00:00:00
TRANSCRIPT OF VIDEO FILE:

00:00:00
_____

00:00:00
BEGIN TRANSCRIPT:

00:00:00
[sil.]

00:00:00
WARNING This program is copyright under United States and applicable international laws. It is a violation of copying law to copy, duplicate, edit or broadcast this program for any reason or by any means without prior written consent of Films for the Humanities & Sciences.(r) The Federal Bureau of Investigations investigates allegations of criminal copyright infringement (Title 17, US Code, Sections 501-606)

00:00:15
[music]

00:00:15
(ffh logo) Films for the Humanities & Sciences (r)

00:00:35
[sil.]

00:00:35
(ffh logo) Films for the Humanities & Sciences (r)

00:00:35
This program discusses mature themes. Viewer discretion is advised.

00:01:00
[music]

00:01:10
NARRATOR In the pantheon of ancient Greece, one god represented freedom. The inventor of wine, he was the god of intoxication and divine ecstasy. He was also the god of fertility. His followers worshiped him in the wilderness, singing and dancing and wild rituals that culminated in bloody sacrifice. He was Dionysus. At first, the followers of Dionysus acted as a group, a chorus of worshipers singing and dancing together in praise of their god. But at some point, one of them stepped away from the chorus to become a solo performer. He sang and danced, not as himself but as a character from mythology while the others watched. At that moment, he became an actor and the event became theater.

00:02:20
[music]

00:02:20
THE DRAMA OF ANCIENT GREECE From Ritual to Theater

00:02:20
THE FESTIVALS OF DIONYSUS

00:02:25
NARRATOR A performer, impersonating a character, acting out a story in front of an audience, these are the building blocks of theater and we see them for the first time in the ancient rituals in honor of Dionysus. In time, something fascinating happened to these rituals. We don't exactly know when or how but they grew into major public events. They attracted larger and larger audiences, so large that special structures had to be built that could hold thousands of spectators. New emphasis was placed on the quality of the performances. Actors and dancers were paid to rehearse their parts and poets were hired to rework the familiar mythical stories into scripts that could be performed. By the fifth century B.C., these performances had become so important that twice a year all activities in the City of Athens came to a halt for the presentation of plays.

00:03:25
JEFFREY HENDERSON Chairman, Classical Studies Boston University

00:03:25
Jeffrey Henderson There were thousands of people participating. Ah, dancers, actors, playwrights, ah, and a very large audience. Ah, the Assembly of Athens contained about 6,000 people and the theater, ah, could accommodate 15,000 to 20,000. So when we think of a great theater, we have to think of a very large audience who've taken off a week, ah, in which all business of the city comes to a close and for that week, the only thing is the theater.

00:04:00
NARRATOR To accommodate the huge crowds that would attend these play festivals, a vast theater was built on the side of the Acropolis. Literally, in the shadow of the fortified temple that was one of the city's holiest places. This is the theater of Dionysus. Like most theaters, it was located on the slope of a hill, a natural amphitheater where a large audience could stand or sit and have a clear view of the performers. The space for the audience was called the theatron.

00:04:30
theatron

00:04:30
NARRATOR Literally, the seeing place. At the foot of the theatron was a circular playing area called the orchestra, or dancing place.

00:04:35

orchestra

00:04:40
NARRATOR Here the chorus would dance and chant the great choral odes of Greek drama. There may have been an altar at the center of the orchestra, a reminder of the theater's religious origins. From the very beginning, there was some kind of structure to the rear of the orchestra.

00:04:55
skene

00:04:55
NARRATOR This structure was called the skene, the root of our modern word "scenery." Most plays of this period are given exterior settings, like a house or a palace, and the skene came to represent these structures. To better create the illusion of a sumptuous building, the skene grew larger and more elaborate. It was used for actors' entrances and exits and might have included a balcony or other elevated places. The space in front of the skene was called the paraskene.

00:05:25
paraskene

00:05:30
NARRATOR This was the primary performance area for the actors. Today, a theater is considered large if it holds 2,000 people. The theater of Dionysus held 15,000 to 20,000 people. It was the largest gathering place in the City of Athens.

00:05:45
Athens

00:05:50
NARRATOR The performance of plays wasn't limited to Athens, not even to the country of Greece as we know it today. The borders and influence of ancient Greece extended across much of the Mediterranean. Hundreds of theaters were built throughout Asia Minor, testaments to the strong appeal of this new art form. Many of these theaters still exist. However, the best preserved is in the town of Epidaurus, southwest of Athens.

00:06:15
Epidaurus

00:06:20
NARRATOR Built in the fourth century B.C., the theater seats 14,000 and is still in use today. Epidaurus is famous for its superb acoustics. An actor speaking softly in the center of the orchestra can be heard clearly in the very last row. It's generally thought that these massive theaters were filled with men only, although some scholars now believe that women might have been in the audience as well. It is certain, however, that all of the performers were men, even those who played the famous women's roles like Antigone, Medea, Lysistrata. The two play festivals in Athens were called the Greater and Lesser Dionysia, which means

they were dedicated to Dionysus. So the connection between theater and the great god Dionysus remains strong. But why? Why was theater an appropriate way to worship Dionysus?

