Euripides' Alkestis: Experimenting with the Exotic

Andrew Wardenaar
Euripides’ *Alkestis*: Experimenting with the Exotic

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by *Andrew Wardenaar*

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Note:
In accordance with Anne Carson’s translation of *Alkestis*, which seeks to more closely emulate the original Greek, I will employ her spellings of character names in my discussion. Traditionally, English translations have furnished the names Alkestis and Herakles with a “c” (Alcestis, Heracles), and Admetos with a “u” (Admetus), and where this practice occurs in referenced material, it will be quoted as such.
An Exotic Experiment

The plays of Euripides, when placed upon the contemporary stage, have two prominent qualities: they are 1) exotic, and 2) experimental. The theatre of Euripides is a foreign thing to modern audiences, steeped in ritual, and so holds the potential to captivate today’s observers and practitioners in ways that more familiar, narrative theatre cannot. For similar reasons, today’s theatre of Euripides is inherently experimental; his drama was birthed in a culture vastly different from our own, and one that is ultimately lost to us. To stage Euripides now, even when trying to follow known convention, is to undertake an experiment.

Of course, this isn’t exclusive to Euripides’ canon. As a theatre artist, I know that any and all of my work is, to a degree, experimental. Every project carries with it goals and expectations; there is a need to assess those goals and adjust those expectations throughout the process, and a time of reflection that comes afterward. The adherence to this need and the attention paid to the reflective period is what defines whether or not an experiment is successful. Even an unsuccessful production can be a successful experiment.

I feel that my production of Alkestis, while certainly flawed in some respects, was successful as a piece of theatre. My primary concern, however, lies in the success of the experiment. How effectively did my concept, which made so much sense to me on paper, translate to production? Did I appropriately adjust my approach as I delved further into my preparation and entered into rehearsal? Perhaps most importantly, did I capture the essence of Greek tragedy while making it relevant to the contemporary stage? Did I tell Euripides’ story? What follows will attempt to answer these questions,
but as with any experiment, it is first necessary to create a context, and to outline the reasons for the experiment: the *what*, and maybe more vital, the *why*.

There exists ample evidence to tell us what Greek dramatic practices were probably like, but the picture is far from complete. The drama in 5th-century Athens contrasts sharply with the theatre of today. Like our ancient counterparts, we seek fulfillment, but many today define such fulfillment by whether they are entertained and/or moved enough to justify the price of admission; when we go to see our theatre, we purchase a product. Such was not the case in the Golden Age of Athens. It is widely asserted that the presentation of tragedy arose from religious festivals, the plays from dithyrambic hymns (Brockett 12), and that all citizens were called to attend. Compare the entire population of Athens to the self-selected theatregoers of today—the latter group, however passionate they might be, cannot claim to be bearing witness to the same scale of societal event. All Athenians had a deeply spiritual relationship with tragedy.

It goes beyond cultural perception. Though fragments of the rich Athenian theatre culture have been preserved, its style is extinct. Theatre conventions have transformed in the past two-thousand years, and technology has greatly evolved. Ancient plays were performed outdoors, without the element of electric lighting. Countless movements have since come about, and added layers upon layers to western civilization’s view of theatre. The text of Greek plays has been handed between numerous translators, critics, scholars, and adapters, all of whom have had influence over how these plays are perceived today. But if the words survived, the music did not. The dancing did not. The
ritual did not. That which defined what Greek theatre did not survive to our current age. Thus, any Greek theatre pursued on the modern stage will be inauthentic.

If authenticity cannot be achieved, are these ancient plays still worth pursuing in production? The answer is an unequivocal “yes.” For the very reasons that Greek theatre is inauthentic, it is dynamic. The myriad of interpretations over the past two millennia have enriched these ancient works. Modern technology affords new possibilities with staging. That which is not known, in fact, frees modern productions from strictures. The music, movement, and all other question marks become exploratory. Greek theatre becomes experiment, and experiment is necessary for innovation.

Ancient Greek drama is, has been, and will be ever subject to constant innovation, and those theatre practitioners that take part in this process are the curators of the lost, but thriving form. These curators have ensured and will ensure the preservation of these plays, even as said plays transform along with the rest of western civilization. These curators have brought, and will continue to bring, these fantastical, universally resonant, and deeply human stories to the audiences of their own time period. The plays are not static things, either. They are altered by the artists that work on them and the audiences that experience them. Experimentation forwards the form.

Why *Alcestis*? What is it about this strange work of Euripides that demands it be brought to the contemporary stage? It is thought by more than a few to be a confusing tangle of a play that defies classification. As William Arrowsmith articulates: “By general agreement the *Alcestis* is a spirited, puzzling, profound, and seriously light-hearted tragicomedy of human existence” (3). The play opens with a a nigh-grotesque
interaction between two immortals, is home to one of the most vicious father-son quarrels in all of Greek literature, features an on-stage death, a comical drunken scene, and ends with a seemingly amiable but undeniably ambiguous moment. Its tone and focus are not fixed. It reveres a central female character even as it revolves around a male protagonist. “Among extant Greek plays,” Arrowsmith continues, “there is literally nothing like it” (3).

*Alkestis* was composed in 438 BC, which, according to J. Michael Walton, was an “experimental year” for Euripides (16). If the playwright was particularly compelled towards experimentation at this point in his career, perhaps that alone can offer some explanation as to the play’s uniqueness. Even if such a supposition does not tell the entire story, it makes a strong argument for the viability of a modern staging of the eclectic *Alkestis*; if the form is experimental, as has been posited, it should be an ideal vehicle for an experimental play.

Of course, discussion of the play’s far-ranging eccentricities does force some clarification of it’s elusive genre. L.P.E. Parker thinks of the *Alkestis* primarily as a tragedy, contending that “It has the features that distinguish tragedy from other dramatic forms of the time: the leading characters are noble, mythological personages and the language and versification are those of ‘serious’ poetry” (Parker xxi). Walton, however, drawn more to content than form, insists that “*Alcestis* is not, of course, a tragedy” (Walton 50). Gilbert Murray calls it “pro-satyric” (Murray ix). How can the differing classifications of genre be resolved?

The onus falls not upon the critical debate, which has lasted over two millennia, but rather on the particular production of the play. Determining genre is always a crucial
element of the director’s role, but it becomes especially daunting with the *Alkestis*,
because 1) tragedy is so well established as a form, and it is from this form that *Alkestis*
springs, 2) the sheer amount of critical baggage attached to the play can be misleading,
and 3) Euripides own feelings on the question of classification are unknown to us.
Having directed the play, I can attest that the answer to this question remains elusive.
Ultimately, I approached it under the banner of “drama,” drifted towards “tragedy,”
recoiled into “tragicomedy,” and now in reflection, I remain indecisive. The only thing I
can say with confidence was that it was an experiment.

What does this experiment hold for modern audiences beyond an opportunity to
experience one of Euripides’s lesser known works? It is a beautifully lyrical play, and by
virtue of its oddities, it brings a kind of exoticism to the contemporary stage; in it, fantasy
meets grim reality. Arrowsmith (3) and Parker (xxvii-xxviii) both find similarities between
*Alkestis* and Shakespeare’s romances. An apt comparison, for like those plays, *Alkestis*
delves deep into human despair in one moment, then glides effortlessly into buffoonery.
Like those plays, *Alkestis* has a firm belief in magic.

Also of interest to the modern viewer might be the unique way that the *Alkestis*
deals with gender. This is a prominent topic in Euripidean criticism (Walton 45-46), and
though there is no definitive answer, *Alkestis* has some unique characteristics where it
comes to the portrayal of women. The play is not feminist, at least not in a
contemporary sense, but it is centered on the choice of a woman, a choice that she
explicitly states she has made of her own accord (*Alkestis*, lines 251-255). This, coming
from a society that subjugates women, is nothing less than astonishing.
Perhaps more relevant to the current day is Euripides’s dualistic portrayal of his title character. Alkestis is on one hand a paragon of womanhood, idolized and possibly objectified. On the other hand, she is undeniably authentic. The Servant’s speech (Alkestis, lines 133-177) reveals the strengthening and weakening of Alkestis’s composure as she prepares for her death. Fantastical though the circumstances may be, this sequence is remarkably simple, and it demonstrates the heroine’s vulnerability as well as her domesticity - she takes the time to bid farewell to every servant in the house. Alkestis is torn emotionally, but when she enters, she is far more practical than passionate. She does not spend her final moments waxing upon the qualities of her beloved husband, but is instead focused on ensuring the continued welfare of her children. She is domestic, and for her excellence at being domestic, she is venerated.

This contradiction bears some similarities to the lives of women in today’s society, for all too often, they are placed on a pedestal, or unfairly stereotyped. Much of the male demographic considers this acceptable, or even flattering, and thus women remain marginalized. Though he is not making the case for gender equality (domesticism is hardly synonymous with equality, and such an idea would likely offend feminists), Euripides is surely aware of the gender inequality present in his own times, and any modern production of Alkestis, as I believe mine was, must be aware of the gender inequality in contemporary culture. Even looking back on the entire production process, it is difficult to come to a solid conclusion about the gender implications of Alkestis’s transcendence and eventual resurrection. Does worship slight her? When she is restored to life, is she restored to bondage? I have hypotheses, and they have developed further, but they do not have conclusive answers.
Here I may be raising a wary eyebrow from you, the reader, for is it not true that the heart of experimentation requires coming to some conclusion on one’s hypotheses? Indeed it is, and I have steadily tracked my own learning, and have reflected extensively on what was gained by delving into this production alongside my collaborators and observers; such is the impetus for my thesis writing. But to draw definitive conclusions about this brilliant play is thankfully impossible. At the outset of working on Alkestis, I had countless ideas and questions. Having come out the other end of the production process, I have infinitely more. I think it is the same for my collaborators, all of whom dove into this project with openness and excitement, and none of whom ever stopped exploring. I think it is the same for our audiences, all of which were exposed to something wildly unfamiliar to them, and none of whom could leave the theatre saying, “Well, I’ve seen something just like that before.”

We all bore witness to something exotic. We all took part in the experiment. In the discussion to come, I have done my best to tracks the success of the experiment where it pertains to our community, to our performers, designers, technicians, respondents, audiences, and to myself. Yet Euripides’ Alkestis and its mysteries remain cosmic in scope, ever worthier for the next experiment.
Research Foundations

Before proceeding, it is necessary to establish some foundations about Greek drama, about Euripides, and his play, *Alkestis*. It is true, as has been discussed, that ancient Greek dramatic practices are not wholly knowable. The known facts of Euripides’s life and career are even more piecemeal, as the very idea of a written biography was foreign to Attic culture. The play is seemingly intact, but due to its defiance of classification, it is hard to draw conclusions from any of the criticism it has received in the past 2461 years. Opinions and interpretations are all over the map.

Even with the contradictions and knowledge gaps, it is wholly worthwhile to spend some time in conjecture. A working knowledge of the play’s form, meter, and basic cultural context is necessary in understanding the script, even on the modern stage. *Alkestis* came from a time, a place, and a particular writer - those avenues must be explored. Cataloguing the history of criticism proves a far more daunting task, but fortunately, an overview of the major critics with a few more detailed investigations will indeed shed a good deal of light on the play.

Greek Tragedy

The Greeks had many gods, and many rites, but Gilbert Murray contends that the one from which tragedy sprang had universal importance to their culture: “... the ritual on which tragedy was based embodied the most fundamental Greek conceptions of life and fate, of law and sin and punishment” (29). Aristotle tells us that it began from the improvisation of the chorus leaders, and that from there, “... it did expand gradually, each feature being further developed as it appeared; and after it had gone through a number of phases it stopped upon attaining its full natural growth” (22). Part of this
“natural growth” was the addition of actors to the stage, the fixation of the size of the Chorus, and alterations to the meter. “For in the beginning they used tetrameter because the form of the composition was “satyr-like,” that is, more given over to dancing, but when speech came along the very nature of the case turned up the appropriate verse. For iambic is the most speech-like of verses” (23).

Murray describes to pre-tragedy ritual as “... an attempt to express with every limb and sinew of the body those emotions for which words, especially the words of simple and unlettered men, are inadequate” (29). But if these rites were too sacred to be altered by “unlettered men,” they could not forever avoid the touch of the tragic poets, and so the form evolved. As Aristotle says: “The creative passion of the artist gradually conquered the emotion of the mere worshipper” (30). Yet as dominant as the language became, it retained the heightened nature of the ritual that birthed it. Like the other tragedians, Euripides followed tragic metrical conventions closely, and though he was more liberal with his verse towards the end of his career, the Alkestis is strictly adherent the accepted rhythmic scheme (Parker lxx).

**Tragic Meter**

“Greek verse is ‘quantitative,’ meaning that it is composed in patterns of short and long syllables” (Parker lxvii). The position of these long and short syllables depends on whether a particular section utilizes iambic, dactylic, dochmiac, cretic, or one of several other varieties of meter (lxxiii-lxxix). Verse takes the form of speech, song, or what Parker calls “recitative” (lxviii), most easily described as chanting. Speech, as Aristotle tells us, was almost always iambic trimeter; lines were composed of three sets
of four beats per set, which began with a syllable that could be either long or short, then continued long, short, long (lxix-lxx):

\[
- \_ ^\_ \_ ^\_ ^\_ ^\_ ^\_ \\
\]

Recitative verse was usually anapaestic, usually appearing as short, short, long, short, short, long (lxx-lxxi):

\[
^\_ ^\_ ^\_ ^\_ ^\_ ^\_ ^\_ ^\_ \\
\]

Theses were arranged in sequences which varied in length, but ended with a catalexis, a slight variance on the above sequence, which ended in short, short, long, long, and signaled the end of the sequence (lxxi):

\[
^\_ ^\_ ^\_ ^\_ ^\_ ^\_ ^\_ ^\_ \\
\]

Sung verse used the widest variety of metrical types, and was thus adaptable enough for tragic poets to create a progression from song to song (lxxii). Sung verse often fluctuated in meter within a stanza (lxxii), and was sometimes interspersed with spoken and recitative verse, in order to create a contrast (Luschnig 180-182). In a sense, the songs were special, and stood out from the somewhat repetitive cadence of the other verse.

It is not known what the music of Attic tragedy sounded like (Parker xxiv), nor is it known how the movement of the chorus and actors may have corresponded to the rhythmic verse. What can be concluded is that the tragic form followed a very particular method, one to which Euripides was carefully attentive (lxx). If his content was a deviation from the norm, his poetry was not.
Structure

Greek tragedies generally followed an accepted structure, beginning with a prologue, which would give the necessary backstory of the play. As Brockett says, “The point of attack in the plays is late—that is, the story is usually taken up just prior to the climactic moment, and only the final part is dramatized” (13). Because of this, a certain amount of exposition is always necessary, and would sometimes carry on past the prologue into the parados, which saw the entrance of the chorus and established their relationship to the characters and story. With the chorus in place, the episodes begin. These scenes drive the plot, and are punctuated by choral odes which serve as transitions. The exodus marks the end of the play, and usually begins during the chorus’s final lines (13).

Independent of these guidelines, there are other conventions that are commonly used in Attic tragedy. One of these is the messenger, a character who appears to inform the chorus (and the audience) of off-stage events. Structurally, this usually happens late in the play, and in fact, many messengers enter to report the often gruesome fate of the principle characters. Death and ruin most often took place off stage, and the messengers’ accounts of these witnessed horrors inform the audience of the story and frequently describe moments of extreme passion, rage, or woe that would not have occurred on stage—tragic performance has a certain restraint.

