

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 διδασκαλῖαι. *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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"Why We Build the Wall": Theatrical Space in *Hadestown*

by Claire Catenaccio
Georgetown University

Hadestown, now playing on Broadway, is the latest staged incarnation of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. This story has been popular with musicians and dramatists since the Renaissance. Indeed, as the critic and philosopher Theodor Adorno said, "All opera is Orpheus."¹ For theatrical composers, Orpheus represents the power of music to triumph even over death itself.

And yet Orpheus' triumph is not absolute. In the tale as told by both Virgil and Ovid, Orpheus fails twice: he loses Eurydice by looking back as they ascend to the upper world, and he loses his own life, torn to pieces by angry Thracian maenads. Peter Burian, in his discussion of versions of the Orpheus myth on the tragic stage and screen, draws attention to the problem that the arc of the story presents.² Artists have developed many innovations and variations to find their way around Orpheus' two failures and to present a happy, or at least uplifting, ending to the myth. For instance, in the 1959 film *Orfeu Negro*, made in Brazil by the French director Marcel Camus, Orpheus loses Eurydice, searches for her in vain, and finally dies himself at the hands of enraged women in the *favela*. But in the final scene, his guitar is rescued by a young boy, who strums Orpheus' familiar song while the sun rises and two other children dance around him. The film ends with a triumphant return of Orphic music, already beginning to invigorate the next generation of musicians, poets, and lovers.

The problem posed by Orpheus' double failure is particularly acute in American adaptations of the myth. As Helene Foley has written, Greek mythology often represents views in tension with American ideas of optimism and exceptionalism.³ Yet it is this very tension that can make American receptions of Greek mythology so rich. The United States was settled partly by Puritans, and almost exclusively by Protestants, until the nineteenth century. Not only did Protestants have at best an ambivalent relationship to the ancient pagans, but they also looked askance at song. The myth of Orpheus involves not only song, but also uxoriousness, special pleading to a royal authority, and, as Peter Burian has noted, failure. All are notably un-American and un-masculine in American terms. In a culture that values self-determination, industry, and perseverance in the face of obstacles, Orpheus is a questionable hero, ultimately undone by doubt. He does not achieve his dream. How then to square the circle, to bring together the death of Eurydice, the error of Orpheus, the triumph of love, the transcendent power of music, and the American belief that hard work can triumph over adversity? These questions are central to *Hadestown*, as to all American versions of the myth.

Hadestown was initially developed by the singer and songwriter Anaïs Mitchell in 2006, as a community theater venture that traveled through her native state of Vermont. In 2010 Mitchell released *Hadestown* as a concept album, featuring vocals

by Bon Iver's Justin Vernon, Greg Brown, and Ani DiFranco.⁴ Mitchell then reworked the script for the stage, and a production directed by Rachel Chavkin ran at New York Theater Workshop in 2016. After closing in New York City, the show ran in 2017 in Edmonton, Alberta, in preparation for its Broadway debut. In the fall of 2018 the show ran in London, at the National Theatre. Most recently, *Hadestown* opened in March, 2019, at the Walter Kerr Theater in New York City, offering tickets for sale until July, 2020. Each incarnation of the project has received numerous accolades and critical acclaim. In 2019, the show was awarded eight Tony awards, including the awards for Best Musical and Best Scenic Design.

The musical or folk opera, the term that the artistic team prefers sets the story of Orpheus and Eurydice in a dystopian version of 1930's New Orleans, a far-away world with uncanny similarities to today's America. In this version, Eurydice sells her soul for the comforts of capitalism. Or something like that one of the more appealing aspects of the show is how it resists being pinned down to any one contemporary interpretation. It strives to be both actual and mythic. In *Hadestown*, Orpheus (Leeve Carney) is an idealistic drifter with an acoustic guitar. Eurydice (Eva Noblezada), his beloved, is far more practical. Like so many young people who have come of age since the financial crisis, she worries about security. Eurydice is seduced by the rhetoric of Hades (Patrick Page), a Southern plutocrat with a rumbling deep voice, who rules over a walled company town that offers its inhabitants the protection of the almighty dollar. His wife, Persephone (Amber Gray), has long ago soured on her husband's wealth and now drinks to remind herself of the springtime she left behind.

