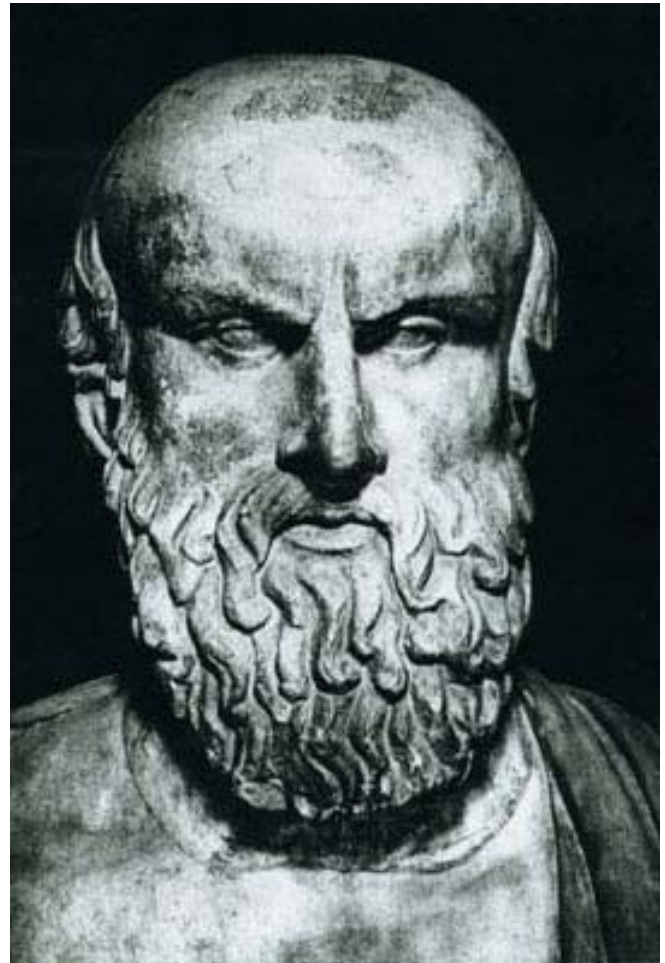


On Aeschylus

Aeschylus was born in 525 B.C.E. in the Greek city Eleusis, near Athens. The sacred rites to Demeter, the goddess of agriculture and fertility, were performed in Eleusis. The celebration of similar rituals in Athens gave rise to Greek Tragedy. According to legend, Aeschylus began writing at the instruction of the gods. The god Dionysus came to him in a dream and ordered him to write tragedies. The next day, Aeschylus wrote his very first play.

When Aeschylus was born, Greek theatre was still in its earliest stages. Thespis, known as the first actor, died only nine years before Aeschylus' birth. Before Aeschylus, plays were performed by a single actor and a chorus. Aeschylus introduced the second actor, thereby bringing dialogue into Greek tragedy. Aeschylus first submitted a play to the City Dionysian Festival in Athens in 500 B.C.E. He did not win, and it would be another 15 years before he took home the grand prize. Over his lifetime, Aeschylus won the competition 13 times, an achievement unmatched by any other playwright.

Before Aeschylus became a tragedian, he was a soldier. He served Hieron, the tyrant of Syracuse, and fought in the Battles of Marathon and Salamis in the Persian Wars. His play, *The Persians*, was written about the Battle of Salamis. Aeschylus told the story of the battle from the viewpoint of the defeated Persians. In this play, Aeschylus included the first ghost scene in theatre. Today, only seven of Aeschylus's plays survive, although he wrote more than 90. Only one copy of Aeschylus' complete works existed, and it was taken to the library in Alexandria,



Roman portrait bust of Aeschylus, the Father of Tragedy, who lived 525 B.C.E.—456 B.C.E. This bust may be a copy of a Greek original.

Capitoline Museums, Rome.



