

GOT HOMER? Adventure Tales from Greek Mythology

Teacher Guide Grades K -6

About the Artists

BOXTALES THEATRE COMPANY uses masks, movement, storytelling and live music to present myths and folklore from around the world. Performers Matt Tavianini, Joanne Lubeck, and Michael Andrews combine their diverse talents to create a professional, high energy, highly interactive theatrical experience for youth and family audiences.

About the Program

Homer's *Odyssey* has been called one of the most important stories of Western civilization: over and over the Western imagination has returned to the story of Odysseus, the sea-bound warrior, and his ten-year journey from the terrible Trojan war to his home in Ithaca. In **Got Homer? Adventure Tales from Greek Mythology**, Greek hero Odysseus describes his adventures in his own words, acting out various episodes from Homer's epic. His encounters with Poseidon, Athena, Zeus, the Cyclops, Circe and the Sirens are all presented in the classic BOXTALES style. **Got Homer?** was directed by Jeff Mills with masks and puppets designed by Ann Chevrefils. BOXTALES brings these marvelous and vital stories to life using a wide variety of performance methods blending acrobatics, circus arts, shadow-puppetry, stilt-walking, and movement. **Got Homer?** effectively tells the eternal story of a man coming home from a world of war to a world of peace, and the journey that transforms him.

Objectives

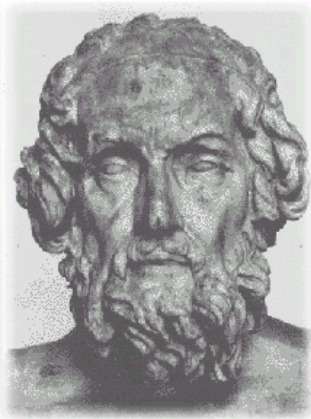
- To introduce students to classic stories from Greek Mythology
- To encourage students to seek out and read more mythology from all over the world.
- To help develop creative imaginations.
- To introduce the importance of oral tradition and theatre as an educational tool.
- To present stories that will help raise self-esteem and teach important lessons.
- Encourage students to identify character traits, attitudes, and situations that are true both in the story and in our present day society.

Preparation for the Program

Through the myths of a society an understanding of the culture can be reached. Stories older than the art of sailing itself, find their way into nearly every civilization during every age. These myths provide us with a window into each culture and into our own humanity.

Why are we fascinated with ancient Greece? Greek culture - its myths, theater, architecture, and sports - has influenced and inspired people for centuries, even millennia! We see the evidence of ancient Greece around us every day - in the constellations we identify in the heavens or the Olympic games held every four years; in the stories we tell and in the movies we see; in the architecture of our houses, churches, and public buildings and in our democratic system of government.

HOMER



Homer is believed to have been a blind poet who lived roughly 3,000 years ago; he wrote the *Odyssey* in the seventh century b.c.e. Homer lived in the Classical Greek period, and the period he describes in his epic poems is earlier still, his tales blending his own Olympian world and the Mycenaean world of the Trojan heroes. The *Odyssey* is an epic poem, a long narrative poem. Homer's two great epic poems, *The Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, tell the stories of heroes of an earlier age, the Mycenaean age. It was viewed in Homer's time as an age of greater men and greater connection to the gods. The Greeks traced the origins of their culture to this age, during which for the first time the peoples of the Aegean gathered together to form a Greek army, and defined themselves as such in opposition to their enemies.



The Stories

Invocation-

Pre-performance activities:

Read the *Odyssey*. Our preferred translation is that of Robert Fagles.

Discuss why the *Odyssey* is considered such an important text. What does it illuminate about the human condition? What makes it such a great story?

Discuss the idea of the gods : what role do the gods play? Why are they in the story? What do we lose by losing gods? With what have we replaced them?

Discuss the idea of the hero: how do we define heroes today? Who do we see as heroic? Discuss ways in which Odysseus does and does not fill the role of a hero. What are his heroic attributes? What are his unheroic qualities or choices?

Discuss the themes of identity and growth: Telemachus' growth from confusion and passivity to action and initiative; Odysseus' growth from a warrior focused on glory to a traveler focused on patience and attention, in order to attain his great desire and his final position of king focused on the health of his family and kingdom. Discuss other characters and whether they grow and learn over the course of the story: does Penelope change? What about Athene?

Discuss the role of the women in the story: how does Circe both hinder and then help Odysseus? What is her role? What is Penelope's nature, and how do we experience her? What is Nausicaa's role? What about Calypso?

