

DIDASKALIA 

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

Imagining and Imaging the Chorus: A Study of the Physicality, Movement, and Composition of the Chorus in A.R.T.'s *Ajax*

Sophocles' *Ajax*

Translated by Charles Connaghan

Directed by Sarah Benson

February 12 - March 13, 2011

American Repertory Theater, Cambridge, MA

Review by Viviane Sophie Klein

Boston University

An earlier version of this paper was presented as part of a 2012 symposium on "The Problem of the Chorus—Staging Classical Greek Drama" at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey.

The chorus is one of the most difficult elements of ancient Greek drama to execute effectively in a modern production. It is a highly formal device, and one that is inextricably bound up in its original cultural context. The director is faced with the challenge of translating this archaic convention into something fresh and meaningful to a modern audience. In her recent production of Sophocles' *Ajax* at the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Massachusetts, Obie-award-winning director Sarah Benson came up with some very creative solutions to "the problem of the chorus," not only updating the ancient device for its modern setting, but also actively encouraging the audience to (re)consider the form and function of a traditional chorus.



Photo courtesy A.R.T.

Physicality

The play was set in a modern military mess hall, complete with a coke machine, plastic trashcans, and folding tables and chairs in disarray. The actors wore contemporary civilian clothing and military fatigues. The chorus leader carried a laptop.

One of Benson's goals for the production was to illustrate the ever-increasing role of the media in modern warfare. Round-the-clock news cycles and up-to-the-minute video footage now enable us, as never before, to document a war as it unfolds. Soldiers can even upload their own video clips to YouTube. Benson hoped to capture some small part of this phenomenon in her production. She wanted her audience to think about how "this kind of documentation changes [the nature or at least our perceptions of] war itself."¹ To that end, she envisioned the chorus leader as a journalist reporting from the front lines. This concretized his function as an intermediary. As a literal and figurative reporter, he negotiated communication among the chorus, the characters, and the audience.

The chorus leader was played by a live actor, but the rest of the choral performances were prerecorded and projected on the sloping ceiling of the mess hall. The members of the chorus—men and women of diverse ages and races wearing modern, everyday clothing—each occupied one of thirty square panels. This video format enabled Benson to experiment with the chorus's liminal nature: the choristers were at once physically present and ethereal, able both to watch the story unfold from afar and to participate in it

actively. Their virtual nature made them seem part human and part otherworldly, an impression deepened by suspending the screens above the stage in a *deus ex machina* position.

The video screens further reinforced the ever-shrinking boundary between warfront and homefront. They created the illusion of a cyberspace community, a chorus of anonymous voices participating in a shared experience. They represented the digital interface that connects so many of us through our computer screens, smartphones, and tablets. In this way, the production revitalized the ancient device of the chorus by reincarnating it in a conspicuously modern medium.

Movement

A traditional Greek chorus, of course, wore masks that restricted their ability to manipulate facial expression and, consequently, amplified the impact of their body language. This production inverted the traditional model. The video footage presented the chorus members from the shoulders up, directing all the attention to their faces. The limitations on their bodies heightened the effect of their smaller movements; a subtle shift, twitch, or frown became all the more dynamic and meaningful.

The videography enabled the production team to make quick edits and guide the audience's eye to a particular character or group of characters, keeping the majority of the chorus in black-and-white and calling attention to the speakers by suddenly representing them in color. The team used the same technique to add dramatic tension to particular moments in the play—for example, highlighting the real-life soldiers in the chorus during speeches that focused on military themes, and bringing forth the women in the chorus during Tecmessa's monologues.

Benson described the videography as a kind of musical score. The production team used sound and video editing to create distinct rhythms, punctuated by patterns in the chorus's dialogue. The choristers spoke individually, in rounds, over one another, or in unison as one collective body. Sometimes they simply appeared and observed the action in expressive silence. The overall effect was that of a living, breathing mosaic.

The chorus members generally appeared in one of three different configurations: individually occupying all 30 boxes, in triptych, or with one enormous face taking up all 30 screens. A fourth configuration was used only once, immediately after Ajax's famous "Time reveals all things and conceals them again" speech, in which he falsely suggests that he has turned himself around and is on the road to recovery and reintegration. In a flash, the entire stage was flooded in a sea of faces. Benson wanted to make this a palpably public moment, almost as if the hero was giving a press conference. At the end of his speech, the chorus erupted in thunderous applause and a symphony of praise and well wishes. It was the only time we saw their hands.

