

# CAMBRIDGE GREEK PLAY 2022

Aeschylus' Persians and Euripides' Cyclops

# EDUCATION PACK



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Cambridge Arts  
Theatre

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The 2022 Cambridge Greek Play **Persians** and **Cyclops**  
19<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup> October 2022, 2.30 and 7.30pm

Tickets for schools and students: £23 Other tickets: £28 /32/35

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[www.cambridgegreekplay.com](http://www.cambridgegreekplay.com)

Director: Danial Goldman

Producers: Jennifer Wallace, Rebecca Laemmle

Composer: Alex Silverman

Set and Costume: Jemima Robinson

Associate Set Designer: Georgie White

Lighting Designer: Richard Williamson

Cyclops Design: Alex Genn-Bash

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# AESCHYLUS' PERSIANS

## *Persians* by Aeschylus 472BC

### Synopsis

The *Persians* is set in Susa, one of the capitals of the Persian Empire. The play opens with a choral ode, sung by the chorus of old men from Susa who are waiting for news on the emperor Xerxes' expedition to Greece. They are soon joined onstage by queen Atossa, the mother of Xerxes and widow of the former king, Darius. Atossa narrates a dream that she has had highlighting how anxious she is about the situation – this dream scene is particularly interesting as it is thought to be the oldest dream sequence in European drama.

After we are told of the dream, a tired messenger arrives offering a detailed description of the Battle of Salamis (480 BC), a key sea battle between the Persians and the Greek fleet (headed by the Athenians). He describes the Persian defeat, recites the names of the Persian generals who have been killed in a long catalogue, and announces that Xerxes has survived and is on his way back home.

Atossa then goes to the tomb of Darius, and asks the chorus to summon his ghost, which they do. On learning of the Persian defeat, the ghost of Darius condemns the *hubris* (arrogance towards the gods) behind his son's decision to invade Greece. In particular

he criticises the impious decision to build a bridge over the Hellespont for the Persian army to more quickly enter Greece. Before departing, the ghost of Darius prophesies another Persian defeat at the Battle of Plataea (479 BC).

The rest of the play shows King Xerxes alone with the chorus engaged in a *kommos* (a type of lamenting song) that mourns the enormity of Persia's defeat by the Greeks.



Figure 1. Relief of an Achaemenid king, most likely Xerxes I, the National Museum of Iran

## Activities

Using the synopsis, come up with a description of each character in two sentences.

Imagine what King Xerxes would say to each of the other characters (i.e., Atossa, the chorus of Persians, and even the ghost of Darius) when he sees them again after his defeat at the battle of Salamis. Write them out like a play; you might like to act them out.

## Context: The Persian Wars and The Battle of Salamis

### Persian Wars

The play is set during a period often described as the Persian (or Greco-Persian) Wars. The Persian Wars stretched from the Ionian Revolt in 499 BC to the Peace of Callias, a treaty between the Greeks and the Persians in 449 BC.

The conflict started when the Ionians, Greeks living in cities and on islands east of Anatolia on the edge of the Persian empire, were incited to revolt against their Persian sponsored tyrant rulers. The cities of Ionia had been brought under the influence of the Persian Empire by the Emperor Cyrus the Great in 547 BC and their position in between Greece and Persia led to much conflict throughout the Persian

wars and beyond. The result of this particular revolt was a network of alliances between the Greek states and a desire by the Persian Emperor to bring the edge of his empire under control.

There followed two invasions of the Greek mainland by The Persian empire, the first under the direction of King Darius and the second personally led by his son King Xerxes. Though the Persian forces gained many successes during these invasions, including at one point holding power over the majority of Greece, ultimately the Greeks were able to prevail and expel the Persians from their land.

## Activities

Create a timeline of key events in the Persian wars.

Key events to include:

The Battle of Marathon  
The Battle of Plataea  
The Second Persian Invasion  
The Ionian Revolt  
The Battle of Thermopylae  
The Peace of Callias  
The Battle of Salamis

The First Persian Invasion  
The Battle of Artemisium  
The Battle of Mycale  
Foundation of the Delian League  
Performance of Aeschylus' Persians  
The Battle of Eurymedon

*These events are not listed in chronological order and some are periods of history rather than one off events. Be creative in how you illustrate this on your timeline.*

## Battle of Salamis

The Battle of Salamis was a naval battle fought between the Greek city-states led by Themistocles of Athens and the Persian Empire under King Xerxes. It resulted in a decisive victory for the outnumbered Greeks. The battle was fought in the straits between the mainland and Salamis, an island near Athens.

