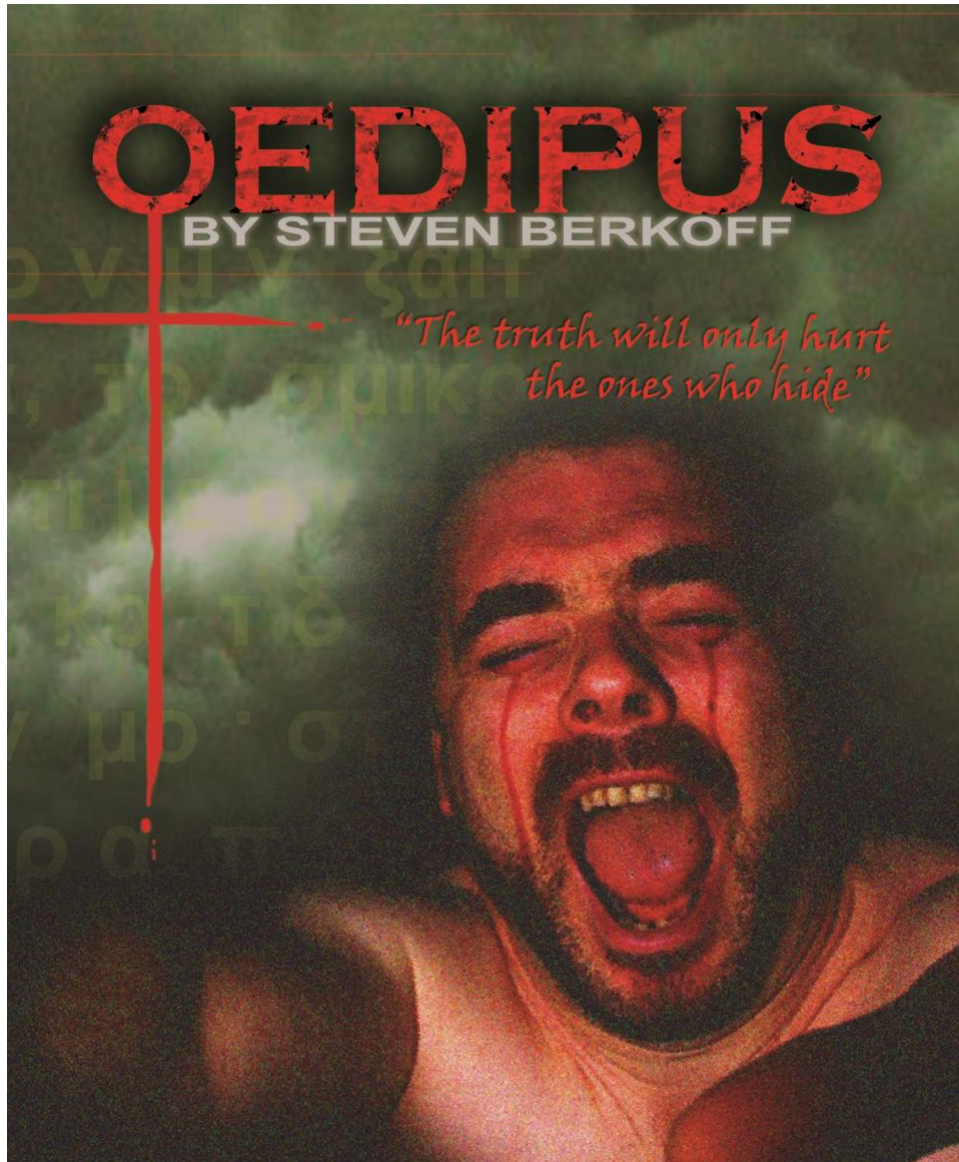


**Blackeyed Theatre and South Hill Park Arts Centre**  
present



**EDUCATION RESOURCE PACK**



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# Welcome

We're incredibly excited about this WORLD-PREMIERE production of Steven Berkoff's *Oedipus* and you should be too! Blackeyed Theatre has stepped up to the challenge of this never before performed piece with an exciting, physical, visual production of one of the oldest written stories in the world. The following pages have been designed to support study leading up to and after your visit to see the production. *Oedipus* will give you a lot to talk about, so this pack aims to supply thoughts and facts that can serve as discussion starters, handouts and practical activity ideas. It provides an introduction to the different theatrical styles of Berkoff and the Ancient Greeks (although perhaps they may not be as distinct as they first appear!) and is intended to give you and your students an understanding of the creative considerations the team have undertaken throughout the rehearsal process.

If you have any comments or questions regarding this pack please email me at [jo.wright@southhillpark.org.uk](mailto:jo.wright@southhillpark.org.uk). I hope you will enjoy the unique experience *Oedipus* offers enormously. See you there!

***Jo Wright, Education and Outreach Officer, South Hill Park Arts Centre***

# Blackeyed Theatre

## The Company

Blackeyed Theatre Company was established in 2004 with the aim of producing enjoyable and challenging theatre at venues throughout England. We put an emphasis on modern classics and syllabus texts, and strive to make our productions as accessible as possible to both new and established audiences.

We believe theatre is at its best when the audience is taken out of its comfort zone. That doesn't mean being shocking for the sake of being shocking. It's about making theatre memorable and thought-provoking without sacrificing enjoyment. It's about telling a story in a way that absorbs and moves its audience at every turn.

Our past productions include Harold Pinter's classic, *The Caretaker*, Valerie Windsor's *Effie's Burning*, Dennis Potter's *Blue Remembered Hills*, Stephen King's *Misery* and most recently Brecht's *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui*.