00:07:15
HELENE FOLEY Department of Classics Barnard College/Columbia University

00:07:20
Dionysus is a god who breaks down hierarchies among males and females, rich and poor, old and young, uhm, even between citizens and slaves. And I think tragedy, and comedy in particular, really conform very well to what Dionysus stood for, in the sense that they often, uhm, offer in their plots and the experiences they show terrible aversions of the norm, terrible and painful aversions of the norm. And this is part of what Dionysus stands for. A positive release and, uhm, an experience of the frighteningness of breaking down boundaries as well.

00:07:55
PETER MEINECK Artistic Director Aquila Theatre Company

00:08:00
Peter Meineck The Festival of Dionysus was a place where boundaries were allowed to be crossed, political boundaries, social boundaries, sexual boundaries.

00:08:10
NARRATOR This testing of boundaries, this constant self-evaluation had an important political dimension. In the fifth century B.C., the Athenians set out on a radical course. Their city-state would no longer be ruled by kings or tyrants. The government of Athens was placed in the hands of its people and Athens became the world's first democracy.

00:08:30
Jeffrey Henderson So it's a great century. It's a revolutionary century because this is the time when democracy was tried out, introduced, fought for and survived. And drama plays a role in the development of all of these dimensions of classical Athens and, therefore, the great age of Greece.

00:08:50
SOPHOCLES' ANTIGONE

00:08:55
NARRATOR Many tragedies from this period examined the potentially destructive nature of political power.

00:09:00
Creon My countrymen, the ship of state is safe.

00:09:05
Chorus Ah!

00:09:05
Creon The gods who rocked her after a long, merciless pounding in the storm have righted her once more.

00:09:15
Chorus Ah!

00:09:15
NARRATOR In Sophocles' tragedy Antigone, the character Creon comes to power after a lengthy siege of his city, Thebes.

00:09:25
Creon . . . respect for the throne as I am next in kin to the dead. I now possess the throne and all its powers.

00:09:35
NARRATOR This production of Antigone from the American Repertory Theatre in Cambridge, Massachusetts was directed by Francois Rochaix.

00:09:40
FRANCOIS ROCHAIX Associate Director American Repertory Theatre

00:09:40
Francois Rochaix I think I could live my life now with doing only Greek plays. I have the impression with Greek plays, I'm doing the most contemporary theater. Ah, and because I think the debates that are, ah, raised in these plays are really all the debates we have today, political, psychologically, socially, just in a, in a, in a deeper way, it goes, it goes further.

00:10:10
NARRATOR Near the beginning of the play, Creon makes a bold pronouncement regarding brothers who had fought on opposite sides of a battle that ended the night before.

00:10:20
Creon Closely akin to them, I have proclaimed just now, the following decreed to our people concerning the two sons of Oedipus, Eteocles who died fighting for Thebes, excelling all in arms. He shall be buried crowned with a hero's honors. The cups we pour to soak the earth and reach the famous dead.

00:10:35
Chorus Ho!

00:10:40
Creon But as for his blood brother Polyneices, who returned from exile, home to his father city and the gods of his race consumed with one desire to burn them roof to roots who thirsted to drink his kinsmen's blood and sell the rest to slavery; that man a proclamation has forbidden the city to dignify him with burial.

00:11:05

Chorus Ho!

00:11:05
Creon Mourn him at all. No, he must be left unburied. His corpse carrion for the birds and dogs to tear, an obscenity for the citizens to behold!

00:11:20
Francois Rochaix Creon wants to make an example. And, ah, so he, he decides that he will not--that Polyneices will not be buried. There is a little mistake, I think, political mistake. He underestimates--and I think oft--often leaders should remember this--he underestimates the kind of religious feelings, old feelings people have. Even if they are not in religion, it stays and it's shocking them.

00:11:45
Antigone And no one knows . . .

00:11:45
NARRATOR The decree is immediately violated by a woman, Antigone, the sister of the two dead warriors and the niece of Creon who made the decree. Antigone has buried her brother Polyneices. Before a chorus of townspeople, Creon, who has been king for less than a day, struggles to regain political control.

00:12:10
Creon You, tell me briefly. No long speeches. Were you aware a decree had forbidden this?

00:12:20
[sil.]

00:12:25
Antigone Well aware. How could I avoid it? It was public.

00:12:30
Creon And still you had the gall to break this law?

00:12:35
Antigone Of course I did. It wasn't Zeus not in the least who made this proclamation? Not to me. Nor did that justice dwelling with the gods beneath the earth ordain such laws for men. Nor did I think your edict had such force that you a mere mortal could override the gods, the great unwritten, unshakable traditions. They are alive. Not just today or yesterday, they live forever, from the first of time. And no one knows when they first saw the light. These laws, I was not about to break them. Not out of fear of some man's wounded pride and face the retribution of the gods. Die I must. I've known it all my life. How could I keep from knowing even without your death sentence ringing in my ears? And if I am to die before my time, I consider that a gain. Who on earth alive in the midst of so much grief as I could fail to find their death a rich reward?

00:13:50

Citizens Like father, like daughter. Passionate, wild. She hasn't learned to bend before adversity.

