

Staging an ancient Greek play



The theater of Dionysus, Athens (Saskia, Ltd.)

Imagine you are a tragic poet named Agathocles and you want to put on a tragedy in Athens at the festival of the greater Dionysia (the end of March). Here are the steps you would follow to put on the play.

1. Decide what plays you want to stage.

You first have to decide what plays you want to put on. Tragic poets normally presented their plays in groups of four: three tragedies and a satyr play (a humorous treatment of a mythological theme). Some tragic poets, like Aeschylus, presented their plays as part of a connected trilogy + satyr play, e.g. the **Oresteia**, which dealt with successive stages in the fall of the house of Atreus (the **Agamemnon**, **Libation Bearers**, **Eumenides**), and the satyr play **Proteus** (now lost). Other tragic poets often presented three tragedies and a satyr play which were unconnected thematically, e.g. Euripides, who in 431 BC presented the **Medea**, **Philoctetes**, **Dictys**, and **Theristae** (the latter three plays have been lost). After thinking for a while, you decide you want to write four plays based on ancient stories: the tragedies **Achilles**, **Helen**, and **Theseus**, and a satyr play called the **Amazons**. You write up a synopsis of the plot of each play.

2. Submit your proposal to the archon eponymos.

Since plays were publically funded in Athens, you next submit your proposal to a polis official called the archon eponymos, (called "eponymos" because the year he served as archon was named after him, e.g., "in the year so-and-so was archon at Athens..."). This official was responsible for, among other things, regulating religious festivals including the Greater Dionysia. You and all of the other poets who wish to present plays at the next Greater Dionysia submit proposals, and the archon decides which three poets will get funding (out of the larger number who have submitted proposals). You submit your proposal and wait...some time later, you find out it is accepted. Congratulations! You don't celebrate too long, though, because you also find out the other two poets who are funded this year are Sophocles and Euripides. Euripides has his ups and downs, but Sophocles' plays rarely fail to get first prize. Oh Zeus!

3. Wait for the archon to select the choregos who will fund your play, and your star actor.

Ancient plays were publically funded, but in a peculiar way. The wealthiest families in Athens were subject to "**liturgies**", or special taxes, to fund major public expenses, including supporting a trireme (warship) for a year, and funding a play. The wealthy usually accepted this burden willingly as a public service, and also because it allowed them to win and maintain popularity if they carried out their duties with distinction. You pray to Dionysus and Athena that you get a good patron, or **choregos**, who will not be stingy with the finances. It costs money to pay three skilled professional actors, to train the chorus, to get good costumes, and

to create effective scenery. Ever since Aeschylus, your fellow Athenians have been used to more and more elaborate scenery and special effects, and you know it will be tough to win without them. Again, you wait awhile...and learn you have been favored by the gods: your choregos is Androgenes, known for his generous support. The poet he funded ten years ago put on a great set of plays, and won first prize!

You are also relieved for another reason: you were assigned a good star actor. It was also the archon's job to make sure that all three poets had good acting talent to work with. Three strong actors were selected by the archon, and then distributed by lot to the three poets. Again, you are relieved because you are assigned Callipides, a promising young actor, though you worry a little because he has been criticized by older actors due to his tendency to overact. You will have to watch him.

4. Finish writing the plays.

Gee, it seemed so thrilling when your plays were selected by the archon. But now you have to write them, and you are having writer's block. How can you possibly write plays that are as good as those Sophocles and Euripides are writing? You settle down, and in a dream one night Dionysus appears to you and says not to worry. He will make sure the Muses smile on you. The next day, your writing begins to go better. Your **Achilles** takes shape, and you decide to focus on the events leading up to and including when Achilles and Priam meet in Achilles' tent. The problem you decide to pose is whether Achilles changes as a hero or not. You decide you will show he has changed, and that you will make it clearer than Homer does at the end of the **Iliad**. Your **Helen** presents more of a problem, because Euripides has already done in years past a couple of brilliant plays with Helen as the central character. Which part of Helen's life will you focus on? The Muses do smile on you, though, just as Dionysus said they would. You decide that you will write about an event from the early life of Helen, when she and her sister Clytaemestra were young and Helen was wooed by Menelaus. You finish the **Helen** relatively quickly and plow through the **Theseus** and your satyr play, the **Amazons**. The **Theseus** goes well (you focus on his abandoning of the Princess Ariadne on the island of Naxos on his way home from slaying the Minotaur in Crete), and you have a really good time writing the satyr play. As far as you know, this is the first satyr play about the Amazons, and you think showing the Amazons attacking a city while drunk is hilarious. You hope the audience will think so too.

5. Write the music and attend to many other details.

As the playwright, you are also responsible for writing the music for the choruses in your plays, choreographing the dance steps for the chorus, training the chorus, and rehearsing and directing the play. You are not a bad composer (since you studied with the great music teacher Damon), but you are having trouble figuring out the choreography. You ask yourself why you didn't pay more attention to how the chorus moved when you were young and had watched Aeschylus' **Oresteia**. The Furies had really danced well in the **Eumenides**! Your choruses will not dance that well, but you hope they will at least not be distracting to the audience.