# Introduction

## How Berkoff chose the text

Below is Steven Berkoff's own introduction to the play.

My version of Oedipus seeks to examine the play and occasionally peer beneath the tendency to strut and pose, to high-blown rhetoric and an air of self-importance somehow unavoidable in versions of Greek tragedy. I also sought to relate some events to images of today since the greatness of Greek tragedy is that its themes deal with the power of natural forces and the cycle of life and death. So its shadow lies across the years and its arguments are mankind's into perpetuity.

I see Oedipus as a modern man, self-made, tough and bold, who uses language as a weapon to cut through verbal adiposity and obliqueness. He is more of a strutter whose stance relates to him having always to battle against some force determined to defeat him. Whether at the crossroads where he destroyed his father and the officious guards, or the Sphinx, he seeks to combat fate and leaves his adopted home so as not to fall into its predicted trap. So when yet another problem in Thebes raises its many heads Oedipus is already fight trained to deal with it. He is seldom destined to have peace, to win a battle and rest on his laurels, and it would seem that fate has dealt rather cruelly with him.

What is incredible to contemplate is a crowd of seventeen thousand spectators in an open air theatre coming to see and hear a cycle of dramatic performances and the only thing one can compare this with today is a rock concert where an equal number would gather for an event which, although utterly divorced from the complexity and dynamics of the Greek ritual, nevertheless, at its best, has its own ritual. Its songs celebrating universal passion and dealing with love, life and death. The crowd today are as involved and the proceedings have also ritualistic air. The performances are larger than life and amplified no less than the Athenian theatre performances that were amplified through the masks of the actors.

The Oedipus story is the star turn in all the Greek tragedies and was probably Sophocles' best and most popular. This is apparently also the judgment of Aristotle who had the play constantly by his side, according to the splendid introduction by E.F. Watling to his very serviceable translation.

I have chosen to attempt my version in iambic pentameter for the main characters since I feel they must have the sweep, the flow of verse. Also the meter contains and strengthens their position. What the spectator wanted in the fourth and fifth centuries BC was epic drama whereby mankind's own fate can be held up for examination. For dissection. A kind of operating table revealing the innermost parts of the human soul. Mankind in all his elemental nature, pushed to his limits as if the drama was some kind of severe testing of the product called a human being. However, the ultimate test is whether mankind can bear the

rigorous testing of moral law. Here we see Oedipus tested to the utmost and eventually made to pay a terrible price. It is a harsh price since he really is absolutely innocent of any premeditation of wrongdoing. A good lawyer today would plead mitigation to all charges and even put it to the defence that he was 'set up' which in a sense he was. It was a 'fates' set up.

It is his supreme arrogance, his refusal to even contemplate anyone else's point of view or their 'truth', which eventually condemns him.

***Steven Berkoff, 2000.***

## **Why *Oedipus*?**

### **How we chose the text**

So what lead us to Steven Berkoff's *Oedipus*? Why Greek Tragedy and why Steven Berkoff? When choosing a text for performance, there are many factors to take into consideration: Will it appeal to audiences? Will it be artistically challenging and rewarding both for those performing it and those watching it? Is it feasible technically? Is it possible to tour, both in terms of the number of actors required and the scale of the set for example? Does it fit with the company's artistic policy? Are the rights available? And so the list goes on.

We considered many texts before we got to *Oedipus*, not through any particular preference, but because we simply weren't aware that the play existed. We considered many different adaptations of many different Greek tragedies, as well as a number of 20<sup>th</sup> century classics. We also considered a number of Berkoff plays before stumbling on *Oedipus* – a little known version of the greatest Greek tragedy of them all.

Suddenly everything fell into place. We had found a play that ticked every single box. It would attract a schools audience (after all it's Berkoff and Greek theatre in one!). It would also appeal to a more general theatre audience, particularly since Berkoff is so well known and has his own fan base. It's written in a way that suited Blackeyed's theatrical style – dynamic, physical with opportunities for live music and song. Despite having at least 12 characters, it could be done using four actors. And then there was the fact that it had never been performed before. It was our belief that any play by one of Britain's best-known playwrights should be performed and that theatre-goers should have the opportunity to see it. But perhaps most importantly, we knew it would make a great piece of theatre. And what could be more exciting than that?

***Adrian McDougall, Producer***



# Finding hope in tragedy

## Directing *Oedipus*

Topping *The Resisable Rise of Arturo Ui*, Blackeyed Theatre's last show, seems an almost impossible objective, but that's the goal. How do we do it then? By taking the strongest elements of the past production - powerful performances, innovative staging, music and direct contact with the audience - and fusing these with the desire to surprise, entertain and pack a dramatic punch, we might have a chance.

And then there's Berkoff of course. I love Berkoff. I don't think that you can find meatier modern day texts. His theatre is a macabre mix of Shakespeare and the Krays. Beautiful poetry, written in iambic pentameter, presents the characters with dilemmas. But the words and imagery used provide a real and earthy edge. He is a modern day playwright with the theatricality of a classical gargantuan. Love him or hate him, Berkoff's theatre is spelt with capitals - T H E A T R E.

We also add Sophocles to the pot - a timeless philosopher who wrote the ultimate tragic play in Oedipus - the boy with the swollen feet, left for dead on a mountain by his parents, in case he commits the ultimate taboo of killing his father and marrying his mother.

Then there are the conventions of Greek Theatre, for instance the role of the chorus - the voice of the people, learning from the play how to live their own lives by holding a mirror up to life. There's also the role of fate, telling us that we are all part of a master-plan, our lives mapped out before us, and even though we are presented with a choice, no matter which road we select at our own crossroads, our path has already been decided.