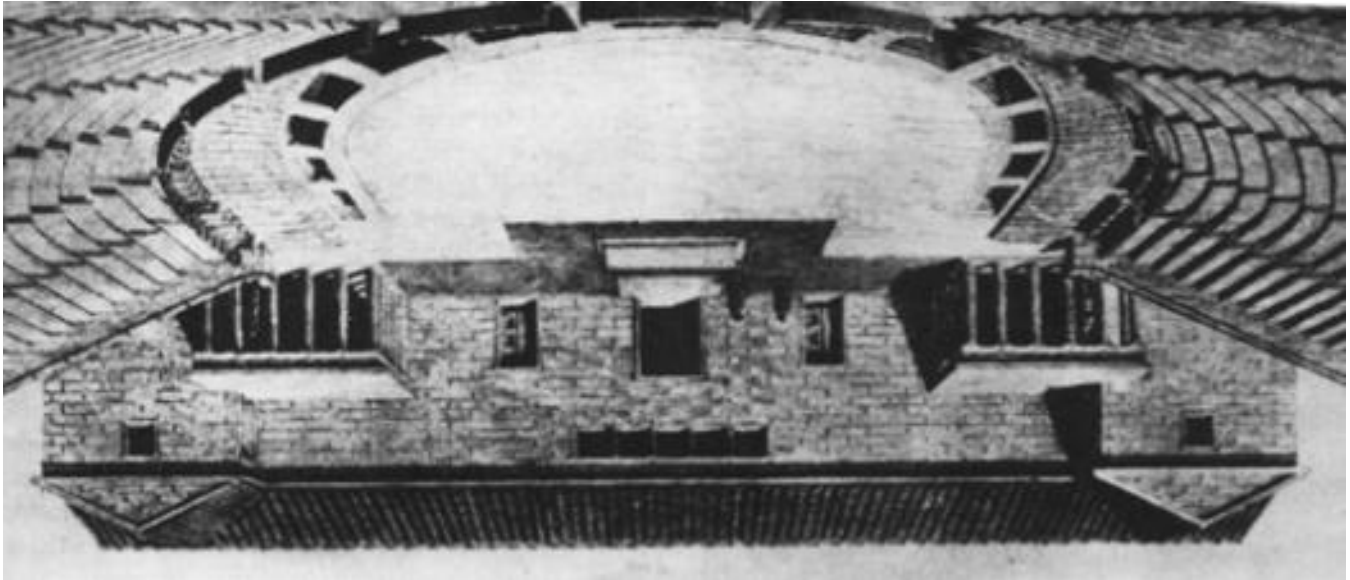
Badisches Landesmuseum, Karlsruhe.

Detail from an Athenian clay vase, depicting Demeter, the goddess of agriculture, about 480 B.C.E. This goddess was worshipped in Aeschylus' hometown Eleusis with rituals similar to those that gave rise to Greek Tragedy.

Egypt, to be reproduced. While it was there, the library burned, and many important works, including Aeschylus' plays, were lost forever.

In his later years, Aeschylus traveled to Sicily to write for wealthy patrons. He died there in 456 B.C.E., the cause unknown. According to legend, an eagle mistook his bald head for a rock. The eagle dropped a tortoise on him to crack open its shell and that was the end of Aeschylus. Aeschylus wrote his own epitaph, and it reads: "Of his noble bravery the field of Marathon can speak, or the long-haired Persian who knows it well." That his contribution to the theatre goes unmentioned has never been explained. Today, Aeschylus is referred to as the "Father of Tragedy." He is considered to be not only one of the greatest Greek Tragedians but also one of the greatest playwrights in history. **S**

The History of Greek



Frickenthaus, Die Altgriechische Bühne, 1917.

A reconstruction of the Theatre of Dionysus, birthplace of Greek theatre, as it appeared in the late 4th century B.C.E.

Greek theatre began around 530 B.C.E. in the city of Athens and the earliest plays were performed at the Festival of Dionysus. The festival took place every year within the first two weeks of March and usually lasted between five and seven days. It was a religious festival created to pay homage to Dionysus, the god of wine and harvest. He was seen as a promoter of peace and was the patron god of agriculture and theatre. The festival was planned, managed and run by an elected official known as the Archon. Every year, at the end of the festival, a new Archon would be elected and they would immediately begin planning for the next festival. It was the Archon's responsibility to select the playwrights who would present their work as well as the judges who would determine a winner. The Archon would select one set of playwrights to present works of tragedy and another set to present works of comedy.

The plays were presented in one of the first theatre structures, the Theatre of Dionysus. This theatre was located near the Acropolis, which was a major structure in Athens including several religious temples. The theatre space itself resembled a modern day baseball stadium and was made up of three parts: the orchestra, the skene and the audience. The actors performed in the orchestra, a large circular space with buildings behind it. These buildings were called the skene and held a backstage area for the actors where they would change their costumes or rest between scenes. Skene were often painted and used to represent the setting of the play. The modern

word "scenery" comes from the word "skene." The stage was surrounded by the audience on three sides. The seats for the audience sloped upward so that they looked down at the action below.

The Festival started with a grand processional into the Theatre of Dionysus. As people entered the theatre, they carried baskets of bread and other foods along with jugs of water and wine as offerings to Dionysus. At the end of this processional, groups of singers or Choruses would perform Dithyrambs for the audiences. A Dithyramb is a song, accompanied by the flute, which chronicles the life of the god Dionysus. Usually the songs would focus on one specific instance in his life. Only men and boys performed the Dithyrambs. After the choral performances, audiences would spend the rest of the evening singing and dancing. On the second day of the festival, the three playwrights who had been selected to present tragic plays would announce the titles of their works, and the next three days would be dedicated to the performance of these plays.

Tragedies consisted of a cycle of three plays, and an audience would spend an entire day watching all three. This collection of three plays would often end in a Satyr play. A Satyr play was a burlesque and overtly sexual play that usually contained characters from Greek myth. Sometimes a character from the previously performed tragedies would appear in the Satyr play where they would engage in various forms of debauchery. On the sixth day of the festival, five

Martin von Wagner Museum, Univ of Wurzburg.