6. Make sure the choregos attends to his duties.

Your choregos Androgenes has been working out well for the most part. He found 15 good people for the chorus, which is always made up of young Athenian male citizens. 10 of the young men have previous experience, and the five who are novices seem to have good voices and are quick to learn. Androgenes has also been willing to spend money adequately, if not as lavishly as you want. He has agreed to pay for new costumes, but wants you to try to find some used masks, since they are quite expensive. You promise to see what you can do. He also has agreed to pay Callipides and the other two actors you have hired well, so they won't have to wait tables in the agora while they are rehearsing the plays.

7. Rehearse, rehearse, rewrite, rehearse, rehearse.

Rehearsals are not going as well as you hoped. **Achilles** is taking shape, but **Helen** stinks. You can't decide if the problem is your writing, music, and choreography, or if Callipides is just a really bad actor. Maybe he really can't help overacting, but whenever he is playing Helen and speaks, the play seems more like a comedy than a tragedy. You try to rewrite some of the lines, but it does not seem to help. Androgenes has come to many of the rehearsals, and has started to butt in all the time. You have to remind him several times that although he is richer than you are, you are the poet, not he. It is only a few weeks before the Greater Dionysia, and you are panicking. You have heard from friends that Sophocles' and Euripides' rehearsals are going well, so well, in fact, that Euripides has sailed over to the island of Salamis for a week of vacation so he will be well rested for the Festival. You pray to Poseidon that his ship sinks.

8. Wait for the process of selecting the judges to take place.

While you have been in rehearsals, an important event has take place. The **Boule**, or Council of 500, has met and drawn up a list of citizens from each of the ten tribes who are eligible to be selected as one of the 10 judges (**kritai**) who will vote on the plays that you, Sophocles, and Euripides stage. To prevent bribery, the names of all eligible to be judges have been sealed in a jar, and the names of the ten who will be the actual judges will be drawn just before the plays begin. Androgenes attended the selection process, and was able to get some of his friends selected as potential judges. You hope a few of them get to be among the 10 judges!

9. Attend the proagon.

A moment of truth has arrived: the **proagon** is taking place. The proagon (literally, "event before the contest") was held one or two nights before the festival of the Greater Dionysia. It takes place in the Odeon, or covered concert hall, that Pericles has recently built next to the theater of Dionysus. You and your choregos Androgenes have gathered together all of your actors, chorus, and musicians, and you assemble at the Odeon. As you arrive, you see Euripides and his people in one corner of the Odeon, and Sophocles and his people in another. Your heart is pounding pretty fast, since this is the first time you have done this. One by one, each of the playwrights is called down on stage, along with their choregos, actors, chorus members, and musicians. Sophocles goes first, and there is thunderous applause as he announces the names of his four plays, and gives brief plot summaries. Euripides is greeted less warmly by the crowd. He does look tan and rested, but the audience jeers a bit when he is giving some of his plot summaries: he has the reputation of "messing with the myths" in ways Sophocles does not, and not everyone likes this. Your name is then called, and you descend to the stage with Androgenes, your actors, and the chorus. You tell yourself not to faint, and then announce the titles and give brief descriptions of your play. There is polite applause, but not much enthusiasm, since you have never put on plays at the festival before. Afterwards, you chat with Sophocles about what a jerk Euripides is. Sophocles is too nice to say much in response, but you are sure he agrees with you.

10. The Festival of the Greater Dionysia arrives.

Athens is going wild as it always does this time of year. The statue of Dionysus Eleuthereus ("Dionysus who brings freedom") is carried through Athens in a torchlight procession to the theater of Dionysus. The next day, there is a huge procession through the city in honor of Dionysus. Young girls from wealthy families bear golden baskets of offerings, citizens and metics march, and the choregoi (including your choregos, Androgenes), parade in brilliant robes. Huge models of phalloi are held aloft, symbolizing the procreative power of Dionysus. Also included in the procession are a bull and other animals who will be sacrificed in the theater precinct. The first few days of the festival involve a lot of partying and drinking, but you are really too

nervous to enjoy it much. You attend the **dithyramb** contests, in which 10 choruses of 50 men, and 10 choruses of 50 boys, sing dithyrambs (poems in honor of Dionysus) and compete for prizes. You try to listen, but you keep worrying about your **Helen**. Will Callipides be able to carry it off?

The night before the tragedies are to be staged, you can hardly sleep. The order of presentations have been selected by lot. Euripides will present his plays tomorrow morning, you will present yours the next morning, and Sophocles gets the coveted third position: he will present his plays on the last morning of the festival. You also learn from your friend Socrates, who seems to know everyone in the polis, that the order for the comedies has been set. Aristophanes will present his comedy tomorrow afternoon after Euripides' plays, Cratinus will present his the next afternoon, after your plays, and Eupolis will present his the day after, on the same day Sophocles is competing.