00:14:00
Creon Believe me, the stiffest, stubborn wills fall the hardest. The toughest iron tempered strong in the white, hot fire. You'll see it crack and shatter first of all. And I've known spirited horses you can break with a light bit, proud, rebellious horses. There's no room for pride, not with lord and master standing by. This girl was an old hand at insolence when she overrode the edicts we made public. But once she had done it, the insolence twice over to glory in it, laughing, mocking us to our face with what she had done. I am not the man, not now. She is the man if this victory goes to her and she goes free.

00:14:45
JOHN DOUGLAS THOMPSON American Repertory Theatre

00:14:45
John Douglas Thompson Part of Creon's--well, probably his biggest problem, is he's living in a society that's political where men are the aggressors and the political leaders, and women are entirely domesticated and left in the home. They do home things and they mourn when people die. He's almost like an old relic, because at the time that he comes to power, Thebes is changing. Because you have a woman like Antigone who is not following the rules of what women should do. And I think Creon, let's say, you know, his downfall, his tragic flaw is he lacks the ability to change with the times.

00:15:30
Antigone Creon? What more do you want than my arrest and execution?

00:15:35
Creon Nothing. Then I have it all.

00:15:35
Antigone Then why delay? Your moralizing repels me. Every word you say, I pray it always will. So, naturally, all I say repels you too. Enough. Give me glory. What greater glory could I win than to give my own brother decent burial? These citizens here would all agree. They would praise me too if their lips weren't locked in fear. Lucky tyrants.

00:16:10
NARRATOR An important device in Antigone and other Greek plays is the chorus. The chorus has its origins in the ancient rituals of Dionysus, where groups of people sang and danced in unison.

00:16:25
Chorus Is vast more deeply . . .

00:16:25
NARRATOR As Geek drama evolved, the chorus came to represent the greater community.

00:16:30

JEFFREY HENDERSON Chairman, Classical Studies Boston University

00:16:30
Jeffrey Henderson Choruses can be very fickle characters. In Antigone, ah, a play which has an unusually sharp, ah, difference of opinion, it's almost, ah, obsessively, ah, concerned with, ah, opposing points of view, ah, between one character and another. And here, if the chorus represents the community, uhm, we might expect some guidance as to how we're to think of what Creon wants and then what Antigone wants, but, in fact, the chorus seems to sympathize with both of them in turn. Uhm, in their long debate, uhm, the chorus says, well that makes a certain amount of sense. Yeah, that sounds good. And then, ah, when the other one launches very violently into an argument against that, the chorus goes, well maybe I was wrong to be too quick about this.

00:17:20
Chorus Ares rapture of battle, our right arm in the crisis.

00:17:30
NARRATOR Of course, that choral ode was originally written in the language of classical Greece. The references to mythology, history and other aspects of ancient life, may mean nothing to a modern audience. So how does a translator approach these problems? The American Repertory Theatre production of Antigone used a translation by Robert Fagles.

00:17:50
ROBERT FAGLES Arthur W. Marks '19 Professor of Comparative Literature Princeton University

00:17:50
Robert Fagles It's a difficult tight rope act the translator pursues. It's one of the reasons why people are drawn to translation, I think. It's what Yeats would call the fascination of the difficult. How fully can I honor something that is over 2,000 years old on the one hand and on the other, make it speak in my own contemporary language. Honor it on the one hand, honor my own poetic language--with any luck--on the other. It's forever a compromise. One of the hardest parts about translating Antigone is not only to reach out and touch Antigone herself, but to place her in her dramatic context. Hegel, as you know, argued that Greek tragedy in general, and Antigone in particular, represents the collision of the highest moral powers. But for me and for many others, it's Antigone, the woman, who dominates the stage with her eloquence, with her passion, with her position vis-a-vis the oldest gods, the great unwritten traditions that insist on the honoring of the burial of the dead.

00:19:05
Antigone Lucky tyrants--the perquisites of power! Ruthless power to do and say whatever pleases them.

00:19:10
Creon You alone of all people in Thebes see things that way.

00:19:15
Antigone They see it just that way but defer to you and keep their tongues in leash.

00:19:20
Creon And you, aren't you ashamed to differ so from them? So disloyal.

00:19:25
Antigone Not ashamed for a moment. Not to honor my brother, my own flesh and blood.

00:19:30
Creon Wasn't Eteocles a brother too--cut down facing him?

00:19:35
Antigone Brother, yes. By the same mother, the same father.

00:19:35
Creon Then how can you render his enemies such honors? Such impieties in his eyes?

00:19:40
Antigone He will never testify to that, Eteocles dead and buried.

00:19:45
Creon He will if you honor the traitor just as much as him.

00:19:45
Antigone But it was his brother, not some slave that died.

00:19:50
Creon Ravaging our country. But Eteocles died fighting on our behalf.

00:19:55
Antigone No matter. Death longs for the same rights for all.

00:20:00
Creon Never the same for the patriot and the traitor.

00:20:05
Antigone Who, Creon, who on earth can say the ones below don't find this pure and uncorrupt?

00:20:10
Creon Never. Once an enemy, never a friend, not even after death.

00:20:15
Antigone I was born to join in love not hate. That is my nature.

00:20:20
John Douglas Thompson He doesn't have an emotional maturity, whereas, other people in the play do. And with emotional maturity, you can kind of make decisions based on--not so much on feelings, but you can take another person's feelings into account, whereas Creon

can't. He can't even take his own feelings into account. They're all new for him. So as I looked at Creon, as, as we started going through it in rehearsal, I said, wow, this guy is emotionally stagnant. He just hasn't had an opportunity to grow.