Fragment from a vase, showing a tragic actor holding a mask, probably dating from the 4th century B.C.E.

comedies would be performed. Comedies were considered to be less sophisticated than the tragedies; however, it was still a great honor to win for best comedy.

At the end of the festival, the judges would determine a winner. Along with a trophy and wreaths

of ivy, the most prized reward for winning the play competition was a goat. The playwright who won the goat had the opportunity to sacrifice that goat to Dionysus. The word "tragedy" comes from the Greek words for "goat song." According to the few records that scholars have found from that time period, Aeschylus won the prize for best tragedy more times than any other playwright.

Greek plays weren't spoken, they were sung much like operas. Over time, Greek plays changed a great deal. Originally, the structure of Greek plays included a large chorus singing in unison about the life of a god. The chorus of a Greek play was made up of anywhere from four to 30 people standing at the back of the orchestra. The members of the chorus would be dressed alike and often wore black. In 534 B.C.E., a single actor and playwright named Thespis left the chorus to perform solo. He sang a solo line in the story, and the chorus responded to what he said. This call-and-response performance is considered to be the first tragedy. Thespis was considered the first actor, which is why actors today are sometimes referred to as "thespians." Aeschylus, born nine years after Thespis' death, introduced the second actor into Greek theatre. As Greek plays continued to evolve, the number of people in the chorus became less and less as more playwrights would write parts for individual actors to break free from the chorus, thus creating dialogue and scenes. Individual actors often performed wearing masks to represent their characters. Their costumes were long and flowing, and they wore large platform shoes to make them appear taller onstage. Although actors didn't have a very high status in Athenian society, they received rigorous training and were often fed special diets to ensure that they would perform well during the festival.

Athenians took great pride in their theatre festival and looked forward to it every year with great anticipation.



The Classical Unities

The classical unities were derived from Aristotle's *Poetics*, in which he gives a detailed description of what characterizes a good tragedy. European neoclassical critics of the 16th and 17th centuries expanded these characteristics into the three strict rules for the structure of any play.

- **Unity of Action**

A play should have only one plot, or action. There should be no (or few) subplots.

- **Unity of Place**

A play should occur in only one location.

- **Unity of Time**

A play's action should occur within one day's time.

Aristotle was definitely familiar with Aeschylus' work. He writes in the *Poetics*, "Aeschylus first introduced the second actor; he diminished the importance of the chorus and assigned the leading part to the dialogue."

The Persians, which follows the unities, features the chorus alternating with the actor. In later plays, as in *The Orestia*, Aeschylus would further develop the role of the second actor.



Photo by Carol Rosegg.

Avery Brooks as Oedipus and Petronia Paley as Jocasta in the Shakespeare Theatre Company's 2001 production of *The Oedipus Plays*.

Synopsis of *The Persians*

The Persians takes place in Susa, the capital of Persia. The time is 480 B.C.E., shortly after the battle of Salamis. The chorus of “trusted ones” have gathered near the tomb of Darius the Great to await news of King Xerxes’ expedition against the Athenians. The “trusted ones” are community leaders like the Head of Treasury and the Minister of Religion. They are the old men left to run the government of a country at war. The chorus describes how King Darius, Xerxes’ father, created a vast empire but was unable to defeat the Greeks at Marathon. Naturally, when Xerxes inherited his father’s throne, he desired to be as great as his father was. Therefore, he launched this expedition to conquer the Greeks and rule the world. The entire Persian citizenry has been drafted and the capital city is vacant. Now, without word or report of the war’s progress, those on the home front are oppressed with worry. Wives, mothers and grandfathers watch as the realm is drained of its youth and splendor.


Atossa, Xerxes’ mother and Darius’ widow, approaches the chorus for guidance and reassurance. She is alone in her palace and haunted by her own “useless importance.” She relates to the chorus a terrible nightmare. In her dream, her son, King Xerxes, commands a chariot led by two distinctly different horses, one Persian and the other Greek. Xerxes cannot control the wild Greek horse. His chariot is overturned, and he is trampled. Darius, long dead, is in her dream, too, as a witness of Xerxes’ misfortune and disgrace. She also reports that she saw a dark hawk mortally wound an eagle on her way to worship and make sacrifices to the gods. She believes the sight to be a bad omen for Persia. The “trusted ones” attempt to calm Atossa. They claim that the dream and the omen are only warnings and that there is time for redress. Atossa is not satisfied and probes the chorus for information about the Greeks. She wants to know about the people and country that would not be made slaves by her husband or son.

A herald arrives, the last surviving soldier of the fallen Persian army. He lists the names of the Persian leaders who have been killed. With this news, worry is replaced by grief. Persia has been beaten down, and Athens stands victorious and intact. The herald tells them that King Xerxes escaped and is returning to the city. He relates the tale of the battle and its gory outcome. Atossa retreats to Darius’ tomb, and the citizens grieve for the country’s great loss and for the terrible fate of their wretched king.



Ghost of Darius Appearing to Atossa by George Romney, 1734-1802.

