

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.

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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.

## Barrie Kosky's *The Women of Troy*

Didaskalia is pleased to present a collection of pieces (8.07–8.11), organized by former Didaskalia editor Jane Montgomery Griffiths, on the Sydney Theatre Company's 2008 production of *The Women of Troy*, adapted by Tom Wright and Barrie Kosky and directed by Kosky. Elizabeth Hale, guest editor for the collection, introduces here the production and the articles, which include essays from [Helen Slaney](#), [Michael Halliwell](#), [Michael Ewans](#), and [Marguerite Johnson](#).

In earlier volumes of Didaskalia, these articles would have constituted an individual, themed issue. In our new practice of publishing a continuous annual volume, such collections will be numbered in sequence but will bear an indication of their related theme in the table of contents. These *Women of Troy* pieces will all have "Kosky" as part of their references on the site, but they may be cited simply by their volume and number.

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### *The Women of Troy: Barrie Kosky, The Sydney Theatre Company, and Classical Theatre in Australia*

**Elizabeth Hale**

*University of New England*

Euripides' *Trojan Women* was first performed in 415 at the Athens Dionysia. It deals with the plight of several Trojan women following the fall of Troy: the queen, Hecuba, her daughter, Cassandra, Andromache, the wife of Hector, and Helen. It is the third and in recent times the best known of three important works engaging with the Trojan War. In the 21st century, the play has been performed most notably in 2007 and 2008 at the National Theatre in London: *The Women of Troy* directed by Katie Mitchell; in Canada in 2008 at the Stratford Shakespeare Festival in Stratford, Ontario: *The Trojan Women* directed by Marti Maraden; and in Australia, in Sydney and Melbourne in 2008: *The Women of Troy* directed by Barrie Kosky. It is with this last production that this suite of essays engages.



*The Chorus (Queenie van de Zandt, Jennifer Vuletic, Natalie Gamsu) and Hecuba (Robyn Nevin)*

photo: Tracey Schramm

*The Women of Troy* was adapted by Tom Wright and Barrie Kosky, and directed by Kosky. It was performed in Sydney, at the Sydney Theatre Company (STC), and in Melbourne, at the Malthouse Theatre. Barrie Kosky and Tom Wright are both Melbourne-born and educated. Kosky has been based since 2001 in Berlin, where he is currently the Director of the Berlin Komische Oper. Wright has been based in Sydney at the STC since 2003, and he is currently Associate Director. The production reflects their long interest in classical and canonical theatre. Kosky in particular is known, in Australia and overseas, for his edgy opera productions, and for using classical vocal music in his theatre productions.

The STC's Artistic Director Robyn Nevin commissioned *The Women of Troy*, after Kosky and Wright's 2006 collaboration with the STC, *The Lost Echo*, an eight-hour staging of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* that incorporated Euripides' *Bacchae*. In contrast to the epic theatrical experience of *The Lost Echo*, *The Women of Troy* was significantly pared back; it ran at under 90 minutes, and using only a small cast and chorus.

The small cast included Robyn Nevin as Hecuba, Melita Jurisic in the triple role of Cassandra, Andromache, and Helen, and Arthur Dignam as Menelaus. A small chorus (Queenie van de Zandt, Natalie Gamsu, and Jennifer Vuletic) played a musical role, commenting on the action through song rather than through speech (a deliberate move, Kosky points out in his program notes, as Euripides' choruses most often communicated in song). As in much of Kosky's work, the production made significant use of vocal music through the chorus; it also used violence, shock, and horror to offer the audience an experience that was unmediated and confronting, as is attested by most critical reviews of the play, as well as the essays written for this collection.

In their adaptation to the play, Kosky and Wright entirely removed the role of Talthibius the messenger, a move which further contributed to the unmediated impact of the action on the audience (as Helen Slaney suggests in her essay); the story, however, remains the same: the Trojan women, grieving the fall of Troy, await their fate at the mercy of their Athenian captors. Each is allotted to a captor. Hecuba is allotted to Odysseus, and she witnesses the fates of three women: her daughter Cassandra, is allotted to Agamemnon and foretells her death at the hands of his wife; Andromache, widow of Hector, whose young son Astyanax is put to death by the Greeks, is allotted to Neoptolemus; and Helen, the ostensible cause of the war, who returns to her Greek husband Menelaus, despite Hecuba's attempts to influence the reunion. As Troy burns and each woman is sent to Greece and into slavery, her commodification was symbolized in this adaptation by her being stuffed into a cardboard box and taped up ready for shipping. Horrific events, such as the death of Astyanax, were represented graphically onstage (we do not see the actual death, but we see the bloodied corpse), rather than reported. Again, we were involved in bearing witness to the horrors of war. As the women related their stories, anonymous workers (torturers, perhaps) pass across the stage, bearing frightening and unexplained implements (including a large, ominous looking corkscrew); in the background, random and unsettling gunshots go off, suggesting horrors unseen off stage.