Until this point in the war the Greeks had suffered heavy losses at the Battles of Thermopylae and Artemisium and the Persians had conquered Greek territories of Phocis, Boeotia, Attica, and Euboea.

Although heavily outnumbered, the Greek fleet were persuaded by the Athenian general Themistocles to fight the Persians at sea again.

The Persian navy tried to block both entrances to the straits of Salamis where the Greeks were stationed but, in this narrow area, the large size of the Persian fleet hindered them, as their ships struggled to manoeuvre and became disorganised. By contrast, the

Greek fleet were able to stay organised and scored a decisive victory.

After the battle, Xerxes retreated to Asia with the majority of the army. One of his generals, Mardonius, was left behind to govern the areas of Greece the Persian invasion had conquered and to complete the conquest of Greece. The following year, 479 BC, the remaining Persian army was defeated at the Battle of Plataea and the Persian navy at the Battle of Mycale. The Persians made no further attempts to conquer the Greek mainland.

Thus, the Battle of Salamis is often considered a turning point in the Persian Wars.

### Fun Fact:

**Aeschylus, who was the playwright of *Persians*, actually fought in the battles of Salamis and Plataea on the Greek side.**



*Figure 2. Kaulbach, Wilhelm von - Die Seeschlacht bei Salamis - 1868*

## Activities

Take a look at these passages describing the battle of Salamis:

“...The first rammer was a Greek,  
Which sheared away a great Sidonian’s crest;  
Then close, one on another, charged the rest.

At first the long-drawn Persian line was strong  
And held: but in those narrows such a throng  
Was crowded, ship to ship could bring no aid.

...  
Nay, with their own bronze-fangèd beaks they made  
Destruction; a whole length of oars one beak  
Would shatter; and with purposed art the Greek  
Ringed us outside, and pressed, and struck; and we –  
Our oarless hulls went over, till the sea  
Could scarce be seen, with wrecks and corpses spread.

The reefs and beaches too were filled with dead,  
And every ship in our great fleet away  
Rowed in wild flight.”

- Aeschylus’ *Persians* 409–423, trans. Gilbert Murray

“The majority of the ships at Salamis were sunk, some destroyed by the Athenians, some by the Aeginetans. Since the Greeks fought in an orderly fashion by line, but the barbarians were no longer in position and did nothing with forethought, it was bound to turn out as it did. Yet the Persians were brave that day, much braver than they had been at Euboea, for they all showed zeal out of fear of Xerxes, each one thinking that the king was watching him.

...  
In this struggle, the general Ariabignes, son of Darius and the brother of Xerxes, died. Many other famous men of the Persians and their allies also died, but only a few Greeks, since they knew how to swim. Those whose ships were sunk swam across to Salamis, unless they were killed in action, but many of the barbarians drowned in the sea since they did not know how to swim. Most of the ships were sunk when those in the front turned to flee, since those marshalled in the rear, as they tried to go forward with their ships so they too could display some skill to the king, ran afoul of their own side's ships in flight.”

-Herodotus’ *Histories* 8.86, trans. A.D. Godley with some amendments for clarity.

Compare these two passages. What are the similarities and differences between these two accounts of the battle of Salamis? Why do you think there are differences? Which account of the battle do you think is more accurate? (Some things to consider include where each writer got their information, the reason each writer is telling their version of events etc.)

If you were going to write an account of the battle of Salamis and what it meant to the Persian Wars how would you do it? Would you write a historical account like Herodotus, a play like Aeschylus, or something else like a poem or song? What perspective would you write from and why?

Do some more research and write your own account of the battle of Salamis.

### Humanising the Barbarian: Imperial propaganda or sympathetic portrayal

Aeschylus' play was first performed at the Athenian City Dionysia, a festival which celebrated Dionysus and was attended by Athenians as well as people from throughout the Greek world. The Athenians used this festival as an opportunity to collect tribute from allied states and display their wealth and power to all who attended.