At the end of Act I, Eurydice arrives in Hadestown. She joins the ensemble for the song "Why We Build the Wall." This call-and-response lays out the inverted, ironic logic of the Underworld. Hades asks, "Why do we build the wall, my children, my children?" The ensemble answers, "We build the wall to keep us free." Their response develops through amplification over the course of the song to encompass themes of poverty, work, and freedom. It culminates in the assertion that "the enemy is poverty, and the wall keeps out the enemy, and we build the wall to keep us free." The song is available via the show's website (www.hadestown.com), as well as through many fan-made videos on YouTube. One, by YouTube user Warner Classics, juxtaposes the song and images of border walls throughout history: [video](#).

When Anaïs Mitchell wrote these lyrics in 2006, the wall around the city of Hades stood for the fear that caused struggling souls like Eurydice to choose the safety of the Underworld instead of the chaos of life. In interviews, Mitchell has referred to her desire to keep *Hadestown* firmly on the "metaphorical plane." But over the last four years, that wall has started to seem less metaphorical. Donald Trump's plan to build a border wall between the United States and Mexico has profoundly changed audience reactions to the song. In 2016, Mitchell released an op-ed with *Huffpost* explaining her composition and speaking out against Trump's election.⁵ Inevitably, many have hailed Mitchell's "Why We Build the Wall" as a prophetic song of protest.

The way that the design team of *Hadestown* has chosen to stage "Why We Build the Wall" exemplifies the uneasy fit between the tragic myth of Orpheus and contemporary American ideology. As the show has moved through its various incarnations in New York, Canada, and London, the artistic team has made decisions about the most effective way to stage this provocative song in each new context. *Hadestown* thus offers scholars of Greek drama a case study of how contemporary theater artists navigate the contentious ideas of identity,

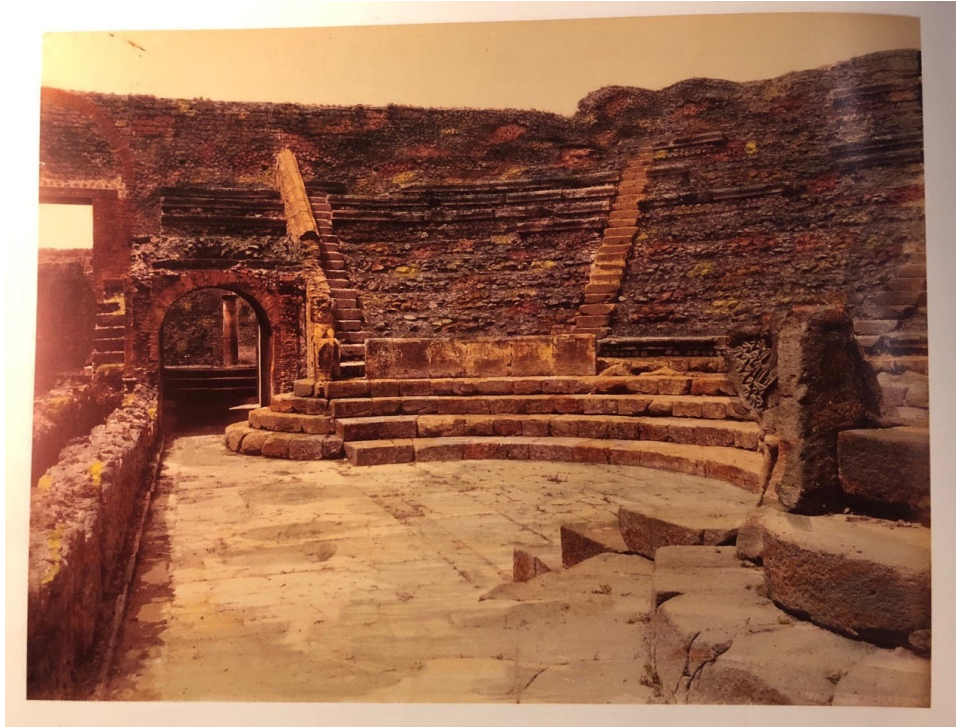
nationality, and culture, especially when making the transition from a small, independent production to a large-scale, commercially viable Broadway show.