Alice Babidge's set and costume design contributed to that unmediated effect, as did Damien Cooper's lighting. The minimalist set design used stained industrial carpeting to cover the stage; the backdrop was a towering jigsaw of army lockers: we saw the action unfold in a dingy backroom or corridor in part of the military-industrial complex. Responding to the flat tackiness of the set design, but perhaps also to the oddly impassive and anonymous qualities of the set, James Waites (reviewing the play for *The Sydney Morning Herald*) described the set as 'very locker room. A kind of male jock porn setting—which is totally right for this sickening fable.'<sup>1</sup> Because of these qualities, the action on stage, of such moment to individual characters, appeared both to be personally tragic, and also dwarfed by the scale of events (implied by background noises, such as intermittent and irregular gunshots) and by the businesslike aspects of this corridor—in other words, that these tragic queens and princesses are simply part of a large-scale processing of the spoils of war. Such a move flattened but also heightened the sense of tragedy, and it underscored the depths to which they have fallen.

A similarly paradoxical attitude towards the theatricality of the production was seen in the set design, which, through the visual language of anonymous contemporary bureaucracy rather than a historically accurate setting, brought the action forward to the contemporary moment, but also isolated it—out of real space and time, and into the space and time of the theatrical moment. This had the potential effect of underscoring the universality of the action, in which the women of Troy become representative types of women (virgin, mother, whore, crone), rather than individualised tragic characters. Another production choice also had the effect of underscoring the role of the audience in witnessing a production, and particularly a tragedy: each seat in the theatre was draped with calico. Jason Catlett, reviewing the production for *Time Out Sydney*, saw this as a move to draw the audience into the action, obliging us 'to sit in a hilly graveyard, our chairs shrouded in white body bags; our seat numbers become our serial numbers.'<sup>2</sup> My own impression was that the pale seats heightened the visibility of members of the

audience, who were outlined against them instead of being able to sink anonymously into the normal obscurity of a darkened auditorium. Whether we were drawn into the action, as Catlett suggests, or exposed as a visible audience, the effect was to foreground the role of the audience in witnessing the unfolding action.

Despite, or perhaps because of, this accumulation of story and performance, the production was curiously static; rather than seeing action played out on stage, we watched Hecuba responding to the stories of the three women, and reflecting on the aftermath of this brutal war. The play is, as Kosky points out in the program notes, “one of the most searing and moving anti-war plays ever written,” but it is not through event, but rather through reflection that the anti-war elements are conveyed, both in the original and in the adaptation. Wright describes it as the play’s “‘stand and deliver’ quality; the action is over, now for the shouting.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, this production seemed full of declaimed speeches, which contributed to a feeling of stasis. Each woman, in essence, stood and delivered her story, only some parts of which played out on stage.

As a symbol of the stasis, the opening scene of the play resonated most strongly, in which Hecuba, shaking and terrified, was led on stage, stripped down to her underslip, her head covered in a black hood, and stood on a battered cardboard box, from which she uttered her first speeches. This scene, clearly designed to remind us forcibly of the hooded prisoners of the Abu Ghraib detention facility in Iraq, elicited reflection on contemporary, and likely ongoing, horrors of war. But as well as this visual reminder of contemporary abuses, the use of the cardboard box (which linked tragically to the later packaging and dispatch of the women) as a kind tatty and degraded pedestal from which Hecuba was forced to speech was a metaphor for the role of contemporary classical theatre.