The Alkestis employs the messenger, but not in the usual way, and not in the usual place (Parker xxiii). The Servant who comes out at the start of the first episode is such a character, and she proceeds to tell the chorus of Alkestis’s actions on the day that she is to die. The Alkestis that we hear about is filled with despair, and weeps freely.
The character that we meet shortly after this is restrained, coolly resolved to face her fate. It comes quickly, and she dies on stage. Euripides gives us the full report of the off-stage emotional breakdown, and demonstrates how that contrasts with the character’s on-stage behavior, though he reverses the usual order, places it early in the play, and confronts his audience with Alkestis’s death. This is characteristic of the Euripidean tendency to have an immaculate understanding of the rules, then bend them.

**Presentation**

Though a number of other festivals eventually incorporated drama, the original home of tragedy was the City Dionysia festival (Brockett 17). Tragic plays competed against one another in a contest, and are largely thought to have been presented in tetralogies, with three tragedies preceding a comical satyr-play, though Parker casts some doubt on the consistency of this practice (Parker xx). It is known that *Alkestis* was presented in this fourth slot in 438 BC (Luschnig 6), and despite some of its comic features, it more closely resembles tragedy. We cannot know if the inclusion of a satyr-play was a rule, and even if it was, we do not know how and why Euripides forced an exception. What we do know is that that year, Euripides won second place, behind Sophocles (Luschnig 6).

The City Dionysia festival was held at the Theatre of Dionysus, located on the southeastern slope of the Acropolis (Brockett 25). The Theatre of Dionysus featured a similar layout to most Greek theatres of the time: the main playing area was known as the *orchestra*, and behind it stood the *skene* (or scene-house). The skene was often representative of a noble house, and so was readily referenced and utilized by the
plays. *Alkestis* takes particular interest in the house of Admetos; from the moment Death enters it early in the play (*Alkestis* 75), it has a powerful presence.

Greek theatres, like the Theatre of Dionysus, also incorporated an altar, called a thymele, somewhere in the orchestra (Brockett 25). A few plays, such as Euripides’s *Iphigenia at Aulis*, make explicit use of the thymele, though *Alkestis* does not ostensibly do so. The seating, a section known at the theatron (28) was literally carved into the side of the mountain, and formed the rounded shape that we associate with a modern day amphitheatre. Because the performances were held outdoors, and featured a succession of four plays, they likely began very early in the morning (Russell 26).

The actors and chorus both wore full-faced masks; those of the former were larger, so that the characters would stand out from the others (Russell 27). Tragic masks were depended upon to convey character: “In the Greek theatre the persona and the mask are one and the same” (Kott 103). There were only a handful of actors that would play the many roles called for, and so the character of the masks needed to be clearly differentiated (Brockett 19).

Because of tragedy’s origins in ritual dance, and certainly because the face was not visible, acting was predominantly gestural. Some masks were designed with different facial expressions on either side “... so that an actor could establish a change of mood by merely shifting his head” (Russell 27). These masks were likely shaped as to amplify the voice (27); like the movement, the diction needed to be discernible across large distances. The Theatre of Dionysus “… seated 14,000 to 17,000 persons” (Brockett 29).
The Greeks idealized the body, and the “... emphasis was on designing clothing so that the natural grace and controlled beauty of the body would project though the fabric and guide its line and movement” (Russell 24). Tragic actors, however, wore padded robes, which resembled an enlarged version of the Doric “chiton” (Russell 24), or draped, rectangular cloth. In achieving the “larger-than-life” effect, some of the subtleties of the human body were lost (27). Perhaps this was of benefit in the portrayal of female characters, as all of the actors on the Attic stage were men (Brockett 19). Whatever the case, it can be imagined that a skilled actor could manipulate the flowing robes, along with the rest of their body, to great effect:

One can assume that their impression was a majestic, flowing, and rhythmic one; gestures were simple, large, and based in the upper planes of the body; and the actors primarily faced the audience directly or stood in a three-quarter turn. In addition, they had limited physical contact with one another and almost never sat down. On the other hand, Greek classic tragedy when first performed was not the exaggerated, melodramatic, overly theatrical visual and physical presentation characteristic of Greek theatre after the close of the fifth century B.C. The acting of the Greek Golden Age must have been both real and abstract, emotional and yet reserved, excited yet controlled—all attributes of the balance that was the Greek ideal of the time. (Russell 31)

Intent

Because of its origins in religious ritual, it can be surmised that impetus behind Greek tragedy was, in large part, worship. Friedrich Nietzsche, in his book, The Birth of Tragedy, draws tremendous attention to this facet of the form. Nietzsche contends that the chorus, which originally existed as a Dionysian gathering, remains the center of the drama even when interacting with mythic characters (44). The chorus, and through them, the audience, are witnesses to divinity:

If we think of Admetus, lost in thought as he remember his recently deceased wife Alcestis, and consuming himself entirely in mental
contemplation of her - when suddenly, the image of a woman, similar in form and with a similar walk, is led, veiled, towards him; if we think of his sudden, trembling restlessness, his stormy comparisons, his instinctive conviction - then we have an analogy for the feeling with which the spectator, in a state of Dionysiac excitement, saw approaching on the stage the god with whose suffering he had already become one. (Nietzsche, 45)

Though Nietzsche goes on the blame Euripides for the death of tragedy (55-64), he still notes the power of the Admetos’s “trembling restlessness” in Alkestis.

The spectator that Nietzsche refers to, who shares suffering with Admetos, is under the effect of “catharsis,” an idea that comes from Aristotle’s Poetics:

Tragedy, then, is a process of imitating an action which has serious implications, is complete, and possesses magnitude; by means of language which has been made sensuously attractive, with each of its varieties found separately in the parts; enacted by the persons themselves and not presented through narrative; through a course of pity and fear completing the purification of tragic acts which have these emotional characteristics. (Aristotle 25)

As Aristotle sees it, tragedy does not simply treat on grave matters—it gives such matters life on stage, making them immediate to the audience, forcing them to confront the “pity” and “fear” that has stirred within them, and so be cleansed of those emotions. Greek tragedy, then, is a potent reminder, and not merely a rhetorical one, of the laws and beliefs most sacred to its people. It forces them to experience them repeatedly. The lesson concluded, it releases them back into the world, purified.

Of Euripides

Euripides was a polarizing figure in his own time, and remains so to this day. Compared to the other tragedians, he saw a scant few victories in the City
Dionysia, taking home first prize only four times (Parker xix). It is clear that his plays had a strong following during his life, however.

On the contrary, the amount of attention paid to them (and to him personally) by Aristophanes and the other comic poets shows that he must have been high successful with the Athenian public. Satirists do not waste their efforts on the unpopular and unsuccessful, nor is there any point in allusions and quotations that the audience is not going to recognize. (Parker xix)

Aristophanes lampooned Euripides constantly, featuring him as a character in three plays, and mentioning him in most of his others (Walton 44-45). His most famous appearance in the work of the comic poet was in *The Frogs*, which pitted a foppish Euripides against the stout Aeschylus in an underworld contest for “best poet.” Aristophanes seems to take great delight in employing both the legendary Aeschylus and the god, Dionysus, against one of his favorite comic butts.

The condemnations that Aristophanes hurls are not without basis, for indeed, Euripides held at least a minor association with the sophists (Murray 27). He did write about subjects and characters that appalled more conservative Athenians. Audience reactions to his first portrayal of Phaedra in the now lost *Hippolytus Veiled* prompted him to write a defense to accompany his second attempt at the story (Carson 309-312). Euripides drew disapproval with his murderous Medea (Brockett 14), a strange thing considering how celebrated that play, titled after that character, has become in the current day. He stirred up trouble with his ironic take on two of Aeschylus’s most beloved plays (Walton 18-22). He was thought blasphemous by some for his depiction of the gods as
uncaring beings that wrought destruction on humanity (14), yet whether or not he deserved such ire, he does visit such themes regularly.

That which makes him controversial is that which makes him iconic—what has made him and still makes him worthy to be read and produced. He is a champion of those dispossessed by war. The other tragedians did not advocate, as Euripides did, for those oppressed in Attic culture: slaves, children, and women (Walton 46). Euripides dared things that Aeschylus and Sophocles did not; and so changed tragedy. He dressed the king, Telephus in a beggar’s disguise, “... and though critics were shocked, the practice established itself” (Murray 36). Walton describes how Euripides insisted on finding “plausible motive” for his characters (Walton 18). He explored his chosen stories deeply, never taking the fantastical for granted, always weighing how his characters would react. “Many of his most powerful dramatic situations arise out of the contradictions that are thrown up between received myth and possible human reactions to such events” (16). Euripides wrote humans, he wrote people “... the way they are” (Aristotle 68).

If he faced disdain from Attic world, he yet managed to extend his influence beyond region and period. “In the eyes of the Greek world in general, if not of the Athenians, Euripides was the foremost literary figure of the times even before his death” (Harsh 157). Philip Waley Harsh continues: “During the fourth century the plays of both Sophocles and Euripides were greatly admired and frequently reproduced; but as time went on, though Aristotle much preferred Sophocles, Euripides became more and more the most popular of all dramatists”
His popularity after his lifetime was great enough to ensure that a full nineteen of his plays survived from antiquity, by far the greatest number of extant works by a Greek tragedian (157).

Yet for all his acclaim, and his ever-enduring legacy, Euripides was, by all accounts, a strange, surly man. Harsh calls him a “recluse” (Harsh 157), and Murray’s more exhaustive research appears to concur, for he tells us that Euripides lived on the Isle of Salamis in “a cave” (Murray 12). According to Murray, “He lived very much alone, and hated visitors and parties. He had a quantity of books and could not bear women” (12).

Here is an interesting theory that seems to pervade 19th century criticism: Euripides the misogynist (Walton 46). Certainly we cannot know that he was not, but a few scattered biographical details hardly undo the richness of his female characters. It is enough to say that the theory exists, and mention Walton’s answer to it: “Equally possible is that, never mind women, Euripides was a man that did not like anybody very much” (46). In either case, it is a strange concept, considering the seemingly everlasting fame of the playwright. He was no orator, no true sophist, but a hermit.

It should be known too, before proceeding, that he, like all men of Attica, was from youth to old age, a soldier (Murray, 19-20). Military service was mandatory, thus all artists of Athens were also warriors, to be called upon when needed. This casts an interesting light on the later anti-war plays of Euripides, for they came from the experience of a veteran as well as from a citizen angered by Athenian military policy (64-65). More relevant to Alkestis, though, are the
implications on dramatic form. Murray ponders: “... the gulf that lies between the life of an ancient poet and his modern descendants” (50). The life of modern poet is, relatively speaking, rather sheltered. “But an ancient poet was living hard, working, thinking, fighting, suffering, through most of the years that we are writing about life” (50). The modern poet yearns for “something harsh and real” (50), but the ancient poet has lived this reality, and seeks to escape it.

It is probably this immersion in the hard realities of life that gives ancient Greek literature some of its special characteristics. Its firm hold on sanity and common sense, for instance; its avoidance of sentimentality and paradox and various seductive kinds of folly; perhaps also its steady devotion to the ideal forms and high conventions, and its aversion from anything that we should call “realism”. (Murray 50)

Euripides is often accused of being a realist, but this is too sweeping a claim, for though he writes always with human interest and readily explores difficult truths, he carefully observes the tragic form, and tells the most fantastical tales. Humanist, yes. Realist, hardly.

**Of the Alkestis**

At the City Dionysia in 438 BC, the *Alkestis* was presented alongside three tragedies, *The Cretan Women, Alcmaeon in Psophis, and Telephus*, none of which have survived (Luschnig 6). Attached to it are a pair of *hypotheses*, which begin a long tradition of trying to characterize the mystifying play. The second of these notably tells us that neither Sophocles nor Aeschylus ever touched the myth in their writing (6), but we do know that a tragedian named Phrynichus produced his own version, which predated Euripides’s play and employed the same title (Parker xv). The nature of this play is unknown, not only because it has
been lost, but because it came from a time before the tragic form reached the heights set by Aeschylus (xvi). Based on a fragment of a line from the play, it is guessed to have included a wrestling scene between Herakles and Death (xvi), so it seems that Euripides inherited both these two characters and their off-stage confrontation. As we will see, however, he puts his distinctive touch on the story.

Indeed, stepping back from a few of Euripides’s specifics, one finds a well-circulated intercultural myth about a wedding day on which the groom learns that he is to die, but his death is delayed or averted by the willing sacrifice of his bride (Parker xi-xii). In one version, known at the Monoyannis, the husband and wife split the remaining years of life that are left to her, accepting a shortened life together instead of one of them dying and leaving the other alone (xii). In most of variations on the story, kin of the groom are asked to intercede, but do not, leaving the young wife to take the action (xiii). In only one instance does the dying bride not return to life; it is accepted that she must return to be mother to the children (xiii).

Euripides’s version differs from these tellings in a couple of key ways. Firstly, he leaves a large time span between the date of the bargain and the prescribed date of the death (xiii), which gives us a domestic drama rather than a romantic one. The Alkestis of Euripides is not making an impassioned, impulsive decision in front of an audience that has seen the circumstances unfold, rather, we meet a woman that has borne her choice for several years. The situation is stickier, because children are involved. Secondly, Apollo’s prologue clearly states that Admetos propositioned his friends and family before Alkestis volunteered
(Alkestis lines 15-17). We do not see him ask her to make this sacrifice, but neither does Euripides show us that her offer was not solicited. He leaves it ambiguous, implying that if Admetos has been bold enough to ask his mother and father to die in his place, little would stop him from asking the same of his wife.

The conclusion that we can draw is that Admetos has consented to Alkestis’s self-sacrifice, and that becomes a defining point of Euripides’s play. As Richard Lattimore states: “The theme of the drama is not ‘if a wife dies for her husband, how brave and devoted the wife,’ so much as ‘if a husband lets his wife die for him, what manner of man must that husband be?’” (Grene 3). “An ordinary playwright would elude the awkward question.” Murray posits, “Admetus would refuse his wife’s sacrifice and she would perform it against his will or without his knowledge. We should somehow save our hero’s character. No so Euripides” (Murray 34). With ample precedent to avoid the issue, Euripides is instead attracted to it. It is what his play is about.

But in the Euripidean version of events, it is not just Admetos that comes to blame. As Walton points out, it is Apollo who engineers this situation, thinking himself benevolent (16). This is the playwright so well-known for questioning the wild whims of the immortals, and here is history’s first example of him doing so. Looking to the lighter folklore from which The Alkestis springs, it is clear that Euripides has tackled the myth not because of its beauty, but because of its prickly, human questions.
Criticism

As C.A.E Luschnig and H.M. Roisman state, the Alkestis has “... become a battlefield for commentators trying to classify the unclassifiable” (4). Many critics argue viciously about whether the play has any merits at all. Charles Perrault attacked it in 1674, in defense of Alexandre Lully’s opera, Alceste ou le Triomph d’Hercule, based on the myth and play (Parker xxxvi-xxxix). This launches a wave of criticism that targeted various parts of the play as unseemly, namely the drunken buffoonery of Heracles, and the vitriolic scene between Admetos and his father (xl). Despite his lack of fondness for Euripides, who he credited with the decline of the tragic form, Friedrich Schlegel had a soft spot for the play, praising its “beautiful morality” (Parker xli); yet like so many other critics of the time, he took exception with the low portrayal of Admetos and Pheres. Here seems to be a trend of disapproval towards the apparently non-heroic characters. Many seems unable to come to terms with the deep flaws that Admetos takes from his father.

A landmark piece of criticism was A.W. Verall’s Euripides the Rationalist, in which the author diagnosed the disdain that critics seemed to have for Admetos, Pheres, and Herakles (Parker xliii). Verall theorized that when other scholars accused these characters of being “not well-drawn,” what they really meant was that they were “not pleasingly portrayed” (xliii). To Verall, these three were very real characters, pulled credibly from real life (xliii). Unfortunately, he all but discredits himself with his outlandish theory that Alkestis does not, in fact, die, but rather collapses into a psychological coma that comes about from her certainty of
her doom (xliii-xliv). According to Verall, Euripides is debunking myth (xliv), and so justifies all fantastical elements with realist explanations. This theory is perhaps amusing, certainly puzzling, but it does at least perceive that Euripides’s intention with Alkestis is to examine the human issues within the story instead of simply recounting a fairy-tale.