00:20:50
Creon Then go down below and love, if love you must. Love the dead. While I'm alive, no woman is going to lord it over me.

00:21:00
HELENE FOLEY Department of Classics Barnard College/Columbia University

00:21:05
Helene Foley Creon thinks that emotions should really be excluded from any kind of critical, important decisions. Antigone thinks exactly the opposite, that a choice like hers is completely inauthentic unless it combines both larger principles and the emotion which permits her to commit such a heroic act. So one of the things I'm fascinated with about this play is that I think it's one of the first works in wes--western literature that really considers a question that has become very interesting to philosophers later. That is, that you don't always make ethical decisions in the same way across the board. Ethical decisions can be made differently depending on what kind of social position you find yourself in. And you probably can't have any kind of universal ethical answer to how you make a choice.

00:21:55
NARRATOR Antigone is a Greek tragedy, but how do we define that word, "tragedy"? Today, if someone is accidentally killed, or if our team loses a championship game, or even if we miss our plane, we're likely to call it a tragedy. Even though none of these things would seem like a tragedy to the ancient Greeks. It was the Greek philosopher, Aristotle, who first tried to define tragedy and understand how it works as a dramatic form. In his Poetics, Aristotle examined tragedy's components, and he found a word for the unique effect that tragedy can have on an audience.

00:22:35
Catharisis

00:22:35
NARRATOR He called it catharsis.

00:22:35
JEFFREY HENDERSON Chairman, Classical Studies Boston University

00:22:40
Jeffrey Henderson It means cleansing or purification in Greek. And, ah, Aristotle said that watching a tragedy, ah, purifies the emotions of the audience.

00:22:50
PETER MEINECK Artistic Director Aquila Theatre Company

00:22:50

Peter Meineck Catharsis is a, a psychological healing, a sense of we will test to the boundaries, but you don't have to do it. You don't have to die. You don't have to sleep with your mother. You don't have to kill your father, but you can get to experience what happens if this actor does it for you. And I think that's catharsis. I think that it's good psychology to have mythology that explains to you what would happen if I perform this act.

00:23:20
NARRATOR Aristotle had seen many Greek tragedies, including Sophocles' play about the Oedipus myth, which Aristotle thought was the perfect tragedy. He created a language to speak about this kind of play, a language we still use today.

00:23:35
Hamartia

00:23:35
NARRATOR Central to his thinking, was the term hamartia, which is generally translated, tragic flaw, the mistake that brings the central character to his or her downfall.

00:23:50
Helene Foley This means that, according to Aristotle at least, major trag--tragic characters often make a critical mistake. And the mistake is often made because, like any human being, we can't know everything about a decision that we're making and, therefore, we're likely to make terrible errors.

00:24:10
ROBERT FAGLES Arthur W. Marks '19 Professor of Comparative Literature Princeton University

00:24:10
Robert Fagles I like to see the tragic as something that is crushing all right, overwhelming, no question about it. Overwhelming in the sense of loss and destructivity. I think that tragedy and the tragic hero is not a condition of lack, or incapacity, or weakness, or flaw so much as it is a question of capacity, ability, the ability above all to turn adversity through struggle into something which is precious, which is one's own, which is one's own destiny. Oedipus says in a very telling line, "My troubles are mine, and I am the only man alive who can sustain them." He's speaking as a victim, it is true, but he's speaking out of a sense of proud defiance too.

00:25:00
SOPHOCLES' OEDIPUS TYRANNUS

00:25:00
NARRATOR In the beginning Sophocles' tragedy, Oedipus Tyrannus, a title which is also translated Oedipus Rex or Oedipus the King, Oedipus doesn't realize that he has killed on his own father and married his own mother. Ironically, his objective in the play is to seek out his father's murderer.

00:25:25

Oedipus If any man knows who killed Laius son of Labdacus, I command him to disclose everything to me. Do not fear that you will condemn yourself. I offer amnesty and will drop all charges, only exile. And you will leave this land unharmed. Should anyone know that the murder is a foreigner, let him not keep silent any longer. I will pay a rich reward and give my grateful thanks.

00:26:00
NARRATOR When Oedipus asks the blind soothsayer, Tiresias, about the murder of Laius, he's stunned by the old man's answer.

00:26:10
Tiresias You are this land's defiler. You are the curse.

00:26:15
Oedipus Insolence. How dare you stir up such a story? Do you think you'll escape the consequences?

00:26:20
Tiresias I do. Truth protects me.

00:26:25
Oedipus This is not prophecy. Who put you up to this?

00:26:25
Tiresias You did. You forced me to tell you.

00:26:30
Oedipus Tell me what? Say it again so there will be no misunderstanding.

00:26:35
Tiresias How could you not understand? Do you dare me to speak of this?

00:26:40
Oedipus Again! Let there be no doubt.

00:26:40
Tiresias I say that the murderer you seek is you.

00:26:45
NARRATOR When he directed the Aquila Theatre production of Oedipus Tyrannus, Peter Meineck made the decision to use masks.