To my mind, props such as the cardboard box, and set design such as the towering wall of lockers, reflected the productive contradictions that run through contemporary performances of plays like *The Women of Troy*—namely, the efforts made by those involved in the production to bring a play up to date, but also to respect its original power and resonances. In their program notes, Wright and Kosky comment both on the original political impact of the play, and on the contemporary resonances they seek in *The Women of Troy*. Wright’s program notes point out some of the historical resonances—such as the recent defeat by Athens of the city of Melos, and its slaughtering of the male Melians: “the audience would have been littered with good citizens who had Melian women and children as slaves in their homes and businesses. None of this can have been far from the mind of anyone listening to Hecuba’s descriptions of war and its aftermath.” Such a specifically historical contextual note reminds us of the immediate political purpose of such a play and seems designed to disinter ancient theatre from the potential stagnancy of canonical appreciation. At the same time, Wright and Kosky point to the timeless quality of the work, referring to the ‘eternal figure’ of Hecuba, and the ‘tripartite feminine’ represented by Cassandra (virgin), Andromache (mother), and Helen (whore). What we found, then, in this production, was an attempt to connect with the immediate political and cultural context—through the visual references to Abu Ghraib and the Western military-industrial complex—and also to connect with the timeless and universal qualities of the play, through the characters and speeches of the women of Troy and through the horror of the death of the boy Astyanax.

The chorus’s beautiful songs offered a further way to connect to the universal. They also pointed to the juxtaposition of horror and beauty that pervades the play. Often, as Michael Halliwell observes in his essay for this collection, songs offer implicit commentary on and contrast to the action. The play emphasized the horror of war’s aftermath, of what Kosky refers to as taking place as ‘after a catastrophe’, a world in which everything that the women “assume to be certain about the world is liable to be brought crashing down around their ears” (Wright, program notes). Aftermath, in this production, mapped onto a post-traumatic space, which had much in common with the flatness of affect that is a cliché of post-

modern culture—the grubby corridor, the flat-toned tannoy through which a disembodied voice orders the women around, the anonymous workers passing through the action, en route to carry out routine tasks of torture, which all served to undercut any possible tragic grandeur in Hecuba’s situation. The only place in which sublimity was allowed in this play was in the exquisite songs of the chorus, which served to highlight the grubbiness and degradation onstage, and which were ultimately silenced unceremoniously when the chorus is shot. This was all the more poignant when we consider Kosky’s program notes claiming that music allows the women to ‘Hang on to their sanity . . . [Music] is their last stop before madness, exile or death’. Or, as John McCallum observes, in his review for *The Australian*, the three women of the chorus ‘were singing sublimely in the face of all this savagery, and then [Kosky] had them shot.’

In refusing sublimity in this production, Kosky and Wright pointed out the original context of the play and also questioned the role of classical theatre in the context of global and post-modern culture.

### The Critical Reception

Audiences familiar with Kosky’s work would be somewhat prepared for an experience that deliberately sets beauty and horror against one another; *The Women of Troy*, however, appears to have been a particularly confronting experience for many, perhaps because of the play’s refusal to lift away from horror, or to allow rest or reflection or sublimity or even pathos. For the most part reviewers embraced the confronting aspects of the production. Jason Catlett, reviewing for Sydney’s *Time Out* magazine, found the production ‘shattering’; ‘we felt like insects being tortured by some cruel and childish god.’<sup>4</sup> Rebecca Whitton (*Australian Stage Online*) praised Kosky’s rigour and intellect: ‘everything that is original, astute and poetic about Kosky shines through.’ To her mind, Kosky ‘transforms *The Women of Troy* into a play for our times without diluting Euripides’ anti-war message . . . masterfully delivers a powerful lesson for today from our distant past.’<sup>5</sup> James Waites described the play as a ‘sobering’ but also ‘extremist’ theatre event: ‘in this instance, short, pungent, gruelling, attenuated by great moments of aural beauty (the music/singing). Ultimately we are served an uncompromising physicalisation of the play’s anti-war theme.’<sup>6</sup> Such responses indicate a general willingness to go along with Kosky and Wright’s vision for the performance, including an acceptance of both the meta-theatrical and horrific elements of the production as contributing to, rather than distracting from, the emotional impact of the play.

Most evenings, however, several audience members walked out, unable, perhaps, to continue witnessing the horror on stage. For Waites, this seems to have been more of an affront than anything that happened on stage.