As director of this play I want to present you with an evening of theatre that you will go away and talk about. It is the greatest tragedy ever written and I want you to connect to that.

Oedipus is a modern man. Likeable, strong, sexy and confident. He's been through a few tight scrapes and come out the other end a winner. He is a great King. To get to the heart of the tragedy I want you to see the heart of the man who also happens to be king. He feels real love for his wife and family, he wants what is best for his people, and (if he were given the chance) he would invest and believe in you, providing the opportunity for you to achieve alongside him.

I think that this play teaches a very simple life lesson very powerfully. That even a great and good man (a man just like you) can be blinded by self-importance and overconfidence and forget to listen. You can't rest on your laurels. You have to create again each and every day.



This is how I see my craft. Live theatre is just that, something that is created live right before your eyes at each and every performance. There is an immediacy and an 'in-the-moment' energy different to any other medium.

I want the actors and the audience to truly believe that Oedipus has a choice and that he could escape his fate. If we play the tragedy we will only scrape the surface of this timeless play. We need to present to you the emotions and hope that lie within the tragedy. We need to get you to hope that the situation will resolve itself, that things will go back to how they always were. Then we truly present you with the rich theatrical tapestry of this fantastic piece of work.

***Bart Lee, Director***

# Performing a premiere

## What does it mean as an actor?

‘What a fantastic opportunity! To be part of the very first performance of any play is a privilege as an actor. But when it’s a play by one of the leading theatre practitioners of our time, it’s a very different proposition. In a way, it’s rather daunting, since there is no previous version against which you can benchmark your own – that means no previous reviews, no write-ups and no photos. On the one hand, therefore, as an actor you have to have complete trust and confidence in your own (and your director’s) interpretation, or at least the confidence that you can justify why you have chosen a particular direction for your characterisation.

However, there’s also something quite liberating about portraying a character that’s never been portrayed before. Play Richard III or Lady Bracknell and the likelihood is audiences will have certain expectations about the way those characters should be played. Many of the great roles have definitive interpretations, such as Alison Steadman’s Beverly in *Abigail’s Party*, for example. As an actor, expectation can be a dangerous thing; on the one hand there are certain facets of a character you must remain faithful to because that’s how the character has been written, and equally certain qualities an audience expects to see. But at the same time, as an artist there is a desire to find something new in your own interpretation that’s never been found before, to produce something ground-breaking.

Of course, there have been many Oedipus’s and many Jocastas, but never this particular Oedipus or this particular Jocasta. Because while Berkoff’s version remains very faithful to the Sophocles plays, he offers his own interpretation of the characters. As he says in his introduction, “I see Oedipus as a modern man, self-made, tough and bold, who uses language as a weapon...it would seem that fate has dealt rather cruelly with him...he really is absolutely innocent of any premeditation of wrongdoing”. His Oedipus, therefore, is different from Sophocles’s Oedipus, and the differences are there in the text should the actor decide to look for them.

Because we’re talking about a Berkoff play, there are expectations about the style. Berkoff has his own style – a muscularity of language that sets him apart from other playwrights. In addition, as an actor and a director, Berkoff prescribes a performance style that’s very raw, very gutsy and very real. Fans of Berkoff, or indeed anyone who has seen one of his plays before, will expect a similar style of performance when they come and see *Oedipus*.

**Adrian McDougall**

# Re-telling a tale

## The history of the Oedipus myth

Everyone knows the original version of the Oedipus Myth was by Sophocles, right? Wrong!

- Actually the story was probably one the ancient Greeks knew well. Homer refers to it in both *The Odyssey* and *The Iliad*
- The poet Cinaethon of Sparta wrote an epic called the *The Story of Oedipus (Oedipodea)*. Though the piece itself has not survived, a few commentaries on the epic have. The story seems to tell of a merged Oedipus and Sphinx story, but details are unclear.
- Aeschylus, an Athenian playwright presented an entire trilogy based upon the Oedipus myth in 467 BC, winning the first prize at the City Dionysia. The First play was *Laius*, the second was *Oedipus*, and the third was *Seven against Thebes*. Only the third play survives, in which Oedipus' sons Eteocles and Polynices kill each other warring over the throne.
- Sophocles' play *Oedipus the King* (in the original Greek Οἰδίπους τύραννος, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, or "Oedipus the Tyrant") was first performed in 429 BC as part of the Annual play competition.
- Sophocles wrote three plays concerned with Oedipus and his family, known as the Theban play cycle. Sophocles did not, however, produce them as a trilogy, starting with *Antigone* in 442 BC, followed by *Oedipus Tyrannus* in 429 BC and finally *Oedipus at Colonus* in 405 BC. Chronologically speaking the plays should run beginning with *Oedipus Tyrannus* and ending with *Antigone*.
- There have been numerous adaptations of *Oedipus Tyrannus* since the Sophocles play, including *Nie Yuan Baoad (Retribution on a Sinful Affair)* an adaptation of Oedipus the King that premiered in Taiwan in 1994 by Heibei Bangzi Theatre, a film *Oedipus the King* in 1984, silent film adaptations, an opera by Igor Stravinsky and Jean Cocteau and a satirical Western-themed oratorio by P. D. Q. Bach that follows the adventures of Oedipus Tex ("you may have heard of my brother Rex") in Thebes Gulch!
- Berkoff himself has written two versions of the Oedipus myth. *Greek*, first produced in 1980 and published in 1982, is a re-telling of the myth complete with plague, sphinx and propheet but Londoner Eddie's (the protagonist) reaction is somewhat different to that of the Greek hero! *Oedipus* was published in 2000 but has never been performed – until now!