In this way, Benson used the chorus to distinguish between public and private moments and spaces. The chorus appeared all together, as in a *parodos*, at the beginning of the performance, became fragmented over the course of the play (except for the one scene described above), and then came together again at the end. In collaboration with video designer Greg Emetaz, Benson orchestrated an ebb and flow to the chorus's movement, using videography to recreate the choreography that was one of the defining features of an ancient chorus.

Composition

The composition of the chorus was arguably the most striking and important aspect of the ART's production. Benson wanted the chorus to represent a community. She was very interested in exploring

the ways in which a community responds to crises and takes care of its own. To this end, she made the bold and controversial decision to draw the chorus from the local community, like the chorus of ancient Greek drama. Benson wanted us to recognize its members and in turn to recognize ourselves as part of the same community. The production thus invited its audience to identify with its chorus, making the issues raised seem more personal.

Furthermore, this production was designed in collaboration with Theater of War, an organization that uses ancient plays as a forum for dialogue with modern soldiers about the psychological aftermath of war. In addition to professional actors, the chorus featured active-duty military men and women, veterans, and their friends and families. Their presence created a meaningful sense of metatheatricality, especially when they departed from Sophocles' script to speak of their own experiences with and opinions about war.

All the chorus members were interviewed separately. They spent about 10 hours each working with the production team, role playing and drawing from their own experiences. Benson asked them to respond in the first person, eliciting lines such as:

"Yeah, it sucks right now. You know what, it sucks for me too."

"There are so many people that . . . you make such a difference in our lives. I can't imagine life without you."

"Look at yourself. This is not you. You can't do this. I'm sorry."

Rather than keeping the long, highly stylized, traditional choral passages, Benson asked the chorus to talk informally about themes addressed in the original odes and those that she wanted to explore in the context of this production. For example, she asked them to describe what community means to them, the times they felt betrayed, their beliefs about Fate, what it means to become obsolete. Benson remarked that the chorus responded very positively to the exercise. The military members, in particular, found it "cathartic." The majority of the chorus met for the first time opening night. They came with their families and left having forged new communities.

Benson's solution to the "problem of the chorus" was not without its flaws. While the chorus was arguably the most compelling part of this production, it was also the most controversial. Because the chorus's lines were (for the most part) unscripted, their words lacked the elegance and intensity of the original text. The greatest tragedy in the play was arguably not the death of its titular hero, but rather the loss of Sophocles' language.

Since the rest of the production attempted to follow a translation and sustain an elevated tone, the choral passages often stood out as awkward, unpolished, and "platitudinous," to borrow an expression from the *TheaterMania* critic.² The reviewer from *The Phoenix* also criticized the "non-lyrical commentary [which ranged] from chewing the fat over fate and free will to conciliatory psychobabble."³

The critic of the *Boston Theatre Review* pinpointed another problem with the choral passages.⁴ The chorus inconsistently referred to events in the real world and in the world of the play, going back and forth between the two and hence muddying the distinction between the members' fictional and nonfictional roles. While this effect was probably intended, it quickly became confusing and detracted from the authenticity of their real experiences. For example, when a chorus member said of Ajax, "He did something very real for me and he's affected me a lot as a person," it somehow broke the spell and forced us to recognize the boundary between the action on stage and real life.

Regardless of their ultimate opinion about the chorus, audiences left the theater talking about it. Thus the production achieved a number of important goals. It invited its audience to contemplate the form and function of a chorus (even if only to criticize it); it encouraged the audience to frame the play's ancient ideas in a modern and personal context; and, perhaps most importantly, it involved the local community at all stages of the theatrical process, from performance to reception.

notes

¹ Sarah Benson, interview by author, Cambridge, Mass., March 22, 2012.

² Sandy MacDonald, "Ajax," *TheaterMania*, February 7, 2011, http://www.theatermania.com/boston/reviews/02-2011/ajax_34231.html.

³ Carolyn Clay, "The A.R.T.'s 21st-century Ajax," *The Phoenix*, February 22, 2011, <http://thephoenix.com/boston/arts/116052-arts-21st-century-ajax/>.

⁴ J. Jacob Krause, "Ajax," *Boston Theatre Review*, February 21, 2011, <http://www.bostontheatrereview.com/2011/02/ajax/>.