

DIDASKALIA 

The Journal for Ancient Performance



photo: P. Winters/Theater of War

*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 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](mailto: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](http://didaskalia.net).

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## Note

*Didaskalia* is an online journal. This print representation of Volume 8 is an inadequate approximation of the web publication at [didaskalia.net](http://didaskalia.net), which includes sound, video, and live hyperlinks.

## Sophocles: Seven Sicknesses

Adapted and Directed by Sean Graney  
September 6-October 23, 2011  
The Hypocrites  
at The Chopin Theater, Chicago

Review by **Teresa M. Danze Lemieux**  
*University of Chicago*

Of established Chicago-based off-loop theatre today, The Hypocrites might be the most consistently cutting edge company around. Since its founding in 1997 by Sean Graney, The Hypocrites have gained a reputation for boldly tackling absurdist playwrights and throwing a bit of the humorous into straight-laced tragedies, winning countless accolades from local reviewers and multiple Joseph Jefferson nominations and awards. Their original approach is supported by a mission to make a "Theater of Honesty" in which actors strive for "genuine emotional vulnerability" while acknowledging the artificial nature of theater by "embrac[ing] high theatricality." They vow to abide by authorial intent, to create a new experience for every production, and to respect their audience, but they reserve the right to break all their own principles.<sup>1</sup> Apply this philosophy to Sophocles and the results are anything but conventional. In 2001, Graney adapted and directed *Ajax*, adding Edith Hamilton (an influence on all of his work with Greek tragedy) as a character—a narrator who commissions the play's invented Jacobson family of three to perform the roles alongside a choral group of mustachioed sailors.<sup>2</sup> While it opened to mixed reviews, the play received a Jeff nomination for best adaptation. The Jeff recommended *Oedipus* in 2009 seemed more to the critics' liking as a "rock opera"<sup>3</sup> set in a carnivalesque back alley. Iocasta downed bleach while singing a lounge song in a port-a-potty; balloons were tossed around between actors and audience.<sup>4</sup> Most recently, The Hypocrites tackled all seven of Sophocles' fully extant tragedies as *Sophocles: Seven Sicknesses*, the highly anticipated four-hour epic adaptation written and directed by Sean Graney and performed at the Chopin Theatre in Chicago's Wicker Park neighborhood, September 6–October 23, 2011. This review will look at how the adaptation succeeds as both a performance and as a reworking of the seven original tragedies.

For a contemporary audience that expects the familiar tones and circumstances of realistic film, TV, or theater, nothing could be more foreign than choral song and dance, the framework of a largely unfamiliar mythology, and the poetry of Sophoclean speech. Consequently, the uninhibited



Figure 1: Jeff Trainor as Oedipus with Sarah Jackson and Shannon Matesky as the Nurses.  
Photo: Matthew Gregory Hollis.



Figure 2: Lindsay Gavel as the Blind Seer (front) with Tien Doman, Erin Barlow, and Walter Briggs.  
Photo: Matthew Gregory Hollis.



Figure 3: Erin Barlow as Jocasta.  
Photo: Matthew Gregory Hollis.

Hypocrites are the perfect group to tackle what modern audiences often consider to be the impenetrable oddities of Greek tragedy. They break these unfamiliar elements down and rebuild them into an ambitious tragicomedy filled with emotional depth, sophisticated staging, and perfect comedic timing. By bringing death from behind the scenes, laughing at tragic irony, and altering the plays to emphasize an identifiable theme, Graney in particular translates Sophocles for the popular American palate. For purists, Graney's work in the *Seven Sicknesses* as a whole might be regarded as a failure. The gods are largely absent, stories are twisted to facilitate loose connections between the plays, and Graney's adaptations of *Philoctetes* and *Trachiniae* betray some of the core elements that make the originals uniquely Sophoclean. But for viewers who are open to bending the rules, as indeed Athenians must have been in regard to their own mythological and narrative expectations, this production of Sophocles' seven extant works offers a riveting, fast-paced evening of compelling drama with a dash of Aristophanic humor thrown into the mix.