## The prequel

### Before we even begin, know this...

The start of our play, and indeed Sophocles' play, is, unusually, not the beginning of the story. Prior to all of the action in *Oedipus* is a story which goes something like this;

King Laius and Queen Jocasta of Thebes learn from an Oracle that Laius is doomed to be killed by his own son. Jocasta, horrified by the prophecy, orders a shepherd to injure her baby son's foot with a pin and abandon him on the mountainside between Thebes and Corinth. The baby is then rescued by another shepherd, named Oedipus (meaning 'cleft foot') and given to the childless King and Queen of Corinth, who raise him as their own.

As a young man, Oedipus hears a rumour that he is a bastard – not the legal and biological son of Polybus and Merope. He confronts them and they tell him he is their son, but Oedipus remains suspicious and decides to consult the Oracle at Delphi. When he asks who his real parents are the oracle seemingly ignores the question saying he is destined to mate with his mother and shed the blood of his father!

So, to avoid this terrible fate Oedipus leaves Corinth, thinking Polybus and Merope are his real parents. The Oracle hasn't specifically told him otherwise so why should he think any different? Of course, if he considers carefully the answer to his question, the oracle has told him if he kills a man, that man will be his father and if he mates, his mate will be his mother! But back to our story.

On the road to Thebes, Oedipus meets a stranger (King Laius – his Father!) who rudely edges his wagon off the road. They argue about who has right of way (an ancient incident of road rage). Oedipus' pride leads him to kill not only Laius, but his entire retinue - or so he thinks...

Further along the road he meets the Sphinx, who has been terrorising Thebes, killing and eating anyone unable to answer the riddle "Which creature in the morning goes on four feet, at noon on two, and in the evening upon three?" Oedipus (who walks with a stick because of his lame foot) thinks and answers, correctly, 'A Man' - he crawls on all fours as a baby, then walks on two feet as an adult, and walks with a cane in old age. Bested at last, the Sphinx throws herself from her high rock and dies. Oedipus's reward for beating the Sphinx is the kingship of Thebes and the hand of the Queen, Jocasta, in marriage. Thus, after unwittingly killing his father and marrying his mother, Oedipus fulfils the Delphic Oracle's Prophecy.

Years later our play begins...

# So what happens next?

## A synopsis of Berkoff's *Oedipus*

Berkoff's adaptation of *Oedipus* is extremely faithful to Sophocles epic tragedy in storyline.

As our play begins, Oedipus has been king of Thebes for many years, living with his loving wife Jocasta by whom he has had 2 sons and 2 daughters. The Chorus (who throughout the play have multiple roles as commentators and crowd) and the priests of Thebes cry out to Oedipus for salvation from a terrible plague sent by the gods. Oedipus sends Creon, his wife Jocasta's brother to the oracle at Delphi to find out what can be done and Creon returns saying the city must expel the '*splinter in its flesh*', '*The criminal who shed the precious blood/Of great King Laius, slaughtered like a dog.*' Oedipus searches for Laius' murderer and swears to exile the man responsible for it, even if it should be someone close to him.

The blind prophet, Tiresias, is called to aid Oedipus in his search; the prophet warns Oedipus that he should not continue his investigation. Oedipus angrily insists that Tiresias tell him. The prophet tells Oedipus that he is indeed the man that he is looking for, and Oedipus becomes enraged in disbelief and accuses Creon of plotting to overthrow him.

Jocasta comes on the scene and Oedipus reveals to her the prophet's proclamation – that he is Laius' murderer! Jocasta tells him that she can prove he is not the killer as an oracle predicted '*Laius would meet his fate/ At the hands of our own precious child, no less!*' and because Laius was killed by bandits the oracle has been proved wrong – thus Tiresias can also be proved wrong. This only serves to worry Oedipus further as he recalls the man he killed at the crossroads.

Oedipus calls for Laius' former servant, the only surviving witness of the murder, who fled the city when Oedipus became king to avoid being the one to reveal the truth. A messenger from Corinth also arrives to inform Oedipus of the death of Polybus, whom Oedipus still believes is his real father. Jocasta and Oedipus are relieved that there is no longer any chance of Oedipus fulfilling his prophecy. At this point the messenger informs him that he was in fact adopted and his real parentage is unknown. Laius' former servant arrives and is known to the messenger as the man who gave him the infant Oedipus to take care of. In the subsequent discussions between Oedipus, Jocasta, the servant and the messenger, Jocasta guesses the truth and runs away. Oedipus is horrified to discover he has fulfilled his terrible prophecy and leaves crying that he will defy the gods. A second messenger arrives and reveals that Jocasta has hanged herself and Oedipus, upon discovering her body, blinds himself with the golden brooch on her dress. The play ends with Oedipus, blinded and distraught entrusting his children to Creon and declaring his intent to leave in exile. Creon, as the new king, banishes Oedipus, 'cleansing' the city.

## Iambic Pentameter

**'I can barely shape the maniacs words/ Between my lips.'**

*Oedipus* is written in iambic pentameter, a rhythmic form of language most often associated with Shakespeare. Berkoff says in his introduction 'I have chosen to attempt my version in iambic pentameter for the main characters since I feel they must have the sweep, the flow of verse.' Shakespeare's aristocratic, highborn characters would speak in this way, so perhaps it is particularly appropriate for *Oedipus the King*! Below is a simple explanation of the iambic rhythm.