I conducted an interview with Rachel Hauck, the designer of *Hadestown*, in October, 2018, as the show was preparing for its London run. In what follows, I draw on that interview. My primary focus will be the evolving set design of *Hadestown* as contemporary politics reshaped the physical staging of the show. The increasing size of the venues has compelled the design team of *Hadestown* to negotiate between competing desires for spectacle and intimacy. In the conclusion I will briefly discuss the relationship between the physical space of the theater and the notional “theater” of American democracy, and how *Hadestown* “performs” American democracy for foreign audiences in Canada and London and for a domestic audience in New York City. *Hadestown* is a thoroughly American telling of the Orpheus myth, ultimately optimistic about the possibility of for-profit art to effect meaningful social and political change.

I. Staging *Hadestown*

Video footage of *Hadestown* is tightly guarded by the press team, and a full-length recording of the show is not available to scholars at this time. However, still photographs of the set model and of the show in production can shed light on design choices. When Eurydice arrives in Hadestown, she joins the ensemble to sing “Why We Build the Wall,” the final scene before the intermission. The song bisects the show, separating the first act, which takes place in the upper world, from the second act in the underground realm of Hadestown. The transition between the upper and lower worlds is emphasized by sound, lighting, and a change of set. It has been staged differently in all four iterations of the production: at New York Theater Workshop in 2016; at the Citadel Theater in Edmonton, Canada, in 2017; at the National Theater in London in 2018; and at the Walter Kerr Theater in New York in 2019. Let us move through the four set designs in sequence.

New York Theater Workshop, where *Hadestown* opened in 2016, is a black-box space on East 4th Street that seats approximately 200 people. The production team wanted to set the show in the round, so that every audience member would have an intimate experience of the music, as in a coffee house or small concert venue. Rachel Hauck, the show’s designer, describes the spirit of the initial design as coming straight from the music: “It’s half an amphitheater from the Greeks and half a barn from Pete Seeger.”⁶ Hauck was inspired by a photograph of the theater in Pompeii, taken in 1860:



*Theater of Pompeii, ca. 1860. Photograph by Giorgio Sommer. Reproduced in *Antiquity and Photography: Early Views of Ancient Mediterranean Sites*. Pub. J. Paul Getty Museum, 2005.*

The main space at New York Theater Workshop, with its unfinished brick walls, matches the warm tones of the photograph of Pompeii. The aesthetic of the ancient theater is clear in these two photographs of the set model Hauck designed for the show:

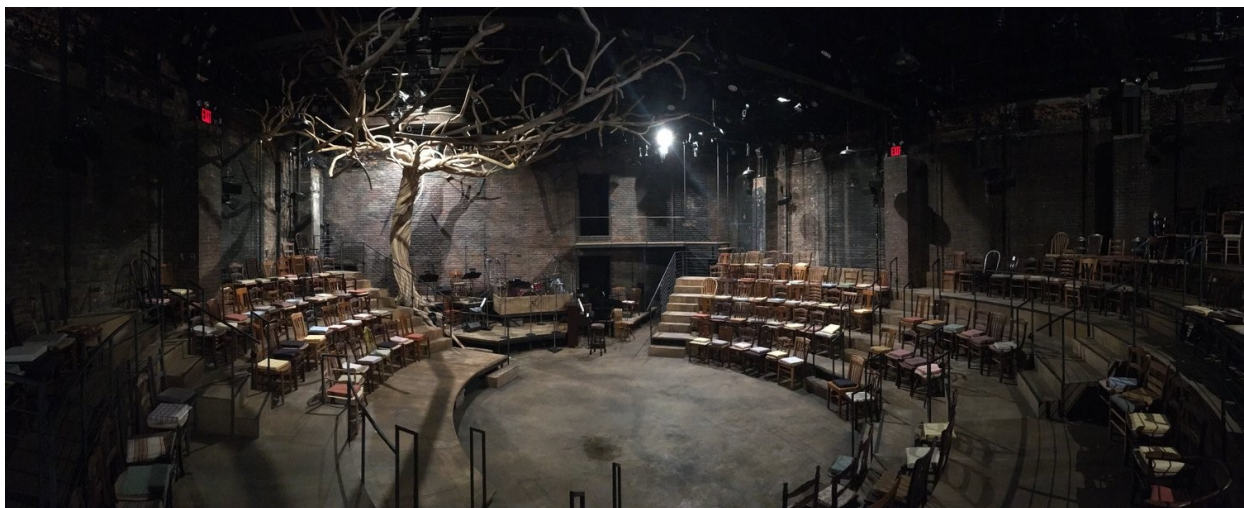




Hadestown set model, New York Theater Workshop. Copyright Rachel Hauck, 2016.