Much more psychology-based criticism would follow Verall, perhaps most notably in the work of Williamowitz and Lattimore (Parker xliv-xlvi). The latter points out that Admetos accepts the veiled woman into his home before he knows that it is his returned wife, Alkestis (xlvi). Earlier thinkers, seeking the perfect Greek hero, might have been bothered by this, but for those cataloguing the myriad of human flaws within the character, this revelation perhaps proved just another addition to the list.

Albin Lesky, a German scholar who had assembled a very notable collection of related folklore, was an eager student of the play (Parker xlvi). He seems to have paid particular interest to the debate between Admetos and Pheres, and insisted on keeping it just that: debate. This scene, Lesky claimed, was the “agon,” a structural feature usually found in comedy which conveyed rhetoric, or an idea (Brockett 16). It was erroneous, he felt, to make one side of this argument, which has no just victor, the “key to the understanding of the whole play” (Parker xlvii-xlviii). This thought is difficult to come to terms with, as this scene seems to mark a breaking point in Admetos, and so it seems that some profound message must get across to him here. Perhaps it is the first time
he doubts his selfish position, even if his father’s is similarly selfish. An argument need not be resolved in order for it to affect change in its participants.

Few scholars in the 20th century are as intimately familiar with the Alkestis as A.M. Dale (Parker xlix-l). She reminds readers that the play cannot be read purely in terms of character, for Greek dramatists, including Euripides, are more interested in “action” and “rhetoric” than they are in “character” (xlix-i). This assertion helped to bridge the gap between the psychological and romantic views of the play, and resembles an Aristotelian balance. Aristotle placed “action,” or plot, as the foremost criteria for a successful tragedy. It is followed by “character,” and then “thought.” (Aristotle 27-29).

Modality

The wild disagreement in critical response to the play is a sign of its merit, and a vital point of reference to any and all artists that seek to bring it to life on the stage. Informative though it is to wade through the contradictory conclusions, it is ultimately necessary for a director to land upon a line of critical thought that resonates with their need to explore the play. For this production, it was William Arrowsmith’s insistence that Euripides’s play is a “modal drama,’ that is, a play that is deeply concerned with drawing the line between different “modes” of life (3). The primary distinction is between the mortal, who must accept the “necessity” of death, old age, duty, etc., and the immortal, who is not as susceptible to it (5). “Modality” is central to beliefs of Greek culture, and it does not just exist between gods and people, for the latter are further stratified by different forms of ananke, or “necessity” (5-7).
The modality that dominates the action in *Alkestis* is that of Admetos’s fated death, for the play shows that “... each man must do his own dying” (11). In consenting to have Alkestis die in his place, Admetos is defying *ananke* (11), and indeed, he seems hardly aware of the other aspects of his life that should be governed by necessity. Arrowsmith calls him “modally ignorant” (16), for he breaks the oath he makes to Alkestis, fails to understand the accepted duty that a son owes his father, and deceives his guest (17). The ending, though, marks a change in Admetos, for through his suffering, he is finally comes to understand mode (22).

All of the characters in the play are bound by *ananke*, by “necessity,” in some sense (Arrowsmith 15). Apollo, having just finished a period of servitude mandated by Zeus, must depart before the taint of death comes into the house, and Death is quick to remind him of the “law” (*Alkestis*, line 63). Herakles is obligated to his labors (line 420). Alkestis herself is in a unique position, for she faces the *ananke* that a wife owes a husband (Arrowsmith 15), but once she accepts her fate, she is free of “necessity”–she transcends mortality, and achieves a different modality (25).

*Alcestis’ “resurrection” should, I am convinced, be understood in the same way. Euripides, as certain scholars have argued, may have been too skeptical to believe in “the nonsense of physical regeneration.” But the point surely is not bodily regeneration but the deathless presence of the hero, the permanence of heroic achievement. That Euripides did believe in the immortality of *arete* (virtue) seems to me quite beyond dispute; (Arrowsmith 25)*
**Alkestis the Deity**

Arrowsmith’s interest in the title character’s immortality is reinforced by the findings of multiple scholars, several of whom point to evidence that she was likely revered as a minor goddess. Both Philip Waley Harsh and A.M. Dale acknowledge that both Alkestis and Admetos are thought to have been worshipped in Thessaly as “chthonian deities,” from the underworld, and both scholars draw attention to the passage in the Second Choral Ode that prophesies this worship (lines 390-395). Neither Harsh or Dale place tremendous significance on this supposition, however. They are more concerned with the dramatic structure of the play. In regards to Alkestis’ return from the underworld, Harsh asserts that “… such resurrection was essential to apotheosis” (164). That is to say, Alkestis must come from back from the dead in order for the story to function. In discussing Alkestis/Admetos and Euripides’ treatment of their myth, Dale shrugs off the implication that they were thought of as gods, contending that: “Their legend as he knew it is firmly rooted in man’s morality…” (viii).

Yet if the historical precedent of Alkestis’ “immortality” is indefinite, and perhaps outside of the purview of dramatic critics, it is undeniably present in the action of the play. Arrowsmith’s thinking centers on the ways in which the characters understand and transcend mode. As happens often in the work of Euripides, here are mortals imposed upon by immortal circumstances. Admetos’ comprehension of mode is flawed, and that only becomes apparent when immortal privilege is dangled in front of him. Alkestis never asks for immortality, rather, she is granted it independent of her will. Whether or not Euripides would
call her divine, he features her heroism, which comes from her understanding of
ananke and her exemplary arete.

Alkestis the Woman

It is not entirely accurate to say that Alkestis and Admetos are perfectly opposite in their adherence to mode, because for men and women, ananke and arete were very different concepts. In 5th-century Athens, men demonstrated virtue through displays of wisdom and bravery in public life, whereas the virtue of women was tied to their domestic duty and obedience.

The virtue most vigorously demanded of Athenian women was sophresune (literally “sound-mindedness”). This has no single English equivalent, but ranges over self-control, self-knowledge, deference, moderation, resistance to appetite, and chastity. (Blondell 51-52)

This viewpoint, prevalent in the period, was expressed with little variation by numerous Athenian public figures, from Plato to Pericles. The latter of the two proclaimed that women’s greatest glory comes from being essentially invisible (Blondell 98).

This makes Euripides’ character a curious heroine, because unlike other prominent female characters in his canon, Alkestis remains exemplary in her observance to sophresune, yet she earns recognition because of this observance. In the same sense that she accepts her mortality and is made immortal, she accepts her invisibility and is subsequently made visible. As discussed above, the work of Euripides seems ever eager to use irony when examining established convention; he is thought to have challenged the idealized portrayal of the gods, and so too is he thought to have elevated the plight of
groups marginalized in Athenian society, such as slaves, children, and women. Alkestis does so without the blazing defiance possessed by Medea or Hecuba, or the acquiescence to desire that appears to characterize Phaedra. Alkestis sidesteps this by appearing in veiled silence.

The veil is key here, not just as a circumstance of Euripides’ story, but as an essential element of an Athenian woman’s “invisibility”:

In all movements outside the home, a woman was supposed to be inconspicuous to the point of invisibility, and although the use of the veil is not yet well understood, what was probably expected upon leaving her house to wrap her mantle or veil around her head so that it obscured part of her face and neck. (Tortora 58-59)

Lloyd Llewellyn-Jones, in his book *Aphrodite’s Tortoise*, discusses the strange freedom that may have come from the practice of female veiling in Athenian society (3). As Llewellyn-Jones says, “... the act of veiling, with a variety of veil-styles that concealed the female body in diverse ways and varying levels of austerity, gave women of different social ranks a modicum of freedom to explore male public space unimpeded” (14).

This logic very much speaks to the Alkestis that arrives with Herakles at the close of the play. Nancy Sorkin Rabinowitz notes that “Alcestis is a veiled and silent presence” in the final scene (102). “As enacted, Alcestis drops out to facilitate the interaction between the men.” says Rabinowitz, “Alcestis is necessary, but she is neither the one who gives nor the one who receives” (103). She is central, but her feminine arete seems, on the surface, unthreatened.

What of her power as immortal, feminine icon? “Does she retain this power,” Rabinowitz asks, “or is the woman—full of a dangerous wildness, because
connected with death–domesticated?” (103). The question has no easy answer in Euripides’ ambiguous play, but Rabinowitz encourages the reader to look beyond “political power” and consider the “spiritual and ritual avenues to influence” (96). The play juxtaposes funerary rites with marriage, just as it does comedy and tragedy, mortal and immortal, man and woman. The play, like all those penned by Euripides and his fellow tragedians, is intended as religious ritual. It instructs its observers in the concepts of ananke and arete as it simultaneously brings them spiritual fulfillment.
Analysis

The *Alkestis* is economically plotted, and its machinery functions because of the obligations that its characters must adhere to. The dramatic conflict arises from this, for the protagonist, Admetos, avoids or ignores *ananke* (necessity). This is not easily done in the Greek world, for *ananke* is unyielding. If Admetos is to avoid his fated death, there must be a sacrifice. The dramatic question is posed: “Will Alkestis’s sacrifice teach Admetos the importance of *ananke*?” If the question sounds clunky, it is because Greek drama hinges on abstract cultural ideas, often words with no direct translation, unwieldy in some situations. To make it more specific would be to rob it of its universality. It is instead necessary to examine how *ananke* manifests itself with each character in each situation.

Sacrifice too, is at the core of this play, most obviously in the case of *Alkestis*, perhaps less obviously in the case of Admetos. This seems a strange assertion, as sacrifice is a selfless act, and Admetos is a selfish man. Yes, the play is certainly interested in exploring the lack of willingness to sacrifice, as we will see with some of the characters, but as an addendum to the dramatic question above, let us also ask: “What sacrifice does Admetos make, and how does it free him?”

Prologue

As *Alkestis* opens, Apollo appears and relates the preceding events, beginning with the “penalty” (line 7) that Zeus imposed upon him for the murder of his sons. Necessity rears its head very early, and we see how it created the situation. Apollo came to serve Admetos out of necessity, to pay for his crime,
and Admetos, following the necessity of being a good and hospitable master, found favor with the god. The concept of piety in Greek culture reached beyond religion and into several different aspects of duty, so in calling his former host “pious” (line 11), Apollo is actually commending Admetos for his adherence to ananke.

It later becomes clear that Admetos is either impious, or at the very least, selectively pious, but what matters in the opening is that Apollo thinks him so. Ironically, because of this, Apollo has afforded him what seems to be a great boon: the opportunity to cheat necessity and avoid his fated death - that is, if somebody agrees to die in his place. Despite Admetos’s active solicitation of his friends and family, most notably his aging parents (line 17), he only found a single person willing to make such a sacrifice: his wife, Alkestis. She is to die this very day.

Death enters shortly after, and launches into an interchange with Apollo. This is scene, following Apollo’s grave revelation of Alkestis’s doom, is oddly comic. It makes Death appear foolish, as he misunderstands one of Apollo’s comments.

APOLLO. Take her, go. I know I can’t persuade you.

DEATH. What, to kill an appointed victim? That’s my function!

APOLLO. No, to grant a delay.

(lines 48-50)
It is possible that the clownishness of this scene is intended to undermine Death’s power in the play, though he holds his own. Apollo appeals to him, but Death is unwilling to sacrifice what he believes he deserves.

DEATH. You can’t have everything. You can’t just break the law.
(line 63)

This line speaks directly to the message of the play, and could seemingly be directed at Admetos. In this instance it suffices to drive away Apollo, who is himself bound by ananke and cannot interfere further, but the sun god gets the last word in, revealing a prophecy that Death will be stopped by a guest in the house of Admetos (lines 64-70). Death brushes it off, yet this is indeed what comes to pass. It is hard to believe that in such tightly-plotted play, Euripides would focus on Apollo’s posturing, so perhaps he is working to alleviate any suspense. It has been established that he is more interested in the questions raised by his play than in surprising the audience.

Parados

As discussed above, the Chorus’s entrance song plays upon Alkestis’s delicate position between life and death. These mourners are old men of Pherai, the capitol city of Thessaly, and they come out of their own necessity: to pay their final respects to their queen. That they are men is a deliberate choice from Euripides, for Greek culture’s gathered mourners were traditionally women (Luschnig 172). It is possible that the dramatist wished to focus on the male perspective, because Admetos is the protagonist, but choosing to make the Chorus male also sidesteps a number of potential problems. Herakles’s offer of
the veiled woman at the end of the play, which Admetos cannot accept without breaking his oath, would lose considerable dramatic gravity if Admetos had been confiding in a group of women for the entire play. Also, because the Chorus matches his own gender, his differences with them demonstrate his impiety rather than his misogyny. On the other hand, Euripides rarely made choices out of convenience. It is difficult to know his intent here.

First Episode

The first episode begins when a female servant, Alkestis’s handmaiden, comes out of the house, and informs the Chorus that her mistress is hovering between life and death. She is not present long before she speaks of Admetos’s lack of understanding:

CHORUS. O Admetos what a woman you are losing!

SERVANT. The master does not know this yet—until he suffers it.

(lines 125-126)

That a slave possess wisdom that a king does not is very Euripidean, and this comment certainly foreshadows Admetos’s coming trial, but the real significance here is the difference between what the Servant says about Admetos and Alkestis. If she dismisses the former, she speaks worshipfully of the latter, and so too does the Chorus:

CHORUS. Let her know that she dies glorious, incomparable, best of wives under the sun.

SERVANT. Who could deny it?
Who could surpass her?

(lines 131-134)
The Servant launches into the Alkestis’s version of the messenger speech, which, though it occurs much earlier in the play than was usual, achieves much the same purpose as other examples from tragedy. Through the Servant’s description, we become aware of a passionate outburst of a character that has a very controlled manner while on stage. It is true that we have not seen Alkestis yet, for this messenger speech is also atypical in that it demonstrates the contrast between off-stage frenzy and on-stage restraint in the reverse, but the convention is unmistakable.

The speech accomplishes a number of things. We see the reverence that the servants have for Alkestis, as well as the love that Alkestis has for them:

SERVANT. All the servants were weeping throughout the house.
She gave her right hand to each, none was unworthy.
(lines 173-174)

We also get a detailed description of the interior of the house, a building that holds great significance in the play. Most importantly, though, we see Alkestis thrashing against the weight of ananke, for she has accepted her husband’s fate, and it is quickly approaching.

First Choral Ode

CHORUS. It is clear, all too clear, yet we pray to the gods.
Their power is absolute.
O Apollo, king of healing,
find some strategy for Admetos’ pain.
Help us, help us! You did so before.
(lines 192-196)
The Chorus recognizes that *ananke* is inescapable, but even as they acknowledge that, they plead for a miracle. In that respect, they express the actions of both Alkestis and Admetos in the scene to come. For Alkestis, it is “all too clear,” but Admetos still pleads. Apollo’s assistance of Admetos is well known, but here, Euripides has given the audience knowledge that the Chorus is not aware of: Apollo’s hands are tied, and being unable to intervene, he has departed. The mortals have been left alone with Death.

**Second Episode**

When Alkestis finally graces the stage, the wailing woman depicted in the Servant’s speech is nowhere to be found. This Alkestis could be called wistful, but it is clear that she has put the greater part of her emotion aside. Admetos cries out in lamentation, but his doomed wife does not. Just as she appears to be fading, Alkestis suddenly revives, and with full lucidity, speaks with startling practicality about Admetos’s *ananke*.

**ALKESTIS.** Well, some god worked things out this way.

So be it.

But you—*remember what you owe me.*

I have a request.

It is just, as you will agree.

For you love these children no less than I.

Do not put a stepmother over them.

Let them be masters in this house,

not persecuted by some jealous second wife.