An iambic foot is an unstressed syllable followed by a stressed syllable. We could write the rhythm like this:

da	DUM
----	-----

A line of iambic pentameter is five iambic feet in a row:

da	DUM	da	DUM	da	DUM	da	DUM	da	DUM
----	-----	----	-----	----	-----	----	-----	----	-----

We can notate this with a '˘' mark representing an unstressed syllable and a '/' mark representing a stressed syllable. In this notation a line of iambic pentameter would look like this:

˘	/	˘	/	˘	/	˘	/	˘	/
---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

The following line from John Keats' ode *To Autumn* is a straightforward example:

To swell the gourd, and plump the hazel shells

We can notate the scansion of this as follows:

˘	/	˘	/	˘	/	˘	/	˘	/
To	swell	the	gourd,	and	plump	the	ha-	zel	shells

We can mark the divisions between feet with a |, and the caesura (a pause) with a double vertical bar ||.

˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ / ˘ /

To swell | the gourd, || and plump | the ha- | zel shells

# What sort of writer tells this story?

## Sophocles and Berkoff

### Sophocles

- The main source for information about Sophocles is the ancient "Life of Sophocles" - existing as sort of preface to his plays.
- Sophocles was an Athenian, from the deme (village community) of Colonus, where his last play, Oedipus at Colonus, is set.
- As a boy, Sophocles won prizes for wrestling and music - and as a 16 year old, was chosen to lead the boys' chorus, which celebrated the Athenian victory over the Persians at the Battle of Salamis (480 BC). The boys were naked and shiny with oil - presumably Sophocles would not have been chosen for this unless he was exceptionally good-looking!
- To begin with Sophocles was an actor author - he acted in his plays as well as writing them. But he gave up acting because of his weak voice.
- He founded a club (thiasos) for students of the arts – an early Equity perhaps!
- His character was such that "everyone liked him". He served Athens as a general (this was an elected post in Athens - each of the ten "tribes" - constituencies - chose one each year). Sophocles was elected twice and was also chosen as Hellenotamias (Treasurer of the Imperial Fund). The Life calls him philathenaios - very patriotic indeed!
- Sophocles had two sons by two marriages - both became tragedians. One, Iophon, brought a lawsuit against him when Sophocles was in his 90s saying he was infirm and his estate should be handed to his son. Sophocles read out the unfinished Oedipus at Colonus as his defence!
- He was severely religious - and let his house be used for worship of the healing god Asclepius while a temple was being built.
- Sophocles also communicated with the gods! When a gold crown was stolen from the Acropolis, Heracles appeared to him in a dream and told him where it was!
- He was born around 496 and died in 406 BC and thus lived to be over 90 - Oedipus at Colonus must rank as one of the most amazing achievements of old age in all art. There are various accounts of his death - did he choke on an unripe grape, or was he reading the Antigone



(aloud - silent reading was unknown to the ancient Greeks) when he passed away?

- Sophocles wrote 123 plays and won 24 victories (so Berkoff has some catching up to do!). He never came third (i.e. last) in a dramatic competition.
- Only seven of Sophocles plays have survived in a complete form, namely Ajax, Antigone, Trachinian Women, Oedipus the King, Electra, Philoctetes and Oedipus at Colonus (produced after his death, in 401). Note that he never wrote "trilogies", and the three Theban plays are separated by decades. His first play was put on in 468 - nearly 20 years before the first drama which survives - so there is no such thing as a youthful or immature work of Sophocles!
- Several ancient writers have commented on Sophocles' love of youths. Athenaeus alleged that in addition to seeking and keeping female courtesans, "Sophocles was fond of young lads, as Euripides was fond of women." Plutarch, in his "Life of Pericles," mentions an incident, during a naval expedition, in which Sophocles praised the beauty of a young recruit. Pericles rebuked him by warning that a general must keep not only his hands clean, but also his eyes!
- Sophocles died at the venerable age of ninety in 406 or 405 BC. He was so respected by the Athenians that two plays performed at the Lenaea soon after his death paid homage to him.

## **Berkoff**

- Steven Berkoff is probably one of the most famous playwrights of the 20th and 21st centuries. The Guardian said recently, 'At the grand age of 70, Steven Berkoff remains one of the most provocative voices in British theatre.'
- Berkoff's real name is Leslie Steven Berks!
- He was born in Stepney, in the East End of London, in 1937.
- Berkoff's family are Jewish, originating from Russia, with their original surname, "Berkovitch", having been shortened by Berkoff's father.
- Berkoff was educated at Hackney Downs School and trained at the Webber Douglas Academy of Dramatic Art in 1958, and in 1965, at the Ecole Jacques Le Coq in Paris.

- Berkoff is a playwright, actor and theatre director. He usually plays villains and his acting roles have included parts as diverse as aliens, bond villains and Adolf Hitler!
- In 1968, after working in repertory theatre, he founded the London Theatre Group, working with a group of actors to perform an adaptation of Franz Kafka's story In The Penal Colony.
- Berkoff has adapted a number of other classic works for the stage, including Kafka's Metamorphosis and The Trial, Poe's The Fall of the House of Usher and Strindberg's Miss Julie.
- Berkoff's first original play East established him as a major talent. He is now performed over the world, and at the yearly Edinburgh Fringe Festival he is the most performed playwright after Shakespeare!
- Berkoff claims he is now in semi-retirement, BUT in 2006 he appeared in six films or TV episodes, acted in his own plays, did a solo tour with Shakespeare's Villains and commercial voiceovers. Nothing like taking it easy!
- "Acting was my therapy," Berkoff once told the Observer. "A person can find themselves through acting - and escape themselves. Acting can release you and make you so much more aware of life."
- Loneliness has been a prevalent theme for Berkoff, reflected in his art as well as his relationships. He is often perceived as a megalomaniac, difficult to work with and reticent in his communication, though he emphasizes the need for collaboration between artists and often relies on the unity of a large chorus to realise his artistic vision. Berkoff's rebellious attitude and quick temper seem somewhat poignantly in opposition to his need for recognition and acceptance by his peers and critics.
- Berkoff is rumoured to be preparing a version of the classic film On the Waterfront for the stage. Workshops have been held in London. It expected to premiere in Nottingham Playhouse, then moving to London, in 2008.
- See if you can spot Berkoff in the following films; Beverly Hills Cop, Octopussy, A Clockwork Orange or Rambo:First Blood Part II

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Not quite 123 plays, but give him time!

