

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 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 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 8 is an inadequate approximation of the web publication at didaskalia.net, which includes sound, video, and live hyperlinks.

Hecuba

by Euripides

Translated by Jay Kardan and Laura-Gray Street

Directed by Amy R. Cohen

October 8-10, 2010

The Randolph College Greek Play

Review by **Jaclyn Dudek**

Wayne State University

The 2010 Randolph College Greek Play, a production of Euripides' *Hecuba*, fulfilled many objectives, both academic and artistic. The "Greek Play" is a Randolph College tradition going back to 1909, and this production coincided with Randolph's first conference on ancient drama in performance, serving as an excellent finale for a day devoted to practical and artistic questions about ancient theater.

Director Amy Cohen's purpose was to follow ancient stage conventions as closely as possible: fully integrated music, three actors for all the principal speaking parts, gender-blind casting, and masks. Although most of the actors were women, the few male choristers did an excellent job, blending well with the others in their choral garb. The cast and crew consisted of undergraduates from all disciplines. The performance took place outdoors, in a Greek-style theater, under perfect weather (a good omen sent by the gods). The translation by Jay Kardan and Laura-Gray Street was crisp and contemporary without sacrificing the grandeur of the original. The production also included original music composed by Chris Cohen and Randall Speer, a mix of violin, melodica, and drums.

The highlight of the entire production was the exquisite masks, director Cohen's specialty. These were not grotesque caricatures but slightly oversized, naturalistic human faces, with a variety of features and hairstyles (kudos to the wig team). The effect was magical; static expressions seemed to change with the mood, while large unblinking eyes held the audience in a kind of tension. I heard one audience member say she was able to focus more on the words because she wasn't distracted by individual faces. Acting in masks is no small feat, especially when they obstruct peripheral vision, but all the actors were naturalistic and unified in their movements.

Often, when there is little to commend a play, the safe comment is, "I could hear everyone." In this instance, however, the audibility of the performers was a truly impressive aspect of the production. As a veteran of outdoor performing, I was impressed with the



Anneka Freeman as Odysseus
photo: J. Shupe



Video 1: Laura Shearer as Polyxena, with Sasha Budd as Hecuba and Anneka Freeman as Odysseus
video: Randolph College
youtube.com/watch?v=8Wsr0UPiHkY



Video 2: Laura Shearer as Talthybius, with Sasha Budd as Hecuba
video: Randolph College
youtube.com/watch?v=HFV68yaAYDI

excellent articulation and diction of all the actors. Each sustained a level of volume that filled the large outdoor space, whose hazards included planes, trains, and a family of raucous crows (I thought of them as the carrion birds outside of Troy). In addition to the difficulties of open-air theater, the integration of masks and sung choral odes would have made the production tricky even for seasoned thespians, yet Cohen's well-taught actors skillfully maneuvered through these potential snags to great effect.

The incorporation of sung choral music is a difficult task and had mixed results, but it raised several interesting questions. The original score by composers Cohen and Speer had complex harmonies and a non-Western touch, with a very striking chord in the third chorus. At other times the musicians and singers seemed disconnected from each other and the action of the play, an effect mostly attributable to the large space and reduced sightlines of the masks. The music raised several questions concerning the placement and integration of the musicians and provided insights into acoustical logistics. The theater itself was more oblong than circular, presumably making it more difficult for the musicians and singers to hear each other. I came away with a deeper respect for both.



The musicians and part of the Chorus
photo: J. Shupe

Three actors shared eight roles between them, following ancient convention. College senior Sasha Budd (Hecuba) was a competent actor, but she exhibited her real strength as a performer during the lyric solos. Her voice was excellent and had a raw quality that was very moving. Polyxena, Talthybius, the Therapaina, and Polymester were all played by junior Laura Shearer. While Shearer's singing was not as strong as Budd's, it lent itself well to the vulnerability of the characters she portrayed, an excellent foil to the strength of Hecuba. Shearer's versatility was highlighted during Talthybius' messenger speech, in which she switched to her Polyxena voice when quoting the dead girl. (*See videos 1 and 2 to see her in the two roles.*) This was an excellent directorial choice, at once both eerie and self-consciously theatrical. Euripides would have approved. He would have also approved of the broken and panicked way that Shearer, as the blinded Polymester, sang the lament. The emotional climax of the play came as members of the chorus crept up to him, touching him only to run away. Polymester, disoriented, spun around, grabbing at nothing. After the blinding scene, the sympathetic chorus became cruel and taunting. Their transformation from victims to child murderers was quite chilling and I truly felt sorry for Polymester, in the weirdly guilty way that is Euripides' trademark effect.

Senior Anneka Freeman (Polydorus, Odysseus, Agamemnon) had the task of playing not one but two Greek generals. Equally unlikable and unctuous, both characters deny any real responsibility for the war. The doubling convention raised some practical questions and insights. Freeman's petite form and voice were easily recognized in her various roles, while Shearer's were less so. The disparity helps explain the stilts, large padding, or robes that the ancients may have used in order to disguise the individual actor underneath. On the other hand, casting the same actor as both the politician (Odysseus) and the general (Agamemnon) had the effect—intended or unintended—of joining the two character "types" as reflections of the same empty political machine. This observation, coupled with the voice switching in mid-speech, made me wonder how an ancient audience would have reacted to the intertextual ironies that might arise from the three-actor rule. Would an ancient audience find it ironic

that the actor playing *Polyxena* is also playing *Polymester*? Or was it just a matter of course? How thoroughly would the ancients disguise their actors? Would a playwright such as Euripides knowingly use such metatheatricality to his advantage?

Randolph's *Hecuba* was not just a performance, but also a research laboratory. Director Cohen's work in the creation and study of masks was made clear in the first ten minutes of the play. The real success of the production lay in the number of questions that it posed, which led to a deeper understanding of the complexities of staging, music, light, and acoustics. In accordance with the civic implications of Greek tragedy, there was a sense that the entire college and community were somehow involved in the production. The motto of the conference was "The Practice Matters to the Understanding." If we translate "catharsis" as a type of understanding, then even by Aristotle's standards, *Hecuba* easily achieved its goal.