The play as a whole is divided into three parts, and each part is subdivided into acts that are grouped according to the status of honor within the plays. "Honor Lost" contains "Oedipus," "In Trachis," and "In Colonus," while "Honor Found" comprises "Philoctetes" and "Ajax." "Elektra" and "Antigone" conclude the evening under the title of "Honor Abandoned." Two intermissions, the first with a Mediterranean meal, separate the three parts. The acts within the parts follow each other without interruption, the mopped-up blood of one tragedy preparing the way for new misery in the next. The honor and dignity prized by the protagonists in "Honor Lost" cannot prevent their tragedies, written by the Fates and ensured by human pride. While Philoktetes and Ajax find ways to recapture honor, it comes at a cost: Philoktetes must abide by Heracles' will and Ajax must die. By the end of "Honor Abandoned," we have learned that honor is an unattainable goal as long as the sins of man continue to afflict us.

This search for honor takes place neither on a battlefield nor before the doors of a palace but within the sanitized space of the hospital. Upon entering the theatre, ushers direct the audience through swinging doors that open directly onto the set by Tom Burch and Maria Defabo—a raised galley stage disguised as an operating room complete with white linoleum, harsh lighting, and an operating table. From there, audience members must choose to sit either left or right of the stage while vulnerably on display to the earlier arrivals who have just completed the same ritual. Our traverse of the stage into an intimate space fit for fifty challenges us to accept our exposure: we are all ill and in need of a cure, all responsible for and complicit in the process.

As we settle onto our pillowed bench seats with drinks from the lobby bar, preparing for four hours of advertised blood and bawdy humor, the cast of twelve actors arrives onstage in costume with energetic and jovial smiles to welcome audience members. In accordance with what we have come to expect from this theatre company, costuming for *Seven Sicknesses* avoids the traditionally classical and instead favors bold colors and contemporary silhouettes. Indeed, Alison Siple's costumes speak volumes about each character without suggesting any one time period. Menelaus could be a WW II general in his trench coat and military hat, while Iocasta would easily fit in with the New York socialites of the new millennium in her jewel-tone sateen dress. Though it is hard to say whether Chrysothemis's bright pink petticoat skirt would better suit Elle Woods of *Legally Blonde* or one of the Pink Ladies from *Grease*, either character would be at home in Siple's wardrobe and Graney's adaptation of the *Electra*. The initial preview of actors in costume ultimately reminds us that we are about to see familiar stories in a new way, presented by a group that doesn't take itself too seriously—a realization that puts us at ease with the strangers we're actually rubbing elbows with.

The opening of the first act shows immediately what kind of adaptation we are in for. Instead of the silent supplication of the priests and children found at the beginning of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannus*, two young Nurses in aquamarine dresses with white aprons (Sarah Jackson and Shannon Matesky) enter

through the swinging doors. One is newly hired, the other experienced. "Don't speak, just work," the latter exclaims. You can feel the classicists in the room take note: this is your chorus and it is not traditional. In fact, Graney's chorus sings only once and it barely speaks. These women are here to bandage wounds, sever the gangrenous foot of Philoktetes, and mop up the bloody aftermath of every eye-gouge, suicide, and murder that occurs onstage. This is not to say that there are no genuinely choral elements in the production. The protagonists and minor characters facing a critical moment in each play sing the lyrics from Bruce Springsteen's album *The River* to the tunes of Kevin O'Donnell's soft musical score. These heartfelt ballads of nostalgia and blue-collar strife suspend the rapid pace of the show and temper the mood, helping us cope with the death and tragedy we have or will soon witness on the stage. Philoktetes' ode to his amputated foot, sung in the lyrics of the Springsteen album's title track, is oddly touching, and "Fade Away" turns Ajax's suicide by a five-foot butcher knife into a poignant inevitability that is as much about his loss of honor as about the loss of his relationship with Tecmessa. Had the Nurses been given the choral task, the middle-class woes of the Springsteen lyrics would have been an apt parallel to the popular beliefs and narrative commentaries found in the choral odes of antiquity. But Graney's final product was undeniably moving.

