

**BOXTALES THEATRE COMPANY
DIGITAL ASSEMBLY LEARNING GUIDE**

The Odyssey

Grades 8 - 12

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, Jeff Mills, Joanne Lubeck, Jenny Sauer-Klein 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. The *Odyssey* has influenced some of the greatest artists in Western history: Dante, Goethe, James Joyce, the Coen Brothers in our day, have all used the *Odyssey* and its characters to build their own works of art, finding the story a fruitful vessel to explore their own cultural milieu. Boxtales' *The Odyssey*, directed by renowned director Peter Lackner, with masks and puppets designed by Ann Chevrefils, costumes designed by Lesley Finlayson, and lights designed by Jon Retsky, brings this marvelous and vital story to life on stage with a vast array of theatrical techniques and spectacular visual elements, in the belief that our understanding of our own times can be enriched through this ancient and timeless story.

Boxtales' *The Odyssey* combines a wide variety of performance methods, blending acrobatics, circus arts, shadow-puppetry, stilt-walking, movement arts and ritual forms, and a wide variety of instrumentation, to create a work full of spectacle and surprises. At the same time, it 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, as well as the story of those left behind: his son who must grow up without a father and his wife who tries to protect their kingdom and who longingly awaits his return.

Program Goals

The overall goal of our program for the *Odyssey* is to give students a deeper understanding of this classic work of Western literature and how it illuminates the human journey. Specifically, by the end of their time with us, the students will:

- Have a firm grasp of the plot and be able to tell the basic story from memory.
- Know the names of the main characters and locations.
- Be able to identify character traits, attitudes, and socio-political situations that are true both in the story and in our present-day society.
- Become familiar with the concept of “The Hero’s Journey,” Joseph Campbell’s term for the basis of hero tales from antiquity to our times.
- Identify with the character of Telemachus (the archetypal teenager who is initiated into adulthood) and be able to express how their own lives are like or unlike his.
- Have an overall impression of ancient Greek culture and how our current notion of democracy and individual freedom was invented by the Greeks.
- Be able to link the idea of war and peace in Homer to our own notions of war and peace in the world today.
- Be inspired to seek out and read more mythology from all over the world.
- Be inspired to become active in attending performing arts events.
- Become advocates for the arts.

Preparation for the Program

When we think of Greek culture today, we think most commonly of the Greece of the Hellenistic period, which was at its height in the 5th century b.c. This is the period in which the philosopher Plato wrote his works on love and the soul, the sculptor Praxiteles carved his miraculous marble figures, and the great playwrights of the tragedies competed for honors at the Festivals for Dionysus. The Hellenistic period saw the birth of democracy as the most reasonable form of government, and the development of the legal system, with the new idea of trial by a jury of peers rather than blood revenge as a means of arriving at justice. This civilization, the basis of Western civilization, was unknown to Homer, and the world of the *Odyssey* is one of very different ideas about law, government and philosophy.

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. 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 Mycenaean Age, or the era of the Achaeans, was at its peak in the 12th century b.c. The Mycenaeans conquered the Minoans, an immensely advanced people whose goddess worshiping, matrilineal culture included printed texts, sophisticated court life, running water systems, and strange and beautiful artworks. The Mycenaeans derived much of their culture from the Minoans, but whereas the Minoans were peaceful the Mycenaeans were warriors, conquering other cultures all around the Aegean area. Their most famous battle was the Trojan War, immortalized in Homer's *The Iliad*.

The Iliad tells the story of the Trojan War, in which Odysseus participated. The Greeks went to Troy to get back Helen, the wife of Menelaus, who was abducted by Paris, prince of Troy. Menelaus, his brother Agamemnon, and the group of Greek kings who had sworn to band together, all went to Troy. This coming together of the Greek leaders as one people united against the Trojans was seen by later Greeks as a main origin of Greek identity. The Greek army hoped to conquer Troy quickly, but the walled city proved impenetrable to their attacks. The Greek army fought outside Troy for ten years, and then Odysseus devised the plan of the Trojan Horse: the Greeks pretended to leave, but hid in the wooden horse, which the Trojans brought into their walled city, believing it to be a gift from Poseidon. In the night the soldiers climbed out, let the rest of the Greek soldiers in through the gate, and destroyed the city. Helen was brought home, and we encounter her and Menelaus in the *Odyssey*. Other participants in the battle never returned, and Agamemnon, commander of the Greek army, made it home but met a gruesome end: his wife, in retaliation for the sacrifice by Agamemnon of their daughter, slaughtered him in his bath. The *Odyssey* follows the story of Odysseus' attempt to get home after the Trojan War.

Rite of Passage

“One of the themes of *The Odyssey* is the development of Telemachus from an incompetent boy into a mature, responsible adult. Students can identify with the fact that he begins to accept more responsibility as he grows up. He is trying to figure out who he is and what he should do with himself, especially in the absence of his father. Students who live in a one-parent home can identify with his dilemmas. They may also recognize some of Penelope's and Odysseus's situations and feelings, especially those of helplessness, mistrust, and yearning. The value of family and home in the epic can be stressed in the classroom.” – Victoria Allen

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

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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>