00:26:55
Peter Meineck We need to understand that Greek drama, all Greek drama, was always performed in masks. And mask theater doesn't really exist in western drama anymore. And it's interesting because we have a lot of dramatic monuments in the fifth century and later that show actors contemplating their masks and looking at their masks. And there's something about putting that mask on that allows you to step into that character. And when

you take it off, the character is left behind. It's a very different technique and a very different psychology. Modern actors are, are often trained in, in method, are trained in, in sort of realistic types of acting that perhaps suits a small theater or suits film and television. Doesn't necessarily suit, you know, mask acting in a 27,000-seat theater, in an open-air environment, which is what these plays were constructed for.

00:27:40
NARRATOR In daily life, facial expressions give us important clues about what a person is thinking and feeling. But a mask is fixed, rigid. It doesn't change. So an actor wearing a mask must learn to use his voice and body more expressively to convey the emotional life of a character. And a mask presents another challenge. When a mask is turned away from the audience, it loses its power. The face disappears. So while it might seem natural for a modern actor to turn and face another character, that can't happen in a production that uses masks. An actor wearing a mask must learn to communicate with the actors around him while facing the audience as much as possible. In the course of the play, Oedipus begins to suspect that he himself is responsible for the death of his father Laius. His wife, Jocasta, attempts to put his mind at rest.

00:28:50
Jocasta An oracle came to Laius once. I won't say from Apollo, it came from priests, that Laius would die at the hands of a son that would be born to him and me. But Laius was killed by strangers at a place where three roads meet. That's the story. And our son, he did not last three days. Laius yoked his feet and had him thrown away by other people into a wilderness of mountains. So Apollo did not make the tale come true. The boy never came to murder his father. The father had nothing to fear from his son. That's the way a soothsayer chops the truth. Don't trust them. The god knows what's needed. The god himself will speak when he sees fit.

00:29:40
Oedipus What you're telling me shakes my soul. Sends my mind reeling one way then another.

00:29:50
Jocasta What's the matter? You're startled. Please, tell me.

00:29:50
Oedipus I thought though I heard you say that Laius was murdered where three roads meet.

00:29:55
Jocasta So they say. The tale's still told.

00:30:00
Oedipus Where exactly did this happen?

00:30:00
Jocasta A place called Phocis, where the roads divides, one road from Delphi, one from Daulis.

00:30:05
PETER MEINECK Artistic Director Aquila Theatre Company

00:30:05
Peter Meineck I think that it's interesting that people protest about violence on television, and they protest about swear words, and they protest about the debasement of sort of western culture. And yet, if you go back and look at Greek drama, ah, here is every taboo being broken on stage. And Oedipus is a play that clearly breaks, you know, the--one of the biggest taboos that there is, which is that, ah, this guy unwittingly sleeps with his mother, you know, commits incest, kills his own father.

00:30:35
Second Messenger Fell inside the room.

00:30:35
NARRATOR Jocasta kills herself when the truth is known.

00:30:40
Second Messenger She was hanging there. His wife, we saw her hanging in a noose and breathe did not. Then he saw her. He howled in misery, loosened the hanging rope, laid her down on the ground. Poor woman. Then a horrible sight. He tore out the long pins of beaten gold that had adorned her clothes, lifted them up and plunged them into his eyes, crying out, now you may not see the evil, not the evil I have done or suffered. From now on, you must gaze in darkness upon forbidden faces while the ones you should have seen you'll never know. That was his litany.

00:31:30
NARRATOR After blinding himself, Oedipus returns one final time to speak to the chorus.

00:31:35
ROBERT FAGLES Arthur W. Marks '19 Professor of Comparative Literature Princeton University

00:31:40
Peter Fagles He emerges from the inner chambers blinded, self-mutilated. And the chorus, fond of him, loyal to him, is appalled. And asked, what superhuman power drove you on? And he replies, "Apollo, friends. Apollo. He ordained my agonies, these my pains on pains. But the hand that struck my eyes was mine, mine alone. No one else. I did it all myself." There's a kind of pride in that statement, a kind of proud, fiery defiance that is quite wonderful and I think is especially the possession of tragedy.

00:32:20
NARRATOR The first performance of Oedipus Tyrannus was given around 430 B.C., during the golden age of Greek tragedy. Yet we know that tragedies were performed in Greece as early as the sixth century B.C. although not a single text survives from that period. Of the dozens of playwrights who competed in the next century, the fifth century B.C., the works of only three survive. The oldest Greek tragedies we have are by Aeschylus.

00:32:50
Aeschylus

00:32:50
JEFFREY HENDERSON Chairman, Classical Studies Boston University

00:32:50
Jeffrey Henderson Aeschylus, ah, wrote tragedies in the days when, ah, you didn't have three actors, uhm, but only one actor or two actors. And most of his plays, ah, are seen very choral, because there's so little in the way of, ah, action. And in Aeschylus' plays, the language is very grand. Ah, Sophocles, although he was a younger contemporary of Aeschylus, couldn't be more different.

00:33:15
Sophocles

00:33:15
Jeffrey Henderson Sophocles, we associate with, ah, intense focus on individuals. Antigone and Oedipus the King, the most familiar examples probably, uhm, these are plays that, ah, relegate the chorus to a relatively subordinate role.

00:33:35
Creon The most barbaric death.

00:33:35
Jeffrey Henderson The characters are much more motivated by their human predicaments and their own rights than they are creatures of great define forces. Now, the language of Sophocles is also, ah, much less metaphorical, complicated, abstract than Aeschylus, ah, very dignified and very intense.

