

An introduction to Greek theatre and myths for Year 7

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KS3

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Introduction

This scheme of work has the following aims: To provide a brief introduction to the time period of Ancient Greece; to experiment with approaches to Chorus and character; to research and perform Greek myths; to understand the Greek gods; to develop vocal skills and physical skills; to develop written analytical skills and reflection in Drama.

Resources needed:

- ▶ Access to a computer room or laptops/tablets
- ▶ Several sheets of A3 paper
- ▶ Marker pens
- ▶ Full face white theatre masks for the whole class (optional)
- ▶ A small number of rostra or methods to create levels.

Lesson 1: An introduction to the world of Ancient Greece – time for access to some IT!

This lesson aims to give Year 7 students a brief insight into the world of Ancient Greece and the place theatre had in it. This will be a combination of research-based work and fast-paced practical exercises designed to start getting the students thinking about how to represent on stage key ideas, objects, and figures from the time period.

Research

Book a computer room or arrange access to IT.

Put the students in small groups and give them the following questions to research:

1. Where is Greece? (It can be useful for them to print off a map of Europe or the world and identify Greece on it.)
2. When did Ancient Greek Theatre first start appearing? (Approximately in the sixth century BC)
3. What did the Ancient Greek playwrights use as inspiration for the stories that they told? (Ancient myths and legends, tales of the gods)
4. Find one example of a famous Ancient Greek myth
5. Why did the Ancient Greeks think that theatre was important? (Theatre formed social bonds which helped to create communities and was also a ritual that showed respect to the gods.)
6. What gods did the Ancient Greeks believe in? Each student should find one female and one male and research their importance.
7. What did an Ancient Greek sailing vessel look like?
8. What was built so that the Greeks could get into the city of Troy?
9. In what kind of buildings did the Ancient Greeks stage their theatre?

Give students time to research the questions and then put their findings on a sheet of A3. Title the sheets 'The Theatre of Ancient Greece' and students can then decide how to present the information on them. Make sure any pictures drawn (or printed – this can be a longer activity at the start of the project if you want something nice for a long-term display) are clearly labelled and relate directly to the questions asked.

Ask the students then to present their ideas to the rest of the class, but impose the rule that the following skills must be used during the presentation:

- ▶ At the start of the presentation half of the group must enter from stage right and half from stage left.

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- ▶ They should meet exactly in the middle of the space at the same time on their first entrance.
- ▶ They should speak directly to the audience, not each other.
- ▶ They should speak the title of the presentation – ‘The Theatre of Ancient Greece!’ – all together and their voices should reflect the fact that it has an exclamation mark at the end, so an upward inflection and building volume is needed. (It can be useful to practise this as a whole group at the start of the activity as a vocal warm-up.)
- ▶ The presentation must follow the order of the questions.
- ▶ Some parts of the presentation should be done by individuals speaking.
- ▶ Some parts of the presentation must be done by the whole group speaking together in unison – a bit like a chorus! And at one point they must all use the same gesture during a choral moment of speaking.

Lesson 2: Building the basis of a Chorus and knowledge of Greek Theatre

Activity

In different groups, ask the students to create tableaux to dramatise the following theatrical ideas:

- a) A god looks down on the people who worship them
- b) An Ancient Greek sailing vessel
- c) The Trojan Horse built by the Greek army
- d) A battle with swords and shields
- e) The goddess of love.

Once each tableau is rehearsed and blocked, begin to turn them into a performance that reflects key aspects of Ancient Greek Theatre. They can do the tableaux in any order they choose. Then:

- a) Again, ask them to start off-stage, but split equally between stage left and right.
- b) They then walk into the centre stage and face the audience directly.
- c) As a chorus, announce the title of tableau number 1 (‘A god looks down’, etc.) and then over 5 seconds walk into the first tableau position and then hold it for 5 seconds.
- d) Then, while transitioning into tableau number 2 over 5 seconds, have just one member of the chorus say the title of tableau number 2.
- e) Hold tableau 2 for 5 seconds and then have half the group say the title for tableau number 3 during the 5-second transition into tableau 4.
- f) Again, hold tableau number 4 for 5 seconds and then ‘canon speak’ the title of number 5 so they are saying the whole title individually but experimenting more with vocal effects. The canon should finish as they arrive in position for tableau 5 which they will hold for 5 seconds again.