This performance context encourages us to consider why Aeschylus

presented the Persians in the way that he did. Many people have been surprised by the sympathetic nature of his portrayal of the Persians, in particular Xerxes, at a time when one would expect the Athenians to be buoyed by their successes against them. So, is the play as sympathetic as it seems? Or is it simply a work of Athenian imperial propaganda? Let's take a look at the arguments on either side:

Imperial Propaganda	Sympathetic Portrayal
<p>It is possible that the portrayal of Xerxes is actually mocking rather than sympathetic. We see Xerxes lamenting the fall of his empire and crying in a way that is typically associated with women. This emasculates Xerxes and encourages the Athenians to feel superior because of their victory and disdain towards their un-manly enemy.</p>	<p>It is a tragedy and not a comedy, meaning that its more likely that the audience is meant to view the play as sad and/or tragic. Xerxes is treated like a tragic hero and just like with other tragic heroes the audience is meant to feel sympathy towards them. His lamenting isn't comic and can be compared to the mourning of Priam in the <i>Iliad</i> for example.</p>
<p>The play highlights the <i>hubris</i> of Xerxes, presenting him as impious and rash. Even his father despairs of his actions in attempting to punish the sea. The audience is encouraged to feel morally superior and see his defeat as an inevitable consequence of his own tyrannical and hubristic actions- his suffering is his own fault rather than that of the god-fearing democratic Athenians.</p>	<p>Many tragic heroes display some form of <i>hubris</i> and it is being used as a warning to the Greeks not to follow that example and face truly tragic consequences. By feeling sorry for the Persians, the audience is more likely to take this message into their own lives.</p>



If Aeschylus had written an overtly gloating play, that in itself may have been an example of *hubris*. So, writing sympathetically is a way of him (and by extension the Athenians) taking the high ground and proving themselves morally superior to Xerxes and the Persians.

Much of the action of *Persians* waiting on news of the battle and grief at the loss of men, could also have been recognised by the audience in relation to other battles during the conflict. They are encouraged to measure their own feelings against those of the Persians and recognise if they want to prevent their own suffering, they have to make their enemy suffer

By highlighting the common humanity between the Greeks and the Persians, and encouraging sympathy for Xerxes Aeschylus may be making a point about the nature of war and getting his audience to question the utility of the ongoing conflict with the Persian Empire. What are they fighting for? And is it worth it?

### Activities

Can you think of any other arguments about why Aeschylus may have presented the Persians in the way that he did? Think about other aspects of the play, e.g., the focus of the plot and the description of events, how do these feed into the arguments for either side?

Overall, which side of the argument convinces you the most and why?



*Figure 3. The Ghost of Darius Appearing to Atossa, drawing by George Romney.*



# EURIPIDES' CYCLOPS

## *Cyclops* by Euripides 412 or 408 BC

### Synopsis

The play is set in Sicily at Mount Aetna. Silenus, a horse-human hybrid creature, explains that he and his sons, the chorus, are slaves to a Cyclops called Polyphemus. Odysseus arrives on the island with his men and asks Silenus/the chorus where they can find food and water.

When Odysseus hears about the Cyclops terrorising the chorus and the likelihood of being eaten, he is keen to leave. However, Silenus is keen to trade the Cyclops' food for the wine Odysseus happens to have brought with him. When the Cyclops catches them in the act of trading, Silenus says that Odysseus has beaten him and is stealing the Cyclops' food, which he believes. Polyphemus decides to eat Odysseus and his men.

While the Cyclops eats the first two of Odysseus' men, and drags a drunk Silenus into the cave, Odysseus comes up with a plan to save himself, his remaining men, and Silenus by blinding the Cyclops. The satyrs agree to help to free themselves from slavery.

Odysseus calls on Hephaestus (the god of fire) and Hypnos (the god of sleep) to help him, then goes into the cave after Silenus and the Cyclops. The chorus, rather than helping with the blinding directly, offer to cheer him on. They successfully distract the Cyclops by mocking him, which allows Odysseus and his remaining men to escape. The satyrs agree to go with Odysseus and return to their servitude of the god Dionysus.



*Figure 4. A first century AD head of a Cyclops from the Roman Colosseum*

### Activities

Pick a scene from the synopsis above. Think about the sense in which it is funny, and how you might update or translate that humour for a modern production.

## Satyr Plays and Comedy

You will likely have heard of the usual genres of plays: tragedy and comedy. However, the Cyclops doesn't quite fall into either of those categories. Euripides' play is what is known as a satyr play, a third genre of ancient Greek drama that straddles the two genres.