Setting the show in the round entailed a massive and costly redesign of the main stage space at New York Theater Workshop, which usually has a frontal seating arrangement. This redesign is available as a time-lapse video on YouTube, published by New York Theater Workshop: [video](#)

A central element of the initial design at New York Theater Workshop is a tree.



Hadestown set, New York Theater Workshop. Copyright Anna Maria Aburto, 2016.

At the crucial moment when Eurydice leaves the upper world and enters Hadestown, the tree was lifted from the flies. Its green and brown branches disappeared from view, and their mirror image, black roots, came to dominate the space of the stage. Standing at the heart of the amphitheater, symbolizing natural beauty, the tree was transformed into its sinister opposite. At the same time, the lighting also changed, becoming cooler and more outwardly focused, drawing attention to the brick walls that hold the constructed amphitheater. These brick walls – the actual walls of the theater building – stood in for the wall of Hadestown that Hades sings about.



Hades (Patrick Page), New York Theater Workshop. Copyright Joan Marcus, 2016.

In the 2016 version of the show, this sudden revelation – that the walls of the town of Hades were the walls of the theater in which the audience sat – was sinister and powerful. As Eurydice arrives in Hadestown, in Hell, inside the walls, the audience realizes that they are contained within those same walls. The whole theater becomes the realm of Hades. And since the audience has chosen to spend money, to buy a ticket, to take a seat, and to be entertained – to participate in the capitalist enterprise of American theater – they are implicated in “building the wall.” The protest message of the song is complicated and enriched by the fact that audience and actors inhabit the same space, surrounded by the same wall.

This unsettling effect of “Why We Build the Wall” was made possible by the small, flexible space at New York Theater Workshop. The next step for Hadestown to become a profitable show was a run in Canada, a testing-ground for possible Broadway hits. The Shctor Theater at the Citadel in Edmonton is a frontally-oriented proscenium-arch theater that seats 680 people.



Shctor Theater, Citadel Theater, Edmonton, Canada. Copyright Citadel Marketing, 2018.

Translating the show to this larger and less versatile space posed the challenge of keeping the closeness, even complicity, that had worked so well in New York.

achel Hauck describes the deficiencies of the Canadian design: "I think we learned a lot from the Canadian production. Suddenly we had resources, we had space, we had traps, we had flies, we had machines, we had all sorts of technology. And so we tossed everything out from the first design and started from scratch again. In order for the show to be financially viable, we knew we couldn't use an amphitheater as our setting. We needed to stage it frontally. Initially we turned to theatrical tricks, like cycs and scrim.⁷ These were terrible. We also tried literal things, like actual railroad tracks and actual grass, and we made the tree a two-dimensional prop on the stage. But it was banal. It was not emotionally dynamic in your gut, to see two-dimensional scenery that flew. So we learned an awful lot, but I think that the production lost its intimacy. That's not to say that the audience didn't respond quite strongly to the piece, but we were very aware that we had lost some of the magic."⁸

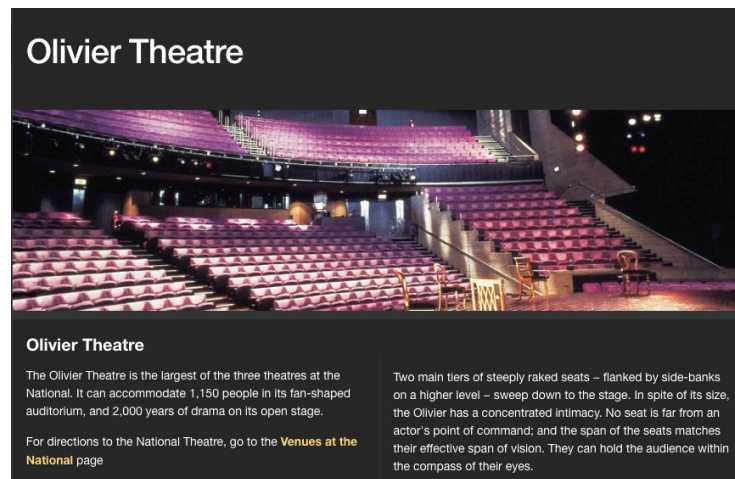
In the Canadian production, at the moment when Eurydice arrives in Hadestown, a cyc flew up to reveal an enormous, corrugated steel wall.