After being entreated by the queen and the “trusted ones,” King Darius appears as a ghost. The ghost is ignorant of his empire’s collapse. Atossa explains that their son caused the defeat of the entire Persian Empire by constructing a bridge of boats across the river Hellespont and marching his soldiers across it. Darius condemns his son for taking such a risk and trying to chain the “sacred Hellespont” like a slave. The ghost holds Xerxes responsible since he attempted to dominate the gods. The chorus considers vengeance, but Darius forbids it. Instead he orders the leaders to rehabilitate Xerxes, teach him self-control and stop him from challenging the gods. The ghost urges the living to mourn for the dead and to “never again squander the grace of good fortune in lusting for yet more.” He advises Atossa to care for her son when he returns and warns her that he will “long for the forgetfulness of death.” The ghost departs for the underworld reminding all to appreciate life.

King Xerxes finally returns in defeat and shame to face his citizens. He recounts the battles and how he underestimated his foes. The king confesses to leaving the dead noblemen unburied at Salamis. The chorus laments the great loss of so many fathers, sons and brothers. Atossa, full of sorrow, greets her son and urges him to ask the country for forgiveness. Xerxes begs forgiveness and honors the dead with grief. 

THE PERSIAN WARS



The Persian Empire, 1729. The caption in Turkish reads, "Ibrahim Mutfarrikah's engraved map of the Persian Empire, showing also the Caucasus, southern Russia, Transcaucasian Turkestan, Iraq and part of Anatolia."

At one time, the Persian Empire was the greatest empire in the ancient world, controlling areas from Macedon to Egypt, from Palestine and the Arabian Peninsula across Mesopotamia to India. The Persian King Cyrus (580–529 B.C.E.), also known as Cyrus the Great, founded the Persian Empire by unifying two Iranian tribes—the Medes and the Persians. Cyrus, known for his conquests, ushered in a new era in the age of empire building. In this time a vast "super state" composed of many dozens of countries, races and languages was controlled by a single ruler.

Among the many lands conquered by the Persians was Lydia, which was made up of Greek city-states along the coast of Asia Minor. Lydia was home to the Ionian Greeks. The Ionian Greeks were unhappy with the Persian rule, due in large part to heavy taxes, forced service in the Persian army and Persia's interference in local government. In 499 B.C.E.,

Aristagoras, ruler of the Ionian city Miletus, encouraged a rebellion against the Persians. Aristagoras went to the Greek mainland for help. The Spartans refused to help, but the Athenians gave him 20 ships. In 498 B.C.E., the Athenians marched on Sardis, the capital of Lydia, but were unable to capture the citadel. The city accidentally burned to the ground. The Athenians left Lydia, and the Persians, led by Darius I, quickly regained control over the rebellious Greek cities.

Because of its involvement in the conquering of Sardis, Athens quickly drew the attention of the Persians. The Persians planned to squash future rebellions by attacking and conquering Athens. They began by moving down the Greek eastern coast towards Marathon where they met the Athenians in battle. The Athenian army stood alone and was outnumbered by the Persians three to one. Fortunately, the Greek army had Miltiades on their side. Miltiades was a former

Persian soldier familiar with the tactics that the Persian army would employ. The Athenians defeated the Persians, chasing them all the way to the water and capturing seven of their ships. An account of the Battle of Marathon was written down by Herodotus, considered to be the world's first historian.

The Battle of Marathon was a decisive win for Athens, and they began to consider themselves the center of Greek society. In Persia, however, the loss was not great and Darius planned to return. Before he could do so, Darius was killed in battle (quelling other rebellions in the empire) and his son Xerxes took control of the Persian Empire. Xerxes, determined to avenge his father's defeat, amassed an army of approximately 150,000 men and a navy of 600 ships with which to attack Athens. Many of the Greek city states, fearing such a powerful army, did not fight the Persian invasion. Only a few resisted, including Sparta, Corinth and Athens. The Athenians feared the Persian army and were sure they would see their city burned. Guided by the Greek politician Themistocles, they prepared for the ensuing attack by building up their navy, which consisted of 200 ships. Themistocles understood that the Persians could succeed only if their army was continually supported by supplies from the navy. He knew that the key to winning the battle was to disrupt communication between the two. The Aegean Sea could be a violent place, and Themistocles kept the Athenian navy safe in harbor while many of Xerxes' ships were destroyed. As the Persian army approached, many Athenians fled to the island of Salamis and watched as Xerxes burned Athens.




Archeological Museum, Tehran.