Discuss the idea of death and the underworld: how do the ancient Greeks view life after death? What is life for?

As a class, listen to a recorded version of the *Odyssey* with the intention of discussing the difference between reading and hearing this story. How does the imaginative experience change? Which do the students prefer and why? How is it different than the experience of seeing a film of the story?

Students can be encouraged to keep a journal while reading and listening to the tale, thinking about parallels between their lives and the lives of the characters in the story, and aspects of the story that seem strange or wonderful to them, or true or false for our times.

Synopsis of our Play

In Homer's time, it would have taken a bard several days to tell the entire story of the *Odyssey* to their audience. BOXTALES tells an abridged version of the story in less than two hours with only five actors. Our version begins with an invocation to the Muse and goes directly to the assembly of the gods on Mount Olympus, where Athena convinces Zeus to help Odysseus get home. Athena then visits Telemachus and encourages him to take a hard line with the men who court his mother Penelope and then to go to visit Menelaus and Helen in Sparta to get news of his father.

Zeus sends Hermes to demand that Calypso set Odysseus free. Odysseus builds a raft and drifts his way toward the island of the Phaeacians. Poseidon destroys Odysseus' raft and our hero is washed up on the Phaeacian shore, a naked, broken man. Princess Nausicaa finds him on the beach and takes him to the palace. King Alcinous and Queen Arete offer Odysseus hospitality and listen as he tells his fantastic story of the voyage home from Troy.

Odysseus tells of his encounters with all kinds of beings: the Cicones; the Lotus Eaters; the Cyclops; Aeolus, master of the winds; Circe the enchantress; Tiresias and others in the underworld; the Sirens; Scylla; Charybdis; and the cattle of the Sun. (Homer's story includes many other adventures not included in our version.) Mesmerized by his tale, the Phaeacians send Odysseus home on one of their ships and he finally arrives back in Ithaca.

Once Odysseus is home, he must find a way to defeat the suitors, reunite with his son and his wife, and start living his peaceful life as king of Ithaca again. He is transformed by Athena into an old beggar and goes to his palace, where he and Telemachus maneuver the suitors into a weak position and slaughter them all in battle. The dead suitors are taken to the underworld and Odysseus is finally reunited with Penelope.

Character List

Aeolis: Master of the winds.

Agamemnon: King of Mycenae, killed by his wife Clytemnestra upon his return from Troy.

Achilles: Greatest Greek warrior, commander of the Myrmidons, killed at Troy.

Alcinous: King of the Phaeacians known for hospitality.

Anticleia: Odysseus' mother, who died while he was away at Troy.

Antinoos: "Ringleader" of Penelope's suitors.

Arete: King Alcinous' wife, known for her kindness and beauty.

Argos: Odysseus' old hunting dog.

Athena: Olympian goddess of wisdom; Odysseus' divine helper

Calypso: Nymph who keeps Odysseus on her island, wanting him for her husband.

Circe: Goddess/Witch who turns Odysseus' men into pigs, then becomes his lover and teacher.

Demodocus: Bard of Phaeacia.

Eumaius: Swineherd; a faithful servant of Odysseus.

Eurycleia: Faithful old nursemaid of Odysseus and his family

Eurymachos: One of the cruelest of Penelope's suitors.

Helen: Queen of Sparta, cause of the Trojan War: "the face that launched a thousand ships."

Heroism: Olympian god, messenger of Zeus.

Lotus Eaters: Legendary people who lived by eating the fruit of the lotus, which caused a drug-like stupor and a forgetfulness of home.

Menelaus: King of Sparta.

Mentes: Name assumed by Athena when she first appears in disguise to Telemachus.

Mentor: Ithacan elder; possessed by Athena, he helps Telemachus on his journey.

Nausicaa: Daughter of King Alcinous and Queen Arete.

Odysseus: Protagonist, hero of Trojan War, unable to return home: “Man of twists and turns.”

Penelope: Odysseus’ faithful and clever wife, mother of Telemachus.

Phemius: Bard of Ithaca.

Poseidon: God of the sea; bears a lasting grudge against Odysseus. Often called “Earthshaker.”

Polyphemus: Cyclops, son of Poseidon.

Telemachus: Odysseus’ son: “a fine-looking boy” approximately twenty years old.

Tiresias: Blind Theban prophet, encountered by Odysseus in the underworld.

Zeus: King of the Olympian gods, father of Athena.