Allow a reasonable amount of time to polish the transitions. Focus on making sure the transition is smooth, lasts the length of the speech that accompanies it and that the group is walking at the same pace and in the same style. Appoint a ‘creative controller’ in each group to step out every now and then to watch the material and make sure there is a uniformity of movement and clarity in each tableau.

Film final performances and get each student to comment and note down areas of success and advice notes on how to refine the quality of the work. This document follows the simple framework of:

- ▶ Title of project
- ▶ Context of moment to be reflected on
- ▶ Aim of moment for audience: intended response from them
- ▶ Vocal skills used – just a list
- ▶ Physical skills used – as above
- ▶ Successful moment
- ▶ Area to improve.

Lesson 3: Developing a more sophisticated approach to chorus work and back to some IT research

Activity 1: Building the physical side of the chorus

Ask students to brainstorm events where a crowd of people who might attend have something specific in common. For example:

- ▶ A crowd at a particular sporting event
- ▶ An audience for a concert/play/etc.
- ▶ A demonstration for or against something.

Place the students in different groups and ask them to choose a particular crowd-based event (if they are struggling to think of examples, the crowd at a tennis match is a really simple and useful example) without letting the other groups know. Ask them to come up with a scene which shows just the crowd watching the event, so no acted-out detail of the event itself. Again, start with the chorus entrance rules of being split equally stage left and stage right and then walking from either side to meet centre stage at the start of the scene and turning to face the audience. Then they should act out the actions of the crowd watching, but they are allowed no words-based dialogue at all, just soundscape ideas created vocally (cheering, the sound of a ball being struck, etc.).

Allow the students 15 minutes to plan their scene: 5 planning, 5 improvising and 5 polishing. Again, nominate a creative controller to step out and check for polish and clarity in the scene. Then perform the scenes and ask the audience to guess which particular event the crowd was watching. Finish off with a discussion of successful moments and moments of advice to refine the work.

Activity 2: Greek gods, myths and legends

Ask students to research in groups one of the following gods and myths

- ▶ Theseus and the Minotaur
- ▶ Odysseus and the Cyclops
- ▶ The Legend of the Trojan Horse
- ▶ Jason and the Golden Fleece
- ▶ Zeus
- ▶ Aphrodite
- ▶ Poseidon
- ▶ Hades.

As they did in Lesson 1 for Greek Theatre, ask each group, once they have chosen their god and myth, to create an A3 sheet presenting their research in a visually interesting manner. And then, with their sheets from Lesson 1, you have an instant display for the drama board.

Lesson 4: Bringing Greek myths to life using chorus and performance techniques

This lesson will require some voice recording equipment.

Activity 1: The Greek Myth podcast planning

Ask each group to identify the five most important events in their chosen myth and then write them out in the style of a news bulletin headline in chronological order, but make sure they add the text at the start of each to give each headline more of an 'arriving messenger announcement' feel, in keeping with the Greek Theatre character and convention.

1. 'Good people of Athens, listen! Athens under attack. King offers children to invaders as food for Minotaur in exchange for peace.'
2. 'Senators of Athens! Prince Theseus volunteers to be the seventh boy offered to the Minotaur to have a chance to kill it.'
3. 'Citizens of Athens! Prince arrives in Crete. Princess Ariadne offers to help him defeat the Minotaur in return for him helping her to escape the island. Mysterious presents of ball of string and sword given.'
4. 'King of Athens! Children locked in Minotaur Maze. Theseus kills Minotaur and uses ball of string to leave a trail to find way out.'

5. 'Thanks to the gods of Ancient Greece! Theseus and Ariadne escape by ship from Crete and head for Naxos. Theseus drops Ariadne on Naxos so she can escape her father and then returns home with all the children.'