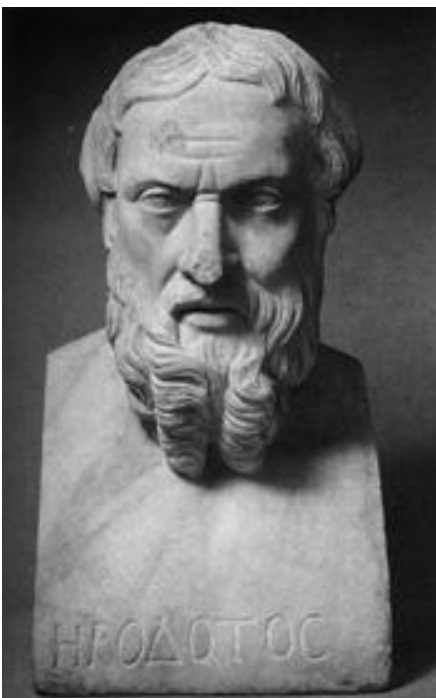
A Persian nobleman terracotta figure from Persepolis.

The definitive naval battle took place off the coast of Salamis. The Persian boats were much larger than the Greeks, and to combat this, the Greeks turned their more maneuverable boats into fighting platforms, filling them with soldiers who would engage the enemy in combat. The Athenians defeated the majority of the Persian fleet and the Persians withdrew their army. Mardonius, a Persian general, stayed on through the winter in Greece but was defeated in 479 B.C.E. by the largest Greek army in history, led by King Pausanias of Sparta.

After the battle of Salamis, the Greek city-states united together to form the Delian League, whose aim was to protect and strengthen the city-states. The Delian League was so named because the treasury was kept on the island of Delos, a neutral territory. The members of the League were given an equal vote and contributed money, troops and ships. Athens was put at the head of the league because of its naval supremacy, its fairness in dealings with other Greek cities and because many of the cities were unhappy with the tyrannical behavior of King Pausanias.

Athens profited greatly from the league and continued to demand money and ships even when the danger from Persia was over. They eventually moved the treasury from Delos to Athens, which angered many allies. When several city-states wanted to secede from the league, Athens would not allow it. The Delian League transformed into the Athenian Empire. This empire came to an end during the Peloponnesian war when Athens was defeated by Sparta. 

Metropolitan Museum of Art



Bust of Herodotus (484-425 B.C.E.), known as "The Father of History," who wrote an account of the Persian Wars.

Timeline of the Persian Empire



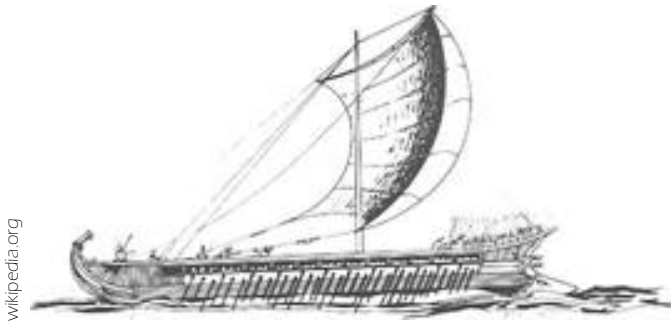
The Persian Empire as depicted in *Historical Atlas* by William R. Shepherd, 1923.

- ◆ **559–521 B.C.E. – The Empire is created.** The King of Persia, Cyrus II (Cyrus the Great), conquers the lands of Media, Lydia and Babylonia to control the majority of land between modern day Eastern Greece and Pakistan. Cyrus' son and successor, King Cambyses, occupies the Egyptian capital city of Memphis to add parts of Egypt to Persian rule. He dies returning to Persia.
- ◆ **521 B.C.E. – Darius I (Darius the Great) assumes the throne.** Darius claims royal bloodline through ancient Persian ruler "Achaemenes," and his successors are called the Achaemenid dynasty. During his rule, the Persian Empire is at the height of its power. He establishes a system of districts and local governors called satraps. Darius rules until 486 B.C.E.
- ◆ **494 B.C.E. – Athens sponsors the Ionian Revolt** in Eastern Greece. Persia successfully crushes the rebellion after four years of battle, but Darius is incensed by Athens' support of the campaign.
- ◆ **490 B.C.E. – First Persian invasion of mainland Greece,** led by Darius I, is repulsed at the Battle of Marathon. According to ancient scholar Herodotus' records of the event, 6,400 Persians died compared to Greece's 192 casualties.
- ◆ **486 B.C.E. – Xerxes I, son of Darius, assumes the throne.** Xerxes prepares for the second invasion of Greece by storing provisions along the road through Thrace. He also allies with Carthage and builds a bridge of ships over the Hellespont for troop travel.



Relief sculpture of Darius I enthroned at Persepolis. The lotus blossom he holds is a symbol of royalty.

◆ **480 B.C.E. – Xerxes leads the Persian army against the alliance of Greek city-states.**



wikipedia.org

A Greek Trireme, the more maneuverable ship used to defeat the Persians at the Battle of Salamis.

◇ **Battle of Thermopylae** — While attempting to hold a strategic mountain pass, King Leonidas of Sparta is defeated, but not without huge losses to the Persian army as Spartans and Thespians fight to the death.

◇ **Battle of Artemesium** — A sudden storm destroys 200 Persian ships surrounding the evacuated island of Euboea. After two days of indecisive battle, the Greek navy retreats after hearing of Leonidas' fall.