00:33:55
Euripides

00:33:55
Jeffrey Henderson With Euripides, ah, things change very radically. Euripides was a theatrical innovator and iconoclast. Here, the language becomes much closer to everyday speech. The characters become much closer to everyday characters.

00:34:15
EURIPIDES' MEDEA

00:34:20
NARRATOR In the Euripides tragedy, Medea, Jason is willing to cast off Medea, his foreign-born wife of many years, for a chance to marry the daughter of a Greek king. Jason believes his actions are reasonable. But Medea, played here by legendary actress, Zoe Caldwell, sees it as the ultimate betrayal. The text used here, is a well-known, free adaptation of Euripides, by the American poet and playwright, Robinson Jeffers.

00:34:50
Medea I loved you once. And I'm ashamed of it. But there are some things that ought to be remembered by you and me. That blue day when we drove through the Hellespont into Greek sea, and the great-shouldered heroes where singing at the oars, and those birds flying through the blown foam. That day was too fine, I suppose for Creon's daughter's man to remember. But you might remember whether I cheated my father for you and tamed the fire-breathing, brazen-hoofed bulls, and whether I saved your life in a field of the teeth. And you might remember whether I poisoned the great serpent and got you the Golden Fleece, and fled with you and killed my brother when he pursued us, making myself abominable in my own home. And, and then in yours. I got your enemy Pelias hacked to death by his own daughter's hands. Whatever these fine Corinthian friends of yours may say against my rapid and tricky wisdom, you it has served. You it has served well. Here are five times, if I counted right, and all is not counted, when your adventures would have been dusty death if I'd not saved you. But now, you think your adventures are over. You are safe and high placed in Corinth and will need me no more.

00:36:25
HELENE FOLEY Department of Classics Barnard College/Columbia University

00:36:30
Helene Foley In the past, Medea was a princess in, uhm, the land of Colchis, and Jason came to get the Golden Fleece, uhm, on a quest with a number of other heroes. He would not been able to get this fleece without Medea's help. She fell in love with him, so she decided to help him. The two of them married with this clasp of right hands, which signified, uhm, an agreement between heroes in this marriage. Medea then gave children to Jason, which was the obligation of a wife in Greek society. And when they married--the two married each other, Jason swore a marriage by oath, by the god Zeus, which means when he abandons her for a new marriage, he is actually violating an oath sworn by the head of the gods. And this is what outrages Medea above all, that she has treated him as a fellow hero, and now, he is treating her as a concubine that he can sort of slough off in favor of a Greek wife.

00:37:30
Jason I see, Medea. You have been a very careful merchant of benefits. You forget none. You keep a strict reckoning. But some little things that I on my side have done for you ought to be in the books too. For example, I carried you out the dirt and superstition of Asiatic Colchis into the rational sunlight of Greece and the marble music of the Greek temples. Is that no benefit? I have brought you to meet the first minds of our time and to speak as an equal with the great heroes and the rulers of cities. Is that no benefit? Here, you are famous. Who would have spoken your name at your days run by on that last edge of the world? That life of that blood and filth I saved you from? So that one day you may vent on me this vileness, this barbarian gratitude? And now this grievous thing that you hate me for, that I married Creon's young daughter, little Creusa. Do you think I did it like a boy or a woman out of blind passion? No. I did it to achieve power here, and I'd have used that power to protect you and our sons. But now, your jealous madness has muddled everything. And finally, as to those acts of service you so loudly boast, whom do I thank for them? I thank Divine Venus, the goddess who makes girls fall in love. You did them because you had to do them. Venus compelled you. I enjoyed her favor. A man dares things, you know? He makes his adventure

in the cold eye of death. And if the gods care for him, they appoint an instrument to save him; if not, he dies. You were that instrument.

00:39:25
Medea Here it is, the lowest. The obscene dregs; the slime and the loathing; the muddy bottom of a mouthed cup. When a scoundrel begins to invoke the gods. Oh, you had better go, Jason. Vulgarity is a contagious disease; and in a moment what could I do but spit at you like a peasant, or curse you like a drunken slave.

00:39:50
Jason Oh.

00:39:55
[sil.]

00:40:10
Medea You had better take yourself back to "Little Creusa".

00:40:15
Jason Medea, I came to help you and save you if possible.

00:40:20
Medea Your help is not wanted. Go. Go.

00:40:25
PETER MEINECK Artistic Director Aquila Theatre Company

00:40:30
Peter Meineck I think that one of the big issues that underlies Greek tragedy and comedy is a gender issue. And I think it's a gender issue that defies political correctness. It's not about feminism, because, ah, you know, we approach feminism from the point of view that, ah, women have less power and, therefore, need, you know, to be brought into equality. I think the Greeks approached it from the opposite view. I think they feared women.

00:40:50
GREEK COMEDY

00:40:55
NARRATOR Greek tragedy is a serious and sometimes very grim study of the human condition. But serious issues don't always have to be treated in serious ways. Comedy in ancient Greece used satire and bawdy humor to expose the deepest flaws in society. The audience laughed at the exaggerated situations and absurd characters, but they also saw themselves up on the stage. Their weaknesses and mistakes laid bare for all to see.