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# The Oedipus Complex

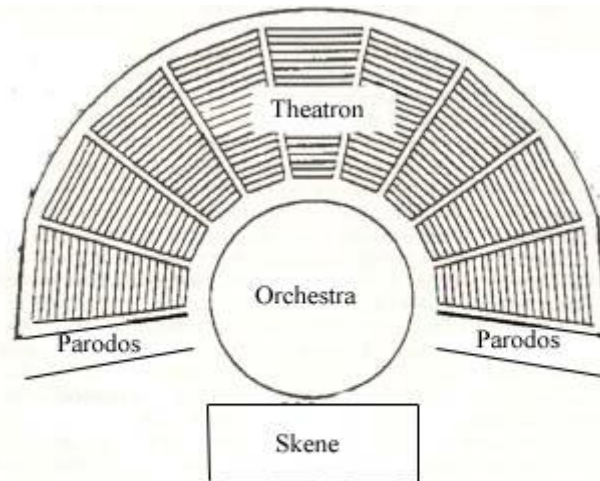
## Fun with Freud

Oedipus' marital relations with his mother gave Sigmund Freud the name of his most famous psychological theory – the Oedipus complex.

For Freud, the childhood desire to sleep with the mother and to kill the father. Freud describes the source of this complex in his *Introductory Lectures* (Twenty-First Lecture): "You all know the Greek legend of King Oedipus, who was destined by fate to kill his father and take his mother to wife, who did everything possible to escape the oracle's decree and punished himself by blinding when he learned that he had none the less unwittingly committed both these crimes" (16.330). According to Freud, Sophocles' play, *Oedipus Rex*, illustrates a formative stage in each individual's psychosexual development, when the young child transfers his love object from the breast (the oral phase) to the mother. At this time, the child desires the mother and resents (even secretly desires the murder) of the father. Such primal desires are, of course, quickly repressed but, even among the mentally sane, they will arise again in dreams or in literature. Freud suggests that both girls and boys can suffer from an Oedipal complex but Jungian thought suggests that girls are more likely to develop an 'Electra' complex (see the play of the same name), competing with the mother for the exclusive love of the father.

## Greek theatre

How *Oedipus* was staged the first time round



Parts of a Greek Theater

The plays of Ancient Greece were always performed in outdoor theatres. Early Greek theatres were probably little more than open areas in city centres or next to hillsides where the audience, standing or sitting, could watch and listen to the chorus singing about the exploits of a god or hero. From the late 6th century BC to the 4th and 3rd centuries BC there was a gradual evolution towards more elaborate theater structures, but the basic layout of the Greek theater remained the same. The major components of Greek theater are labeled on the diagram above.

The front row of the Theatron was reserved for the priests, particularly those of Dionysus (from whose rituals theatre developed). In the second rows, VIP's and Greek officials would sit. Everyone else would sit towards the back, but the higher your social class the closer to the front you were likely to be.

### Greek Theatre definitions –

- *Stage* – I expect you know this one! Early stages were wooden platforms; later, they would be made from stone.
- *Skene* - This is where we get the word 'scene'. A hut/building at the back of the stage, it represented different buildings throughout the play and acted as dressing rooms and entrances and exits for the actors. Sophocles is credited with inventing scenery by painting the outside of the skene building! There was also access to the roof of the skene from

behind, so that actors playing gods and other characters could appear on the roof, if needed.

- *Mekhane* – a kind of wooden crane on which actors would be hoisted to play gods or flying mythological beings.
- *The Orkhestra* – The lower area in front of the stage. The orchestra (literally, "dancing space") was normally circular. It was a level space where the chorus would dance, sing, and interact with the actors who were on the stage near the skene. Because plays were originally part of the feast of Dionysus there would often be an altar on this part of the stage and hymns would be sung here. The earliest orchestras were simply made of hard earth, but in the Classical period some orchestras began to be paved with marble and other materials. The orchestra of the theater of Dionysus in Athens was about 60 feet in diameter.
- *The Chorus* – was a group of actors that chanted and sang as one (like today's Choirs!). They commented on the action, told the audience about the characters and the chorus leader could speak to the actors as part of the play. They often represented the common people in the play. The chorus would be all male.
- *Actors* – were ALWAYS male who played male and female parts. There were no women allowed on the stage! Actors wore distinctive costumes and masks to indicate character, as the audience was always quite far away – even those at the front!
- *Plays* – would be performed almost in a festival style. They would run for a whole day and at the end of the day the judges would award a prize to the writer of the best play. Sophocles won several times.
- *Theatron* - The theatron (literally, "viewing-place") is where the spectators sat. The theatron was usually part of hillside overlooking the orchestra, and often wrapped around a large portion of the orchestra (see the diagram above). Spectators in the fifth century BC probably sat on cushions or boards that they brought with them from home (much like modern concerts in parks!), but by the fourth century the theatron of many Greek theaters had marble seats.
- *Parodos*- The parodoi (literally, "passageways") are the paths by which the chorus and some actors (such as those representing messengers or people returning from abroad – there are a few of those in Oedipus!) made their entrances and exits. The audience also used them to enter and exit the theater before and after the performance.



