THE MAN WITH THE DISTURBINGLY SMELLY FOOT

BASED ON PHILOCTETES
BY NANCY HARRIS

TEACHER RESOURCE PACK
INTRODUCTION

This is the year when London welcomes the Olympics and amidst the buzz and anticipation there is a renewed interest in the origins of the Olympic Games. Ancient Greece was not only the birthplace of the Olympiad but of theatre, and many of the plays that were written for the Dionysian festivals, held each springtime in the great amphitheatre beside the Acropolis in Athens, have shaped Western European theatre traditions.

The Unicorn presents two plays written by Sophocles more than 2000 years ago whose themes and concerns still resonate with contemporary audiences. Ryan Craig’s adaptation of Antigone, How to Think the Unthinkable, and Nancy Harris’s adaptation of Philoctetes, The Man with the Disturbingly Smelly Foot, will be a memorable introduction to these classics of Greek theatre for young audiences.

These resources aim to offer context for teachers and students coming to see the plays and to link to and enhance other work teachers might be doing in the classroom.

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The beginnings of the theatre as we know it lay in the theatre of Ancient Greece which first began around 508 BCE as a part of the festival dedicated to the god Dionysus.

Dionysus, the son of Zeus and the god of wine and vegetation, was a very important god for the Ancient Greeks. Dionysus died each winter and was reborn each spring, mirroring the death and rebirth of nature, and embodying the renewal and rejuvenation of spring. Each year the Greeks celebrated Dionysus' resurrection with ceremonies and offerings. Somewhere between 530 to 508 BCE the songs and processions that made up the festival to Dionysus evolved to become the first theatre presented to the people of Athens.

The very first democratic system of government was established in Ancient Greece and the word democracy comes from the Greek words for people, *demos*, and rule, *kratos*. However, in Ancient Greek democracy only men were able to take part as women and slaves were not considered to be citizens. Every male was able to take part in the Assembly and influence decisions on how the city state, or *polis*, would be run.

The theatre festival in honour of Dionysus soon became a very important part of annual events in the new democratic Athens. Each year wealthy citizens were selected to pay for the staging of the plays that competed in the City's Dionysus festival. Three playwrights were chosen who each had to write three tragedies and a satyr play, which is a light hearted parody of a tragedy.

In Ancient Athens a trip to the theatre was much more than an evening of entertainment, it was a religious and competitive event and part of the new formed democratic way of life. The Ancient Greeks built huge outdoor amphitheatres in which to stage these great theatre festivals. The theatres, the most famous of which is the Theatre of Dionysus on the southern slopes of the Acropolis in Athens, could hold up to 18,000 people which is nearly as many as attend a concert at the O2.
The festival took place over five days each spring. The first day was dedicated to worshipping and giving offerings to Dionysus, then came the competition between the three chosen playwrights. Judges for the festival were drawn from the audience of Athenian citizens in a very particular way:

- Ten urns represented the ten tribes of Athens. The names of a number of citizens from each of the tribes were put into the ten urns.

- At the beginning of the festival one name was picked from each urn. These ten citizens would then become the judges of the competition.

- On the last day of the festival each judge wrote down the names of the playwrights in 1st, 2nd and 3rd place on a tablet.

- The man in charge of organizing the festival, the archon, drew out 5 of the 10 tablets. The votes were counted and the playwright with the most votes declared the winner.
GREEK TRAGEDY

Greek tragedies are serious plays that asked big questions about life and looked at the relationship between the gods and humans. Many of the tragedies that were written in this Golden Age of Greece were based on the old myths and the stories of the gods as they had been told and re-told throughout the years by people like Homer whose *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are the most famous.

The plays would be performed by three actors and a chorus of fifteen people. The three actors, who would have to play more than one part, wore masks with exaggerated features that could be seen clearly in the vast amphitheatres where the plays were performed. The plays were structured to alternate between episodes of the actors’ speech and choral dance songs which commented on what is happening in the action. The chorus would introduce characters as they enter, remind the audience of the power of the gods and humans of their limitations, give advice, and express the views and doubts of the audience.

