportune moment, the heavens seemingly open and rain drenches them all. Through this island jungle, the birds popopopoi, cacaw, cheep, twitter, chirp, sing and dance—



Image courtesy of Nikos Karathanos

and continue to do so for much of the play, accompanied by an onstage musical ensemble (music composed by Angelos Triantafyllou), as well as the beautiful voice of the Nightingale, played by Vasiliki Driva, a person of small stature. And finally, through these magical trees, the actors and audience bounce a giant, brilliantly lit, moon-like sphere in celebration of gods, birds and humans living together.



Galini Hatzipaschali as Iris

The chorus, costumed by Elli Papageorgakopoulou in rainbow colors—Hawaiian shirts, flowered dresses and bathing suits, "as though they had shopped at the Goodwill for a party in Ibiza" (says critic Sara Holdren). And as clothes are peeled off during the duration of the show to reveal more underpants and bare breasts, the show resembles a throng at Mardi Gras, once Iris (Galini Hatzipaschali) enters in a feathery getup that reaches skyward, and once Peisetaerus converts the birds to godliness. In all, there is more dancing than dialogue (choreographed by Amalia Bennett), more singing than dialogue, and certainly more

undressing than anything else. In fact, once the birds are persuaded to build a wall about their Cloudcuckooland, not much happens.

So what exactly is Karathanos up to in this production? In an essay in the playbill, he states, "Twenty-five hundred years [ago], two Aristophanic heroes, bloated, tired, exasperated with life, left Athens and the world of men, and took a high turn toward the world of birds." ⁸ In an e-mail interview with me, Karathanos states that his *Birds* is less about escaping the politics of a bloated and uninspiring democracy mired in bureaucracy—characteristics that seem to dominate the American political landscape—than about the human desire to move and migrate:

Everything is about movement. People's nature is about movement. Our days of time are passing over, our skin is getting older. There something inside us that moves us towards somewhere beyond. It is our destiny to go from one point to another, in our lifetime, in our sleep time, in our dream time. We are always trying to find a destination, always want to escape and to rebuild our nest. Don't ask "why," it is in our nature. Somewhere out there is a place where sorrows, pain and fears won't follow you.9

Karathanos chose to shape his Cloud-cuckoo-land as "the place we fantasize about when we are tired of life on this strife-torn planet." ¹⁰

Karathanos' utopian *Birds* appears to be more than escapist fantasy, though. And despite his insistence that his *Birds* be viewed as apolitical, Karanthanos makes some savvy political commentary through his focus on *movement*. As suggested by his e-mail response, this production celebrates human co-mingling and mixture inherent in the admittance of "otherness" to the public and political sphere—the moving towards alternate bodily possibilities, towards a celebration of diversity, of difference, an intermingling of a variety of minds and bodies. In fact, Karathanos' *Birds* resembles the Heaven of To ny Kushner's *Angels in America*, in which the character Belize insists that in Heaven,

Everyone is in Balenciaga gowns with red corsages, and big dance palaces full of music and lights and racial impurity and gender confusion. And all the deities are creole, mulatto, brown as the mouths of rivers. Race, taste and history finally overcome.¹¹

Karathanos' democracy is enacted through a vigorous display of embodiment, heightened by the cast's nakedness. To the tunes of ethereal music, the bird chorus grasp and tumble. They

scramble up trees, caw and coo in throngs across the stage, in dance, in song, in tight white underpants, in bathing costumes, and, at one perplexing moment in the play, in chocolate pudding, some of it eaten by the actors. Iris, unwelcome in Cloudcuckooland, wrestles with Peisetaerus in that pudding for what seems like an inordinately lengthy period. All of this byplay contributes to the production's carnival atmosphere.

At times, the movement in the play appears too punishing for the actors, but this just heightens its focus on embodiment. As NYU Professor of Classics Peter Meineck says about the play, "it was a brutal production. Brutal on the actors." Despite this observation, the production's insistence on constant movement—running, tug-of-warring, and roughhousing—signals something the current governmental administration others: bodies that are different and bodies that are diverse. Certainly, the chorus celebrates a variety of bodies that are often marginalized on the public stage—brown, disabled, female, and cross-dressing bodies. The casting choice for the Nightingale, played by Driva, is not the only body on stage that is often the object of discrimination. One chorus member, a cross-dressing man in his mid-50s, looks suspiciously like Hilary Clinton. Yet, the crowning moment in this celebration of inclusivity comes with the entrance of Zeus at the end of the play—an interpretation, perhaps, of Major's insistence that the Birds should be read as an expression of Aristophanic democracy that ensures all are accepted in the ideal city. Paralympic athlete Yiannis Sevdikalis' Zeus emphasizes Karathanos' focus on relentless movement and commitment to diverse casting. Bare chested and gold belted, Sevdikalis- who competed in track events at the 2018 Berlin Paralympics- makes quite the entrance, sprinting onstage on his prosthetic legs with breakneck speed, leaping across cables, as the play draws to a close.