Graney's style of writing is unquestionably popular, and sometimes his characters dwell on a point *ad nauseam*, but there are tender moments of poetic language and intelligent humor that artfully tap into the heart of human struggle. "Philoc-titties" seems a cheap joke, and the moral importance of making a choice becomes an obvious refrain. Yet the depth and sense of humor characteristic of Graney's work often appears at traditionally tense and uncomfortable moments to great effect, turning what has been accepted as ironically tragic into something morbidly humorous. When Oedipus rails at Creon in the first act for his supposed part in a conspiracy, condemning him to exile, Creon responds in rightful disbelief with "Are you, like, banishing me?" The collective laughter from the audience applauds Graney's juxtaposition of casual language with an arcane practice, and Zeke Sulkes's pitch-perfect tone of absurdity and shock reflects the underlying emotion that every audience member surely felt on first hearing this tragedy.

The production's serious moments are no fewer or less ingeniously written than the comic. In the "Oedipus," the news that Oedipus was adopted strikes him like a thunderclap headache, forcing him to contemplate the revelation while Nurses take his blood pressure ([Figure 1](#)). Oedipus imagines himself as two persons suddenly faced with one another in the present—"Someone else slept with my lovers," he desperately exclaims. "Who am I, who is he?" His awakening to this first point in his horrific journey of self-discovery throws into question the very substance of his being, making him a stranger to the man he has become but preparing the way for his rebirth through blindness. Graney deftly articulates the larger questions at work in "Oedipus" without falling into clichés about finding oneself, while the emotional truthfulness of Jeff Trainor's Oedipus captures the weight of the tragedy before his character knows exactly where it will lead.

Each section of the heptalogy could stand alone as a complete play, but the arrangement of the sections is so important to the staging that the whole production is best reviewed from beginning to end.

Understandably, the "Oedipus" is the most thoroughly developed of the seven tragedies. A man in extreme pain enters after the Nurses, who place him on a gurney and attend to him to as Oedipus looks on, showing a likeable if somewhat uncomprehending concern for the man's life. The Blind Seer (played with delight by Lindsey Gavel) is aptly costumed as witchy old bag-lady in a wheelchair whose sharp tongue goads Oedipus into revealing his impatient side ([Figure 2](#)). There is no effort to age the dignified and graceful Jocasta (Erin Barlow), but her dark wig suggests concealment. Her death through the consumption of bleach recalls the 2009 production but seems more apt in the hospital setting of "Oedipus" ([Figure 3](#)). One reconfiguration of the story in particular demonstrates both the efficiency of Graney's staging and his ability to make poignant theater. The Sick Man (Robert McLean) who enters in the prologue and remains onstage in the operating room is revealed to be the man who handed over the

infant Oedipus. Unaware of the original oracle, he is completely innocent of acting with foreknowledge, and is guilty only of pity for the innocent. In contrast, Sophocles' original Oedipus must twist the arm of the Herdsman to hear the truth that he knew of the oracle and ignored orders to expose the infant. Oedipus the politician and the blue-collar Sick Man are bound by their generous acts of compassion, but the consequence for the Sick Man ends there, while Oedipus must now live with the shame, gouging his eyes out center-stage for all to witness. But Graney's Creon—a smarmy, sharp snake in the grass—is entirely unsympathetic to Oedipus' misfortune, banishing him and his two daughters from Thebes and thus facilitating their return in the third act.