THE LANGUAGE OF THEATRE

It is in the Greek tragedies of this period that Western theatre began to emerge as actors took on roles and pretended to be other people. Many of the English words associated with theatre have their roots in ancient Greek and the theatre that arose out of the Dionysian festival:
In Ancient Greek society the gods were powerful and the people believed that they had to honour them with prayers, sacrifices and offerings. In return the gods would help them with whatever challenges they had to face. People would visit an Oracle, a temple where they could ask questions of the gods about the future, and a priest or a priestess would act as intermediary and communicate with the gods to find answers.

Priests and soothsayers were also trained to interpret omens, or signs, in the flight of birds, in thunder and lightning or in the entrails of sacrificed animals that could predict the future. If the omens and prophecies were not heeded, the Ancient Greeks believed that events would not go well and it would anger the gods.

In Greek tragedy it is not only the action of humans that has an influence on what happens in the play, the action is guided by prophecies and omens. In The Man with the Disturbingly Smelly Foot Odysseus is forced to return to the island where he has abandoned Philoctetes because of a prophecy foretelling that without his skill as an archer the Greeks will never win the war against the Trojans.

FURTHER READING

The BBC and the British Museum websites will have more information on Ancient Greece and Greek Theatre.

http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/ancient_greeks/arts_and_theatre/

http://www.ancientgreece.co.uk/
The Man With The Disturbingly Smelly Foot is based on Sophocles’ play, Philoctetes, and is set towards the end of the Trojan War. The main characters are Odysseus, Philoctetes, and Neoptolemos, and the role of the chorus is taken by two Sea Shells who comment on what is happening in the action. There are references throughout the play to other Greek warriors, Ajax, Patroclus and, in particular, Achilles, who have fought alongside Odysseus and Philoctetes in battles against the Trojans.

The Trojan War, the story of which is told in Homer’s The Iliad, began when the King Menelaus’ beautiful wife Helen was stolen away by Paris and taken to Troy. The King began the war which was to last 10 long years and in which many famous Greek warriors fought and died. When the play begins, the Greek army has not yet won the war and they need Philoctetes’ help to do so.

**Odysseus - leader of the Greek army**

Odysseus is one of the leaders of the Greek army and is renowned not only for his bravery but for his cunning plans and quick thinking. The Iliad tells that when finally the Greek ships reach the shores of Troy, Odysseus is about to lead his men off the ship when he remembers the prophecy that the first warrior to land on Trojan soil will die. Odysseus throws his shield onto the shore first and when he jumps he lands on it and his feet never touch the ground - Odysseus is safe but the next man who jumps ashore is killed immediately by the Trojans. It is Odysseus’ idea of a wooden horse - another cunning plan - that would finally win the war against the Trojans. Once the war was over, Odysseus and his men began the long journey home to Greece.

**Neoptolemos – Achilles’ son**

Neoptolemos is the son of Achilles, another warrior in the Greek army. When Achilles was still a little baby, Thetis, his mother, wanted to protect him from harm, so, in secret, she dipped him into the waters of the River Styx. Every part of Achilles’ body became protected from injury of any sort except for the one heel she had held him by when she submerged him in the water. It is a wound to that heel that causes Achilles’ death in battle.
Philoctetes (the man with the disturbingly smelly foot)

When Odysseus and Neoptolemos arrive on the island looking for Philoctetes, the Greek army, led by Odysseus, has been engaged in the war against the Trojans for nearly ten years. Without the help of Philoctetes, who, until he was bitten by a snake, was the best archer in the Greek army, they will surely lose the war. Philoctetes’ bow and arrow, which had been a gift from Heracles, has magical qualities – the tip of each arrow is poisonous and once the arrows are fired from the bow, they always hit their mark. Having been abandoned on the island by Odysseus and his men after having been bitten by the snake, Philoctetes is now the very person that Odysseus needs to talk to because the bow and arrow he owns is needed to help the Greeks win the war against the Trojans.