What is amazing that so many weeks into the season, you still have people walking out of this show. The night I was there, about thirty left. . . . Just in dribs and drabs throughout the entire event: at some point they’ve had enough. Where do these people live? I mean mentally. Is it not enough to know that if this is a Barrie Kosky production then you are up for something that is not going to be tame? This is without getting into the far more complex question of why such people feel the need to flee such a work. A work that is, like *Guernica*, ultimately very beautiful. What is it about their lives that they feel so compelled to cling to? To the extent that a show like this threatens them? What are they refusing to let go of? What is it about sitting in front of this production that poses such a threat? And yes, how can they not see the sorrowful beauty in it?<sup>7</sup>

Without being able to see inside the minds of audience members, I’d like to suggest that several factors come into play here: first, the unmediated qualities of the play—such as the removal of the messenger, and the ordinary unstaginess of the set design—do much to unsettle an audience, already unsettled by being so visible to one another in their seats, and clearly able (perhaps even encouraged) to see others leaving. Second, Kosky’s reputation for not being ‘tame’ carries its own unnerving expectations. Third, it



is possible that the death of a child onstage is particularly confronting, and it is understandable that the impulse to leave might be overwhelming. Indeed, it is possible that the audience member who leaves is less 'threatened' than overwhelmed by the trauma presented on stage.

It is possible that audiences found the meta-theatrical aspects of the play unconvincing and uninteresting, and that they found it threatening not to their lives, but to their sense of what canonical theatre aims to do: that they did not find a sorrowful beauty in the production, but that in fact they found it disrespectful. Michael Connor, writing for *Quadrant*, articulates these possible responses in his review of the play, suggesting that its confronting aspects were a cynical ploy to sell tickets through the publicity obtained by outrage: 'Productions by director Barrie Kosky have been deliberately crafted to trigger this . . . response. He offends knowing that any protest will stimulate elite support and affirmative ticket sales. For maximum effect Kosky applies schlock and shock to classic works like an R-rated games maker.'<sup>8</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, Connor disliked the play intensely, seeing in it a tired revamping of Kosky's trademark use of shock and horror: 'It was a relief when [the chorus] were badly treated, stuffed into cardboard boxes and wheeled away.' Indeed, for him, 'Kosky is a commodity, a commercial product used to castrate classical or much-loved works to achieve maximum offensiveness in order to draw attention to himself. By offending those who love theatre, and dead playwrights, Kosky gains elitist approval which translates into more work.' Those who appreciate Kosky's works, in Connor's view, are 'educated philistines who, with babbling and erudite appreciation, applaud the maiming of beauty.'<sup>9</sup>

This is the sole negative review I have been able to find (though commenters responding some of the reviews online have not been uniformly positive about the production). That it is written for *Quadrant*, a conservative magazine, deeply suspicious of leftist or progressive agendas, suggests this reviewer may have gone to the play with preconceived notions. In contrast to Waites's response to the set design, Connor saw theatre seats 'covered with dust clothes' and the carpet on stage with 'many depressing looking stains,' a response that implies that the production failed to overcome his preconceptions, or that the parts (challenging and metatheatrical production combined with shocking elements) failed to coalesce satisfyingly or convincingly into a whole.

Politics aside, to my mind, Connor's response is important because it reveals what a production like *The Women of Troy* is up against. If shock and horror start to feel contrived, if unconventional and metatheatrical elements work against the emotional impact of a story, then we need to think critically about the relationship between the representation of trauma on stage, and methods of updating, or perhaps jazzing up, classical theatre.

John McCallum's response to *The Women of Troy* offers a full-throated defense of Kosky's approach:

It still astonishes me when people say things like, "Oh, Barrie Kosky is just an egotistical bad boy out to shock." To anyone who is paying attention to what he is doing—with his mixture of pop—culture playfulness, visceral theatrical effects and serious classical learning—Kosky is one of the greatest directors of our times.<sup>10</sup>

For McCallum, *The Women of Troy* was 'one of the most harrowing nights I have spent in the theatre', but he found it so moving, so powerful, that he 'went to see it again. I took my daughter and her partner. I wanted to put people I loved through this terrible and cathartic experience, and they felt it.' To those who, like Connor, failed to be moved by this production, McCallum says, "We need to say to them, 'If you don't get it, and don't want to try, then stay home!'"