Locations, Vocabulary and Key Concepts

Ithaca: Island home of Odysseus.

Sparta: Mainland home of Menelaus and Helen.

Ogygia: Island home of Calypso.

Olympus: Mountain in Greece where the gods live.

Scheria: Island of the Phaeacians. Land of milk and honey.

Bard: Musician and storyteller. Very important, well-respected in ancient Greece.

Mentor: special teacher or leader.

Philoxenia: hospitality.

Text and Textile: same root - telling stories, weaving stories.

Heroism: in an epic, a comic hero rather than a tragic hero.

Epic: Magic or divine nature of life, life infused with divinity, so larger than ordinary life.

Recklessness versus Measure.

Identity versus Oblivion.

Family and Community versus Isolation and Loneliness.

Immortality versus Mortality.

Destiny versus Free Will or Randomness.

Cunning versus Brute Strength.

Pride versus Patience.

Passivity versus Assertiveness.

Follow-Up Ideas and Activities

These topics can either be discussed as a class or used as essay topics:

Discuss how the theatrical version of the story was different from the read/heard version and how that changed the experience of the story. What became more and less important? How was its effect different for the audience member?

Discuss the idea of the hero: how do we define heroes today? Who do we see as heroic? Discuss ways in which Odysseus does and does not fill the role of a hero. What are his heroic attributes? What are his unheroic qualities or choices? How did the play deal with these issues? Do you consider him to be a hero? Has your idea of the heroic changed by experiencing this work? If the hero, with Odysseus, moves from slaying everything to understanding everything in the words of Roberto Calasso, how does Odysseus' journey reflect this growth toward a new idea of the hero?

The *Odyssey* begins and ends with Telemachus' journey: where does he start? Where does he end? What does he learn about himself, his father, and his world along the journey?

A large section of the *Odyssey* is devoted to Odysseus' telling of his story. Why is this important for him? What does he learn in telling his story? And how does that link to the idea that we all have a story and it is important that we can tell it?

Research war and its effects: there are stories of Vietnam and the Gulf War and the difficulties veterans encounter on returning with their experiences of war to a culture of peace. Discuss your findings and how they coincide or differ from Homer's description of the experiences of Odysseus and his men? Are there parallels between our veterans and Homer's veterans? Do you see things that evoke Lotus Eaters, sirens, cyclops?

“Without monsters and gods, art cannot enact our drama. When they were abandoned as untenable superstitions art sank into melancholy.” This is a quote from Mark Rothko, a great contemporary painter. Discuss this idea in terms of Homer and contemporary storytellers: what is lost with the loss of gods and monsters? What are they replaced with in today's stories?

Write a review of BOXTALES' the *Odyssey*. This should include a discussion of Homer's story, and the choices made to turn that tale into a performance. What was lost and gained in the movement from spoken text to drama? What were the strengths and weaknesses of the production? What would you have changed/kept?

Write an Odyssey of your own: Choose a journey, and make five detailed journal entries about the locations you go to, the adventures you have, and the things you learned through each adventure. Make a map of the voyage. This can be either a real or an imaginary odyssey.

Research costume, food, weapons, plants, architecture, pottery, any aspect of Mycenaean culture that interests you, and prepare a visual and textual study of that aspect of the culture.

Storytelling festival: Each student can choose a portion of the *Odyssey* or another epic tale and prepare it to present for the class. It can be taped and performed, and if students want it can be taken into the community.

Resources/Bibliography

Alums, Larry. *The Epic Cosmos*. Dallas: Dallas Institute Publications, 1952.

Boitano, Piero. *The Shadow of Ulysses*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994.

Edinger, Edward. *The Eternal Drama*.

Homer. *The Odyssey*. Translated by Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin Books, 1996.

Kerenyi, Karl. *The Gods of the Greeks*. London: Thames and Hudson, 1951.

Shay, Jonathan. *Odysseus in America*. New York: Scribners, 2002.

Yarnall, Judith. *Transformations of Circe*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994.

There is a wonderful teacher's guide to the *Odyssey* by Victoria Allen online:

http://www.penguinclassics.co.uk/nf/shared/WebDisplay/0,,82503_1_10,00.html

There is a lovely introduction to Mycenaean culture at:

<http://www.wsu.edu/~dee/MINOA/MINOA.HTM>

<http://www.mythweb.com/odyssey/>

<http://library.thinkquest.org/19300/data/homer.htm>