00:41:25
Komoidia

00:41:25

JEFFREY HENDERSON Chairman, Classical Studies Boston University

00:41:25
Jeffrey Henderson The word comedy in Greek Komoidia, is song of the Komos. And a Komos, ah, is a very old, ah, immemorially old, ah, celebration connected with Dionysus that involved masked, ah, groups of revelers, ah, who were drinking, because it's Dionysus, ah, moving through the city and singing about, or commenting about, ah, or even impersonating, uhm, important people, talking about important events, gossip, scandal.

00:41:55
NARRATOR We know there were many comic poets in the fifth century B.C., but the work of only one of them has come down to us. His name is Aristophanes. Aristophanes found much to ridicule in Athenian society. He made fun of everything, politicians, institutions, religion, sex. And one of his biggest targets was the Peloponnesian War.

00:42:15
ARISTOPHANES' LYSISTRATA

00:42:20
NARRATOR For 27 years, Athens and Sparta were locked in a bloody conflict. The cost to Athens was immense. It lost its navy, most of its wealth, and a great many lives before it was over. In his play Lysistrata, Aristophanes attacks this war by creating a fantastic situation, a premise that provides an entirely new perspective on the crisis. Athens, of course, was a society dominated by men. Women existed simply to run the household and provide pleasure for their husbands. But in Lysistrata, the gender roles are completely reversed. Women have all of the power, and they take control with a strategy that is both subversive and hilarious. They take control of sex. This production was staged by students at Bretton Hall College in Wakefield, England.

00:43:15
Lampito But who has called together this council of women, pray?

00:43:20
Lysistrara I have.

00:43:20
Lampito Well then, tell us what you want of us.

00:43:20
Lysistrara With pleasure, my dear.

00:43:25
Cleonice What is this most important business you wish to inform us about?

00:43:25
Lysistrara I will tell you. But first answer me one question. Don't you feel sad and sorry that the fathers of your children are far away from you with the army? For I'll undertake there is not one of you whose husband is not abroad at this moment.

00:43:45
Cleonice Mine has been the last five months in Thrace-looking after Eucrates.

00:43:45
Myrrhine 'Tis seven long months since mine left for Pylos.

00:43:50
Lampito As for mine, if he ever does return from service, he's no sooner back than he takes down his shield again and flies back to the wars.

00:44:00
Lysistrata And not so much as the shadow of a lover!

00:44:05
All Oh!

00:44:05
Lysistrata Since the day the Milesians betrayed us, I have never once seen an eight-inch long dildo even, to be a leathern consolation to us poor widows. Now, if I have discovered a means of ending this war, will you all second me?

00:44:25
Cleonice Well, yes, verily, by all the goddesses, I swear I will, though I have to put my gown in pawn, and drink the money the same day.

00:44:35
Myrrhine And so will I, though I must be split in two like a flat-fish, and have half myself removed.

00:44:40
Lampito And I too; why to secure peace, I would climb to the top of Mount Taygetus.

00:44:50
Lysistrata Then I will out with it, my mighty secret! Oh! Sister women, if we would compel our husbands to make peace, we must refrain.

00:45:05
Cleonice Refrain from what? Tell us, tell us!

00:45:10
Lysistrata But you will you do it?

00:45:10
Myrrhine We will, we will, though we should die of it.

00:45:15
Lysistrata We must refrain from the male altogether.

00:45:25
[sil.]

00:45:30
Lysistrata Nay, why do you turn your backs on me? Where are you going? So, you bite your lips and shake your heads, eh? Why these pale, sad looks? Why these tears? Come, will you do it, yes or no? Do you hesitate?

00:45:50
Cleonice No, I will not do it, let the war go on.

00:45:55
Lysistrata Oh, wanton, vicious sex! The poets have done well to make tragedies upon us; we are good for nothing then but love and lewdness! But you, my dear, you from hardy Sparta, if you will join me, all may yet be well; help me, second me, I conjure you.

00:46:20
Lampito 'Tis a hard thing, by the goddesses, as it is! For a woman to sleep alone without ever a strong male in her bed. But there, peace must come first.

00:46:35
Lysistrata Oh, my dear, my dearest, best friend, you are the only one deserving the name of woman!

00:46:40
NARRATOR Clearly, Aristophanes doesn't shy away from sexual issues. Sexuality, especially male sexual desire, is fertile ground in Greek comedy. The masculine urge is exposed quite literally in the costuming of the period that featured the phallus. The phallus is a prop in the shape of a male sex organ. So we are constantly aware of the basic need that influences male behavior.

00:47:10
PETER MEINECK Artistic Director Aquila Theatre Company

00:47:10
Peter Meineck Sexual licentiousness is part of the fact that this is connected with fertility rites. We have the phallus on stage. Ah, we have sexual jokes. We have, ah, a place where we're allowed to say and do whatever we like. The licentiousness that's part of the worship of Dionysus gets manifested in, in attacking the state, attacking politicians, attacking social mores. And we have Aristophanes throughout his plays constantly saying that the theater should be a place for free speech. The theater should be a place where he is allowed to say and do whatever he likes.