Activity 2: Planning and recording interviews with characters from myth

Ask each student to improvise an interview situation between a central character involved in each headline (e.g. King Minos for headline number 1), and a podcast news reporter. Keep each interview short (4/5 questions only and use their research into the myth to add the extra detail), so Minos could be interviewed about his desire to attack Athens and his pet monster, the Minotaur, who needs feeding with children. These are radio-style interviews only, so students are forced to focus solely on their vocal delivery, helping them to work on the necessary skills to develop vocal variety for the upcoming chorus work. Students need to make sure that each interview is punchy and full of interesting questions that flesh out the detail of the story, so that, by the end of all 5 interviews, the audience will have an understanding of the plot and the characters involved.

If possible, use YouTube to find some appropriate news-style podcast intro music and encourage them to play that at the start and the end to help create a more professional recording. Allow the students the rest of the lesson to begin preparing their podcasts and one whole lesson afterwards to create, write scripts and then record them. Focus on developing different vocal qualities for each character (an unexpected voice for the Minotaur can be funny) and try to give the interviewer a very specific style. It is a good idea to vary the character of the interviewer, so one can be a very formal *Today* programme style interrogative reporter, one could be a very sympathetic voice, and one could be very 'youth' orientated and upbeat (listening to a quick clip of the current *BBC Newsround* can help here). The key aim for this exercise is to make each character individual and recognisable. This really requires students to practise different tones, accents and characterisation.

Activity 3: On the sofa with a god

Show the students a brief clip of a TV or YouTube chat show that has some very famous and instantly recognisable guests (e.g. shows hosted by Graham Norton or Jonathan Ross). Find one that has an opening monologue from the presenter. Ask each group to decide on which famous person they would be on a chat show (impersonations are fine here), but one student must be a presenter and one must be their chosen Greek goddess or god. Go straight into the improvisation with all groups working at the same time so there is no need to show these to the whole class. Allow them to run for three or four minutes and make sure each guest has had the opportunity to be questioned.

Now place the class in pairs and ask them to label themselves G and C. G is a goddess or god running an advice helpline for ordinary citizens to phone into about problems in their lives. Who they are will determine the advice they are giving, so if they are Hades, they will offer advice for the recently dead or those coming to terms with their grief. Aphrodite can offer relationship advice. Poseidon can offer help with sea voyages and swimming events. Zeus should specifically offer advice for people having trouble at work with colleagues who are big-headed, arrogant or bullying. It can be useful to explain what the term *hubris* means here. Run quick, spontaneous improvisations starting with the line, 'Hello, helpline of the gods - how can I help you ordinary citizen?' at the start of each improvisation, to be delivered by G. Choose some entertaining ones to show the rest of the class and to help them develop ideas for questioning the gods.

Now, place the class in a circle and quickly ask them what sort of questions they would like to ask a Greek god. Look for specifics, so what would they ask a god who spends all their time with the dead? What does it mean to be the goddess of love? How does the king of the gods feel the other gods should behave towards him? Is it right that the gods should punish people? Where do they live? What are their houses like, if they have any? Try and keep a balance of fun and seriousness to encourage the class to think seriously about the responsibilities of the gods.

Now ask for volunteers and run another spontaneous improvisation in front of the whole class. One is the TV chat show presenter and the others are all Greek gods or goddesses who have been invited onto the sofa for a chat as they all have a book coming out about their lives. Ask the volunteers to think up titles for their books while the rest of the class think of at least one question they would like to ask them. Run the spontaneous improvisation

Lesson 5: Bringing a chorus to life using vocal and physical skills, part one

In Sophocles' *Antigone*, the Chorus act as commentators on the action, characters in the play and also senators who advise the king and represent the views of the city of Thebes. In their second choric ode they laud the achievements of humankind, but also warn directly against the dangers of hubris. This is done through an ode that not only reflects their function in reminding the people of Thebes at the time that they should respect and fear the gods (the playwright's intention in *Antigone*), but also they provide a list of the greatest achievements of humankind. These achievements are:

1. Sailing and travelling across oceans
2. Ploughing and farming
3. Hunting
4. Fishing
5. Taming and domesticating animals to ride and use on the farm
6. Learning different languages
7. Politics, government and debate
8. Building and architecture.

At the end of the choric ode though, the Chorus remind the audience that humans must remember that they are not as important as the gods and anyone who forgets their place in that hierarchy will be punished.