(lines 265-273)
Admetos agrees immediately, though not simply. Before his reply is done, he has sworn that he will never again play music, sing, or host revels. He has said that he will have a “likeness” (line 310) of Alkestis crafted, in order that he can lie with it. He has alluded to Orpheus’s failed attempt to liberate his dead wife from Hades. Alkestis ignores Admetos’s excessive and strange embellishment; all she cares about is her husband’s consent to her oath.

ALKESTIS. Children, hear this!
Your father vows he will not set another wife over you,
not take from me my honor, ever.

ADMETOS. Yes I vow it. And I will keep this vow.

ALKESTIS. On such terms receive the children from my hand.
(lines 331-335)

This is the inciting incident, over three-hundred lines into the play. It is on this vow, this form of ananke, that the dramatic action of the play turns, and it is through breaking this vow that he will fail. For the moment, though, Alkestis is content, and so she lets go of life, and dies.

It is vital to note the stark contrast between husband and wife in this episode. Alkestis’s cool pragmatism is juxtaposed with Admetos’s grandiose display of emotion and ironic sentiments. This difference springs, in part, from the differing definitions that arete holds for men and women. Alkestis is expected to be of sound mind, and deferent, but that is not to say that Admetos is bound to be dutiful and quiet. His loud proclamations do not contradict the public glory that men of 5th century were ever-seeking. His flaw here is not with interpretation arete, but ananke. Admetos, though genuinely upset, thinks himself free of
necessity, even as he adds superfluous conditions to the oath he swears. He suffers deeply, yet does not understand his obligation. Alkestis is the opposite. She has come to terms with necessity, and in accepting her fate, has transcended sadness and regret. She takes ownership of her death, for it was by her choice.

ALKESTIS. I die—I did not have to die—for you.
I could have married some other man of Thessaly,
I could have dwelt in a princely house.
I did not want to stay alive without you, Admetos,
without a father for my children,
although I was young and loved being young.
(lines 252-257)

Her original consent to die for Admetos might have come from ananke, a sense of duty to her husband, but here, in on the precipice of death, she is free of it, and so transcends her mode. If indeed Alkestis becomes an immortal (Arrowsmith 25), it is here, in the moment before her death, that it occurs.

Second Choral Ode

CHORUS. Let him know, the blackhaired god of hell,
let him know, the deathconductor who sits at his oar
this is the best woman who ever crossed the lake of Acheron.
Singers will sing you,
to the seven strings of the lyre,
they will glorify you in songs without lyres,
at Sparta when Apollo's sacred month comes round,
in shining Athens when the moon sails all night long—
your death will make them sing.
(lines 387-395)
Admetos and his children depart with the body of Alkestis, and the Chorus begins to sing again, celebrating their deceased queen. They not only worship her, they foretell that others will as well. Scholars have pointed to this passage as a reference to a Thessalian cult dedicated to Alkestis (Harsh 164). It is another example of her divinity.

At the close of the ode, the Chorus criticizes Admetos's father and mother, both of whom refused to die in his place. This position, that of blaming the parents, is discredited later in the play, for it defies ananke, yet here the Chorus echoes the anger of Admetos and Alkestis. By the final ode, the Chorus will be a moral authority, but at this point in the play, they reflect the views expressed on the stage—those that the audience is possibly feeling. It is a good reminder that the Chorus follows different rules than those of the characters.

**Third Episode**

“When Heracles arrives, he is immediately recognized by the Chorus who, without hesitation, welcome him and temporarily forget their grief” (Luschnig 190). Indeed, though it seems strange that the Chorus so quickly goes from mourning to this mildly comical interchange, they are adapting to the situation, as was their function. The jarring tonal shift has a purpose, for it will soon put the returning Admetos in a difficult situation. The early part of this episode, though, is mostly exposition, and the reinforcement of the power of ananke. Herakles is on the way to Thrace, seeking the monstrous horses of Diomede (line 416).

CHORUS. You can’t master the horses without a battle.

HERAKLES. But neither can I refuse a labor.
CHORUS. Well, you may come back, you may not.

HERAKLES. It won’t be the first such risk I’ve run.
(lines 419-422)

Herakles is keenly aware of necessity; he is at the mercy of his sentenced labors. What’s more, death is an ever-present risk, but he does not let the fear of it dissuade him from his duty.

The conversation between he and Admetos that follows is a confounding one, for Admetos’s deception is halfhearted, yet Herakles accepts his lie, despite being lost in his friend’s “riddles” (line 451). Admetos, unable to acknowledge ananke and admit that his wife has died, develops a fiction that she still lives. What is hard to pinpoint is where Admetos decides to commit to the falsehood, and whether he conceives of it himself or simply riffs off of Herakles’s confusion. In any case, his description of the person who has died as a “woman” (line 460) who was “not kin” (line 462), and that was “orphaned” (line 464) are all true of the late Alkestis. Perhaps he feels the need to pepper his lies with truth, in order to make them more believable, to himself and others.

Also enigmatic are Admetos’s reasons for insisting that Herakles stay with him. He is renowned for his hospitality; Apollo himself has commended him for it. Euripides’s Admetos, though, is so ignorant of ananke that it seems odd that his piety would serve as a fulcrum for the plot. Arrowsmith insists that his generosity is not benevolent, and that it is instead derived from his sense of entitlement (Arrowsmith 17-18). That his motivations are selfish seems plausible, particularly after Herakles exits and Admetos justifies himself to the Chorus:
ADMETOS. It would just add another layer of pain, to have my house called inhospitable.
(lines 485-486)

His concern is not his duty, but his reputation.

Third Choral Ode

CHORUS. Even now, even in tears, you open your house to a guest, though your wife is lying inside. Noble impulse! I stand in awe. A good man knows what he’s doing. Or so I trust.
(lines 508-512)

This song is focused on Admetos’s unwavering devotion to hospitality, and not ironically, though the the final lines demonstrate the Chorus’s doubt. It is significant that they applaud not his action, but his “noble impulse.” Would not a “good man” get credit for his doings rather than his intentions? The support of the Chorus is coming into question.

Fourth Episode

Few confrontations in extant Greek drama are as savage as this argument between Admetos and his father. Pheres is a curious character; with the possible exception of his compulsion to make a respectful offering at the beginning of the episode, he appears untouched by ananke. Admetos tries to snare him, but it fails.

PHERES. I did not contract to die for you. Whose law is it—that fathers die for sons? It isn’t Greek.
(lines 573-575)
Admetos attacks his father savagely, and disowns him, along with his mother, but ultimately cannot indict him. This is because Pheres is not acting in violation of necessity. He is a selfish man, though, and an uncomfortable reflection of Admetos. Pheres disrespectfully calls the dead Alkestis a “corpse” (line 603), and before he leaves the stage, Admetos uses the same word (line 627). Is this a moment of realization, or does Admetos’s resolve falter off-stage? In either case, it is after this conflict that Admetos, who has struggled to understand why he is losing his wife, discovers that he is at fault. This episode is his turning point, and from here he learns much, though he has already erred, and will be trapped by ananke before all is said and done.

Because the Chorus follows Admetos to the funeral, it cannot perform an ode before or after and thus this episode consists of multiple parts. Thus we find that Alkestis’s funeral happens concurrently with Herakles’s merrymaking, much to the chagrin of the Servant that must attend on Admetos’s guest, for he, like the rest of the household, adored Alkestis.

SERVANT. And I could not attend her!
    Could not even stretch out my hand.
    She was a mother to me, to us all.
    (lines 657-659)

In this episode, we see both sides of Herakles “–on the one hand, an oversized, dimwitted, drunken brawler, on the other, an all-suffering savior of humankind” (Carson 248). His lecture to the Servant is comical, but it reinforces the play’s lesson.

HERAKLES. Come here, let me share a bit of wisdom with you.
Have you given much thought to our mortal condition?
Probably not. Why would you? Well, listen.

*All mortals owe a debt to death.*
There’s no one alive
who can say if he will be tomorrow.
Our fate moves invisibly! A mystery.
No one can teach it, no one can grasp it.
Accept this! Cheer up! Have a drink!
(lines 668-676)

Of key interest here is the concept of fate moving “invisibly,” for this has not been
the case with Alkestis, whose fate has been known to all, not the least, herself. In
the earlier exchange between he and Admetos, Herakles was confused by the
half-living, half-dead state that his friend described to him. This blending of life
and death, all too well-known to Alkestis and Admetos, is foreign to Herakles.
Gradations are unknown to him. In fact, when he discovers the truth about
Alkestis, everything changes in an instant.

**HERAKLES.** So there I was drinking, carousing, carrying on,
while the poor man suffered in the same house?
And you said nothing? This house is dark indeed.
(lines 710-712)

Less than a minute after his drunken speech, Herakles speaks of his debauchery
in the past tense. He is suddenly sober, and the bright house is suddenly dark.
Herakles the drunkard is suddenly Herakles the champion, determined to save
Alkestis from her fate.

Herakles has left the house. Admetos is afraid to reenter it, for he it was
the realm of his wife, and he has begun to grasp the gravity of her loss. He has
just buried Alkestis, and has undergone a transformation; he’s learned what
Alkestis realized earlier, that fate, that *ananke*, is insurmountable, and it is in
accepting it, not avoiding it, that one can achieve freedom. He understands that
Alkestis is sanctified by her willing sacrifice.

ADMETOS. Friends! I count my wife luckier than me,
strange as that may seem.
No grief will touch her anymore.
She is stopped from pain. She has her glory.
While I, who should not be here, am loosened by fate
into anguish of living.
Too late I understand.
(lines 807-813)

Admetos has learned his lesson, and we have the beginnings of an answer to the
dramatic question articulated earlier: “Will Alkestis’s sacrifice teach Admetos the
importance of ‘necessity’?” It has, though the play is not yet finished. This is in
part because this is Alkestis’s story, even if it is Admetos’s play, and her
involvement is not yet complete. It is also because understanding the *ananke* he
avoided is not sufficient for Admetos. He must be subject to that necessity he has
inherited since the play began.

It is necessary to recall that the true action of the play did not begin until
Admetos’s dying wife extracted an oath from him. This was the inciting incident,
and here, he brushed with necessity. Not long after, he mistreated his guest,
Herakles, deceiving him about the death of his wife and all but forcing him to stay
as his guest. Again, Admetos brushes up against necessity. He has made two
bargains, created two different responsibilities, and they are about to come into conflict.

**Fourth Choral Ode**

CHORUS. Necessity, you alone need
no altar,
no image,
no sacrifice.
Lady, I pray you, do not come at me.
For whenever Zeus nods yes
You bring it to pass.
Your will can crush iron.
And your spirit is a cliff that knows not shame.
This goddess has you, Admetos, in her unbreakable bonds.
Endure it.
You will never recover the dead with weeping.
(lines 841-852)

The moral of the play has not been made secret, but here it is laid bare.
The Chorus has grasped it, and through them, so too has the audience. Admetos may say he understands, but if he does, he must prove it. He must endure it. The Chorus insists that he “will never recover the dead with weeping.” There is a possible double meaning in this, for though it makes it clear that death is inescapable, Herakles is about to prove that untrue. Could the Chorus mean that Admetos’s weeping, which has been ample to this point, has not been enough? Is Admetos coming humiliation a test of worthiness? Very possibly.
Fifth Episode

Herakles approaches with a veiled woman in hand, and a ruse in mind.

This woman, he claims, is a prize that he won in an athletic contest. He is due in Thrace (thanks to his *ananke*), and so proposes to leave her with Admetos.

HERAKLES. The lesser victors took home horses,
the greater—in wrestling and boxing—oxen.
The woman was a bonus.
It seems a shame to waste.
(lines 883-885)

Note that Herakles uses a half-truth in his deception, just as Admetos did in the third episode. Herakles knows, based on Admetos’s earlier behavior, that he will bend over backwards to accommodate guests, and has further sway with his friend beyond that. With both amusement and justice in mind, Herakles exerts pressure, relentlessly.

HERAKLES. You wrong me if you deny me this.

ADMETOS. And if I do it, I cut my heart in two.
(lines 947-948)

Because he has been caught in his lie, Admetos knows that he owes Herakles, and he is possibly also drawn to the shapely woman with a veil out of desire for her, but his oath to Alkestis mandates that he refuse. He is caught between two forms of *ananke*, and he knows he will be split “in two” by this dilemma. This is where Admetos is sacrificed, for in finally relenting to Herakles, he breaks his oath to Alkestis, thus giving up the last thing he has left of her. It is his lowest point.
But there is a stunning reversal with the lifting of the veil, for this woman is Alkestis. Admetos reacts with joy and surprise, and as one, his sacrifice and hers are washed away. Herakles makes a final attempt to instruct his friend.

HERAKLES. But take her in. And be a man of justice in the future. Reverence your guests. Now farewell. My labors call me.

ADMETOS. Wait, stay with us, be our guest.

HERAKLES. Another time. I have obligations.

(lines 998-1000)

Herakles departs immediately. Necessity calls him elsewhere. But Admetos and Alkestis go into the house. Admetos is not only unafraid of his wife’s deathly presence, but also of the house he dreaded in the previous episode.

ADMETOS. To my townspeople and the whole territory I proclaim dances and altars and sacrifice to celebrate our happiness. Now we change our life! The beauty of my luck I shall not deny.

(lines 1002-1005)

With a single, royal edict, the ban on revelry, the *ananke* that held Admetos so tightly, is undone. He claims that things will “change,” but will they? Has his “luck” robbed him of his learning?

If Admetos is pleased by this outcome, what of his wife? Alkestis stands still, saying nothing. Her lack of speech is explained by the taint of death that still hangs upon her (lines 994-995), but her dramatic presence has undeniable solemnity. She would seem menacing, but her power has been stripped from her. After dying with such beautiful dignity, she has, throughout this final episode,
been treated as an object. If earlier she transcended mortality, she seems to have here been yanked back. Necessity has a hold of her once more, and she silently obeys it.

**Exodos**

CHORUS. Many are the shapes of things divine.
Many are the unexpected acts of gods.
What we imagined did not come to pass–
God found a way
to be surprising.
That’s how this went.
(lines 1006-1011)

The ending of the play is ambiguous, and so too are the final words of the Chorus. They are not specific to *Alkestis*. They are shared with Euripides’ *Medea*, *Helen*, *Andromache*, and *Bacchae*, in each instance spoken (not sung) at the close of the play (Walton 17). What do they mean here? Is this commentary on the meddling of Apollo, does it refer to the demigod Herakles, or is Alkestis the “God” in question?

It seems to be all of them, simultaneously. One cannot overlook the bullheaded initiative exhibited by both Apollo and Herakles. In acting against the laws of life and death, they have defied *ananke*, but in the very way that defines men who achieve *arete*. In this respect, they have both been “surprising,” but not to the degree that Alkestis has. She too, standing in silence, has followed dictates of *arete* prescribed to her sex by Athenian society, and she too, has thus defied *ananke*, and so is surprising. Yet, Alkestis, both by the nature of her actions in the play and the expected behavior of women, has had no agency in
this final act. Not only is the supposedly amiable ending not of her design, but it forces us to question whether or not it is to her benefit in any way whatsoever. In dying dutifully, she was revered as an immortal. In dying dutifully, she was free. With her revival, she returns to a silent, domestic, and earthly existence.