Taking Neoptolemos with him to the island to meet with Philoctetes is another of Odysseus’ cunning plans because Philoctetes and Achilles were best friends. Who better to make Philoctetes do what Odysseus wants than the son of his best friend?
PREPARING TO SEE:  
THE MAN WITH THE DISTURBINGLY SMELLY FOOT

One way of introducing your class to the play before the visit to the theatre is to watch the clips on the Unicorn website of some of the actors talking about the roles they play in *The Man With The Disturbingly Smelly Foot*:
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=taoqjcVTTFs

CHARACTER EXTRACTS

These short extracts introduce the main characters and give a sense of what sort of person they are and how they think at the beginning of the play. Hear some of the actors speaking in their first week of rehearsals as they talk about their characters and speak some of the lines of the play.

ODYSSEUS  
*PLAYED BY ALEXIS RODNEY*

I use my mind more than my sword. My brain instead of my biceps. I can think on my feet and stand on my head. I win battles by fooling rather than fighting - and still everyone agrees I’m the greatest warrior the Greek army has ever seen.

Costume design by Signe Beckmann
PHILOCTETES  
PLAYED BY MARK MONERO

I have been chewed up and spat out by the Greek army - by men I 
believed were my closest friends, who I treated like brothers and 
would have laid down my life for. Those very men I loved so much 
turned out to be my enemies. Those men care only for power, not 
for people. They care only for riches and glory, not for flesh and 
blood. Men like Odysseus.

THE GLAMOROUS SEA SHELL  
PLAYED BY
KANGA T BUAH

THE NOT SO GLAMOUROUS SEA SHELL  
PLAYED BY
MERCY OJELADE

We’re sea-shells.
1. This is the mythological age. Gods 
fly out of the sky and talk to mortal 
men.
2. There are islands populated by 
nymphs with magical powers.
1. And seas with sea monsters in them.
2. So really talking sea-shells aren’t so 
strange.

NEOPTOLEMOS  
PLAYED BY ALEX AUSTIN

We haven’t treated him very well. Why should he be loyal to us 
when we haven’t been loyal to him? I would rather lose the war 
than win by treachery.
Ellen McDougall, the director of the Greek season at the Unicorn Theatre, talks about her approach to the adaptations of Sophocles’ classic tragedies: *How To Think The Unthinkable* and *The Man With The Disturbingly Smelly Foot*.

*How To Think The Unthinkable*, our new version of Sophocles’ Antigone explores the question of what is right, and how far would you go to do the thing you think is right. Antigone is faced with the most extreme example of this, where doing what she believes is right will get her killed by Creon, the king. However he is only doing what he believes is right for the people of Thebes. Antigone wants to be loyal to her family, while Creon feels he must be loyal to his country and his people.

*The Man With The Disturbingly Smelly Foot*, a re-working of Philoctetes, explores the idea of friendship, and how important loyalty is over ambition. Neoptolemos has a difficult decision to make in the play: to follow Odysseus and the glory of being a great warrior in the Greek army, or to follow Philoctetes who is a loyal and honest friend.
Both of these versions of Sophocles’ tragedies offer a clear and accessible exploration of the characters and stories. They are truthful to the original plots, but both go further into the themes and encourage us to ask questions about the choices we make in life. The language of both is contemporary and funny at times, and the characters are more 'down to earth' than typical classical Greek heroes, whose poetic language can sometimes feel heightened and unreal.

We are going to start our rehearsals by looking at who the characters are in the story: what are their backgrounds. Using other Greek myths, it’s possible to create a biography of each character, made up of the different stories they appear in. For example, Antigone is the daughter of Oedipus, who had a very difficult life - which is very useful for the actress playing Antigone to know about before we start working on the scenes. See the timeline on pages 12 - 14.

We will also look at maps of Greece to understand more about the places the stories are set in. For Antigone in particular, we are also using references of countries in the Middle East and North Africa who have modern day royal families with political power and unstable political situations, like Tunisia, Libya and Iraq. We will watch videos about being soldiers, as many of the characters have fought in war.