Activity 1: Instagram pictures from a holiday in Ancient Greece

Give students access to the list of achievements above. In a circle create a spontaneous improvisation situation based around the idea of a travel company trying to encourage people to travel to Ancient Greece for their holidays. Give the travel company a name (e.g. 'Back in Time Holidays') and ask them to suggest ways that we could encourage people to travel there, bearing in mind the amazing things that are on offer (the list of achievements). Improvise a meeting where the students suggest how these activities could be shown in a TV advert or YouTube clip-style presentation.

Then, in those groups, ask students to imagine one of them is showing their Instagram account to an (imaginary) friend, detailing their holiday in Ancient Greece. Ask them to choose 5 of the activities available, as shown on the achievements list. While they describe each activity they did, the rest of the group create the Instagram image using quickly-formed tableaux. Give each group a short period of time to rehearse this and then show them to the rest of the class. This will give them the basis of some ideas for the choral activity coming up next.

Activity 2: Becoming a Greek Chorus

Have the whole class stand in a space. Ask them to take up a freeze-frame position immediately for the following words or phrases

- ▶ Farming
- ▶ Eagle
- ▶ Construction
- ▶ Clever (a bit tricky, but they should rise to the challenge)
- ▶ The greatest!
- ▶ Hunter.

Now project or hand out copies of the following choric ode. This activity can be done using white full-face theatre masks if you have them available. Read the ode around the whole class, one line at a time per student. Ask them to stand when saying it and to imagine that they are saying it inside a huge amphitheatre to encourage their volume. In the past I have done the first part of this exercise outside.

*GOOD people of Ancient Greece
Humankind is the GREATEST of all creatures on earth
They have mastered PLOUGHING and FARMING
They HUNT and tame animals of the LAND and AIR
Their BRAINS are powerful and they discuss and DEBATE
They use their INTELLIGENCE to solve great problems
They have built GREAT cities
But, they MUST remember their LOWLY place in this world
They are not as important or powerful as the GODS!*

Now place the class into groups of approximately 5 and ask them to break the speech up among them, so that some lines are said as a whole chorus, some in smaller groups and some individually. They can break individual lines up and all come in on certain words and phrases if they wish. They must, however, for each word highlighted in capitals, create a tableau, or very brief scene, to bring that particular idea to life. The scene can have sounds in it, but they must not be actual words to avoid losing the focus on the actual speech itself. It can be easier to specify mime instead for these physical images to avoid too many animal noises. It can also be interesting to vary that rule from group to group.

Allow the students the rest of the lesson to play with the speech and refine their ideas. Towards the end of this lesson, ask each group to show one or two lines from their performance and get feedback from the rest of the group regarding the clarity of the words and ideas, to create the physical image. Make sure their performance always starts with them split equally offstage left and right, then enter and meet in the middle and turn to speak directly to the audience.

Homework for Lesson 6: Learn your lines

Teacher preparation for Lesson 6: Create a shared Google doc with the following format:

- a) Type out one line from the choric ode you have just performed where you were involved in using your voice and your physical skills
- b) What response did you want from the audience when you delivered that line?
- c) Briefly describe how you used your voice to bring the line to life (2 or 3 ideas)
- d) Briefly describe how you used your physical skills to help bring the line to life (2 or 3 ideas)
- e) On a scale of 1 to 10, with 10 being the best, what rating would you give yourself for your success with this line (you are not allowed to use the number 7)?
- f) What ideas do you have to improve the way you performed that line in order to get a mark of 10 for your acting?

Lesson 6: Bringing a chorus to life using vocal and physical skills, part two

Activity 1: Performance

Allow a brief run-through of the performance at the start of the lesson and then each group will show their choric ode to the rest of the class. Discuss each group's performance afterwards and highlight group and individual moments of success. After each performance choose one class member to give the group a piece of advice that would help them refine their performance and to give them a mark out of 10 (but remember they are not allowed to give 7). Film them if possible.

Activity 2: Reflection

In the computer room, or on tablets if possible, ask the students to complete the shared document. Before completion, it is useful to run through a few basic terms to help them with their written work (tone, pitch, pace, volume, pause, facial expression, gesture, stance, body language, etc.). I would recommend having these permanently on the wall. This exercise is excellent preparation for question 2 on the set texts section of the AQA GCSE Drama Component 1 written exam.