

Classics Visits to 'Oedipus Rex' at Bloomsbury Theatre and 'Orestes' at the Barbican

On the 8th of February, our eager year 12 Classics class went to see the next best thing after a Broadway show, a Classics one. This particular play was called 'Oedipus Rex' starring the UCL Department of Greek and Latin at the Bloomsbury theatre. We had all thoroughly enjoyed the gory details of the play, having studied and imagined the protagonist, Oedipus, and his tragic downfall twisted with incest and fate. That being said, truly there is nothing more fascinating than seeing the characters you have analysed and discussed be portrayed so fantastically in real life. The play began slowly. I think we all had our own particular versions of the characters in our heads, therefore it was frustrating to see UCL put a different spin on it. In the play by Sophocles, the chorus members were made up of Theban elders, who passionately supported their king despite the words of Tiresias, a clairvoyant. Whilst in UCL, the chorus were made up of plague victims, both dancing and singing in unison making the play unsettling to watch. I personally loved that UCL took a male dominated play and gave an integral role to the women as the chorus, who remained on stage for the majority of the time, showing the effects of Oedipus' curse in a memorable way. My friend Hibah said, 'I felt my interpretation of Oedipus was completely reversed when we saw the production.' The play had taken the words written by Sophocles and created a sympathetic protagonist that was driven mad by the truth of his marriage and past. The dramatic irony that came from Oedipus' destiny created an immense amount of tension and suspense and I remember Pairahvi physically sitting on the edge of her seat as the play reached its climax. Oedipus' heart wrenching scream after finding out the truth echoed around the entire theatre. At the end of the play we all agreed that the best part was the messenger speeches said by a dorky awkward traveller, who provided comic relief and a break from the depressing nature of Oedipus' fate. Also we had all learnt the importance of the theme of dramatic irony and all in all watching the play we studied in detail allowed us to investigate different interpretations and experience it similarly to an Ancient Greek audience during the City Dionysia. Ultimately these plays were written to be performed, thus simply reading it does not do it justice.



On the 22nd March, we were given the fantastic opportunity to see a production of Orestes at the Barbican, performed by a theatre school rather than university students like in 'Oedipus'. We had not studied Orestes and so the plot was unfamiliar to us, a short summary informed us about how Orestes and his sister were facing a death sentence for committing

matricide, to which they hatch a terrible plot to alter their fate. Upon arriving at the theatre, we are overwhelmed by the dark, particularly modern set, with fog trailing behind and two characters already on stage in almost a state of hopelessness. Having little to no knowledge of the story itself, we were entranced by each character, Orestes' madness, Electra's fear for

her brother and their fate, with added tension from the ritualistic and chilling singing of the chorus. Orestes is not on our syllabus, but the production itself gave an insight into a modernised version of an Ancient Greek play, without the limitations of the Ancient Greek theatre, and an experience it first-hand rather than simply reading it. Everyone was, honestly, on the edge of their seats as the play developed, with the two gory, bewitching messenger speeches, that narrated the horrific, violent scenes that occurred offstage. Compared to 'Oedipus', the unified singing and dancing functions of the chorus were more clearly seen, the chorus chant 'slash, slit, kill', stomping their feet creating a sense of foreboding as they anticipate the death of Orestes' aunt. I and everyone else was astounded particularly when the theatre was swallowed by darkness and part of the stage fell back illuminated by golden lights to showcase the god's coming down to solve and intervene in human affairs. Like the

'deus ex machina' used in the Ancient Greek times, to hold up characters of the god's above the mortals. The production was overall exhilarating and importantly allowing us to experience the emotions like Ancient Greek audience.



Alyssa Man 12SEA and Santhana Kanapathipillai 12NHO