## Writing

Tragedy and comedy were viewed as completely separate genres, and no plays ever merged aspects of the two. Satyr plays dealt with the mythological subject matter of the tragedies, but in a purely comedic manner. However, as they were written over a century after the Athenian Golden Age, it is not known whether dramatists such as Sophocles and Euripides would have thought about their plays in the same terms.

## Comedy and Tragedy Masks

The comedy and tragedy masks have their origin in the theatre of ancient Greece. The masks were used to show the emotions of the characters in a play, and also to allow actors to switch between roles and play characters of a different gender.

Melpomene is the muse of tragedy and is often depicted holding the tragic mask and wearing cothurnus. Thalia is the muse of comedy and is similarly associated with the mask of comedy and comic's socks.

## Structure of the plays

The basic structure of a Greek tragedy is fairly simple. After a prologue spoken by one or more characters, the chorus enters, singing and dancing. Scenes then alternate between spoken sections (dialogue between characters, and between characters and chorus) and sung sections (during which the chorus danced). Here are the basic parts of a Greek Tragedy:

- a. **Prologue:** Spoken by one or two characters before the chorus appears. The prologue usually gives the mythological background necessary for understanding the events of the play.
- b. **Parodos:** This is the song sung by the chorus as it first enters the orchestra and dances.
- c. **First Episode:** This is the first of many "episodes", when the characters and chorus talk.
- d. **First Stasimon:** At the end of each episode, the other characters usually leave the stage and the chorus dances and sings a stasimon, or choral ode. The ode usually reflects on the things said and done in the episodes, and puts it into some kind of larger mythological framework.

For the rest of the play, there is alternation between episodes and stasima, until the final scene, called the...

e. **Exodos:** At the end of play, the chorus exits singing a processional song which usually offers words of wisdom related to the actions and outcome of the play.

# Physical theatre

## Don't use your words...

Physical theatre is a general term used to describe any mode of performance that pursues storytelling through primarily physical means.

There are many different styles of performance which could all, quite legitimately, describe themselves using the term "physical theatre", which has led to a lot of confusion as to what the definition of physical theatre actually is! These include Mime, Contemporary Dance, Clowning, Physical Comedy, Theatrical Acrobatics and sometimes Puppetry.

While performances based around all of the above could equally claim to be "physical theatre," it is often difficult to say for certain what is and what is not physical theatre. Distinctions are often made quite arbitrarily by critics and performing companies.

Physical Theatre's primary focus is on the physical work of the actors, expressed through the use of their bodies. This is not to say that text isn't extremely important but it must be immersed in or work seamlessly with physical representation or interpretation. Companies like Complicite produce work in which language is woven into a physical journey that the audience witnesses. It is a highly visual form of theatre. The action in physical theatre may have a psychological base, an emotional thread or a clear storyline and it can often grow out of improvisational work. However, the means of expression are always primarily physical rather than textual – the subtext appears visually rather than vocally, and you can often see what isn't said.

Mime and theatrical clowning schools such as L'Ecole Jacques Lecoq in Paris have had a big influence on many modern expressions of physical theatre - Berkoff received his initial training here! Eastern European practitioners have also had a strong influence on modern physical theatre, and both Vsevolod Meyerhold and Jerzy Grotowski are regarded by many as "fathers" of modern physical theatre. Berkoff's own influences can be recognised in the work of Lecoq, Grotowski and Antonin Artaud.

Contemporary dance has had a huge influence on what we call physical theatre, partly because most physical theatre requires actors to have a level of physical control and flexibility rarely found in those who do not have some sort of movement background. Modern physical theatre also has strong roots in more ancient traditions such as Commedia dell'arte and some suggest links (very important for us and Black-eyed) to the ancient Greek theatre!

Notable British companies practising physical theatre (other than Black-eyed!) include DV8, Kneehigh Theatre and Complicite among others.

Daniel Stein, a teacher out of the lineage of Etienne Decroux, has this to say about physical theatre:

"I think physical theater is much more visceral and audiences are affected much more viscerally than intellectually. The foundation of theater is a live, human experience, which is different from any other form of art that I know of. Painting, writing, music happen in a mostly interpretive way, which is to say that somebody sits down and writes something and then somebody else interprets it, often in front of a camera. Live theater, where real human beings are standing in front of real human beings, is about the fact that we have all set aside this hour; the sharing goes in both directions. The fact that it is a very physical, visceral form makes it a very different experience from almost anything else that we partake of in our lives. I don't think we could do it the same way if we were doing literary-based theater."

# Why don't you?

## Things to do before and after the production

### Before the show:

- Go through the synopsis of the play with the group so everyone is familiar with the story. Greek audiences would DEFINITELY have been familiar with the Oedipus myth before they saw the play, so they knew what to expect.
- The Oedipus Family Album – Make some 'snap-shot' still images of Oedipus at various stages of his life. Who would be in his baby photos? What about his toddler ones? Show how Oedipus feels about his family in each portrait, including characters like Creon and Oedipus' own sons and daughters. Perform the tableaux in order. You could extend this exercise by bringing the pictures to life and having the characters interact. How do they feel at this particular time in their lives? Add a caption for each image, or a line from the text.
- Pick five points at which Oedipus could have chosen another path. Do two scenes, one which is faithful to the story and one in which Oedipus does something different. What would happen if he made a different decision? This should help explore the elements of tragic circumstance and allow the class a better understanding of the doomed hero before they see the show.

### After the Show

- Why not make your own Greek theatre masks and incorporate mask work into your drama classes? Below is a very simple and effective way to make a full or half mask that will fit you almost perfectly!