**Sacrifice**

Greek marriage had a number of formal and functional similarities to sacrifice. “Both seek to gain a propitious future through violence, loss and submission to a social order” (Foley 1985: 85). As sacrificial procedures established under what circumstances life could be taken and a living being consumed, marriage established socially sanctioned conditions for heterosexual intercourse and reproduction. Sacrifice affirmed differences between human beings (who sacrifice) and animals (who are sacrificed); marriage affirmed differences between males (who marry) and females (who are married). Sacrifice created bonds between human beings and gods by the gift of an animal; marriage created bonds between males of different households by the fist of a woman. Both involved little or no choice for the object given, although in both cases the appearance of coercion and violence was avoided.” (Blondell 56)

The significance of Alkestis wearing a veil in the final scene is not lost on either Rabinowitz (101-102) or Llewellyn-Jones (234), both of whom insist that the specified action of the scene leaves no doubt that this last episode is a marriage ceremony. Much more so than her earlier onstage death, this is the true sacrifice of Alkestis, for in accordance with the above definition, it is not in that earlier moment, but in this final one, that she has “little or no choice.”
If she is here sacrificed, then the play has taken a tragic turn in its conclusion, even though it has blurred the line between genres up until this point. But in being resurrected does Alkestis lose all of her power? Does she retain *arete*? Has she violated *ananke*? Why and how does she yet inspire worship, and from whom? These questions can only be tackled through experiment.
Approach

Because of the rich characters that populate Euripides’ *Alkestis*, and due to my own predisposition to latch on to a play’s ideas, it becomes all too easy to overlook what is perhaps the most essential element of Greek drama, and a key ingredient in the experiment: the Chorus. In undertaking this project, a large part of my directorial duty fell upon illuminating the plot and launching into the character analysis that has become familiar to me. Much of my attention would go to Arrowsmith and his discussion of modality, for Greek drama always contains a lesson. But in order for me to really explore this play, and what I found compelling about it, it became necessary for me to find my way in through the Chorus. It would not be enough to simply treat them as another element, for as Nietzsche has articulated, the Chorus is the beginning of the ritual—they are the core of the drama.

Let us recall the origins of Greek tragedy, before character emerged and the plays were given form, when the worship of Dionysus took the form of hymn and dance. Those participants in the rites sought something beyond what we cover in our conventional analysis of text, because at the beginning, there was no text. My experiment then, would begin there. With a mystery cult. With a Chorus. It would become the vehicle for *Alkestis*.

This is a Greek drama that looks through the lens of a female character, and one that treats heavily upon femininity. In the spirit of the experimental, I would cast it solely with women. These women, these members of the Chorus, would be the genesis of the dramatic story. They would become Alkestis,
Admetos, Apollo, and the rest, by the donning of adornments. Plot, character, ideas, rhetoric and everything else valued by Aristotle and by western theatre traditions would come into play, but these things would be deepened because we would start with the Chorus.

Friedrich Nietzsche would call the women of this particular Chorus “Dionysian,” for they are the ones that emotionally inhabit the myth. The costumes they don to become the characters and tell the story, he would call “Apolline,” for they are the constructed images that were added to the dithyrambs when tragedy was born.

This insight leads us to understand Greek tragedy as a Dionysian chorus which discharges itself over and over again with an Apolline world of images. Thus the choral passages which are interwoven with the tragedy are, to a certain extent, the womb of the entire so-called dialogue, i.e. of the whole world on stage, the drama proper. (Nietzsche 44)

The Chorus, independent of the myth, is central to the doing of the play.

**The Cult of Alkestis**

There would be a story behind these women, for in the ancient world of Euripides, polytheism was standard practice. As discussed earlier, in villages all over Greece, there existed cults dedicated to deities minor and major, and Alkestis likely had such a following (Harsh 164). The actresses in this production portrayed one such cult, and though the world of the play existed outside of region and period (this immortal myth is universally relevant), it was be inspired by the ritual practices well-known in fifth-century Attica. “For the play is, with rarest and most doubtful exceptions, essentially the enactment of a ritual, or
rather, of what the Greeks called an *aition*—that is, a supposed historical event which is the origin or ‘cause’ of the ritual” (Murray 31).

Before rehearsal began, I landed on the idea that this cult was made up of women who had all recently married. Their interest in Alkestis was to stem from her iconic role as a young wife, and these women would revere Alkestis because of the agency she achieves early in the play, and mourns the subjugation she encounters when she is resurrected. They would gather together in a holy place, unbeknownst to their husbands, fathers, brothers, and sons, to inhabit the story of their sacred mistress, and to understand her journey. Among them this time would be a new woman, an unbeliever, who would shy away from the mask of Alkestis, and would be made instead to portray Admetos. In becoming him, she would recognize the wrong he does to his wife, and thus come to feel pity and fear for the immortalized but oppressed Alkestis. The newcomer, like the other women who take part in her initiation, would find some solace in Alkestis’ *arete*, for though her sacrifice has ultimately been stolen from her, the queen of Thessaly ends the play having found a kind of peace.

**Conflict**

Before the very first rehearsal, complications arose in looking at conflict. I had a very solid basis where it came to character analysis based on my preparatory work, but in placing the emphasis on the Chorus, I had to take the exploration of conflict a step further. It was clear that the Choral personas of the women would add another layer to the performance, since they are women voluntarily inhabiting a rite that celebrates, but ultimately traps, a woman. The
Chorus’s involvement is not deeply psychological, however, as they would represent a unified body rather than a collection of individuals. This would be different with the newcomer who plays Admetos, for she was to be in conflict with the rest of the Chorus as a whole (as Admetos is in conflict with “necessity”). Like Admetos, she would not think of herself as faithless, but when she facing discomfort in the preparation of the ritual, she would look for a way out. The newcomer would the skeptic in the ritual throughout, just as Admetos plays the doubter in the play. The conflict has a dual-nature, and the arcs of the newcomer and of Admetos would follow a similar trajectory, though it would differ in the closing moments.

The Chorus member playing Alkestis was to be different from the rest of the cult as well, though not so much as the newcomer. This woman would be a devout worshipper that would, through inhabiting her goddess, lose herself, yet she would simultaneously be taking on the role with the intention of instructing the newcomer playing Admetos. In so doing, she too would face a the conflict of the Chorus as well as the conflict of the story itself.

**Breath**

I was quite adamant from the beginning that the production would not feature recorded sound. The actors would solely provide the aural element of the show. This choice was in deference to the Chorus being the origin of the drama—to incorporate outside sound would rob them of their ownership of the rite.

The show would began with the sound of breath. Alkestis’s gasping for air is a powerful image in the play, and hearing such labored breaths in contrast with
the deep, unified breathing of the Chorus was intended to draw emphasis to it. Breath is central to life, and its absence signifies death. The in-between, the place that Alkestis occupies, is a place of short, shallow breath.

The opening of the play would feature the ten women entering the holy site, breathing in measured unison. As the Chorus approaches the adornments of Alkestis, lain out before them, the newest of their number would begin to lose control of her breath. She would be singled out and directed towards the mask of Alkestis, but she would be afraid and would not take it. She would silently implore the others to help her, but they would refuse, edging away from her. Suddenly, another woman would move forward and dons the mask. The newcomer would regain her breath, and would be chosen to play Admetos instead.

The sound of breath would surface again during the enactment of the myth, for the Chorus that introduces this element would be present throughout the play. The sound of gasping breath would occur, for instance, just prior to the death of Alkestis, quickening and shortening in her final moments, then stopping suddenly and completely when the heroine dies.

Speech and Song

The other element of sound would come from the words of the play. From the first day of rehearsal, I was to employ a scored copy of the script, which would indicate if a given section is spoken, sung, or chanted (following the three modes discussed in the portion of the Research chapter titled “Tragic Meter”). Carson’s text does not consistently fit iambic trimeter, nor any of the other Greek meters, but the use of long and short syllables was possible.
In some Choral sections, the entire Chorus would speak, with other sections being divided between individual speakers, or a smaller group of speakers. The content of what is being said was a factor in orchestrating this, though my goal was to create a great variety of aural qualities with the Chorus. Audiences tend to tune out redundant sounds. For this reason, tempo was also to be dictated, and was to be taught to the actresses from the very outset, as a part of the text. This is not simply done to manipulate the ear of the audience, but also to give the speech heightened attributes.

Choral odes, along with certain characters’ stanzas, would require composition. The focus of these “songs” would be on the text, and they were to have a hymnal quality rather than appear as polished musical pieces. The chief purpose would be to differentiate the choral odes from the rest of the text, and so break up the episodes, but the manner of this composition would also be central to the tone of the show. The ceremony would be funerary in nature, and the dirgelike quality of the songs would do much to establish this.

**Inhabiting Masks and Donning Robes**

Even before the design process began, on the suggestion of Professor Gregory Pulver, the costume designer, I decided that the masks worn by the characters would be made of sculpted leather; the characters are organic beings with a life of their own. These would be half-masks, which would prominently feature the lower jaw of the actresses, so there will be a union of mask and human face. Normally, tragic masks are full-faced, but as we have discussed, the genre of *Alkestis* is not definitively “tragedy,” and so using elements of comic
mask would be appropriate. Furthermore, full-faced mask training is much more involved—the resulting work would not be as strong, considering the limited rehearsal time.

These masks would be designed according to character, not just in terms of age and gender, but in what William Arrowsmith refers to as “modality” (5). The mask of Apollo was highly decorated, whereas those of the Servants were relatively simple. All of the masks, even those of the younger characters, would feature leather folds; this is a natural part of the sculpting process, and mask folds corresponded to the folds in the draped robes. Like the rest of the production, the costumes were be inspired by Athens of the 5th-century, so the robes would resemble the chitons and himations worn during the period (Russell 24-25).

With the exception of Alkestis, who would come on and off stage, “exits” and “entrances” were to be handled as elaborate, choreographed costume changes. The higher the status of the character, the more involved the transformation. Suffice it to say, Apollo’s appearance at the top of the show was to be a relatively elaborate spectacle.

Alkestis’s changes happened off stage, so there was to be more flexibility in what her costume would look like, but there was a precedent for it being particularly ornate, as the female Servant says that she “dressed herself beautifully” (Alkestis, lines 141-142).
Movement

Greek tragedy featured dance heavily, and though we cannot be certain of what it looked like, I would incorporate the use of gesture in the staging of the play. This would became especially important with mask work, as the features of the face were largely lost to the actors. The actresses would craft many of their own gestures in the rehearsal process, though I would choreograph some of them myself, and would depend on my mask coach to create several more.

Environment

The sacred place that these women visit was be inspired by the layout of the Attic stage. Following an image of a Thessalian temple (Appendix 1), there was an approximation of a skene, a thymele, or altar, and a round disc representing the orchestra. The surrounded pillars held the masks, so the space would be inhabited by the “characters”–the Chorus would arrive and become them.

In terms of the lighting of the environment, the ritual would occur at night, but the enactment of the tragedy would be stylized enough that I did not perceive an issue with the lighting changing to reflect daylight, once the Chorus begins the play. I envisioned a progression from morning to afternoon to dusk to twilight, despite the play’s “unity of time.”

Exodus

In the closing moments of the play, Alkestis, the newcomer playing Admetos would be overcome with joy–her character has survived the ordeal, and his conflict with ananke has ended. The Chorus member playing Alkestis, though,
remains tasked with instructing the newcomer. Where Alkestis fails to teach Admetos in the end, the woman playing Alkestis would not. She would approach the newcomer playing Admetos and unmask her, forcing her to relinquish the advantages that the King of Thessaly holds. The newcomer would be thrown into shock, and subsequently would be firmly embraced by the other members of the Chorus. Together, as a body, they would witness the tragedy of their divine mistress, yet draw power from her arete.

Moving out of my research and analysis, I was able to craft what I thought was a solid and compelling approach the play. As I moved into collaboration with designers, and later with actors, it necessarily changed. In some instances, this represented an evolution, and improved upon the initial concepts. In other instances, I lost sight of something essential to the play.
Process

This discussion examines the entire production process for *Alkestis*, beginning with early design conversations, and continuing through opening night. It is, in part, chronological, but it is more accurately divided into 1) design, 2) music 3) auditions/casting, and 4) rehearsal. As much overlap as there was in these areas during this period, it can be certain that the questions and priorities that came up once the show was in process deviated a good deal from those expected during research and analysis. In many respects, this is a good thing, as it reflects an ability to look past early assumptions and conclusions and move towards a more evolved vision of the play. In some instances, however, I fear something vital to the preparatory work may have been lost in execution.

Design

The design collaboration, for the most part, was quite successful, and transitioned smoothly from exploring character into environment and mood. Design conversations started with the focus on action, and then moved to theme and tone. I am not certain that rehearsal followed this arc as successfully, as the work there followed the inverse pattern, beginning with tone/theme, then arriving at action afterwards. I will delve more deeply into this discussion as I reflect in the following chapter, but as it pertains to the narrative of process, I think it is essential to mention it now.

Designing Character

Design meetings began almost immediately after the conclusion of the 2013 Spring semester, and took place at the same time as much of the research.
At the outset, there was little departure from the original intent of the production, but the conversation was fundamentally different because it was focused on images rather than being text-centric—it was dependent upon instinctual response rather than intellectual analysis. During our first session, Gregory Pulver, the costume designer, tasked me with providing him with simple adjectives pertaining to tone, color, and texture; arriving at such simple descriptors was not an exercise in thinking—it was rooted in my emotional reaction to the play.

In subsequent weeks, Gregory and I made use of a shared Dropbox folder and began to deposit in it images that inspired us. We felt free to include anything that struck even a remote chord. Compiling images at the early stages was an act of free association, loosely bound by logic, always with the goal of generating raw material for further discussion. Discussion naturally organized itself by character, in part due to the nature of costume design, but also because of the way that he and I were approaching the play. From the start, we knew this production would be driven by character over thought.

And so I encountered an early instance of my approach contradicting some of what I had come across in my research, for it is here that A.M. Dale might have taken issue with what Gregory and I were doing. The primary assertion of her commentary is that Euripides’ *Alkestis*, and indeed all of Greek drama, is firstly concerned with the argument, regarding character as secondary. Though Dale is but one scholar in the previously discussed sea of quarreling critics, she has the weight of an Oxford edition behind her, and her position is reinforced by Aristotle. I picked up on the imagined objection, and used it as a
way to assess my take on the play. This particular conflict got at the very heart of my project, because it centered on the difference between a more traditional interpretation of Greek tragedy and my interest in the form as a contemporary experiment.

I was forced to acknowledge that my thesis production was exploratory above all else, and that this exploration was a goal unto itself. I certainly knew this previously, and in fact emphasized it during my proposal to the faculty in February 2013, but as a director that constantly touches on a production’s responsibility to the playwright’s intent, I found myself hesitant to admit that I was not going to be delivering a methodically distilled Euripides. Instead, I would be using his play as a vehicle for my own questions.

This confession was eased by Gregory’s prompts that we steer away from strict period of 5th century Athens and into something more all-time, or “timeful.” The production suddenly made a great deal of sense to me as something inspired by Greek tragedy rather than as a replica. After all, I started work on the project vehemently stating that the latter was inherently inauthentic. So it was that we departed from certain expectations of the form, and followed the wild inspiration that came from the images and words we were sharing.

I do wonder if I drifted too far from my concrete research and analysis, and will continue to entertain such questions not only as I reflect on this process, but throughout my relationship with Greek tragedy. I am certain, though, that the scholarly work that I had conducted, and was still conducting at this point, was informing my emotional choices. The early design process, then, became an
exercise in trust. I had to trust not only my own instincts regarding *Alkestis*, but I had to trust the first of many collaborators. When I look at these several months of work on the thesis production, I recognize that “letting go” was an ever present need, and it was at this point when I first began to understand that.

To answer Dale, it is perhaps true that Euripides and his audiences were not as fixated on the particular motivations of the tragic personages as they were on the rhetoric, but it is also true that our approach was to be the story of women who looked at those personages and their choices with a kind of veneration. The actresses would become characters that would in turn invoke even greater characters. This invocation was at the core of Nietzsche’s idea that the drama stems from the Chorus, a concept essential to my approach. This invocation, as we envisioned it, called for individualized masks made of sculpted leather, the shapes and details of which would come from character traits and psychology. Character was the necessary place for our attention.