"In Trachis" demonstrates most clearly both the dominance of Graney's vision and his departure from Sophocles' text. While the play capitalizes on themes that reflect the Sophoclean version, e.g., the destructive consequences of despotic sexuality and blinding emotion, it comes at the loss of Hyllus's difficult decision to end his father's life and of the intriguing complexity of Sophocles' Deianeira, whose desperate need for love tragically outweighs her otherwise rational and compassionate nature. This Deianeira is a shrill and suspicious desperate housewife consumed with a lust and pride that rages as fiercely as those of her absent husband. While Deianeira still attempts to win back the affection of Heracles by applying Nessus's supposed love charm to a robe (considered here to be a woman's trifle rather than a religiously significant gift), in Graney's version the charm is not his clotted blood but rather bloody semen that Deianeira harvested herself from the dying centaur, who had wooed her in the past, as she recalls with girlish delight. Deianeira's hope is that Iole, the household "infection," will be "ejaculated" from Heracles' mind. Iole, meanwhile, dressed in a luxurious red-and-gold gown, becomes the more understanding female, sympathetically summing up Deianeira's pain: "You've been replaced like a pair of old batteries." Her purity will cleanse the house of disease, claims Philoktetes, a clever replacement for Lichas in this act. Our pity is for Iole even as we watch Deianeira end her own life, the victim of blind trust. Walter Brigg's Herakles lacks the sustained urgency of Sophocles' character (his distress over his melting flesh and exposed veins quickly recedes) but he is an arrogant and fierce figure who will achieve his ends by any means necessary. Intent on marrying off Iole to Hyllus, he threatens to beat his slightly effeminate son into submission if he doesn't agree. This Hyllus has always disappointed his father, but he eagerly runs off to marry Iole with only slight resistance—a far cry from the Hyllus of Sophocles' original *Trachiniae*, who struggles to resolve misunderstanding and to accept his fate after succumbing to his own emotional blindness. Philoktetes instead must be the one to bring Herakles to the incinerator to help him end his destructive lust and lies.

Of the three Theban acts, "In Colonus" ventures farthest from the original, but it proves as engaging as the others. Polyneices is a drunken frat boy who needs his father to reinstate him as ruler of Thebes. Creon, for his part, needs Oedipus to return because Eteocles is as much of a disaster as his brother. To raise the stakes and force Oedipus's decision, the oracle of Oedipus's death is suppressed in this version until the Blind Seer arrives. Oedipus will give good fortune to the city in which he is buried, she reveals; where he chooses to die is up to him. But Athens will not prove to be as gracious a home for Oedipus as in Sophocles' version. After consulting repeatedly with the Athenian council, Theseus begrudgingly offers Oedipus respite, but only to antagonize Thebes, expressing his enmity for that city with the modern Greek gesture of spitting on Creon's shoes. After Creon departs, Theseus drags Oedipus to his death offstage and orders Antigone and Ismene to go back to their home. Their expulsion not only emphasizes the theme of greed and selfishness for political ends that runs through the entire production; it also puts Antigone and Ismene back in Thebes for the final act of the evening, the chilling and heartbreaking "Antigone."

"The Philoktetes" also exhibits a shift in the storyline in the service of Graney's thematic interests, but with more complexity of character. While Odysseus remains the cunning, deceptive warrior of tradition, Neoptolemus is a weak, indecisive young man whose first act onstage is to vomit at Philoktetes' stench,



but who eventually has the stomach to deceive just as well as Odysseus. This nerdy and overly earnest child of Achilles, played endearingly by Geoff Button, struggles with his duty to deceive. He has no chance to reveal his remorse out of pity, however, because the Carrier (the ubiquitous Messenger of each play clothed in flannel with the rod of Asclepius on his back) soon enters. He explains that only the bow is needed, not Philoktetes. This unusual twist makes sense of the shifting requirements of the oracle that were left unexplained in the Sophoclean version, but it leads Neoptolemus to become a deceiver himself. Neoptolemus counsels Philoktetes to pretend that he forgives Odysseus for trying to steal his bow and agreeing to come to Troy but never following through. The evils of deception for any reason and Neoptolemus's rediscovery of his *phusis* through pity—two elements that strongly define the Sophoclean nature of this tragedy—are suppressed in The Hypocrites' version. Instead, Neoptolemus develops a thicker skin while learning the art of cunning. In many ways, this is a more satisfying character than the Neoptolemus who succumbs to Philoktetes' coercion at the end of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*. Though Philoktetes tries to remain on the island with his bow, Herakles intervenes. Selfishness is the greatest disease of mankind, Herakles argues: Philoktetes must let kindness crack corruption and truly forgive Odysseus, since it is time for them to stop treating each other like animals. Herakles' counsel is a truly modern sentiment but one that Graney skillfully adapts to the Philoktetes myth.