I had to find something for the design that could be used in both plays because they are playing in rep. I talked to the designer about the atmosphere of Antigone, which is a city recovering from war and we looked at images of cities and streets which were dusty with the debris of war. Philoctetes is set on an abandoned island and we realised that covering the floor with sand would be a way to create the right – but different atmospheres - for both pieces, as long as we light them differently and use different costumes and props.
COUNTING DOWN TO THE BEGINNING OF PHILOCTETES

This timeline counting down to the beginning of the play was created by director Ellen McDougall to be used in rehearsals to help the actors understand their characters.

45 years ago
Philoctetes is born in Thessaly, a son of the king, Poeas.

Achilles is born to Thetis and Zeus. He was raised by Peleus on Mount Pelion. As he grew up, he was fed on the entrails of lions and boars to give him strength, and he trained horses. He also learned to play the lyre.

Patroclus is born: he is related to Achilles but born in a different part of Greece. When he was a child he killed a friend over a game, and was banished. Peleus, who was bringing Achilles up, took him in, and the two grew up together.

34 years ago
Achilles meets Philoctetes (both 11) and they get to know each other. Achilles teaches Philoctetes how to ride a horse. Achilles is desperately afraid of mice and spiders and one day when he finds a mouse in his house, his screams are heard in the next village. Philoctetes comes to get rid of the mouse for Achilles.

30 years ago
Philoctetes (15) is given the bow and arrow of Heracles, which were given to Heracles by Apollo, god of war. He built his own funeral pyre and ordered one of his servants to light it. Everyone refused except Philoctetes, who was rewarded with the bow and arrow.

Philoctetes becomes known as a great warrior and people look at him in awe and wonder.

29 years ago
Achilles, Philoctetes and Patroclus (all 16) train as soldiers with Achilles’ cousin Ajax (who was given strength by Heracles).

25 years ago
Odysseus is born to Sisyphus and Anticlea. Sisyphus names him Odysseus (which sounds similar to ‘to hate’ in Greek), because Sisyphus himself was hated. Laertes (Odysseus’ step-father) puts Odysseus to work through his childhood sending him on errands around Greece.

16 years ago
Achilles (29) meets Deidameia while on the island of Scyros. They have a son, Neoptolemos. He grows up on the island and learns to swim from a young age.
12 years ago
Odysseus (18) becomes King of Ithaca as Laertes hands over the throne to him. Odysseus marries Penelope, the sister of Helen, who eventually, after many suitors (including Philoctetes and Odysseus), marries Meneleus, king of Mycenae. They have a son, Telemachus.

Odysseus is championed by Athena, who is the goddess of war. She protects him from conflicts and ensures he always comes out on top.

11 years ago
Paris steals Helen from Meneleus and they go back to Troy together. Agamemnon, brother of Meneleus, and King of Argos, raises an army of all the city states in Greece to go and attack Troy and get Helen back.

Odysseus is finally persuaded by Agamemnon to join the war effort to recover Helen from Troy. He goes to a prophet with Meneleus who tells them that Achilles will be instrumental in the war. Odysseus goes to find Achilles and persuade him to join them.

10 years ago
Odysseus finds Achilles (35) on the island of Scyros, and persuades him to come and fight. Achilles leaves his wife and son Neoptolemos (6) to go and fight.

Odysseus leaves his wife Penelope and son Telemachus (3) to go and fight. He is warned by an oracle that he won't return for 20 years, and then, alone and destitute.

9 years ago
The Trojan war begins with the gods telling Agamemnon he must sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia, if he wants to win. Odysseus is sent to fetch her from her home on the pretext that she is to be married to Achilles. When Achilles finds out what is going to happen he bitterly resists but is threatened with death if he stops her from being sacrificed. Iphigenia is sacrificed at Aulis, and they head for Delphi to make a final sacrifice to the oracle of Apollo.

On the way to Delphi, Odysseus quarrels with Achilles. He is praising prudence while Achilles is arguing for bravery. While praying at Delphi, Philoctetes is bitten by a snake on his foot. The wound becomes infected and Philoctetes’ cries of pain, and the stench of his foot, are difficult for the other soldiers to bear. He takes a nap every afternoon to recover from the pain: he can only stay awake for a couple of hours at a time.