Hadestown, Citadel Theatre, Edmonton, Canada. Copyright Citadel Marketing, 2018.

The change from a brick wall – the actual wall of the theater in New York – to a stage-set steel wall was tied to a new focus on the imagery of mines, machines, and oil. But this new idea was not entirely satisfactory. The sense that actors and audience were implicated together in the capitalist ideology of *Hadestown* was lost. Because the show was staged by an American company in front of a Canadian audience, some of the community between actors and audience was already gone. Without this sense of intimacy, “Why We Build the Wall” becomes facile and preachy in its message. The moral is too easy.

The next stage design, for the London production, was developed to address the loss of metaphorical power that results from having the wall as a flat element of the set in a large, frontally oriented theater. The Olivier at the National Theatre in London is a bowl-shaped space that seats 1,200 people, all of whom look down on a rounded central stage. It was explicitly modeled on the fourth-century Greek theater at Epidauros. The stage itself includes a drum revolve, an innovation which enables the stage effectively to be split into two, allowing scenic changes to take place underneath the stage and then be rotated into place within seconds.

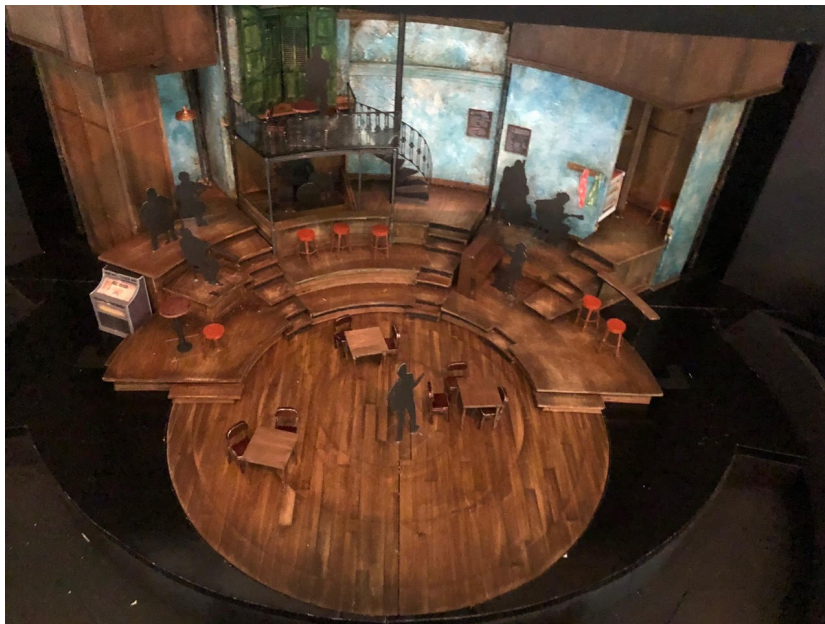


The Olivier Theatre, National Theatre, London. Copyright National Theatre, 2019.

The Greek amphitheater remained at the heart of the design for the London production, but only in the arrangement of the audience. Hauck removed the tree, with its evocation of natural cycles. The new set for the first half of the play takes its inspiration from New Orleans jazz bars like Preservation Hall, in an attempt to stay true to the folk-music roots of the production. The design team looked at thousands of images to create the aesthetic of the play: the American South and West, the Dust Bowl, Detroit, abandoned factory towns, graveyards, railroad depots, warehouses, ruined places across the country. The set is meant to evoke a formerly wealthy culture now crumbling in ruins.



Preservation Hall, New Orleans. Copyright Preservation Hall, 2019.



Set model for HADESTOWN, National Theatre, London. Copyright Rachel Hauck, 2018.



Hermes (André De Shields) and the company of Hadestown, National Theatre, London. Photo by Helen Maybanks. Copyright National Theatre, 2018.



Hades (Patrick Page) and Persephone (Amber Gray) in Hadestown, National Theatre, London. Photo by Helen Maybanks. Copyright National Theatre, 2018.