It is hard to choose which adaptation is the most successful, but "Ajax" must be among the top three. The act opens with an sensitive yet morbidly humorous montage of madness. Instead of Odysseus and Athena gazing upon the blood-stained and maddened Ajax, as in the original, a flock of sheep enters the stage, bleating its way into Ajax's mind. These aren't just any sheep, but politicians in sheep's clothing. Dressed in blue with a red sash and sheep-headed cloaks, they taunt Ajax, who wields a large butcher's knife. They surround him, fall when they are hit, and then rise up again in a life-sized version of whack-a-mole, mocking Ajax with the repeated refrain that the army "nee-ee-ee-eeds" clever politicians like Odysseus, not dull-headed warriors. It is both a hilarious and a haunting representation of madness that brings the audience to pity Ajax as much as Odysseus did in the original prologue. Ajax's suicide does not clearly center upon his disgrace when he realizes what he has done, however, because his concubine Tecmessa, dying from the wound he gave her while slaughtering the sheep, begs him to stay for Erysakes' sake. Her death onstage is completely unnecessary, but our hearts go out to Erysakes (Geoff Button), who gazes at his parents while quietly singing "The Price We Pay." Now orphaned, the boy must help Philoktetes bury them both at the behest of the callous Agamemnon, who bites into an apple with arrogant gusto, the same apple one could imagine that Iole carried with her when she arrived in Trachis. Odysseus finally professes pity for Ajax, explaining that he could see Ajax felt loss and sadness in his killing of the sheep despite being mad, but chose to push honor into their hearts in the wrong manner. Odysseus vows that they will show the honor that Ajax tried to push into the political sheep by justly burying him. With the transfer of Achilles' "unchinkable" armor to Odysseus, there is a new world order, Agamemnon claims. Given what we've seen of Odysseus, from his days as a deceiver in the previous act to his new persona as a compassionate peacemaker, the world looks hopeful despite the death it has cost.

The final part of the play, however, will erase all hope of a cure. "Elektra" remains closely aligned with its original in plot and character, but also shows the efficiency and ingenuity Graney shows in his other acts. At the opening of the act, the ghost of Agamemnon stands onstage dressed in a white suit and military hat, commanding the awestruck Orestes and Pylades to avenge his death and bring justice to Argos. As they exit, Elektra (Lindsey Gavel) enters with tokens of her father in hand, covering herself with mud, nursing a cough, and ignoring the rotten apples that lie before her. She has been sick for a while, lamenting her father's death and her mother's infidelity, but she has never translated her words into the tasks required to avenge Agamemnon. Her inaction is palpable. Clytemnestra (Tien Doman), a vision of June Cleaver dressed in royal blue with perfectly coiffed hair and an upbeat attitude, is equally unmovable in her conviction that she was justified in her murder of Agamemnon. We can't help but agree, given the Agamemnon we've seen in previous acts, and her frustration with Elektra's self-pity