You will need:

A bowl of water

A clean paint brush

A roll of gummed paper between 2 or per person (similar to the strip on envelopes that you lick!)

Kitchen roll

A towel each

1. Set up a chair next to each bowl of water
2. The person whose mask is being made sits on the chair with their head tipped slightly back and eyes closed.

3. Soak a piece of kitchen roll and place it on the face of the person in the chair, making sure it is moulded as closely to their features as possible. This will make sure that the finished mask will closely fit their face.
  4. Tear off a small strip of the gummed paper NO BIGGER than 2cm by 6cm. Wet the back using a paint brush (or dip in the bowl if you are short on time) and place on the wet paper towel.
  5. Take another piece and overlap it over the first. Keep doing this until you have covered the face, not forgetting the forehead or jaw-line. Leave air holes around the nose so the person in the chair can breathe!
  6. Build up AT LEAST three layers of gummed paper. The more layers you put on the stronger the mask will be. I find four is probably about right.
  7. Remove the mask from the face of the person in the chair.
  8. If the kitchen roll base is dry enough peel it away, and stuff the mask with balled up kitchen roll so it will keep its shape
  9. Leave in a warm dry place to set.
  10. When the mask has dried trim the edges to the desired shape. Cut eyeholes and a mouth if you need to speak (although a half mask is usually better if this is the case).
  11. Bend a piece of wire to go round the edges of the mask and attach it using more strips of gummed paper.. This will allow you to bend the mask so it fits perfectly
  12. Decorate to taste!
- Do your own re-telling of Oedipus' story! How about a two minute Oedipus, or Oedipus the Musical? Oedipus the early years – a prequel to Sophocles' plays?
  - 'A good lawyer today would plead mitigation to all charges and even put it to the defence that he was 'set up' which in a sense he was. It was a 'fates' set up' (Steven Berkoff) Hold a mock trial, with Oedipus in the dock for murder and incest. Is he at fault or can you plead not guilty?
  - What goes through Jocasta's mind when she realises Oedipus is her son? What does she do between her exit and hanging herself? Discuss as a group what you think her thought process and feelings would be and write her internal monologue. Remember, she has truly loved her husband and has 4 children by him.

## Discussion points

### Consider this...

- Can you escape your fate? Both Oedipus and Jocasta try and avoid the outcomes the oracles prophesy, and by doing so simply fulfill them!
- Oedipus wasn't as innocent under Greek law as he might appear under English or Roman: (non est actus reus nisi mens sit rea - there is no guilty act without a guilty mind). To the Greeks the act counted, not the motive.
- The murder of Laius wasn't a crime per se - in fact it was any Greek's duty to harm his enemies (as well as helping his friends). And as far as he knew at the time Laius was an enemy - by insulting Oedipus he had made himself one.
- Family was everything in Greek culture. Thus the worst conceivable crime was to kill one's father; the second worst was to sleep with one's mother. (More than just an incest taboo is involved here.) No Greek could imagine a worse 'double' than Oedipus'.
- Oedipus - the greatest of men, the solver of riddles - can only solve the riddle of his own origins by revealing a truth too awful to bear.
- The power of the curse - Oedipus, having cursed the murderer of Laius - feels he must carry out the sentence on himself.



## Glossary

**Characterisation** – The way in which an actor moves, speaks and acts in order to bring a character to life, or make them 'real'.

**Dionysus or Dionysos** - was the Greek god of wine, representing not only its intoxicating power, but also its social and beneficial influences. He was also known as Bacchus. He is the patron deity of agriculture and the theatre.

**Oracle** - An oracle is a person or agency who is a source of wise counsel or prophetic opinion. It may also be a revealed prediction or precognition of the future usually from the gods. In the ancient world many sites gained a reputation for the dispensing of oracular wisdom: they too became known as "oracles". The most famous was probably the oracle at Delphi in Greece, referenced in the play.

**Sphinx** – Often painted as a winged lion with a woman's head or a woman with the paws, claws and breasts of a lion, a serpent's tail and eagle wings, the sphinx was sent by Hera from her Ethiopian homeland to Thebes.

## Further reading and resources

<http://academic.reed.edu/humanities/110tech/Theater.html> - A breakdown of Greek Theatre

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/ancientgreece/classics/theatre/intro.shtml> - Greek Theatre for beginners!

*Greek* by Steven Berkoff – Berkoff's earlier, modern version of the Oedipus myth. Be warned, there's a LOT of swearing!

*The Theatre of Steven Berkoff* (text by Steven Berkoff, photographs by Roger Morton) Methuen, 1992

E.F. Watling's translation of the Theban Plays  
(<http://www.penguin.co.uk/nf/Book/BookDisplay/0,,9780140440034,00.html>)

*Oedipus at Colonus* by Sophocles – the 'middle' play of the Theban cycle

*Antigone* by Sophocles – a play about the fate of Oedipus' daughters and the last play in the Theban cycle.

*Words on Mime* by Etienne Decroux

*Steven Berkoff and the Theatre of Self-Performance* by Robert Cross

<http://www.stevenberkoff.com/> - The official website!

<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0000925/> - Steven Berkoff on the Internet Movie Database

<http://www.contemporarywriters.com/authors/?p=auth256> - A Biography of Berkoff by the British Council

<http://www.iainfisher.com/berkoff/berkoff-biography.html> - A useful website with some interesting insights

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/arts/gallery/2007/aug/03/berkoff?picture=330322763> - Berkoff in Pictures

<http://www.greektheatre.gr/> - A comprehensive look at Greek Theatre for

<http://www.pushtheatre.org/philosophy.htm> - A case for Physical Theatre