11. Attend the events which take place just before the plays are presented.

As you sit in the theater at dawn on the first morning of the plays, you are excited and nervous. Before the plays begin, there are a number of civic ceremonies. A piglet is sacrificed on an altar in the theater, and the ten **strategoï**, or generals, pour libations to the gods. Next, the yearly tribute (tax) paid by Athens' allies is spread out, talent by talent, over the floor of the orchestra in the theater. It is an amazing mass of silver, and it makes the spectators realize what a powerful and rich city they live in. After the tribute is gathered up, an official calls out the names of citizens who have benefited the city in the preceding year and have been voted a crown of honor, and then a final ceremony takes place. Young men, whose fathers had died in battle and who had been raised and educated at city expense, come forward dressed in hoplite armor and are presented to the city. Each of these ceremonies drives home to you and the other spectators the power of Athens, and tries to inspire you to act on its behalf.

12. The plays are presented.

Euripides' first play is finally beginning. As you gaze around the theater of Dionysus, you see an amazing spectacle. On the stage, a single actor begins his prologue, and the chorus is about to appear and dance in the orchestra. In the **theatron**, or seating area, 17,000 or so people, mostly Athenian male citizens, but also including some women, metics (resident non-citizens), foreigners, and slaves, are watching. Sitting in special seats in the front are the priest of Dionysus, and the 10 judges who have been selected (You are in luck - three of them are Androgenes' friends - thank you Dionysus!). As you gaze behind you over your shoulder, the acropolis and the Parthenon loom over you. What a great polis - now if only Euripides' plays don't do too well! No such luck, though. Euripides has really outdone himself with this group of plays. Who would have thought he would really have Hecuba turn into a dog at the end of the play? The audience seems shocked and thrilled at the same time. Some spectators do boo at the ending, though, so maybe you have a chance. The other three plays of Euripides go better, though, so you feel not so good. You decide to skip the Aristophanes comedy in the afternoon, and go home to worry and try to sleep. The big day is tomorrow.

After another night of not much sleep, you rise very early. Today is the day. You get to the theater well before dawn, and make sure everyone is there: the chorus, the actors, and the flute player. The audience streams into the theater, dawn is just breaking, and your first play begins. The **Achilles** has started. Callipides is brilliant as Achilles. He has the voice and gestures down just right, and from backstage you can hear the sobs from the audience as Achilles comforts Priam on the death of Hector. The applause after the play is strong, and you think to yourself that it is hard to go wrong when you base a play on Homer. You quickly help the stage people change the scenery. The next play (**Helen**) is the tricky one, though: Callipides had never been able to get Helen right in rehearsals. He doesn't start too badly, but in the crucial scene when Helen accepts Menelaus' marriage proposal and Helen's maid goes into a prophetic frenzy, predicting the death of thousands

of Greeks and Trojans because of the wedding, he gets the tone all wrong. He makes Helen sound like she wants all those people to die - Oh Zeus! The applause for the **Helen** is much lighter than for the **Achilles** (there are even a few jeers). You feel depressed, but hope the **Theseus** and the **Amazons** go better. When all the plays are over, you are excited and relieved. You doubt you will come in first, but you hope you won't come in last. You have to wait for tomorrow to hear what the verdict of the judges will be.

13. The judging takes place.

The next day, after Sophocles presented his plays in the morning (brilliantly written, as usual, unfortunately - no one creates heroes like he does), and Eupolis presented his comedy in the afternoon, the judging takes place. Each judge scratches onto his voting tablet his rankings of the plays, and then drops the tablets into an urn. The archon then draws out five tablets at random, and announces who won first place, second place, and third place in the tragic competition. No surprise about first place: Sophocles is awarded a first, as usual. Then you are completely amazed. In spite of Callipides' bad acting in the **Helen**, you are awarded second prize - wonderful considering this is your first tragic competition! Euripides looks shaken when he is announced as the third place finisher. You prefer to think it was your talent that beat him, but you also think something Socrates told you might be right: the Athenians have a hard time understanding his plays. Sophocles and his choregos are crowned with wreaths of ivy in the theater to great applause.

14. Go to the cast party, and begin thinking about next year.

That night there is a huge cast party at Androgenes' house. Everyone drinks late into the night, celebrating the second place finish, and most people fall asleep before dawn. Only you and Socrates, who somehow got invited to the party, remain awake, and you talk about the nature of pity and other tragic emotions for a number of hours. It is not fun, because Socrates, who had begun asking you about pity by praising the way you had written the scene between Achilles and Priam in the **Achilles**, has gradually become a real pest. How are you supposed to know what pity "really is", and whether it is a good thing to feel it or make other people feel it? The only way out of your predicament is to pretend to fall asleep until Socrates leaves, and you vow to yourself never to talk to Socrates again.

The next day there is one final gathering of the citizens in the theater at the end of the Greater Dionysia to review how the Festival went. The conduct of archon is discussed, and this year everyone agrees he did a great job. As you sit in the theater while an orator drones on praising the conduct of the archon, you begin to daydream about what plays you will propose to the archon for next year. You try to figure out how Sophocles does it, and begin to think about how you might write a play based on the Oedipus legend differently than he had done it a few years ago in his **Oedipus the King**. Maybe, you think, you could focus on Oedipus' encounter and murder of Laius on the road, or his meeting with the Sphinx outside of Thebes, or...

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