The relationship between satyr plays and tragedy is strong; satyr plays were written by tragedians, and satyr plays were performed as the conclusion following the performance of a group of three tragedies. The satyr play's mythological-heroic stories and the style of language are also elevated in the same way as in tragedies. However, the connection with comedy is also significant – and with its happy endings, over the top characters, and toilet humour it is probably closer to a comedy in feel. A good way to think of a satyr play is as comedic supplement of tragic performances.

The genre of satyr play takes its name from its chorus which is made up of satyrs. In Greek mythology, a satyr is a male nature spirit with the ears, legs, and tail of a horse. They are typically exaggeratedly ugly and have mane-like hair and snub noses and are always shown naked, with a horse tail on their backside and their phalluses on full display. Satyrs were characterised as lovers of wine, music, dancing, and sex. They were companions of Dionysus and they often attempted to seduce nymphs and mortal women alike, typically with no success. Over the

course of Greek history, satyrs gradually became portrayed as more human and less bestial. Sometimes people confuse satyrs with the god Pan (who is a human-goat hybrid) or the later Roman nature spirits, fauns.

The introduction of a chorus of satyrs into a mythological scene is a key element of the satyr play genre. This adds comedic effect as they are driven by their own base instincts causing chaos for the other characters.



*Figure 5 Pronomos Vase, 400 BC, Naples, Museo Nazionale Archeologico. Depicting Satyrs dancing in the worship of Dionysus*

## Activities

Comedy has many different forms. How many can you think of? (Examples: Satire, Master/Servant, Farce, Slapstick/Physical, Musical Comedy.)

Discuss in groups your favourite comedy characters and shows. What makes them funny? What genre of comedy do they belong to? (Examples: Mr Bean – Physical comedy; Blackadder – Master/Servant; Simpsons – Slapstick and Satire)

Starting with a popular myth or story, think about how you would insert a chorus of satyrs. What humour would this bring? *For example, how could a troupe of satyrs help/hinder Little Red Riding Hood?*



*Figure 6. Terracotta kylix (drinking cup), ~490-480 BC Attributed to Makron depicting Satyrs and Maenads*

## Homer's Cyclops

The myth that is adapted into Euripides' satyr play is the story of Odysseus blinding the Cyclops. This myth was most famously told in an episode of Homer's *Odyssey*, which would have been well known to the audience at the time. In the play, Euripides very obviously alludes to the works of Homer. By acknowledging his sources, Euripides invites the audience to compare the two retellings of the myth and is another way of having an inside joke with the audience.

In the *Odyssey*, the Cyclops is brutish and alien to Odysseus and his crew. Odysseus relates the tale of the Cyclops to the Phaeacians as part of a longer series of stories about exploring the various lands they came across and how they interacted with, and assessed, native people. Polyphemus certainly comes across as one of the most 'uncivilised' and animalistic characters that the crew encounter on their journey – he lives lawlessly and eats raw human flesh! He is very firmly characterised as 'other' to Odysseus and therefore the Greek audience of the poem.

By contrast, Euripides' Polyphemus is a bit more complicated than this. While he still participates in eating Odysseus'

men and rejecting the Olympian Gods, he is also shown to be sophisticated and is a match for Odysseus in argument. He may not respect the laws or the gods but he has articulate reasons why he doesn't and some scholars have suggested that he is presented as a sophist of sorts. \* This erodes the 'otherness' of the Cyclops and makes us question who we as the audience identify with and helps us to question whether Odysseus' blinding of Polyphemus is justified. What is more, the fact that we now witness directly what happened on that island rather than having to take Odysseus' word for it as we do in the *Odyssey* also casts some doubt on Odysseus. Did he, for example, actually tie all those sheep together to enable his and his crew's escape under them or did he just tie them together in order to steal them more efficiently?

**\*Sophists were teachers in ancient Athens who were criticised for their abilities to win arguments through rhetoric, regardless of the true merits of what they were arguing for, and that they taught others to do the same.**



## Activities

Take a look at the following passages of the Cyclops eating Odysseus' men:

“...but sprang up and put forth his hands upon my comrades. Two of them at once he seized and dashed to the earth like puppies, and the brain flowed forth upon the ground and wetted the earth. Then he cut them limb from limb and made ready his supper, and ate them as a mountain-nurtured lion, leaving naught—ate the entrails, and the flesh, and the marrowy bones.”