Eurydice (Eva Noblezada) and Orpheus (Reeve Carney) in Hadestown, National Theatre, London. Photo by Helen Maybanks. Copyright National Theatre, 2018.



The company of Hadestown, National Theatre, London. Photo by Helen Maybanks. Copyright National Theatre, 2018.

achel Hauck updated the design for “Why We Build the Wall” to take advantage of the advanced technological resources available at the National Theatre. She describes the new design as breaking the imagined wall that separates the experience of the audience from the backstage mechanics of a professional theater. Hauck explains, “The basic shape is a Greek bowl. But in this version, when you go down to Hadestown, the bowl pulls apart. It splits. Part of it flies off, and part of it pulls back, and the bomb-lights go from being up to being down. The dynamic changes fundamentally. You become aware that this thing that you thought was the whole world is a small cog in a giant machine of rotting American industry.”⁹ This splitting apart of the stage set was made possible by the drum revolve at the Olivier. Throughout the play the revolve was used to underscore the imagery of circles, prominent in the lyrics in reference to the cycle of the seasons and Persephone’s return to the upper world in springtime. At the moment when Hadestown is revealed to the audience, the design gives the

impression that the entire first half of the play has taken place in a created, illusionary world; the second half takes place in a world where illusions have been shattered. Hades town becomes the city where the American dream has come to die.

Lighting plays an important role in the transition. The tone changes from warm to cool, and new shadows are cast by the separated pieces of the set. Whereas the first set was lit from within, from its center, the second set is lit from without, by lights above and behind the main set that draw attention to its artificiality.



Set Model for Hades town, National Theatre, London. Copyright Rachel Hauck, 2018.



Hades and Persephone, National Theatre, London. Copyright National Theatre, 2018.

In its current incarnation, Hadestown opened on Broadway in 2019 at the Walter Kerr Theater on West 48th Street. The Kerr, formerly the City Center, is one of the smaller houses in the New York City theater district and seats 975 people. The décor, with plush velvet seats and gilded decoration, recalls the days of the theater's founding in 1921.



The Walter Kerr Theater. Copyright Playbill magazine, 2019.

For the hometown audience, Rachel Hauck re-envisioned the set design from the London production. The Kerr is a proscenium-arch theater, whose seating creates no opportunity for intimacy. Reconfiguring the space as an amphitheater was impossible. To keep the imagery of circles tied to the play's themes of seasonal change and mythological return, Hauck instead developed a series of concentric circular risers built into the main part of the set. When characters descend to Hadestown, they can be lowered below the stage on these risers. The risers also rotate, allowing characters to walk without moving, as on a treadmill. These risers are used principally to create the effect of a "journey," when Orpheus finds his way alone to Hadestown and again when he and Eurydice follow the path back to the upper world.



Orpheus (Reeve Carney) underground, Walter Kerr Theater. Copyright Matthew Murphy, 2019.



Orpheus (Reeve Carney) on his journey, Walter Kerr Theater. Copyright Matthew Murphy, 2019.



The ensemble on rotating circular risers, Walter Kerr Theater. Copyright Matthew Murphy, 2019.

At the beginning of “Why We Build the Wall,” Eurydice has just been lowered into Hadestown on the risers. As in the London production, the transition to Hadestown is created by a splitting apart of the set, combined with a change in lighting that emphasizes the artificiality of the constructed world onstage. Hades, who leads the song, stands at the front of the stage before an old-fashioned microphone, like a political leader at a rally. His wife Persephone accompanies him, expressionless. The actors who sing in response to Hades are ranged across the stage set, all facing forward. In the original New York Theater Workshop production in 2016, the chorus was interspersed among the audience, contributing to the effect that everyone, actors and audience alike, chanted the answer, “We build the wall to keep us free.” At the Merr Theater, the arrangement is more antagonistic. The audience is confronted with the sight of the ensemble, flattened in front of them as on a television screen. In this version, *Hadestown* makes a virtue out of the enforced distancing of the proscenium-arch space. Whereas the rounded seating at New York Theater Workshop allowed for intimacy and complicity, the banks of seats at the Merr Theater force the audience into the all-too-familiar position of passive spectators watching a political demonstration that they are powerless to stop.