**Action Precedes Mood and Theme**

The images we shared over the summer went on to define the silhouettes of the characters, but it was later in the process, beginning in August, that Gregory and I talked more seriously about color and texture. Whereas shape and silhouette were determined by character action, later considerations were more tied to mood and theme. The female Servant, for instance, is bound to her queen, *Alkestis*, and so would wear a harness. Because she is both suffering greatly and trying to remain composed in public, she would have an asymmetrical mask, one side of which would be shielded, the other left open.
Those elements of the character are deeply tied to what she is doing in the scene, emphasized in the costume and to be undertaken by the actress. The color and texture were less indicative of what the character was doing, and more symbolic. Her tan/beige hue would speak to her simplicity, her humility, and her muddled feelings. Her rough woven thread would speak to her place in the modal hierarchy (as William Arrowsmith discusses), and the harshness of her circumstances. The Servant is in awe of her mistress, but does not embody the death fantasy herself.

Similarly, Death’s mask would be topped with curling tendrils, reaching up from the underworld to claim the dying. The bottom of it would be a literal burden, the duty he owes Hades. While those details would establish his action, his shiny, beetle-blue texture and color would represent a coolly logical character, reflective rather than flexible. This trend, from action to mood and theme, would follow through all of the characters. The same transition would take place as the design conversation shifted from costume to set and lights.

Crafting Environment

When we began talking scenography in September, Professor Larry Larsen’s first questions to me were about what the characters were doing in the space. As with the costume design, the scenic conversation began with action as the concern. By now, I had landed firmly on the idea that the Chorus was a cult of Alkestis, and that this group of women was undertaking a veneration ritual dedicated to their mistress. Larry and I decided, then, that the environment would be a place of worship. Next, we wondered how well-maintained it was. Did the
women clean it, or was it dusty? How extensive was the women’s pilgrimage to this place? Every early question about the physical state of the space, as well as its location in the world of the play, were tied to what the women were doing there.

We eventually concluded that it was in a mountainous area, in keeping with the actual geography of Thessaly, and so began to look at images of mountain temples. We happened across a remarkable photograph of a Thessalian ruin (Appendix 1), a circular building with only three columns remaining at full height. Larry and I were both fascinated by the fact that no errant marble lay in the area; we decided that the temple was “ruined by design.” What remained was a structure vividly reminiscent of a Greek stage, with the three surviving columns forming a skene of sorts, and a raised thymele in the middle of a circular orchestra. The shortened column bases that lined the edge seemed to us to be a natural place for the masks to live, for Gregory and I had wondered if the play’s characters might be a literal part of the environment.

Looking at lines 628-633 of Alkestis, and sticking to the convention of the Chorus remaining on stage through all of the action, I wondered about the possibility of conducting the burial on stage rather than having it be an exiting procession. Larry was open to the idea, and we conjectured about making use of the hydraulic lift on stage. Again, our interest was in the action of the play—what were these women doing? How could the environment support what these women were doing?
It was after mapping the action that we set our sights on some of the play’s thematic elements. The veil motif had become an essential part of my research, and had heavily influenced the costume design, so Larry and I conversed about how to incorporate it into the environment. Gregory and I had touched on the idea of using a scrim as a scenic representation of the veil, and as he was just down the hall, we invited him in to discuss possibilities. This led to a conversation about scenic fabric and its relationship with costume fabric. From the outset, the scenic conversation and the costume conversation were unified.

Larry’s thoughts on shape and symbolism were much further along than my own, and he was thinking about the geometry of the space in ways that I had not considered. I thought of the orchestra as a rounded area, and he took it a next step, suggesting a horizontal circle that mirrored the floor. He asked questions about Alkestis’ lineage, and what symbols or patterns might be present in this place dedicated to her veneration. As she was the granddaughter of Poseidon, Larry wondered if it might be worth featuring an aquatic sigil of some sort. I had not thought of this, and walked away from the meeting stewing on this and other questions that Larry had posed.

At this point, still on the verge of beginning rehearsal, I had a lot of confidence about the direction of the design process. Gregory and Larry were consulting with each other, and pushing me forward with their questions and concerns. Where we were unable to meet, we continued the interchange electronically via e-mail and Dropbox. Gregory bought fabric, leather, and drew up patterns. Larry started sketching possible ground plans. We’d planted seeds
with action, touched on theme, tone, and symbolism, and from there, the
designers set to work.

**Lighting, and the Shift Towards Mood**

Em Douglas, the lighting designer, came into the design process later,
after rehearsals were well underway. After Em had read the play, independent of
any mention of the production’s approach, we met and I caught them up to speed
on the key concepts. As I mentioned above, rehearsals had begun more oriented
towards tone than action, and with the costume and scenic conversations being
quite far along, there was a wealth of mood, tone, and theme to discuss. Even
still, Em and I landed first on action. We were concerned firstly with Alkestis’
choice to die, the power of that choice, and the resulting implications of her
surprising resurrection. And it was here that Em distinguished themselves, for
they drew a connection to a popular culture reference near and dear to me: *Buffy
the Vampire Slayer*.

At the end of the fifth season of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, the title
character sacrifices herself in order to save the world and protect her sister, and
at the beginning of the sixth season, her friends use powerful, dangerous magic
to resurrect her, against her will. Buffy, having died a martyr, had earned
heavenly rest, but was suddenly pulled back into her earthly existence and
solemn duty. Em felt that this mirrored the journey of Alkestis, and I
wholeheartedly agreed.

This marked a large realization for me in the design process, and one that
went beyond shared nerdiness, because the reference was brief, but carried with
it an instant emotional connection to the action of play. For the same reasons, this shared emotional response, images are ideal in the design process. Though the Buffy reference was not an image, neither was it text-centric. It was based in feeling, and not the intellectual, and thus ripe for the beginning of our design collaboration. Furthermore, it was about character actions and choices rather than about tone. Despite being at a very different point in the production process, the lighting design conversation started in much the same way as the other design collaborations.

In the case of the lighting, action mostly clearly emerged in the beginning and end, on either side of the ritual. Within the play, the action defied the time of day, and though the Apollo/Death scene was influenced by morning and the unveiling of Alkestis influenced by twilight, the ritual was less concrete in circumstance. Framing the play, though, were the before and after of the ritual, and Em and I determined that the women came to the temple in the dark of the night. This decision was largely made during my conversations with Larry, but Em really honed in on “when” the nighttime sojourn occurred, which forced specificity in lighting choice, but also gave us food for rehearsal. It was a question I hadn’t addressed with the actresses.

Em and I moved to mood quickly, with me providing them with adjectives, colors, and textures. This progression had much to do with the chronology of the production process—mood and tone were on the minds of the other designers as we made adjustments, but I do feel that lighting, more than other elements of design, lends itself more heavily to those things. Very quickly, Em and I were
assigning colors to the backdrop, all of which were based in the emotional quality of the scene more so than the action.

**Bringing it Together**

Through October and into early November, Larry and Gregory were largely working independently. They would consult me regularly, but both the costume and scene shops were working full-tilt towards getting the show ready. During this pre-tech period, I frequented both, always eager to see progress and address any emerging questions and concerns. My presence and interest was seemingly welcome, and I appreciated the opportunity to keep apprised of design developments. As tech got nearer and nearer, Em began to work up in the light lab, so my visits proved a good time to consult with them as well.

During tech week, Larry and Gregory worked more or less independently, giving and taking notes, then addressing their respective tasks on their own. Where lighting was concerned, though, this period made up the bulk of my collaboration with Em. Cue-by-cue, scene-by-scene, light-by-light, Em and I consulted on color, intensity, texture, and timing, staying after every dress rehearsal to make adjustments. By now, action was as clarified as it was going to be, and the focus was very much on tone and mood. The variations may have been minute, but the tuning process was exhaustive, and necessarily occurring amidst the last of my work on the show. That seems to be the half of the process that tone/mood best inhabits, a conclusion that was reinforced through my work with the actresses, though perhaps not in the same wake of the success that the design enjoyed.
Looking at the cohesive world created through this inspirational and open design collaboration, it’s hard for me to give voice to my reservations about the result, but I must make mention of the “prettiness,” which slipped a little from where I had originally intended. The costumes were so bright and colorful, and the square columns so clean. The saturated lighting was lovely and striking, and it played wonderfully with the fabrics and textures in the space, yet I wonder if we lost some of the dusty desperation of this play. In so many ways, Euripides’ *Alkestis* is about ruin, and the allure of the beautiful design work distanced me from that idea a little bit. I do wonder if, when, and how I should have said “no” to certain choices. As I reflect, this mystifies me, because what we put on stage was so exactly what I wanted, yet it was somehow, just a pinch, a departure from the play I fell in love with and determined to bring to life. I wonder if we all got a little bit seduced by *Alkestis*, and I wonder what that means.

**Music Composition**

In my research, I had become very drawn to L.P.E. Parker’s discussion of the three modes of speech in Greek tragedy, and had since been juggling a number of options for applying those ideas in production. Originally intending to utilize meter and dictate tempo in the entirety of the play’s text, I became increasingly doubtful about that serving the play. Uncertain whether or not we could successfully execute that level of precision, I reminded myself that part of what attracted me to *Alkestis* was its human quality. In February, I had pitched the play as a bridge between realism and style, one that would push our young actresses while keeping them in at least somewhat familiar territory. Beyond that,
I had paid great lip service to the importance of putting the tragic form in a contemporary context.

The answer was not to impose strict style on the play’s more informal moments, but rather, to heighten the style of the odes, and certain sections of the text that lent themselves to musicality. The translator, Anne Carson, had formatted the text in such a way as to convey lyricism in select passages. In August, I decided that these sections required composition, but exciting as was that prospect, it put me in an intimidating position of seeking somebody with a musical background with little time to complete the work prior to rehearsals beginning.

Fortuitously, on the recommendation of music faculty, Dr. David De Lyser, junior Dana Coppernoll-Houston enthusiastically came on to the project. Collaborating with Dana held many similarities to the design process, with character action being the first step in the conversation. I started by sending Dana details about what the Chorus and characters were doing in the various sections that called for composition, with notes on mood and tone applying more generally to the odes as a whole. For instance, I described the Chorus’ action on the Second Choral Ode as “accepting the death of the queen,” followed by them “reminding each other of Admetos’ oath.” Here, in the span of 25 lines, the Chorus touches on *ananke*, the understanding of obligation which drives the play. Here, *ananke* has two sides to it: the acknowledgement of Alkestis’ debt to death, and Admetos’ promise not to remarry. Dana conveyed this transition with a key change in the middle of the song.
I asked Dana to compose without attachment to a time signature, as I wished to treat any rests and beats as acting moments rather than a musical score. I made this decision partially because several of the cast members had little to no musical background, but chiefly because these odes weren’t musical numbers. They were not to sound like beautifully polished music, but rather the hymns of laypeople. Dana complied with this request readily (example in Appendix 2).

If I in fact have an issue with my collaboration with Dana, it was with the ease of it. I fear that I may have imposed a little too heavily upon her work by calling for the hymns to hit such similar tones throughout. By insisting on making the songs hymnal and funerary, I may have cheated us some musical diversity. Perhaps due to her relative inexperience with theatre, Dana did not seem to push back at all, and often took the attitude of “whatever you want.” I knew going into the design process that I never wanted this to be the avenue I took with costumes, set, and lights. I now wonder why I allowed myself to take it with the show’s music.

It becomes easy to latch on to this critical point, as I would later receive feedback that the compositions were too similar, hitting the same tone again and again. Ultimately, though, I think that the music composition marks a successful collaboration, and that the odes and songs were easily one of the highlights of the show. The lesson to take from this, I think, is that I need to approach a composer with the same priority that I did the designers—action before mood and theme. I do not think that Dana and I really talked about what the Chorus was
doing in the odes beyond a few simple sentences; this is a disconcerting fact, considering the importance I placed on the Chorus in my approach.

**Auditions and Callbacks**

Despite months of anticipation, auditions and callbacks came and went in a whirlwind of quick assessment and preliminary testing of production ideas. With costume design already well underway, a clear sense of the character of the production, and a pile of research and analysis, I went into casting with a wealth of material and only a sliver of time to put it to use. It was at this point that I first became keenly aware of the dreaded “opportunity cost,” which defines the work of every director— with limited time and much material to cover, any attention given to a particular section will invariably have a “cost.”

It is not that I went into callbacks not expecting to have limited time. I had carefully selected sides that would highlight my key questions about the principal characters. I was not overly concerned with finding the perfect Male Servant, but instead wanted to see different aspects of the enigmatic Admetos, to be interpreted by our more experienced actors. To that end, most of the sides I prepared included that character at various points in the play. I felt that if I saw a good deal of Admetos and Herakles, with a smattering of Alkestis, Apollo, Death, and the first of the two Servants, I would be prepared to make informed decisions about the other roles.

It was my intention to use ten minute callback sessions to move through each side twice, with me imposing an adjustment between the two readings. The sides I had picked, sections of 70-85 lines, proved to need nearly twice as much
time as I had guessed. To further complicate things, I was not always succinct when giving adjustments, and I did not guess at how many questions the actresses would ask, or how long it might take my to answer them. It dawned on me quickly that I was running things much less efficiently than I needed to.

I was able to address this between callback nights, but the greatest problem came on the second night, when I set aside a half-hour period to look at choral movement and speech. I prepared a simple chant for the Fourth Choral Ode, along with some simple choreography, figuring I could teach both to ten actresses inside of ten minutes, and then run it. Less than two minutes into working with the first group, I scrapped the song, and most of the choreography, and opted to see the actresses come to set positions and speak. As a result, this session proved much less valuable than I had hoped. If anything, it served as a valuable lesson that the precision I was adamant about would be very time consuming once rehearsals began.

**Casting Character Over Actress**

University of Portland utilizes company casting at the beginning of every semester, holding general auditions followed by callbacks to specifics shows, all of which take place in the span of a week. At the close of the week, a casting meeting is held in which the directors of the respective productions decide which actors will be offered roles in which productions. When possible, it is preferred not to cast the same actors in multiple shows, a practice which allows the department to sidestep scheduling issues and to offer acting opportunities to
more students. Of course, a side effect of this is that these casting meetings become bargaining sessions.

Considering the talent level of some of the actresses in the department, it is often tempting to make casting decisions based on skill rather than character fit. Going into the casting meeting, I was determined to avoid this practice as much as was possible. The design process paid such careful attention to character, and so too should the casting. I veered away from several actresses that I knew to be skilled and dedicated, but that hadn’t fit well as a particular character during callbacks.

Though I prepared to make concessions, I did end up making some unexpected choices due to the demand for certain actresses that I’d hoped to cast. This led to some frustration in the moment, but in several cases, I found myself ultimately grateful to have been afforded the opportunity to work with some of the students I had originally overlooked as casting options. I did come away with my first choices in the three key roles of Alkestis, Admetos, and Herakles.

Preparing for Rehearsal

With several weeks between casting and the beginning of rehearsal, I had a tremendous amount of preparation ahead of me. My brush with opportunity cost during callbacks served as a solid reminder that I would need to keep efficiency ever in mind as I mapped out my rehearsal plan. I had already made a number of decisions about how I would structure our rehearsal sessions, and so it came time to communicate this to the cast.
I was intent on setting aside 45 minutes at the beginning of every rehearsal for style training, and due to the physical nature of the work to come, I was similarly determined to avoid table work in favor of working on our feet immediately. I laid out the key ideas of my rehearsal approach in a handful of emails to the cast. These were hardly binding, but there was a finality to them, because I was utterly convinced that I was making the best possible decisions, and I was demonstrating my confidence in said decisions by informing the actresses of them.

After a great deal of deliberation, I elected to have us start earlier than I had originally hoped, to front-load the scene work before Fall Break. This was done for the sake of providing a solid foundation for a difficult show, with efficiency and opportunity cost very much in mind. I chose to do this because I expected things to take longer than I had originally projected, and I wanted some built-in flexibility. This proved to be a sound decision, as the early scene work did stretch on, but opportunity cost was definitely still at play, for holding thirteen rehearsals before break would limit us to seven afterwards.