00:47:45
JEFFREY HENDERSON Chairman, Classical Studies Boston University

00:47:45

Jeffrey Henderson Aristophanes uses, ah, bathroom humor, and vulgarity, and obscenity, ah, in addition to politically disruptive kind of speech, as, as I say. And Aristophanes was actually brought to court at least twice for outrageous material in his comedies. Uhm, to an extent, the audience expected this, ah, because one of the functions of comedy, ah, in the theatrical festivals was to provoke people about their own situations.

00:48:15
NARRATOR In a famous scene from Lysistrata, a warrior tries to get his wife to satisfy his desires. But the sex roles are temporarily reversed. The female is in complete control of the situation. He won't get what he wants, sex, until she gets what she wants, a promise that he'll stop the war.

00:48:35
Cinesias At any rate, let's have a short time together.

00:48:40
Myrrhine No. No. No. All the same, I cannot say I do not love you.

00:48:55
Cinesias You love me, then why refuse what I ask? My little girl, my sweet Myrrhine?

00:49:05
Myrrhine But, miserable man, where? Where?

00:49:10
Cinesias In the cave of Pan. Nothing could be better.

00:49:10
Myrrhine Well. I'll be off and find a bed for us.

00:49:15
Cinesias 'Tis not worthwhile. We can lie on the ground, surely.

00:49:20
Myrrhine No. No. Bad man as you are. I don't like your lying on the bare earth.

00:49:30
Cinesias Ah. How the dear girl loves me.

00:49:35
Myrrhine Come, get to bed. Quick. I am going to undress.

00:49:50
[sil.]

00:49:55
Myrrhine You've got no pillow.

00:49:55
Cinesias I don't want one. No. No.

00:50:00
Myrrhine I do.

00:50:00
Cinesias Dear oh, dear. How they treat my poor self for all the world like Heracles.

00:50:05
Myrrhine There. Lift your head, dear.

00:50:15
Cinesias That's really everything.

00:50:15
Myrrhine Is it? Everything? Hmm, I wonder.

00:50:20
Cinesias Come, my treasure.

00:50:20
Myrrhine I'm just unfastening my girdle.

00:50:30
[sil.]

00:50:35
Myrrhine But remember what you promised about making peace. Mind you'll keep your word.

00:50:40
Cinesias Oh, yes, yes. Upon my life, I will.

00:50:45
Myrrhine You've got no blanket.

00:50:45
Cinesias Great Zeus! What matter of that? 'Tis you I want to love.

00:50:50
Myrrhine Never fear. Directly, directly, I'll be back in no time.

00:50:55
Cinesias The woman will kill me with her blankets.

00:51:00
Myrrhine Now, get up for one moment.

00:51:05
Cinesias But I tell you our friend here is all ready.

00:51:10
[sil.]

00:51:15
Cinesias Come you provoking creature you, to bed with you and don't bring another thing.

00:51:25
Myrrhine Coming. Coming. I'm just slipping off my shoes.

00:51:35
[sil.]

00:51:40
Myrrhine Dear boy, will you vote for peace?

00:51:45
Cinesias I'll think about it. Ah!

00:51:55
NARRATOR By the end of Lysistrata, the men can take it no longer. Peace is declared, and the long, destructive war is brought to an end.

00:52:05
Jeffrey Henderson Classical, ah, comedy, Aristophanes' comedies, ah, are often seen, and I think rightly so, as a sign of the, ah, health of Athenian society, ah, because, ah, in a repressed society, and I mean sexually repressed and politically repressed society, ah, humor and satire is typically not tolerated. Ah, and, in fact, we can gauge the degree of authoritarianism in a society, ah, by the relative absence of political humor and the relative absence of sexual freedom of expression in that society. And if we use that measure, ah, classical Athens, ah, was, ah, healthy.

00:52:50
NARRATOR Today, the remains of ancient theaters are scattered throughout the land that was classical Greece. They offer strong proof of the vital role that drama played in everyday life. And while most of these theaters are abandoned and decayed, the ancient plays live on. Two and a half millennia after they first took the stage, Greek dramas are in constant production throughout the world. What is their fascination? Why do they speak to a contemporary audiences?

00:53:20
JOHN DOUGLAS THOMPSON American Repertory Theatre

00:53:20

John Douglas Thompson Someone had asked me the other day, why do Antigone? Why do it now? Uhm, is it relevant? And it is on many levels. It's the age-old question between men and women on what emotions drive them to do what they do, how they act with each other, family, how families react to one another, dysfunctional families, which many of us are. Uhm, and then also on a political level on what's more important, the person's--the personal issues or the state?

00:53:55
ROBERT FAGLES Arthur W. Marks '19 Professor of Comparative Literature Princeton University

00:53:55
Robert Fagles We live in tragic times. We live in times of enormous suffering, suffering that is often too great to bear, to speak, to tolerate. What tragedy will show us, even if it doesn't teach it as a lesson but show us as, as a powerful example, are those who have suffered greatly too but who have somehow struggled through it to attain another state of being even at the cost of their own lives to attain another, better state of being. That, I think, is very much part of the tragic attitude.

00:54:30
NARRATOR Greek theater suffered the fate of the Greek nation as a whole. As the nation's influence faded, the Roman Empire rose in prominence, and Greek tragedy gave way to more varied entertainments. The Romans had a taste for lavish spectacle, games of all kinds, and bloodshed. The plays of ancient Greece were all but forgotten. In the following centuries . . .

00:54:55
END TRANSCRIPT