



Didaskalia is an electronic journal dedicated to the study of all aspects of ancient Greek and Roman performance

DIDASKALIA

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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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***Antigone*: A first for the American Shakespeare Center**

Translated by Robin Bond

Directed by Doreen Bechtol

Premiered on 30 Aug 2018

Blackfriars Playhouse, Staunton, Virginia, and multiple subsequent sites

Reviewed by C. Michael Stinson

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For many years, the American Shakespeare Center (ASC) has presented the works of Shakespeare and other dramatists in Staunton, Virginia, at its Blackfriars Playhouse, which the ASC routinely bills as “the world’s only re-creation of Shakespeare’s indoor theatre.”¹ Since the ASC’s founding in 1988, the company has presented all of Shakespeare’s plays, most multiple times, as well as numerous works by Elizabethan and Jacobean playwrights such as Marlowe, Jonson, Lily, and Webster, as well as selected later plays and musicals by Shaw, Wilde, and others, including several living writers. Blackfriars has hosted well over 5000 performances since it opened in 2001, but before late 2018, none of them had been a Greek tragedy. The performance reviewed here was the opening night of the first presentation of any Greek tragedy by ASC, Sophocles’ *Antigone*.

ASC’s productions routinely begin with remarks to the audience explaining how “Shakespeare’s staging conditions” are honored at Blackfriars. This includes their oft-repeated explanation that at ASC, they “do it with the lights on” rather than in a darkened theatre, as well as using minimal props, simple sets, and live music before and during performances.² ASC’s production of *Antigone* observed all these conditions. For audience members who had seen previous ASC productions, this approach was familiar, but for those whose only exposure to Greek (or any) theatre had involved curtained stages, dimmed lights, and actors who appear and disappear exclusively from the rear of the stage, such elements might have been a surprise. The audience was also informed before the play began that this was the first Greek tragedy to be produced by the ASC, and that an opportunity would be given to talk with some of the actors after the play.

The ASC supports both a resident troupe and a traveling troupe of actors. The cast presenting *Antigone* was ASC’s current traveling troupe, and after opening night, the group left for a tour during which they would perform *Antigone* ten more times in six states from September through early April, in repertoire with *The Winter’s Tale* (to be performed 17 times) and *The Comedy of Errors* (20 times), before returning to Staunton for additional performances of all three plays.³ Perhaps it’s unsurprising that a group best known for presenting Shakespeare’s plays was booked to perform *Antigone* less often than the other two works. But the inclusion of *Antigone* in the touring troupe’s 2018–2019 repertoire did offer a valuable opportunity for audiences —many of whom might have never seen Greek tragedy on stage — to see this work performed by a group of skilled, professional actors. Even for those familiar with the genre, experiencing *Antigone* in the intimacy of the Blackfriars Theatre had the potential to challenge any facile associations of Greek tragedy with settings such as amphitheaters or school stages where it might have been previously encountered. At Blackfriars, the actors move among the spectators as freely as they perform in front of them, another feature of

ASC's approach to Shakespeare that was carried over into this presentation of *Antigone*. Another such feature, though not one of Shakespeare's own staging conditions, is ASC's routinely cross-gender and ethnically diverse casting. For those familiar with this policy, it was no surprise to see the diversity of the cast presenting *Antigone*, though in this production the gender casting was relatively traditional.⁴



Antigone shortly before her final exit
Photo Credit: American Shakespeare Center

Anticipating the dialogue between Antigone (Constance Swain) and Ismene (Madeline Calais) that opens *Antigone*, I was surprised when, after the preparatory remarks mentioned, most of the cast appeared onstage and began dancing and rapping. For the benefit of audience members unfamiliar with the myth underlying *Antigone*, the ASC actors had prepared a choreographed induction that seemed stylistically to be influenced by Lin-Manuel Miranda's currently popular musical *Hamilton*. Lines were delivered quickly, but for those who could follow them, the Theban legend was summarized while the cast danced or acted out various events that were being remembered. The story of Oedipus' fateful birth, patricide, incest, and blinding were all glossed as rap lyrics, and the final battle between Eteocles and Polynices was acted out in slow motion as it was described, leading to the two bodies of the brothers lying on stage immediately before the beginning of the actual lines of *Antigone*. This innovative hip-hop induction was the biggest shock of the evening for me. As it ended, most of the players left the stage while Swain and Calais began their opening exchange.



Antigone shortly before her final exit
Photo Credit: American Shakespeare Center

Once these first lines were uttered, however, the cast displayed fidelity to the text of *Antigone* in its 2014 verse translation by Robin Bond.⁵ Bond's work is available for theatre companies to use royalty-free, which might have factored into ASC's decision to use his translation, but several of his other translations of ancient drama have been the basis of successful stagings before the adoption of *Antigone* by ASC, so this was surely not the only reason.⁶ As staged by the ASC actors, Bond's *Antigone* was a delight. Their delivery of Bond's contemporary and literary rendering of Sophocles matched the practiced fluidity of their Shakespearean verse.