Applying and Not Applying Concepts and Analysis in Rehearsal

Once rehearsals began, I found myself needing to distill months of preparation into usable exercises and succinct questions. This was easier with some concepts than it was with others. Particularly daunting were the ideas that Nietzsche discusses in *The Birth of Tragedy*. To discuss possible interpretations in my research writing was perfectly appropriate, but to broach them in the rehearsal room would have been, at best, inefficient. Needing to provide the cast
with something playable, I instead arrived at the explanation that on this project, the Chorus would be the center of the drama, a basic way of me getting at what I think Nietzsche is talking about. At the first rehearsal, I emphasized that I regarded the cast as ensemble first and foremost, with a secondary emphasis on character. This philosophy would go on to be an essential part of our work in the rehearsal room, one which heavily influenced the process, but did Nietzsche’s intent really come through? Was I really allowing the Chorus to be the core of the drama?

In a sense, it was. The cast seemed initially hesitant to embrace the idea of ensemble, but once they had accepted that way of thinking, it greatly strengthened their bond to one another, and their commitment to the show. In terms of storytelling, however, the drama of the Chorus fell by the wayside as we moved into scene work. Dealing with character was much more familiar than the more foreign Chorus, whose story needed greater emphasis in early rehearsals. The actresses understood that “ensemble” was important, but perhaps only so far as it pertained to their experiences as actresses in the show, and less as the fully-realized Chorus at the center of the drama.

Other ideas were easier to address more directly, but lingered as questions rather than becoming definitive parts of the storytelling. After the first read-through, the room was deeply aware of the play’s strangely contradictory tone, which bounces between the comic and the tragic. As I explored this contradiction very thoroughly in my research and analysis, I was naturally pleased, and very encouraged by the cast picking up on it. Tone pervaded the
early part of rehearsal. We were all intrigued, and we agreed it was an essential part of the play, but moving into the grind of scene work, we lost track of that tone. It was the inverse of the design process: tone before action.

_Ananke_, the so-called lynchpin of my analysis, suffered a similar fate. After the first read through, I asked every actress to track the “obligations” of the Chorus, and of their characters, but when we got into scene work, I did not follow up with similar questions. Here is where theme arose in early rehearsal, but fell aside as we moved into action. This example is murkier, certainly, because at the core of _ananke_ in Euripides’ play is the vow that Alkestis extracts from Admetos, and his breaking of that vow. That was definitely part of the production, and proved central for the actresses playing these roles especially. The theme of _ananke_, on the other hand, which touches every character in a different way, was not emphasized throughout. Any time a character mentions a “labor” or a “debt” is an instance of this theme, but one that we lost. Here again is the inverse of the design process: theme happened before action.

The above examples, and the discussion about design, tell me a few key things about how action influences process: 1) action is a dominant force in the rehearsal room, and can overpower conceptual ideas and questions, and further, 2) theme and tone come from action. The shifts between tragic and comic are a result of what the characters in the episodes are doing. Herakles’ callous boorishness is not funny if he is aware of what is really going on in Admetos’ house, but the king conceals the truth from his guest, and the guest takes the opportunity to revel, resulting in the tonal contrast. Ananke, the obligation, is only
as important as a character adhering or not adhering to it. Throughout the entirety of the production process, where action preceded tone and theme, there were greater degrees of success. Where the inverse was true, imperfection and inefficiency arose.

**Executing the Rehearsal Plan**

Some of the difficulties applying production concepts can perhaps be ascribed to my adamance about forgoing table work, though I did so for the sake of efficiency. Knowing that the heightened style of the production would require a great amount of training, I set aside the first 45 minutes of every rehearsal to be dedicated to various aspects of style. This practice, which I stuck to until tech week, took up 15 of the 70 hours of rehearsal time that preceded cue-to-cue. With opportunity cost in mind, I cut table work from the process, figuring that they “why” and “what” could be handled at the same time as staging. I think that the clarification of action that normally happens during table work did come through when we put scenes on their feet, but the conceptual ideas that were touched on in the first read-through did not.

The 45 minute sessions were very valuable as a whole, though some sessions were more successful than others. The very first of them was focused on breath, which was not only a skill necessary to choral work, but a motif that we would go on to use in the show. In this opening session, we began by learning a breath centering exercise, which would become a staple of later choral exercises, and closed by staging the opening procession of the show, which
featured unison breath. The session was unique, and tightly structured, and laid the foundation for later work. It was an ideal use of 45 minutes.

A movement session in the third week was considerably less successful. It consisted of a compilation of movement exercises drawn from a number of artists, from Sheila Kerrigan to Jacques Lecoq. It was an eclectic mix, and some of what happened in that session would be referenced in later rehearsals, but this session lacked the direct application to the show that the breath session, mask sessions and choral sessions contained. It was filled with content, but said content was not entirely relevant to the specific work we were doing for Alkestis, thus the session was inefficient.

Other sessions, such as as the unfocused brainstorming session on the backgrounds/circumstances of the Chorus, meandered even more. I know now that I failed to make the objective clear to myself and to the actresses during these more discussion-oriented sessions, and reflecting upon them now, I see parallels to issues I had early in my teaching career. Ten years ago, as a student teacher, I would have some class periods fall flat when my lesson plan lacked a clear objective. “We’ll figure it out” is rarely a successful strategy, whether in class or rehearsal.

**Time Required**

Some of the work we did in rehearsal, such as the learning of the songs and the metered speech, took substantially more time than I originally planned to dedicate to them. In the case of the music, I assumed that we could learn the songs by ear, listening to the recordings as a group and singing along. Despite
the fact that the time signatures had been removed, the computer program used to record the songs played the notes rapidly, and we struggled to keep up. This required an adjustment in the rehearsal plan, and so I took it upon myself to learning the songs during my daily rehearsal preparation, and teach them through call and repeat in the evenings. Recordings and sheet music (Appendix 2) were also provided for the cast as reinforcement. The method proved effective, and though it took up a tremendous amount of rehearsal time, I’m not certain there was a more efficient way to handle it short of bringing a music director on board; I’m not certain this would have been the ideal solution, either, as to do so would have robbed me of the opportunity of discovering the music alongside the actresses.

If we spent the necessary time on the music, we did not spend adequate time on the metered speech. This mode of speech was my take on what L.P.E. Parker refers to as “recitative,” from her research on tragic meter. Involving lengthened syllables and dictated tempo, it was a heightened form of speaking, meant to be a kind of invocation, frequently punctuating episodes. Given insufficient attention in rehearsal, these sections, I fear, proved awkward on stage. They were never entirely successful, but they nevertheless absorbed large chunks of rehearsal time.

The music and metered speech alike were addressed in conjunction with the early scene work, which stretched out over the first half of the rehearsal period, surpassing what I had planned for in my earliest rehearsal schedule. Through advising sessions, early observations about required time, and the
request of our mask coach, Tony Fuemmeler, for longer training sessions, it seemed prudent to allow this foundational work to be extended across more and more rehearsals. Throughout this early scene work, we would routinely run the sections that we had worked. All of this contributed to pushing our first full run of the play right up against Fall Break, during our thirteenth rehearsal.

At several points before Fall Break, I questioned the decision to spend so much time on what we would come to refer to as the “foundation.” I worried that the cast might return from a week-long hiatus without enough time to polish the show before tech. Fortunately, everybody returned from break focused, and the show was very much intact. Less fortunately, it seemed that what would be the most challenging work was yet to come, because it was after Fall Break that we introduced the masks.

**Mask Work, and Collaborating with a Coach**

We hired Tony just before rehearsals began, and due to a prior commitment, he was unable to join us until our seventh rehearsal. Even had he been able to come in earlier, the show’s masks would not have been constructed in time for the beginning of scene work. Tony and I together decided that it would be best to work without masks in the early going, as introducing non-show masks to performers unfamiliar with mask work could prove detrimental. In retrospect, we ended up spending a great deal of time after Fall Break going back over sections we’d already covered and reinforced. Much of the final two weeks of rehearsal was dedicated to relearning the entire show through the lens of mask, and while having a strong foundation from before the break undoubtedly helped
the comfort level of the actresses, I seriously began to question the efficiency of
the process.

A shared challenge and benefit of this point in the work is that I now had a
partner in the room. Outside of rehearsal, Tony and I met regularly in phone
conference, and several times in person. Within the rehearsal room, we were
continuously checking-in with one another. For the most part, we were on the same
page, or as Tony would phrase it, “speaking the same language,” but there were
a handful of times where we misread one another. Going over the earliest scenes
in the play, those we’d worked extensively prior to Tony’s involvement, he would
sometimes make suggestions that contradicted the choices we’d made. At times,
this was to the benefit of the scene, but even in such cases, it proved somewhat
confusing to the actresses. It is possible that additional preparation could have
prevented this, but it seemed more a byproduct of us becoming excited by a
possibilities that would emerge in the moment. The actresses appeared to
become accustomed to the occasional crossing of wires.

This part of the process, though, leads to larger questions about the
crossover between director and coach. In this instance, Tony’s area of expertise
was movement and mask, and he largely kept to this area in his notes and
suggestions. Even still, as the director of the production, mask and movement
work also fell under my purview, and it was at times surely difficult to identify
which of us was the authority on the matter. Tony, the more seasoned in mask
and movement work, or me, the overseer of the production? I was learning how
to utilize a coach on the fly, and the two of us were frequently playing catch up.
Communication issues aside, it was stunning to witness the transformation of the production at this point. Some of the actresses took to the mask work readily, whereas others were resistant to it, but to see such marked improvement after every single night of rehearsal was affirming. At the outset, every one of the actresses struggled to make their gestures large enough to read through the obfuscation of the masks. Here was a psychological acting style, reinforced by our foundation, that was now being contradicted. Tony’s work had a more contemporary bearing than what Douglas Russell hypothesizes about ancient Greek tragedy, but the principles remained the same: moving the “upper planes of the body” while facing out, or at “three-quarter turn” (Russell 31). Actors facing one another was no longer the norm, and instead could only be undertaken as punctuation of particular moments. As it happened, this practice went hand-in-hand with the the need to hit the ends of verse lines—something I had been stressing throughout the process. With a physical action now tied to their verbal action, several of cast members improved greatly in articulation.

As we crept closer and closer towards tech week, the investment that the actresses made in the masks was greater and greater. Actresses who had started with an imperceptible twitch of the head when first donning their mask were now fully undulating and releasing deep, audible breaths. The actress playing Admetos came especially far in this regard. Some of the movements of the others were still too subtle, and indeed, a few of the actresses never quite landed where they needed to in performance, but what was clear was that everybody was committed. Tony and I were told that the cast felt “fed,” and that
was reflected in their enthusiasm for the mask work, disquieting as it first seemed.

Given the opportunity to work with a coach again, I will need to make sure to discuss the overlapping of the director/coach role well before we enter into the rehearsal period. This is not simply a list of who does what, not only because it would prove impossible to imagine every eventuality, but also because heavily dictating boundaries might quash later collaboration—some of the best work that Tony and I did was entirely impromptu. I think the solution lies in shared understanding of the text, and of what is happening in a given moment. The conversation needs to follow the same arc that I landed upon with the designers: action first.

The Strength of the Ensemble

Throughout this process, I was blessed to have the opportunity to work with such a gifted, dedicated group of performers. When we launched into the work at the beginning of the rehearsal process, there was trepidation, and I was rather concerned in the second week about the confidence level in the room, particularly after two cast members dropped the show. Whether my fears were falsely placed or a notable transformation took place in the group, I feel that I can safely assert that the greatest success of the process was the strength of the ensemble.

As mentioned above, the ensemble approach evolved, at least in part, from the concept of the Chorus as the center of the drama. The production, though interested in the becoming of character, began with the ten women that
processed onto stage in the opening. Though their particular story was less than clear to the audience, the ensemble itself was a tightly-knit and fearless group by the time the show opened.

The ensemble work was more than just a mentality, and was based in the style training, with particular emphasis on the vocal choral work. Before rehearsals began, I felt it necessary to appoint a Chorus captain, and actress that would take a leadership role within the Chorus. An ensemble might be prompted by a director, but it is ultimately a separate body, and I recognized the eventual need for me to step away from the Choral training after I’d taught the songs, chants, and techniques to them. The natural choice for captain was Annie Ganousis, and in appointing her I did not err. She kept the group on course throughout the process, interjecting when needed but not assuming power. Also of vitality to the Chorus was Danielle Renella, who had a strong emotional reaction to the work and readily shared her feelings. Beth Lageson and Emily Biggs were cornerstones as well, but everybody participated fully.

We began by reciting spoken poetry in unison, with the emphasis not on correctly remembering the words we were attempting to memorize, but instead on the sound of one another’s voices. When an individual member found themselves uncertain about a particular phrase, they were to listen rather than think. We moved promptly from recited poetry to the choral odes. Even before we were solid on the songs, I had the group circle up in the middle of the room with the lights off. Huddled together in the circle, the ensemble was forced to depend on sound to guide them towards unity.
From this basic model, the exercise took on variations. The most commonly employed, a staple of the choral work, was to remove the expected tempo, volume, and style from a song and explore it verse by verse, with individuals singing a line at a time based on impulse. Upon hearing somebody begin the line, the rest of the group would repeat after them in support, matching the tempo, volume, and style they heard. In one instance, while exploring the First Choral Ode, the shouts of “PAPAI” (line 199) became whispers. This was a particularly resonant moment for the group.

Other variations include the circle splitting and the ensemble spreading to far corners of the room, working to keep in unison across a greater distance. Simply having the members turn around and create an outward facing circle brought about a dramatic effect. Early in the process, when I was a part of the circle, I would check in after every pass through a song, asking for the group to share their experiences. These responses became a part of the work that continued well after I removed myself from the circle later in the process.

The reason this method works, and the reason it supports the heightened nature of more stylized theatre, is because it makes risk a regular occurrence; risk becomes the norm. Standing in the dark brings about a sense of vulnerability and strangeness, which the group must embrace. The room is always safe—that’s essential to any rehearsal process, but the exercise is designed to be unsettling.

These sessions taught the group to listen to one another, and certainly refreshed them on the songs, but I am also certain that they helped the actresses buy in to the exotic demands of this production. As the ensemble grew together,
the circle became a place of trust, one with which I became less and less involved. This recurring pattern, that of letting go, might be the true narrative of the production process. It began with design collaboration, when Gregory joined the conversation, and was complete on opening night, when I joined the audience as a spectator, and along with them, responded to Alkestis.
Response

As valuable as any theatre project might be for the artists involved, the work is ultimately done with the spectator in mind. Our work on *Alkestis* was chiefly in service to the audiences that come to the theatre with few, if any, preconceived notions about what they are about to see. All the same, contemporary theatre is usually a narrative theatre, and it often shies away from ritual. There are relatively few modern productions of ancient plays. In undertaking this project, I wanted to present our audiences with something exotic.

I do feel that *Alkestis* achieved this. Sitting in the audience one night, I overheard a remark following curtain call: “Well, that was different.” Though I would hesitate to take that as a compliment, I found it pleasing to hear, because I wholeheartedly agree with it. *Alkestis* was different. It departed from the more traditional interpretations of the tragic form, but was also distinctive among contemporary, narrative-based theatre.

Most of the audience, regardless of whether they enjoyed the show, or were provoked by it, or found it to be worth their time, did not come to the theatre aiming to formerly assess the production. Because *Alkestis* was a university production, however, and because it was my thesis project, assessment is an essential part of the response. The Kennedy Center Americal College Theatre Festival (KCACTF) respondents assessed the production. University of Portland faculty assessed it. My collaborators assessed their experience working on it. I too must make an assessment, and carry that learning forward in my career.
Exoticism

*Alkestis* is by its nature, exotic to the contemporary stage; it is a Greek tragedy, and an unconventional one at that. This particular production was made more exotic by the stylistic elements. Choral and mask work are certainly something familiar to the form, but many modern productions eschew these. The reasons for their rarity are diverse, I am certain, but I know that more than a few approaches to Greek tragedy aim, like mine, to bring the play closer to the contemporary. For many artists, that means aiming for something more akin to realism, and embracing narrative structure.