◇ **The Persian army occupies Athens.**

◇ **Battle of Salamis** — The Greeks send a slave to Xerxes to trick him into believing that the Greek navy will be retreating under cover of dark. Convinced, Xerxes searches throughout the night for the fleeing fleet. The Greek Navy attacks the exhausted Persians in the morning with their ships, called triremes, in the strait off Salamis. The Persians' bulkier ships are destroyed by the more maneuverable Greek ones. Xerxes watches the sea battle from a throne erected on Mount Aegaleus. Aeschylus fights along with the Greek navy.

◇ **Xerxes retreats to Sardis** — He leaves a small army to control what parts of Greece he still occupies and turns from Greece to quell a Babylonian rebellion.

◆ **479 B.C.E. – The Persian army left to control Greece is defeated in Plataea.**

◆ **465 B.C.E. – Xerxes is assassinated by a religious leader,** vizier Artabanus. Artaxerxes I takes the throne.

◆ **423 B.C.E. – Darius II assumes the throne.**

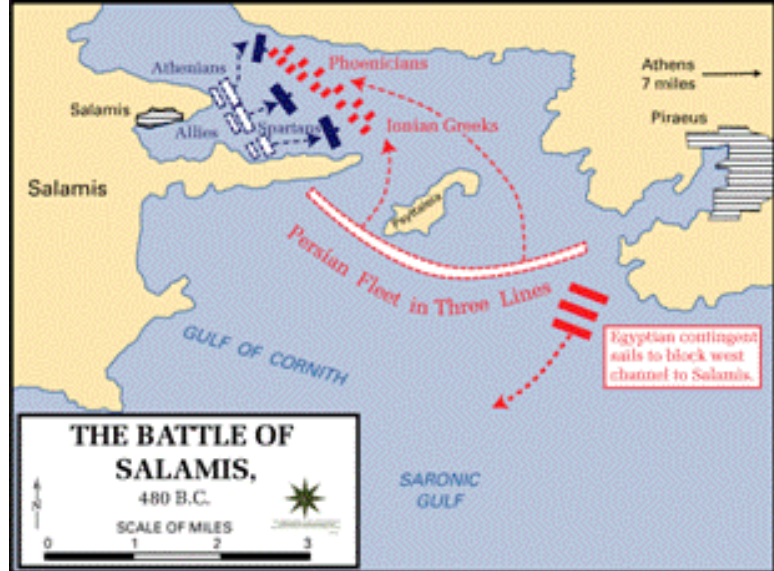
◆ **405 B.C.E. – Artaxerxes II assumes the throne.** Egypt soon revolts from Persian rule.

◆ **358 B.C.E. – Artaxerxes III assumes the throne.**

◆ **338 B.C.E. – Artaxerxes III is assassinated.** Succeeded by Artaxerxes IV.

◆ **336 B.C.E. – Artaxerxes IV is assassinated.** Succeeded by Darius III.

◆ **330 B.C.E. – Darius III is deposed by Alexander the Great of Macedonia.** His death ends the Achaemenid Dynasty and the greatest empire Persia has ever known. 



wikipedia.org

A map of the Battle of Salamis.



www.chania.gr

The chorus in East Moat Theater's production of *The Persians* in Crania, Crete, 2000.

Agitprop:

A combination of the words "agitation" and "propaganda." Agitprop is drama or art that intends to incite audiences.

Choregoi:

(singular—Choregos)
Wealthy citizens who would sponsor a particular play in the Festival.

Artists sometimes use theatre to express ideas that oppose accepted social doctrines or directly protest government actions. They hope to spur their audiences to create social change. This type of theatre is called agitprop or political theatre. The messages in political theatre can be so inflammatory that audiences can be moved to protest or riot. Augusto Boal, a Brazilian playwright, activist and author of *The Theatre of the Oppressed*, used theatre in the 1950s and '60s to protest the government of dictatorship under which he lived. Boal's theatre was so threatening to the political administration that he was arrested and tortured. Political theatre became very popular and widespread in the 20th century, but history is full of examples of theatre used for political reasons.

Aeschylus, author of *The Persians* (472 B.C.E.), reflected the politics of his time in his writing. Scholars and historians have limited information about performances in ancient Greece, so they can only speculate about the playwright's political leanings. For example, we know that Aeschylus was writing about current events: the Battle of Salamis, the subject of the play and a great victory for the Greeks, took place a mere eight years before *The Persians* was first performed. We also know that many of the Athenian audience members, including Aeschylus himself, were veterans of the battle. In addition, we know that the choregoi, or producers, of the plays at the Festival of Dionysus where *The Persians* was first presented may have been engaged in a propaganda battle, attempting to glorify their past political and military victories for future gain. For all of these reasons, one might expect *The Persians* to tell the story of a glorified Athenian victory for an audience of veterans and politicians. But Aeschylus didn't write a triumphant piece from the point of view of his countrymen—instead, he wrote a tragedy from the point of view of the vanquished Persians. What does it mean to write from an enemy's perspective? Some scholars believe that the play was indeed