What these responses reveal about the difficulties of presenting canonical or classical theatre are a range of conflicting desires—on the one hand, we might have a conservative audience, unwilling to see a production that alters any aspects of an original text; on the other, we might have an outrageous theatre

maker determined to use any means necessary to ensure an audience reaction by imposing gratuitous sex, violence, and horror. I have still not made up my own mind about *The Women of Troy*—I did not experience the catharsis that McCallum writes of, but neither was I put off by the shocking or violent aspects of the performance. And the play has lingered in my mind—partly because I had set myself the task of writing about it, but partly because I felt that much of what it presented went beyond what one could digest in one evening. Whether one liked or disliked the production (and I have compared notes with a number of friends and colleagues who saw it), it was memorable theatre that provoked an engagement with the meaning and role of classical theatre in contemporary Australia. To my mind, if *The Women of Troy* proved nothing else, it proved that classical theatre can contain and sustain the kind of strong adaptation performed in Sydney and Melbourne: it can sustain the shock and horror, and it can sustain the broken fourth wall and deliberate downgrading that are offensive to conservative critics.

### The Essays in this Collection

The idea for this collection came in late 2008 when I was putting together a small symposium on *The Lost Echo*, Kosky and Wright's previous production for the STC, a production which had a very positive popular and critical response. In inviting contributions, I suggested that consideration might also be given to *The Women of Troy*, which was about to be staged. The result, in early 2009, was a symposium titled 'Classical Tradition and the Epic Impulse in Australian Theatre: *The Lost Echo* and *The Women of Troy*.' Papers in this symposium gave equal consideration to both plays, and the talks on *The Lost Echo* became the basis of a special issue of *Australasian Drama Studies*.<sup>11</sup> The articles in this collection focus on *The Women of Troy*, and represent a range of disciplinary approaches and expertise.

Helen Slaney, in "Delivering the message in Kosky's *The Women of Troy*," draws together the points of view of classical reception studies and performance studies. Her article argues that the removal of the messenger, Talthybius, from the original play, makes for an unusually stark and confronting adaptation of the play. Michael Halliwell is a musicologist. His article, "*The Women of Troy*: Barrie Kosky's 'operatic' version of Euripides," examines the impact of the musical elements of the play, considering the effect both musically and in terms of the commentary that song offers to the action. Michael Ewans writes from a classical studies point of view, and in "*The Women of Troy*—New and Old" examines the adaptation of the production, paying particular attention to the script. Finally, Marguerite Johnson, in "'Toothless intellectuals,' 'the misery of the poor,' 'poetry after Auschwitz' and the White, Middle-class Audience: the Moral Perils of Kosky and Wright's *The Women of Troy* (or, how do we regard the pain of others?)" writes from the perspective of gender and cultural studies, examining the ethics of shock in Kosky and Wright's presentation of material drawn from war photography and film.

These different approaches to *The Women of Troy* demonstrate, among other things, the potential of classical theatre production to initiate debate, to be relevant in a range of disciplines, settings, and audiences. They also demonstrate that Australian theatre, critics, and scholars are actively engaged in considerations of classical drama, and that Australian classical reception studies is a vibrant and continuing field of investigation. I hope these articles will stimulate further reflection on the role of classical texts in the theatre, be it from Australia or elsewhere, and reflection too on the role of the theatre in transmitting, adapting, performing, and even challenging the classics.

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### notes

<sup>1</sup>James Waites, 'Aftermath of War: One' in James Waites, 27 October 2008, <http://jameswaites.ilatech.org/?p=1166>

<sup>2</sup>Jason Catlett, "The Women of Troy," Time Out Sydney, 24 September 2008, <http://www.au.timeout.com/sydney/theatre/features/3417/the-women-of-troy>.

<sup>3</sup>Tom Wright, *The Women of Troy*, Program Notes.

<sup>4</sup>Catlett, op. cit.

<sup>5</sup>Rebecca Whitton, 'The Women of Troy: Sydney Theatre Company,' Australian Stage Online, September 23, 2008, <http://www.australianstage.com.au/reviews/sydney/the-women-of-troy--sydney-theatre-company-1900.html>

<sup>6</sup>Waites, op. cit.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Michael Connor, 'On the Importance of Being Kosky,' *Quadrant* LIII/12 (2008), 67-69.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>John McCallum, 'Theatre that Messes with your Mind,' *The Australian Online*, November 29, 2010, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/news/arts/theatre-that-messes-with-your-mind/story-e6frg8n6-1225962329385>.

<sup>11</sup>"The Lost Echo," *Australasian Drama Studies* 56 (April, 2010): 103-153.