They set sail for Troy, and are at sea for a couple of weeks, and Philoctetes’ foot worsens. The other soldiers stop eating and are violently sick because of the smell. On their approach to Lemnos, a very small, rocky island, Odysseus announces they will make an extra stop off there. Odysseus takes Philoctetes onto the island and makes him a pillow of straw and puts him to sleep. Then he leaves Philoctetes on the island alone. Medon takes control of Philoctetes’ men and they sail on to Troy.

Philoctetes awakes after about an hour because of a cold wind and he sees the sails of the ships leaving the island. They have left him some tins of beans. He survives by shooting birds with his bow and arrow.

The Greeks arrive at Troy and the battle begins. Everyone agrees that Achilles is the greatest warrior in the army. He wins every battle he is in.
Achilles becomes furious with Agamemnon for asking him to give back a woman Briseis, who he has taken from Troy. He gives her back, but refuses to fight in the war. He stays in his camp, surrounded by women, playing music.

Philoctetes manages to find herbs on the island that temporarily ease the pain in his foot. He also finds a small fresh water river that he can drink from.

8 years ago
Hector kills Patroclus who has taken Achilles’ soldiers into battle without Achilles in a desperate attempt to gain ground for the Greeks. Ajax returns to the battle and offers to fight Hector.

Two sea shells find Philoctetes’ cave. He makes friends with them. He has tried having conversations with birds and doesn’t get much back from them. He isn’t entirely sure if the sea shells are a figment of his imagination.

7 years ago
Achilles kills Hector, mad with guilt at his friend’s death

Philoctetes discovers that if he imagines a type of food, he can make himself experience the taste of it. He starts to imagine all the food he misses from home.

6 years ago
Achilles dies by the bow and arrow of Paris – he hit his heel.

Odysseus returns to the Trojan war and Ajax is left to bring Achilles’ body back. Ajax arrives back with Achilles body and Neoptolemos (10) attends his funeral. The heroic deeds of Achilles are reported. Ajax also talks about the heroism of Patroclus and the loss of their great friend Philoctetes. They comment on Neoptolemos looking like his fathers’ son.

2 years ago
Neoptolemos (14) goes to army training camp. It takes 2 years to train as a soldier. He lives in the barracks during this time.

Ajax returns to Troy to discover Odysseus is fighting in Achilles’ armour. This drives Ajax mad, and he eventually commits suicide.

1 year ago
Paris is killed in the fighting at Troy but the war shows no sign of finishing. A prophet says that Neoptolemos, son of Achilles, will help to win the war with the bow and arrow of Heracles. Neoptolemos is sent for, and Odysseus leaves to go to get him from the army barracks where he is still in training.

Neoptolemos agrees to sail to Lemnos with Odysseus, to recover the bow and arrow, under Agamemnon’s command, on his way to join the Greek army and face real combat. He is excited about seeing real fighting after training for so long.

When they get near the island they have to dock their boat and swim ashore. Odysseus produces arm bands, goggles, flippers, and a blow up dinghy and instructs Neoptolemos to drag him to shore in it.

0 years ago
They arrive at the island of Lemnos.
Costume design by Signe Beckmann

Very big eyebrows & beard (see ref)

Old stained vest top

Sweat patches

Tattered combat trousers

"Antique" wood & gold crossbow & arrow

Bandaged foot

Philoctetes
Costume design by
Signe Beckmann

Odysseus

Desert camouflage

Knee pads

Packed with ammunition bags

Big military boots
Costume design by
Signe Beckmann
Costume design by
Signe Beckmann
Set design by
Signe Beckmann
The Unicorn Theatre offers a range of activities, projects and events that support schools in their engagement with theatre including teacher training, workshops and online resources.

To find out more about how your school can get involved, please contact Schools Relationship Manager, Ella on:

020 7645 0500 / ella.macfadyen@unicorntheatre.com

For the latest information about upcoming shows and events, please sign up to our twice-termly e-bulletin via our website:

http://www.unicorntheatre.com

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