

PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2023 CONFERENCE

(2025)

PERFORMANCE & SPACE II. PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2024 CONFERENCE

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University of the Peloponnese

2025

Four Larks' Katabasis: Imagining Ancient Mystery Rites as Promenade Opera in Los Angeles

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doi: [10.12681/ps2023.8382](https://doi.org/10.12681/ps2023.8382)

24**Four Larks' *Katabasis*:
Imagining Ancient Mystery Rites as Promenade Opera in
Los Angeles****Matthew Diafos Sweeney**

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Abstract

Los Angeles-based transdisciplinary collaborative Four Larks created an immersive opera at the Getty Villa antiquities museum in tandem with the exhibition "Underworld: Imagining the Afterlife." The artists used the exhibited artifacts as source material for the text, design, musical score and choreography. The performance mapped the ancient underworld across the grounds and gardens of the museum, a facsimile of the Villa dei Papyri incongruously perched on the Californian coast. Audiences were led through a series of installations, featuring expansive costumes, large-scale puppets and masks, and custom-made musical instruments activated by performers. The peripatetic performance sought a contemporary analogue to ancient Greek religious rites in which participants would embody a ritualized death and journey through the afterlife.

This essay was adapted from a talk given at the Performing Space '24 conference which included videos and images from the performance, by the production's writer, director, and composer Matthew Diafos Sweeney, and designer and choreographer Sebastian Peters-Lazaro.

Keywords: live performance, promenade opera, mystery rites, site specific, theatre, archeology, museum.

Four Larks' *Katabasis*

Four Larks works across disciplines to create hybrid live performance works and theatrical rituals. First initiated in Melbourne, and currently operating in Los Angeles, we have created and presented work in theatres, galleries, museums, alleyways, a barn, a brewery, an auto-body shop, our homes, and a variety of disused industrial spaces. We incorporate motifs and methodologies from postmodern dance, classical opera, experimental pop music, indigenous folk traditions, and installation-based performance art. For each project, we cultivate an ensemble of performers drawn from these diverse performance backgrounds. We refer to our projects as “junkyard operas” on account of the variety of sources collaged into the text and dramaturgy, and the repurposed materials that comprise both the scenography and the orchestration.

In 2018 the Getty Villa Antiquities Museum approached us to create a companion piece to their exhibition *Underworld: Imagining the Afterlife*, which featured objects from Greece and southern Italy including large funerary vessels painted with depictions of the underworld, gold plaques that were buried with the dead with instructions on how to navigate Hades, alongside funerary offerings, and grave monuments.

Conversations with lead curator David Saunders inspired an investigation of ancient mystery cults, whose secret multi-sensorial and peripatetic rites would be staged at sites like the *Villa dei Papyri* at Herculaneum, used as the architectural model for the museum. In this tradition, we set out to create our own death ritual that mapped the Greek underworld across the museum's grounds and gardens.

Working in consultation with the museum's specialists, we used the artefacts featured in the exhibition as source material. The objects served as graphic scores, as design prompts, and as choreographic inspiration (Figure 1), and their textual fragments and related poetry formed the foundation of our libretto. Through generative exercises with our ensemble of actors, dancers, and musicians, we reimagined these archaeological materials through a prism of contemporary and local anxieties and aesthetics.

We positioned our one-hundred-person audience as “initiates” in a secret ceremony that led them through a series of participatory musical installations. Using voices, movement, mobile props and scenic interventions, we devised parameters for the audience to move intuitively *en masse*. In the opening sequence, they were prompted to follow a mysterious figure carrying a glowing orb, later revealed to be Persephone (Figure 2).

We used the museum's architecture as our primary devising provocation - structuring the performance around its inherent spatial narratives. The geography of the museum dictated the map of our underworld and curated its characters. The museum's unique multi-level staircase inspired our titular *katabasis* (*'descent into the underworld'*). We situated

performers across the staircase reciting the instructional texts of the orphic tablets and waving laurel wreaths, guiding the audience's descent (Figure 3). Next, they gathered around a balcony, looking down on a lower-level courtyard to watch as the Fates prepared to cut the thread of life (Figure 4). We created a choreographic installation using red thread to be observed from above, with patterns mirrored in the musical orchestration (for the guzheng and string ensemble).

The series of rites continued as audiences were ceremonially led across the river Styx, and confronted with the three-headed dog Cerberus who guards the underworld from mortal trespassers (Figure 5). Once the beast was quelled, audiences were invited through a gate into the villa's outer peristyle to ceremonially drink from the river Lethe to purify them of their mortal memories.

Figure 1

*Costume and choreography
(Amico, 2018)*



Figure 2

*Performer carrying a glowing orb
(Galiana, 2019)*



Figure 3

*Performers guiding the audience's descent.
(Galiana, 2019)*



Figure 4

The Fates (Galiana, 2019)



Audiences next passed through the museum's triclinium into the inner peristyle where they encountered the toiling sinners of Tartarus - from Tantalus eternally reaching for his grapes, to Sisyphus rolling his boulder up the mountain, and the Danaids, sisters cursed to try and fill a leaking bucket with water using only sieves (Figure 6).

After passing through the impluvium, the audience arrived back outside where they were faced with three towering figures, looming from the Villa's grand balcony (Figure 7). These judges were the final obstacle to the Elysian Garden, where Persephone, Queen of the Underworld, awaited.

Figure 5

Cerberus (Galiana, 2019)



Persephone embodies both death and rebirth, returning briefly to the living world from Hades each spring. In the performance's final gesture, initiates were once again prompted to follow her as she ascended the staircase, completing the circular structure of both the narrative and the ritual. In following Persephone's cyclical journey, the performance offered a spatialised meditation on the simultaneously eternal and ephemeral nature of mortal life. With this performance we sought to create a platform for participants (artists and audiences alike) to process grief, mortality, and a relationship with the ancient past. As an epilogue, audiences were invited into the exhibition gallery, to view and discuss the materials that had inspired the performance alongside the artists and antiquities specialists.

Figure 6
The Danaids (Galiana, 2019).



Figure 7
The three judges (Galiana, 2019)



Figure 8
Persephone in the Elysian Garden (Galiana, 2019)



References

- Amico, M. (2018). *Katabasis* - promotional image [Online image]. Four Larks. <https://fourlarks.com/production/katabasis/>
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