- Homer's *Odyssey* 9.289-294. Trans. Murray.

“When that vile and murderous cook had everything ready, he snatched up two of my companions. He cut the throat of the first over the cauldron with a sweep of the arm and drained him of blood, the second he seized by the tendon at the end of his foot, struck him against the sharp edge of a rock, and dashed out his brains. Then butchering them with a fierce blade he roasted their fleshy parts in the fire and put their arms and legs in the cauldron to boil.”

-Euripides' *Cyclops* 395-404. Trans. Kovacs.

Compare the portrayal of the Cyclops in both of these texts. How is he the same character and how is he different? Why might Euripides have presented Polyphemus in a different way to the Homeric model?

Come up with your own version of the Cyclops with different characteristics – perhaps your Cyclops is female, or squeamish, or maybe even really jolly. Write a paragraph describing your Cyclops eating Odysseus' men and think about how your characterisation changes the scene.

*Figure 6. The Blinding of the Cyclops, Pellegrino Tibaldi, Ceiling of the Palazzo Poggi (c. 1549–51)*



## The Cyclops and Sicily: Historical context and political meanings

In Euripides play the Cyclops' home is in Sicily and is described as rugged, hostile, and desolate, devoid of wine. This is another change from the presentation in Homer (where the land of the Cyclopes is described as a sort of wild paradise). Not only is this not the same as the Homeric text, it is also not an accurate description of Sicily. During this period Sicily – in particular the city of Syracuse – was one of the major powers in the Mediterranean, with wealth and abundant resources.

So why did Euripides set his play in such scenery?

A definitive date for the play isn't agreed upon but it is fairly certain that this play was written and performed after the Athenians launched a disastrous expedition to Sicily in 415BC in which

the Athenians were defeated and lost a huge amount of manpower and resources. Many contemporary critics of the Sicilian expedition ascribed its motivation to imperial greed and ambition.

As we have mentioned before, in Euripides' version of the myth the Cyclops isn't necessarily presented as the 'other'. The audience is able to see parts of themselves in his behaviour. In 5<sup>th</sup> century Athenian drama, the metaphor of eating is typically used to portray political and/or imperial greed. Thus, the blinding of the Cyclops as a consequence of his greed and *hubris* can be read as a representation of the punishment the Athenians received in the form of defeat in Sicily and as a cautionary tale.

### Activities

Can you think of any other metaphors for political and/or imperial ambition? Explain your metaphor of choice.

# PRODUCING GREEK DRAMA

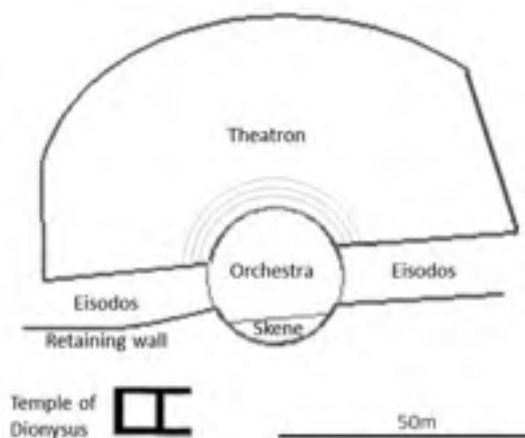
## Producing Greek Drama

### The original productions

The original staging of *Persians* and *Cyclops* would have taken place in spring in an open-air theatre just beneath the Acropolis in Athens. The audience – perhaps very roughly 5000 people – sat on benches in a roughly semi-circular arena, facing the *orchestra*, the central space where the chorus danced and sang. At the back of the *orchestra* was the *skene*, the stage-building. The *skene* had a door which characters could use to enter and exit. On each side of the *orchestra* was a

long *eisodos* (entrance-passage). Just further down the slope was Dionysus' temple.

All the actors, and probably all of the audience, were male. The actors wore elaborate costumes, and masks which fully covered their faces. The actors therefore could not use their own facial expressions to convey emotion; they relied on gesture and on skilful tilting of the mask which can appear to take on different expressions.



*The 5th Century Theatre*



## **Production: Activities**

If you were directing and designing a production of these plays, you would need to make various decisions about staging. In small groups, pick one of the following to focus on:

What time period would you set the plays in, in terms of costuming? What costumes would you choose?