reflects our own. Erin Barlow's truly brilliant Chrysothemis steals the scene, however, channeling Reese Witherspoon in both appearance and manner. Her acceptance of their situation has rewarded her with crisp, pink dresses, perfect pony-tails, and a comfortable life. While she takes Elektra to task for not acting on her desire to take revenge, Chrysothemis refuses to help her commit murder and warns that Elektra is destined for death. "Just don't die on my stuff," she concludes. Highly comical, she is hardly the woman of *sophrosune* that Sophocles depicts in his figuration of the character, but she is an ample foil to the yearning Elektra. The pain of Elektra's isolation does not escalate as it does in the Sophoclean version. The extended scene of mourning over the urn is omitted; the recognition occurs when Orestes reveals a stuffed bear he has had since infancy. Graney uses this moment as an opportunity to lighten the mood before the brother and sister rejoice in their reunion. It takes the reappearance of Agamemnon to chide their mirth with a reminder of the acts they must accomplish, realigning the action towards its morally ambiguous conclusion.

Not surprisingly, "Antigone" is the most intimate and unsettling of the adaptations and also the most tragically gratifying. Antigone is an exquisite figure of strength, a determined young woman played with subtle maturity by Erin Barlow. We have seen her grow up from a terrified child in "Oedipus" to a helpless but devoted teen in "In Colonus." Now clothed in a wedding gown, Antigone digs her brother's grave in the middle of the stage, quietly and firmly intransigent. Creon arrives with lunch in hand, warning her of what will happen when she touches her brother's body, pleading with her to stop. The hospital setting is somewhat unsuited to the action of this final play: Antigone shovels dirt out of the trap doors at stage center. But the incongruity is no less absurd than the activity of the Nurses far upstage, who spend a portion of the act pouring ketchup into Heinz bottles on the operating table. Even these antics, however, are played convincingly. The tender moments between uncle and niece as they share a modest meal, failing to reconcile their differences, are effective and touching. These two have seen more tragedy and felt its effects more profoundly than anyone else, we sense. Their shared experience binds them as much as their blood, yet it also hangs over them like a cloud waiting to unleash a storm of contempt. Creon's increasing frustration creates a tension that finally snaps in a foreseeable yet shocking conclusion. Pushing Antigone into the grave, he beats her with the shovel and closes the trap doors, covering the spot with the overturned operating table while she cries for help from below. The carnage builds as the play comes to an end on top of her grave, the sins of pitilessness, ignorance, and selfishness terrorizing the family until no one, not even Ismene, remains. As the lights dim, the Nurses begin to clear away the bodies. They have seen this before. They will see it again tomorrow.

New Yorkers will be able to experience the monumental achievement of this adaptation when a remount of the *These Seven Sicknesses* opens at The Flea Theater on January 19, 2012, with a cast of 38 known as "The Bats." Classicists above all will appreciate the inside jokes, alterations in the dramatic plot, inclusion of obscure myths, and efficient use of character if they enter with open minds, eager to engage with inspired playwriting and a bold artistic vision.

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## notes

<sup>1</sup> The Hypocrites, "Our Mission," <http://www.the-hypocrites.com/mission> [accessed November 16, 2011].

<sup>2</sup> Based on reviews of the performance: Chris Jones, "'Ajax' too clever for its own good," <http://www.chicagotribune.com/>, May 11, 2001 [accessed November 23, 2011]; Lucia Mauro, "The Hypocrites' 'Ajax' at The Viaduct", Chicago Arts Scene Commentary for the Week of May 7, 2001, <http://www.chicagotheater.com/revAjax.html> [accessed November 23, 2011].

<sup>3</sup> Scotty Zacher, "Review: Hypocrite Theatre's 'Oedipus'," <http://chicagotheaterbeat.com>, June 9, 2009 [accessed November 23, 2011].

<sup>4</sup> Based on reviews of the performance: Nina Metz, "Sophocles gets rich dose of pop culture," <http://www.chicagotribune.com/>, June 8, 2009 [accessed November 23, 2011]; Scotty Zacher, "Review: Hypocrite Theatre's 'Oedipus'," <http://chicagotheaterbeat.com>, June 9, 2009 [accessed November 23, 2011]; Kris Vire, "Oedipus," <http://timeoutchicago.com/>, May 31, 2009 [accessed November 23, 2011].