



Example of a Greek Theatre

**Year 12 Induction lesson: Greek Theatre (H408/21)**

- 3 plays will be studied over the course of the year for this unit:
- ***Oedipus the King*** – Sophocles
- ***Bacchae*** – Euripides
- ***Frogs*** - Aristophanes

**The course:**

- No coursework
- 3 x exams at the end of Year 13
- Essay based analysis
- Literature appreciation and analysis
- Evaluation and Analysis = key marking feature
- You will be expected to research and read widely around the subject

**Origins:**

Tragedy's origins are obscure, but it apparently started with the singing of a choral lyric (called the *dithyramb*) in honor of Dionysus. It was performed in a circular dancing-place (*orchestra*) by a group of men who may have impersonated satyrs by wearing masks and dressing in goat-skins. (The Greek word *tragoedia* means "goat-song.") Eventually, the content of the *dithyramb* was widened to any mythological or heroic story, and an actor was introduced to answer questions posed by the choral group. (The Greek word for actor is *hypokrites*, which literally means "answerer." It is the source for our English word "hypocrite.") Tragedy was recognized as an official state cult in Athens in 534 BC. According to tradition, the playwright Aeschylus added a second actor and Sophocles added a third.

**Performance:**

Greek tragedies were performed in late March/early April at an annual state religious festival in honor of Dionysus. The presentation took the form of a contest between three playwrights, who presented their works on three successive days. Each playwright would prepare a trilogy of three tragedies, plus an unrelated concluding comic piece called a *satyr* play. Often, the three plays featured linked stories, but later writers like Euripides may have presented three unrelated plays. Only one complete trilogy has survived, the *Oresteia* of Aeschylus. The Greek theatre was in the open air, on the side of a hill, and performances of a trilogy and satyr play probably lasted most of the day. Performances were apparently open to all citizens, including women, but evidence is scant. The theatre of Dionysus at Athens probably held around 12,000 people.

The presentation of the plays probably resembled modern opera more than what we think of as a "play." All of the choral parts were sung (to flute accompaniment) and some of the actors' answers to the chorus were sung as well. The play as a whole was composed in various verse meters. All actors were male and wore masks, which may have had some amplifying capabilities. A Greek chorus danced as well as sang. (The Greek word *choros* means "a dance in a ring.") No one knows exactly what sorts of steps the chorus performed as it sang. But choral songs in tragedy are often divided into three sections: *strophe* ("turning, circling"), *antistrophe* ("counter-turning, counter-circling") and *epode* ("after-song"). So perhaps the chorus would dance one way around the *orchestra* ("dancing-floor") while singing the *strophe*, turn another way during the *antistrophe*, and then stand still during the *epode*.

**Definition:**

Tragedy depicts the downfall of a noble hero or heroine, usually through some combination of *hubris*, fate, and the will of the gods. The tragic hero's powerful wish to achieve some goal inevitably encounters limits, usually those of human frailty (flaws in reason, *hubris*, society), the gods (through oracles, prophets, fate), or nature. Aristotle says that the tragic hero should have a flaw and/or make some mistake (*hamartia*). The hero need not die at the end, but he / she must undergo a change in fortune. In addition, the tragic hero may achieve some revelation or recognition (*anagnorisis*--"knowing again" or "knowing back" or "knowing throughout") about human fate, destiny, and the will of the gods. Aristotle quite nicely terms this sort of recognition "a change from ignorance to awareness of a bond of love or hate."

**Questions to consider & complete:**

What is your modern understanding of Tragedy / a Tragic hero?

Are there similarities/ differences between the Greeks' perception and our own modern interpretation?

**Task:**

The first play we read in the Greek Theatre Unit is Oedipus Rex by Sophocles. Research the background to the myth of Oedipus & complete the thinking points below:

Who was Oedipus?	
What are the complications with his Family Tree?	
Outline the 'curse' put upon Oedipus	

Who is Jocasta? What is her role in the play Oedipus Rex?	
Who is Laius?	
What is a 'chorus' in Greek Tragedy?	
What role does 'Fate' play in the myth of Oedipus?	
Who is Tiresias? What is his role in the play?	
What happens to Oedipus at the end of the play?	