Hades (Patrick Page) and Persephone (Amber Gray) during “Why We Build the Wall,” Walter Kerr Theater. Copyright Matthew Murphy, 2019.

II. Staging American Democracy

As we have seen, the design team of *Hadestown* has changed the setting of “Why We Build the Wall,” moving progressively from an arrangement in the round that unites actors and audience to a frontal presentation designed to alienate and shock spectators by recalling current political media. The changing venues of the show have had the effect of distancing the audience from the action onstage. Some critics have seen the commercial and financial success of *Hadestown* as fundamentally at odds with its original, anti-capitalist message.¹⁰

What started as a quirky downtown production based on folk music has evolved, over the course of two years, into a sleek Broadway show, with ticket prices that range from \$100 to \$300.

“Why We Build the Wall” is the most overtly political song in the *Hadestown* songbook. Because the lyrics have remained unchanged since Anais Mitchell composed them in 2006, the manipulation of space has been an important tool in shaping audience reception of this song. For some members of the creative team, the realm of *Hadestown* represents America, and the wall around it exposes the uncomfortable compromises and double standards of American society. Here, the original cast from New York Theater Workshop discusses the symbolism of the wall, in an interview with Esther Cohen for *Stage & Candor* magazine:

Esther Cohen: So if *Hadestown* is America, what is our “Wall”? And who is the enemy?

Chris Sullivan: The wall is money and the fact that we have all been conditioned to seek money above all else. The choice becomes, do you pursue financial security or do you pursue spiritual happiness? And can they coexist? I believe heaven is right in the middle, but that happens so rarely.

Jessie Shelton: The idea of a class system is also key to the concept of the wall.

Shaina Taub: And fear. That’s the common denominator of humanity, that we’re all always scared. But it’s about how you channel that fear, and how leaders choose to manipulate that fear in order to unite people, either uniting them against an enemy or uniting them for good. Leaders throughout history, just like Trump, have gathered people based on fear. They say, “This is the enemy, and if this enemy is gone, your fear will go away. So we must build a wall against that enemy.”¹¹

Because *Hadestown* played for audiences in Canada and London before returning to New York, the show may be viewed as a portrayal of American democracy abroad. I asked Rachel Hauck about her experience, as an American artist, of working on an American show and mounting it before foreign audiences in Canada and London. Her answer shows that in her opinion, theater itself is patriotic, participatory, and fundamentally optimistic:

It feels thrilling. There is a pervasive stereotype of America and Americans in Canada and Europe at the moment, and it’s not flattering. And so it’s pretty great to be standing there proudly with a bunch of Americans saying, ‘This is also America. This is American democracy, having a huge argument with itself.’ And we are furious. I am furious at this president and everything he represents. So I think American theater is an important part of the protest, because when we protest we stand incredibly proudly and unflinchingly in the face of what we disagree with. We all stand very strongly with the politics of the show.¹²

Hauck’s rhetoric of open political discussion through drama may also strike us as extremely Greek. Greek drama was performed by and for its own citizens. In many of the plays that have come down to us, both tragic and comic, we can see Athenian democracy engaged in a knock-down, drag-out fight with its own institutions and values, including the place of for-profit theater in civic discussion. *Hadestown* believes that through art, America may just be able to be saved by its own people.

NOTES

¹Adorno, T. W. (1959). "Bürgerliche Oper." In *Klandfiguren* (Berlin), p. 26 (my translation).

²Burian, P. (2012). "The Fate of Orpheus on the Operatic Stage: Death and Transfiguration." *Syllecta Classica* 23: 51–75.

³Foley, H. P. (2012). *Reimagining Greek Tragedy on the American Stage* (University of California), p. 1.

⁴Righteous Babe Records, 2010.

⁵Anaïs Mitchell, "Why We Build the Wall." www.huffpost.com, published 11/04/2016.

⁶Interview, October 5, 2018.

⁷A cyclorama is a large curtain, positioned at the back of the theater, onto which images can be projected.

⁸Interview, October 5, 2018.

⁹Interview, October 5, 2018.

¹⁰For instance, <https://medium.com/department-of-feminist-conversations/in-conversation-with-hole-and-hadestown-caa3e298b552>, published 3/11/2019.

¹¹Stage & Candor, July 21, 2016. Accessed at www.stageandcandor.com.

¹²Interview, October 5, 2018.