How would you create effects such as the blinding of the Cyclops or the appearance of the ghost of Darius?

What music would you choose for the chorus's songs?

In each case, explain your answer. Would you answer differently if you were putting on the play in a huge open-air theatre like the one in Athens?

## **The Chorus: Activities**

### **Modern day choruses:**

The chorus serves myriad roles in Greek Theatre. They function as observers, emotional interpreters, commentators, companions, story-tellers and much more besides. In order to better understand the role of the chorus, discuss in a group what choruses that exist in modern life. Try to be as creative as possible! For example:

- A group of sports fans
- A class of students
- A group of old women playing bingo

### **Movement and the chorus:**

An effective way to begin thinking about how the chorus will move on stage is to look for examples of groups of animals moving as one in nature. This could include images of shoals of fish, flocks of birds, or sheep being rounded up by a sheepdog. In all these examples, the individual animal disappears as it becomes part of a homogenous group with its companions.

### **Mirroring**

Organise the class into pairs facing each other in a neutral position. Then, with no one in the pair being prescribed as leader, the students are to start moving slowly and to mirror their partner's movements, to experiment with speed and detail of movement, as well as to explore how effectively they can maintain synchronicity when using their peripheral vision.

## Shadowing

In pairs have your students stand one behind the other. The person at the front of the pair will move and the person behind follows and copies their movements exactly. When the person at the front rotates, the person at the back then becomes the leader. You can then extend this task by making the groups larger.

## Shoaling

Organise your students into groups of at least three people. Have them stand together in a tight clump. Whoever is at the front of the clump should then begin to move slowly and the rest of the group should join in with their movements. Whenever the clump turns, the new person at the front should take on the job of leading the movement, however, if conducted effectively it should look like there is no leader at all. Once the group have successfully synchronised into each other's movements, the chorus can begin to play with speed and different ways of travelling.

## Shoaling extension

Once the group has learned to move in unison encourage the individuals to not copy each other exactly, and instead to maintain a similar quality of movement. For example, if someone begins to run, the rest of the chorus may run too, but not in exactly the same manner. This will serve to naturalise, or humanise, the chorus.

## Chorus and vocals

Think about, and discuss, all the different ways a group can make sounds together. For example, a chorus can speak in unison, individuals can speak certain lines, a line can be spoken by an individual whilst the rest of the chorus hum. Then look at this passage spoken by the chorus of *Persians* and put your ideas into practice:

Therefore, doth my spirit mourn,  
Robed in darkness, stabbed with fear,  
Lest a cry the people hear,  
"Woe, woe;  
Woe for Persia's host forlorn,"  
Ringing through the wide unmanned  
Streets of Susa's lonely land.

And the ancient Kissian hold  
Shall reply with manifold  
Lamentation, murmuring,  
"Woe, woe,  
Woe for people and for King,"  
Till the women weep, and tear  
The fine linen robes they wear.

Aeschylus' *Persians* 532-540 Trans. Gilbert Murray

What works? What doesn't? What aural effects can you create?

Then go on to combine both vocals and movement.

## **Costume Design: Activities**

### **Non-Human characters**

Costume is designed to convey an immediate impression of characters: their nature, status and personality. *Cyclops* features primarily mythical creatures who need to stand apart from the world of mortals but still be realisable and practical on stage.

Discuss in groups of 4-5 how you would go about designing costumes for satyrs and the Cyclops. What are the ways you can show power? What are their recognisable features? How are they inhuman? How are they relatable on stage?

Write down or draw some ideas on what you could do for the following characters:

Polyphemus

Silenus

The Chorus of Satyrs

Here are some things to keep in mind:

*Are you setting your production in a particular period?*

*What themes are you focusing on?*

*Do your costumes all look like they're from the same play?*

*Is there a hierarchy of status?*

*Are the costumes practical to move around the stage with?*

*What props might the characters hold that would complement your costumes?*

### **Design in Greek Theatre**

Traditionally, all the actors were male. They wore elaborate costumes and masks which fully covered their faces. This meant that they could not use facial expression as a physical way of conveying meaning, but rather relied on gesture. Over time, new productions of Greek tragedies have moved away from these concepts.

### **Activity**

**The images on the next page are from past Cambridge Greek Plays and they show a range of ways of presenting a Chorus. What are the differences? How has the traditional masked form been conveyed? How is the concept of unity (see the Chorus activities page) presented?**