Paul Santiago and Michael Wiles in *The Persians* at the Aurora Theatre, 2004.

a glorification of Athenian victory and that the audience members would have felt pride as they watched a play about the fall of their enemy. But other scholars believe that the structure of the play is too complex for such a one-sided reading. The Persians mourn the loss of their country and list at length the young men who fell in battle. The Athenian audience must have remembered the names of the Greek soldiers who died in battle as this scene took place. Could the play be a memorial for the fallen men, on both the Persian and Athenian sides? Were the Athenian soldiers in the audience able to feel empathy for characters that represented an enemy? Another reading of the play takes into account other contemporary events in Athens. At the time of the first performance of *The Persians*, many citizens were concerned that the Athenian government was no longer adhering to the ideals of democracy on which the state was founded. They feared that Athens was becoming too concerned with power and was itself becoming an empire. Because the tragedy in *The Persians* is blamed on Xerxes' over-confidence and pride, perhaps the play was Aeschylus' warning to his own country against

national hubris, or an exaggerated sense of pride and confidence in one's own country, bordering on arrogance.

With this in mind, how might *The Persians* be considered a piece of political theatre today? Does the play have any relevance to our own political climate? It is interesting to note that all American productions of this play have taken place after 1970—Americans first saw *The Persians* during the time of the Vietnam conflict, when many American citizens were protesting the war and the actions of the government. In 1993, during the first Gulf War, Robert Auletta and Peter Sellars produced an adaptation of *The Persians* that contained a strong anti-war message. The production created a great deal of controversy by specifically identifying the defeated and sympathetic Persians with Iraq and by implicating the United States as an arrogant super power. Some critics felt that the power of the drama was lost by making a classic play so specifically focused on contemporary events, rather than letting the audience draw their own comparisons.

Considering current events, do you think this play has any political relevance today? How might an audience respond differently to this play today than in Aeschylus' time? Political theatre is intended to affect its audience in strong ways and ultimately advocate for change. Take note of your own and fellow audience members' reactions to the story as you watch the play. Is this a piece of political theatre?



Roberta Maxwell as Atossa and Len Cariou as Darius in *The Persians* at the National Actors Theatre, directed by Ethan McSweeney in a new version by Ellen McLaughlin, 2003.

Interview with the adaptor

Ellen McLaughlin

Photo by David Allen.



Lawrence Thoo, Paul Santiago, Owen Murphy and Christopher Herold in *The Persians* at the Aurora Theatre, 2004.

A translation is a play rewritten from its original language to another. Translators work to keep the play as close to the original as possible, but often there are not direct word replacements. This leaves some room for interpretation, but usually no drastic changes are made. The word “adapt” implies a modification according to changing circumstances, such as an organism adapting to a new environment. Similarly, an adaptation in drama is a play rewritten into a new form because of a new culture, audience, political era or philosophy. An adapter may add, cut and combine elements of the play, just as Ellen McLaughlin does for *The Persians*. Two of the biggest changes McLaughlin made to the play were adding a prologue telling some facts about Aeschylus and dividing the Chorus into different characters with separate voices. Traditionally the Chorus members would speak together.

Ellen McLaughlin is an American playwright and actor for stage and film. Her adaptations include *Iphigenia and Other Daughters* (from Euripides and Sophocles), *The Trojan Women* (Euripides), *Helen* (Euripides) and *Lysistrata* (Aristophanes). She also has written the original plays *Tongue of a Bird* and *Infinity's House*. As an adapter, McLaughlin does not translate

the play from the Greek herself; instead she reads many different translations before adapting. McLaughlin was commissioned to write this adaptation very quickly by Tony Randall, founder and artistic director of the National Actors Theatre, after the war in Iraq began. Here are some of McLaughlin's thoughts about the play, the Greeks and adapting.

How did you come to write this version of *The Persians*?

When America went to war in March 2003, [Tony] Randall cancelled his spring season at the National Actors Theatre and decided to mount, as quickly as possible, the first play in the Western canon: Aeschylus' *Persians*. The play is rarely performed; it is a difficult text, a thorny and palpably ancient piece, and can be daunting in even the best translation. The director Tony chose, Ethan McSweeney, suggested that I take a whack at writing a new version. It meant working at breakneck speed, since Tony wanted to go into rehearsal as soon as was feasible.

What were your ideas and concerns as you began working on it?

I endeavored to let the play breathe, concentrating on bringing the vividness of the language and images to the fore. The idea was to blow the dust off the piece without disturbing the strangeness and wonder of it, which owe much to its sheer age and the peculiarity of the remote era that generated it. *The Persians* is one of the great acts of compassionate imagination by a playwright, and it is a startling, evocative statement about the horrors of war, no matter which side one is on.

What makes this play different from other Greek tragedies?