My aim was to conduct a ritual in a manner that would be compelling to a contemporary audience. Because I allowed myself to get bogged down in the story of the characters over the story of the Chorus, I do think that I fell into a similar narrative trap, but my goal, and the goal of the artistic team, was to create ritual. It was encouraging to hear about Larry’s correspondence with a patron, who picked up on the “religious” nature of the production. My fear, though, is that for the audience, the experience was more akin to a church service than actually spiritually moving.

To the degree that the exoticism of the production was expansive for the audiences that saw the play as well as for the the artists that collaborated on it, I consider the project to have been a success, if not a resounding one. To the degree that the production failed to be the exotic ritual I was aiming for, it gives me a number of considerations to carry into my next foray with the ancients and their theatrical ritual.
Thoughts from my Collaborators

Both the positives and the negatives that came from the collaborator surveys have touched me deeply. The consensus seems to be that I am an open collaborator, always willing to listen to others, whether to the benefit or detriment of the production. To the degree that this is praise reassures me that I am becoming the kind of artist that I have always aimed to be; I want everybody I work with to feel valued, empowered, and safe.

More vital to my growth, though, are the problems that come from the occasionally nebulous space that I give my artistic partners. I must remind myself that the role of director exists for a reason. I, like all directors, am the coagulant which holds a production together, and am expected to take on authority not because of any form of superiority, but instead because it is my job to be involved in every aspect of a project instead of specializing in one. The specialists: the performers, the designers, and the technicians, depend upon the authority of the generalist director because it allows them to focus on their tasks. The hierarchy gives them the sense of trust that I hold as paramount. When I step out of the hierarchy, or fail to assume authority at a key moment, I undermine their trust. It is a continuing problem, larger than “Andrew is too nice.”

It is a difficult issue to be proactive about, because to do so almost demands that I seek confrontation. I think the solution lies more in prevention, and a tremendous part of it lies in my tendency to apologize when it is unasked for. Looking back on this process, I find that most of my unwarranted apologies seem to correlate with a lack of preparedness. When I have been thoughtful
about a particular question, I respond with either 1) a definitive answer, or 2) a follow-up question which forwards the discussion. When I have not been as methodical, I respond with an apology, which does nothing for the conversation and indeed, undermines the trust of my collaborators.

It has never worked for me to “stand up for myself.” The answer, I think, lies in being more thorough in my preparation. I am an artist with conviction, and one that can be incredibly stubborn when I feel strongly about something. I need to always make time to allow myself to develop those thoughts and feelings about the choices that I make. My collaborative tendencies will ensure that I remain open to other options, whereas my non-commitment does nothing but complicate the process.

**Thoughts from the KCACTF Respondents**

I take Professor Patrick Dizney’s labeling of me as “ambitious” as a great affirmation; I did want to provide our actors and myself with the opportunity to work on something challenging. Exoticism and ambition demand special training, and whether or not that training was as efficient as it could have been, it was undertaken, and we all learned from it. The choral and mask work detailed in the previous chapter were embraced fearlessly, and I am confident that the cast was enriched by them.

It was also gratifying to hear both Professor Michael Phillips and Patrick touch on moments that they found “sexy,” or “stunning.” With exoticism so heavily upon my mind, it is reassuring to hear informed audience members connecting to the production’s more artful moments, and appreciating the stage
pictures. Overall, there is a great deal to be pleased about with their comments, but more vital to this process, and to my further development as a director are their biggest hangups, which I take to be 1) the abrupt leap between the poetic and contemporary styles, 2) the plodding pace late in the play, and 3) not understanding the story of the Chorus. I do not take contention with any of these problems, as the production is certainly guilty of them, but here I hope to address why these issues arose, and how I might take something away from them.

As I mentioned when discussing process, I let the play’s contradiction in genre and tone fall aside after broaching it early in rehearsals. What Michael Phillips touched on was something different, however, as he was talking less about the contrast between comedy and tragedy and instead about the contrast between heightened language and a more contemporary exchange. This latter issue, I’ll admit, was somewhat accidental, yet proved wholly necessary to the show; for it marked Herakles’ challenging of the play’s funerary tone, which needed to happen in order for the production to maintain energy. In this respect, the first two issues that I list above are related.

Plodding though it was, the pace of the dialogue in Alkestis was very much in keeping with my original intention. I wanted to create a long funerary dirge, and I did just that. It was later in the process, through not only the feedback I was receiving but through my own observation that I came to question whether or not a funerary dirge was dynamic enough to hold an audience’s attention. Having come out on the other end of the show, I can state that it is not! The slow tempo might have been in line with the ritual I envisioned, but it was not
drama. The drama came from the breaks in the tempo, and those breaks in the tempo came from a shift in intention, or a character pursuing a need that was in conflict with the dirge.

This was most notable in the case of Herakles, who dwells in the funerary mode at certain moments, but is constantly pressing against it. Herakles first enters with a booming greeting and an expectation of the revels due him as a guest-friend. He is soon to face an arduous trial that may well cost him his life, and knowing that, he is fixated on having a good time in the moment. He does recognize the mournful mood, but once his reservations are allayed by Admetos, his focus returns to his own recreation. Annie Ganousis, ever the capable actress, made these tempo shifts work particularly well, not by consciously setting out to go at “speed 7,” but instead by pursuing her objective.

With Annie pursuing her objective with the vitality I asked of her, the tone dipped towards contemporary, partially because of Annie’s default training, but largely because I never gave her a means to play the booming Herakles while employing the heightened tone that pervaded the rest of the show. Herakles inappropriate and boisterous challenging of death is essential to the play. As Anne Carson says: “This desecration breaks the play apart, breaks death open. Out steps life” (Carson 248).

Phillips did not necessarily take issue with the shift in tone itself, rather, he was bothered by the fact that I did not address the transition between the two. Again, here those first two issues are related—the pace of the play bothered both respondents because I had established a slow, ritualized donning of mask and costume for each character transformation, and never sped them up, or allowed them to be dynamic.
There was an opportunity here to either make Herakles’ transformation something wholly different, something contemporary, that would have made for a livelier transition, or rather, to give the actor the means to use poetry and meter in a comic way, in order to justify the slow, methodical change. Either could have been achieved, and many of the tempo issues resolved, had I undertaken early table work dedicated to the play’s inbuilt tonal conflict.

Indeed, I am now entirely convinced that I should have held several dedicated table sessions at the beginning of the rehearsal period to address the tonal conflict and tempo issues that I expected to grapple with. In conducting table work, I’m also sure that I could have addressed the third big issue the respondents raised: the unclear story of the Chorus women.

Both were intrigued by the opening procession and the unison breath, but did not know what it meant. This is hardly surprising, as I barely spent any time discussing this with the cast. It came up at the first read-through, and during one dedicated style training session, but beyond that, it was never made clear to the actresses. I did have a few small touches built in to the play’s staging, with Admetos becoming isolated in a few moments, or sharing a glance with a more seasoned member of the veneration cult, but because I never pushed the intention work, these choices were not those of the actresses, but staging that I imposed.

The most glaring instance of this would have to be the newcomer’s hyperventilating at the beginning, when the mask of Alkestis calls to her. Neither respondent understood what triggered her labored breath, or what stopped it, because she ultimately had no connection to the mask. Had I worked at the table on this
moment, or played with the staging of it, I might have been able to establish the majority of the story in one clear action. Had she picked up the mask, we would have seen it, and witnessed its effect on her. We would have seen the other woman take the literal burden away from her.

The play’s final moment, too, with the removal of the mask of Admetos, might have been clarified by this early work. As it was, I told them what to do, and they agreed that it was cool, but did not purport to understand it. In the worst way, I made the decision to keep the ending open to later interpretation, thinking myself an open collaborator who was planting seeds that would bloom into something deeply resonant when we later revisited the moment. Instead, I was leaving my cast hanging. This was not a commitment to collaboration, but rather, a non-commitment to directing.

Though this ties into the issues raised in the collaborator survey, I find it somewhat strange that skipping explanation proved an issue for me, because too often I delve too deeply into analysis in the rehearsal room when it would serve for me to be more succinct. With Alkestis, I think I was too afraid of opportunity cost. With so much style training to familiarize ourselves with, doing away with table work seemed a necessary concession. Looking back over my thoughts on the matter, I assumed that whereas our methodically trained majors could handle the intention work independent of rehearsal, they would require focused training during rehearsals because they had little background to draw on where choral, vocal, movement, and mask work were concerned.

And that may have been true, but it now seems so clear to me that I could have simplified movement, and cut the arbitrary, half-realized take on metered speech, in
favor of some table time. I do not think a director can gloss over intention and expect
the actors to play catch-up, but I did just that. I skipped the “why,” and so invited
fundamental problems into the “what” that I was so insistent upon.

**Thoughts from the Faculty**

The faculty landed on a few of the same points as the respondents, particularly in
regards to the lack of clarity with the Chorus in the opening and closing of the show.
More specifically, they commented on the transition from the Choral ritual into the play.
Gregory wondered if there might have been an opportunity to establish heightened
movement during the two processions that preceded Apollo’s transformation. This
perhaps may have established a connection to the donning of masks and character
adornments occurring throughout the rest of the play, and helped to reintroduce the
ritual, and thus the story of the Chorus, amidst the play. The opening and ending both
would have felt more intentional, and possibly better prepared the audience for a more
stylized production. I am intrigued by this suggestion, but still I wonder how and when I
might have worked in this movement, and whether or not it would have felt appropriate
without carefully choreographing other moments in the show.

It seems like the faculty felt more or less positive about *Alkestis*, particularly in
regards to visual unity and the strength of the ensemble. Both of these are points of
pride for me, though the latter very much comes from a tested bag of tricks, and one
which I intend to carry with me throughout my career. The design collaboration had a
novelty to it, and so in some respects, I measure it as a greater success—I knew so little
about the design process during my second-year production. Even though I was happy
with the resulting design for The Maids, I wonder if I was really at the center of it, speaking the language of my collaborators. With Alkestis, I certainly was.

I think that as a theatre artist, it can be easy to get swept up in ideas. I am rattled by some of the deeper questions that the faculty posed about my reasoning in putting on this play, and applying this concept to it. Having come to admit that my interpretation of Alkestis is, by its nature, a “departure,” I wonder if I strayed too far. I think it is true that my concept was ambitious, and that I was not successful at telling the story of the Chorus that so inspired me when I elected to pursue this project. And if I did not cope with the play’s clash of style, did I unjustly impose a dirge upon it? Did I try to make a play that was not really about women all about women? Every time I pondered such questions during the research, analysis, and production processes, I came away with greater conviction that the concept was not only sound, but deeply compelling. I wonder, was I wrong? Am I taking too much license? Do I really understand this play?

Coming away from this production, I am forced to confess that I have anything but a definitive understanding of the Alkestis. I explored the play as I saw fit at this particular point in my career, and I am not entirely sure I would fault myself for that considering the nature and scope of this project, but the question I need to address moving forward in my career is, do I keep interpreting as I explore the ritualistic theatre, or do I need to find a way to ground my work?

A Career in Ritual

I cannot deny that my interests as a director are in exploring ritual, and though I have adored my experiences in working on more modern shows that hold similar interests, such as Jean Genet’s The Maids and Peter Shaffer’s Equus, there is
something about the archaic and ancient that taps into something entirely different. When I was in rehearsal for *Alkestis*, I would readily tell those that asked about the process that the universe was falling on our heads. The cults of the ancients, and the dithyrambs and tragedies that came from them were cosmic in ways that the contemporary theatre has a difficult time capturing. I am, nevertheless, determined to try.

Yet, is it my place to apply whatever treatment inspires me when approaching these ancient works, or do owe them the same careful deference that I insist on giving to living playwrights? I stand firmly by my assertion that undertaking Greek tragedy on the modern stage is inherently experimental, but is the aim of the experiment to explore, or is it to excavate? I think a considerable amount of my professional attention will be directed at this question for the coming years.

What I do know definitively is that there a few invaluable tools that I will employ as I delve further into ritualistic theatre, some of which I used over the course of this project, and some of which I should have used. Firstly, I consider ensemble work to be central to exploring ancient ritualized theatre, Greek or otherwise, and I hope to continue to improve my ensemble-building toolset. It will undoubtedly be sometimes based on choral work, but perhaps not always, so I need to be prepared to make adjustments to it, and to allow for smaller groups to work in similar ways. It’s rare outside of the academic setting to have ten performers to work with.

Secondly, I need to incorporate some form of table work into all of my directing. At this stage in my career, I’m not certain how to really get at “why” away from a focused table session, and I’m not willing to risk leaving it behind. The amount of time I spend at
the table will certainly vary based on project, but having done without, I am now thoroughly convinced that the opportunity cost is always worth paying.

Thirdly, emotional research, whether conducted with images, references, or simple adjectives, colors, and textures, is invaluable when crafting the visual and aural elements of a piece of theatre. This was a lesson that began in this past spring semester, with the coursework I took, but having had the opportunity to apply that learning nearly immediately after those classes ended demonstrated to me how important it really is, and I was dazzled by the results. With that in mind, though, I need to work on how and when to edit my own vision of a production, and when to question my collaborators.

Lastly, I need to remember always to begin with action before moving on to tone, theme, mood, and tempo, for action dictates all the rest of these things. Just as I cannot forgo table work, I cannot jump past action, no matter how exhaustive my research and analysis may seem. Directors seek action above all else, and it is in discovering it and conveying it to our audiences that makes us successful storytellers. Identifying action, and committing to it, is what makes a successful experiment. This document is a testament to the fact that, at times, I lost track of this crucial element while amidst the grind of the production process.

Indeed, this thesis contains a great many lessons, and I hope to have the wisdom to trust it throughout my career. I am heartened, however, as I come to a closing point on this project, to know that the conjecture, the experimentation, and the reflection within my writing is, above all else, proof that I am an artist that takes action. It was long ago that I first read Euripides’ *Alkestis*, and it left me wrestling with questions
that I did not set aside. To revisit the play after ten years, and to reawaken my curiosity, is the essence of action. To delve deeply into a story that has existed in crisis since it was conceived thousands of years ago, baffling scholars and dividing critics, is the essence of action. To land upon an inspiring concept, one that could end in failure, and to undertake it, to unabashedly share it with my collaborators, to present it to a contemporary audience—this is the essence of action. I am proud of my work here, not because I think I put on a flawless piece of theatre, but because I was passionate, and I applied that passion from beginning to end.


Appendix 1: Temple of Athena Pronaia at Thessaly
Second Choral Ode

Dana Coppernoll-Houston

Voice

O daughter of Pelias, farewell as you go into Hades.

as you enter the sun-less house. Let him know, the black-haired god of hell,

let him know, the death conductor who sits at his ear, this is the best woman

who ever crossed the lake of Acheron. Singers will sing you, to the seven strings of the lyre. They will glorify you in songs without lyres, in

Sparta when Apollo's sacred month comes round in shining Athens when the moon sails all night long, your death will make them sing. How I wish I could pull you up to the light! Back from Hades' house and the river of hell. You alone beloved lady

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Second Choral Ode

24
tried to change your husband's death for your own life. May the earth lie on you lightly. If he

27
chooses a new bride she will be a thing of ha-tread to your children and to me. His

30
mother said no, his father said no, they begrudged their own son.

33
Old cowards! But you sent your young heart a head of you to face death. If

37
I found a wife like you (rare thing!) she would be my life-long joy.