Since the production was designed to be taken on the road, some of its choices in staging and costuming were likely made with portability and flexibility in mind. The costumes were one of the more conservative aspects of this *Antigone*, but this was not a fault, since the relatively straightforward gowns and robes encouraged a focus on the words of Sophocles and allowed the actors great freedom of movement. The predominant colors were pastel blues and browns. Several members of the chorus wore matching, loose, calf-length pants and gray tops, while others wore simple brown robes or dresses. Creon (Ronald Roman-Melendez) was more ornately arrayed, with a jewel-encrusted sash and crown, befitting his royal status, and the other royal family members wore simpler gold crowns to signal theirs. But the costumes, while somewhat understated, were not completely unimaginative. As Swain delivered Antigone's final words before departing for the cave where she would die,

Observe me, lords of Thebes,
your last and lone princess,
and this my fate at the hands of such as these,
because I honoured what was right,⁷

she walked slowly down stage. One end of the train of her gown remained attached to something out of sight in the discovery space while the other end was still connected to the rest of her gown, the train growing longer as she moved forward, extending in a line behind her, and finally crossing the stage from front to back as she stood at the apron. I wondered what would happen if she took another step, but as Swain finished her final words the train separated from her shoulders and was drawn slowly back into the discovery space as she walked away, visually underlining Antigone's permanent separation from home, family, royal privilege, and life itself. Another exception to the generally muted costuming was Tiresias (Topher Embrey), who appeared wrapped in complex layers of gauzy, tattered, multicolored fabric topped by a white, loosely wound turban, and carrying a staff wrapped with fibers that matched his costume (or had been taken from it); his white head covering set off the white contact lenses he wore to represent his blindness.



Topher Embrey as Tiresias
 Photo Credit: American Shakespeare Center

The presentation of the chorus was another innovation in this production, surprising anyone expecting static rows of speakers who simply walked on and off stage. Actors of both sexes serving as chorus members assumed varying and often remarkably gymnastic positions at each appearance. At times one even climbed atop another's hunched back as they chanted their various pronouncements. The chorus did not simply speak together; they clung to each other, grappled with each other, and moved around the stage as they spoke, drawing attention to what they were doing as well as what they were saying. Clearly, ASC was offering its own appreciation of the role of dance in Greek theatre with an approach to the chorus that was much more athletic and dynamic than that seen in many productions of Greek tragedy.



The Chorus
 Photo Credit: American Shakespeare Center

ASC actors routinely find humor in all of Shakespeare's plays, including the grimmest tragedies, turning even villains such as Iago into sources of laughter.⁸ Despite the dark inevitability of *Antigone*, the same held true for this production, especially early in the play. As Creon dismissed the love between Antigone and Haemon with the line "(t)here are plenty of other fields for him to plough," he accompanied his words with a leer and gesture that produced guffaws around the theater. I found myself chuckling even though I anticipated both the line and the regret Creon would soon express over his misjudgment; in Roman-Melendez's interpretation of Creon, the awareness of his error appeared to strike him abruptly, and late. The demeanor of the Guard (Michael Hahalyak) was also a source of levity; he initially

appeared at the rear of the theater, approaching reluctantly down the aisle, and turned as if to go back the way he had come more than once, matching motion to words —

‘You clown, yet more delay?’ ‘If Creon learns of this
from someone else...then yours will be the sorry ass!’
Such consternation checked my tardy progress here,
and so a meagre path becomes a marathon...

—before finally mounting the stairs at stage left to confront Creon. Lines that might have brought a quiet smile when simply read led to loud laughter in ASC’s hands.

After a minority of their shows ASC actors offer a talkback session, and this was true for the opening night of *Antigone*, when four actors were joined onstage by an ASC educator immediately after the play to take questions from the audience. When the actors, including Swain, were asked why *Antigone* was selected as ASC’s first Greek drama, the question was returned to the audience: “Why do you think?” Soon both actors and audience members had characterized Antigone as “speaking truth to power,” a phrase that also appears in director Bechtel’s notes on the play,⁹ and more than one audience member referred to current political events in the United States during the subsequent conversation. Such immediate application might seem obvious or perhaps even cliché to anyone already familiar with *Antigone*, but for some of those present, feeling the power of ancient drama to speak to us today was clearly a novel experience. The strong showing by “a woman of color” (one audience member’s description of Swain) as Antigone also generated multiple comments. Aside from any historical question of exactly what the original Greek actors would have looked like, this was perhaps as much a comment on the state of theater today as on this particular production.



Creon mourns the death of Haemon
Photo Credit: American Shakespeare Center

At the end of the touring season, the troupe returned to the Blackfriars Theatre and presented *Antigone* as part of the spring season there, concluding with a performance on 7 June. The ASC identifies Blackfriars performances, touring performances, and education as the “three legs” that support their mission,¹⁰ and this new, innovative production of *Antigone* offered all three. Since their founding, ASC has brought thousands of people to a new appreciation of Shakespeare by allowing them to encounter his works on the stage rather than solely on the page. With *Antigone*, they have now provided the same service to Sophocles and to Greek drama for the first time.

FOOTNOTES

¹E.g., at <https://americanshakespearecenter.com/about/>

²Ibid

³Tour details from the ASC calendar web pages and <https://americanshakespearecenter.com/2019/04/the-hand-of-time-tour-returns-home-for-spring-season/>

⁴Full cast details available at <https://americanshakespearecenter.com/events/antigone/>

⁵Bond's translation of Antigone is available at <https://ir.canterbury.ac.nz/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10092/9681/1++Seven+Tragedies+of+Sophocles++Antigone.pdf;jsessionid=93E9D9843FA3544E8B1C22D7CEBEF5A7?sequence=8>

⁶Examples of prior performances of Bond's translations are available at <https://www.canterbury.ac.nz/arts/contact-us/people/robin-bond.html>, and see also his abstract at <https://www.didaskalia.net/issues/vol5no1/bond.html>

⁷My quotations of Antigone are from Bond's translation.

⁸A prime example would be Rick Blunt's Iago in 2014; details at <https://americanshakespearecenter.com/events/othello-2014/>

⁹<https://americanshakespearecenter.com/events/antigone/>

¹⁰<https://americanshakespearecenter.com/about/>