1. **BACKGROUND NOTES**

**Greek Drama**

Drama as we know it began in Greece. The Greeks used to hold festivals at different times in the year to honour and thank their gods. They worshipped these gods who were important in their everyday life. Drama began with groups of people called a chorus singing and dancing together at the festivals. The groups had competitions with each other for prizes.

In time, the **Chorus**, was joined by an actor who talked to them. Next the playwright Aeschylus put in a second actor. This meant the two actors could talk to each other and also to the chorus. They could act too which made real plays possible and the audiences liked it.

Sophocles went further than Aeschylus and brought in a third actor. He wrote over a hundred plays and was one of the most popular playwrights in fifth century Athens. His plays are still popular today, despite the fact they were written well over two thousand years ago because he writes about people and ideas which do not change with time - only the surroundings are altered. The translation of *Oedipus the King* you will read can be related to the present as well as the past and you may, like one of the Greek audience, find out about your own life by looking at the situation in the play.

Sophocles was born around 495/494 BC. In 468 he beat the most popular playwrights of the time in a competition. Afterwards he was a leading playwright in Athens. He was a skilled musician as well as playwright. He had been a soldier and was involved in politics. These experiences were very useful when he wrote his plays.

**The Great Dionysia**

This was the chief drama festival held in Athens every year in March in honour of the god Dionysus, god of wine and the theatre. He was worshipped as god of fertility, both of crops and animals. Women followers called Maenads used to sing and dance ecstatically in his honour. It was a time of thanksgiving and celebration, rather like Christmas today.

On the first day the whole of Athens was on holiday. There were processions, prayers, singing and dancing in the streets and the city was filled with a party atmosphere. T he next three days were for competitions with three serious plays called tragedies. These happened each morning and, after a short lunch-break, perhaps a comedy in the afternoon. The Athenian audience had to sit for up to six hours without a break, watching play after play. Judging by the great popularity of the festival, they didn't seem to mind this at all! Local groups also put on the old type of singing and dancing. On the fifth day the judges decided on the best playwright, actor and chorus and awarded prizes.

**The Theatre**

Greek theatres were in the open air, built into the slope of a hill with tiered seating, rather like an

outdoor modern theatre. This allowed the audience to get a good view and to hear what the actors

were saying from a distance. This semi-circular structure is good for sound or acoustics.



A = Orchestra (circular dancing / performing area)

B = Stage Building

C / D = Parados (entrance ponts for actors )

E = Altar to the gods

There were special seats at the front for judges, priests and important visitors. Most of the play went

on in the orchestra and the stage building, a kind of scenery, usually the whole front of a palace.

Behind this were dressing rooms and storage rooms etc.

**Actors**

Greek actors were all male and so women’s parts were played by men. This idea is not so ridiculous

as it seems as Greek actors wore masks like the one below.

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Wearing a mask made it easier for the audience to see the actor’s face from a distance and recognise

which character he was playing. Some masks even magnified the actor’s voice, making it louder so

that even those at the back of the theatre could hear easily what was going on. Also an actor only had

to change his mask and costume and he could play another part. In the plays of Sophocles there were

never more than three actors on stage at one time and so it was possible to employ a small group of

actors in addition to the Chorus. This cut down on the cost of wages.

The Chorus in a Greek play did two things. As well as being characters in the play they stand aside

and comment on what is happening to the audience. They do this by reciting, singing and dancing.

It is through the Chorus that the playwright makes us think about what the play is really about and

any lessons we should learn from it.

**The Oedipus Legend**

The Greek audience, unlike a modern one, knew the plot of the play before they came to see it. This

is because dramatists chose to write plays based on popular legends and stories passed down from

father to son. A Greek audience, therefore, would be fascinated **not** by what was happening but by

**how** the playwright showed the story to them. So that you will feel like one of the Greek audience,

here are some details of the legend of Oedipus.

**The story so far . . .**

Laius, king of Thebes, is told by Apollo (god of predicting the future) that his baby son will grow up

to kill him. To avoid this happening, he pins his son’s ankles together and gives him to a shepherd to

leave on a mountainside to die. This will seem very cruel to a modern reader but leaving babies to die

was quite common in ancient Greece, especially if the baby was a girl or if the baby was disabled in

any way. The Theban shepherd feels sorry for the baby and decides to give him to a Corinthian

shepherd, who is on his way there. The Corinthian shepherd gives the baby to the king (Polybus) and

queen (Merope) who have no children and who bring him up as their own son. They call him

Oedipus or ‘swollen foot’ (in Greek) because of the injury to his ankles caused by being pinned

together. When Oedipus is a young man he hears rumours which lead him to go and ask Apollo for

information about his parents. When he is told by the priestess that he his destined to kill his father

and marry his mother, he leaves Corinth immediately so that he cannot - even accidentally - harm the

people he thinks are his real parents. On his travels he comes to a crossroads and there meets an old

man and some servants. The old man whips Oedipus and tells him to get out of the way; there is a

fight and Oedipus angrily kills the old man and all but one of the servants he has with him. He then

makes his way to Thebes which is terrified because of a monstrous Sphinx (a beast with the head of a

woman). She has set a riddle and refuses to leave until someone solves it. Oedipus manages to solve

it and the people are so grateful they make him king. He marries queen Jocasta, the widow of king

Laius who was murdered by bandits on the road, and he becomes a new father for her children. He is

an intelligent and caring ruler who puts his people first. He is widely respected and Thebes seems to

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be doing well until one day a mysterious disease destroys cattle, making crops die, causing pregnant

women to have babies born dead, spreading a fatal infectious disease all over the city. The people are

in a panic and turn to the gods and to Oedipus.