The original production was performed at the Ancient Theater of Epidaurus, where it played to sold-out, enthusiastic, and vast audiences in 2016. ¹² In the context of that particular social and political moment for Greeks, Karathanos' Birds speaks to the human desire to move towards home, any home that will be accepting of all—physical or figurative, America or Greece, any space open to the disenfranchised. Meineck concurs, agreeing with me that the play transfers beautifully from one political site to another, resonating with multiple audiences. Of the production in the US, and speaking of it as a reflection of Greek politics as well, Meineck says, "The play reflects Athens as you see it right now. Brilliant, scrappy, creative. Young people are sick of the lack of government help. It's a reaction to the lunacy of austerity. There is an angry energy about the place. Imagine New York City in the 1980s. Like Athens, a bit tragic but also really creative."

And it's the artists—like Karathanos and his troupe—that Meineck credits for the scrappy attempt to create a Cloudcuckooland that admits the abject and disenfranchised, reimagined in brilliant feathers, song, and dance. In fact, situating the production against the political landscape in contemporary Greece, Meineck sees this production as expressing artistic empathy with those who are, in fact, moving from location to location, but extremely othered: Syrian migrants and refugees. He says, "There is something special happening in Athens in terms of immigration. And it is mostly the artists that are handling it with compassion, taking in refugees. In a way, you could read this production in terms of the immigration crisis happening in Athens."

Karathanos' preoccupation with movement that resonates in any venue thus engenders a universal reading of this production. In his Birds, we see both American and Greek politics, not in the shape of a tweeting president or a Greek politician, but in a celebration of migration—both in terms of who gets admitted to this escapist world and who might take refuge in it. Karathanos sums this up beautifully:

We want to speak to you of a people who stand on one leg all the time, who feel foreign and alien in the midst of their own city, who fear their difference, we want to speak to those who have been forced through pain and ill treatment to live on borders and who grow wings, and grow wings every day so that they can cross the borders and jump the walls however "beautiful that wall may be." ¹³

FOOTNOTES

1 David Barrett "Introduction." in *Aristophanes, The Birds, and Other Plays*, ed. David Barrett and Alan Sommerstein (London, UK: Penguin Books, 2003), 149.

2 Wilfred E Major. *The Court of Comedy: Aristophanes, Rhetoric, and Democracy in Fifth-century Athens.* (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2013), 125.

3 Edith Hall, "On the Endurance of Aristophanes' Birds." *Onassis USA*. Accessed March 02, 2019. https://onassisusa.org/multimedia/on-the-endurance-of-aristophanes-birds-by-edith-hall.

4Major, The Court of Comedy>, 131.

5Hall, "On the Endurance of Aristophanes."

6Carol Rocamora noted that the production reminded her of Hair, in "Theater Review: The Birds at St. Ann's Warehouse." *Theater Pizzazz*. May 09, 2018. Accessed February 14, 2019. https://theaterpizzazz.com/the-birds-st-annswarehouse/.

7Sara Holdren, "Theater Review: Aristophanes' The Birds, Gone Cuckoo in the Best Possible Way." *Vulture*. May 07, 2018. Accessed February 14, 2019. https://www.vulture.com/2018/05/theater-aristophanes-the-birds-gone-cuckoo.html.

8Nikos Karanthanos, "What is it that you want: A Note from the Director." (Program, St. Ann's Warehouse, Brooklyn, NY, May 18, 2018), 11.

9Nikos Karathanos, Email, 2018.

10Karanthanos. 'What is it that you want."

11Tony Kushner. *Angels in America: A Gay Fantasia on National Themes: 20th Anniversary Edition.* (New York: Theater Communications Group, 2013). 245.

12 "43 Seconds of Aristophanes' "Birds" by Nikos Karathanos I From Epidaurus to SAW." YouTube video, 00:43. Posted [February 18], https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jZilnrCj5rk.

13 Karathanos. "What is it that you want?"

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"An Intro to The Birds". YouTube video, 1:00. Posted [April 18]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cq0u7rlyMPw.

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