The Persians is an imaginative act of extraordinary compassion and originality. Yet it is typical of all the Greek plays that have survived for us in its unsentimental and clear-eyed view of politics and war. The great Greek dramatists were citizens in a unique political experiment—a burgeoning democracy, newly minted, unsettled and constantly under threat, both from within and without. All of them were active in that experiment. As playwrights, they were far from marginal figures in their society. And all of them served their time as soldiers. When they write about freedom, they know from vital experience the price of that freedom. When they write about war, they know its terror.

How is this play different than other adaptations you have written?

Of all the texts I've worked with, this is the one I stayed closest to. This was partly a function of the haste I was in to get a coherent text together so we could go into rehearsal. (It's the only time I've ever had the experience of hearing my words outside my own head for the first time in the first rehearsal for a full production. I didn't even attend auditions; I was

still writing the script while they were going on.) There was precious little time to mull over the piece and toy with radically new readings. But my fidelity was also due to my desire more than anything to just get out of the way of the play and let it speak clearly. I wanted the language to release the power inherent in the play without tampering with the basic structure. It's also such a little-known play, due to its difficulty, that I didn't feel I had the right to mess with it too much. This was not likely to be one of several productions an average audience member might have a chance to see over the course of a regular theatre-going life. Then too, I didn't want to make artificial parallels. George H. W. Bush is not Darius, George W. Bush is not Xerxes. We, for that matter, are neither the Persians nor the Greeks. The glib formulaic response does justice neither to us nor to the Greeks and belittles the complexity of what Aeschylus was responding to and our own distinct national crisis. I did, however, take liberties with the text throughout, usually in terms of drawing out particularity in the character of the chorus (it was Ethan's idea to give each chorus member a specific area of authority, as if they were members of a cabinet), and I streamlined several sections, always trying to find vivid images and clear, driving motivations to impel the language. I complicated Atossa's journey through the piece and added an entirely new choral section, the chorus' song concerning Xerxes' flogging of the Hellespont. (That material is not part of the Aeschylus; it's from Herodotus.) I thought that section made clearer the growing mutinous feeling of the chorus toward their absent king.

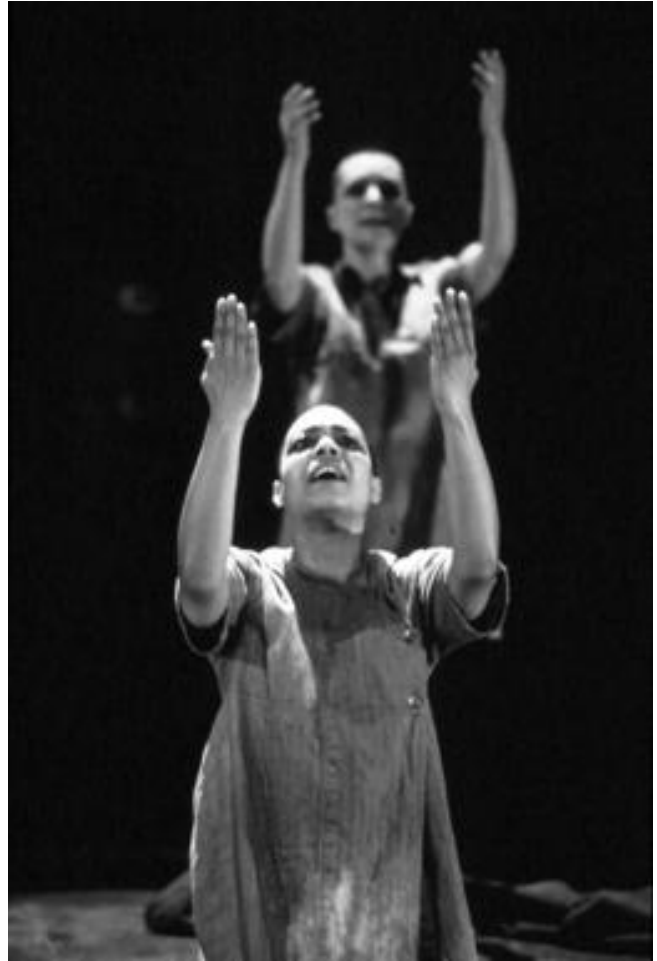


Photo by Carol Rosegg.


Opal Alladin in the Shakespeare Theatre Company's 1998-1999 production of Euripides' *The Trojan Women*.

Library of Congress.



Looking southwest over the Theatre of Dionysus where Greek dramas were given in Athens, from a stereograph published in 1907.

Do you consider *The Persians* to be an antiwar play?

Yes, this is an antiwar play, but it is complex, sophisticated and far from naive. All Greek plays are antiwar plays because they were written by veterans, men who knew, firsthand, the real face of battle and the pity of war. This is a play written by a man who participated in battles that changed history and preserved his fragile country with its unlikely notions of freedom in the face of overwhelming odds. Nevertheless, because he was there, he knows the horror of such a war, and he never deludes himself that it was anything other than the nightmare it was, both for the victors and for the defeated. Such astute sensitivity and wisdom have never graced the theatrical literature of war since. We have much to learn from the founders of theatre now. Ideology has overtaken experience in our age: the truth of war is so drowned in bombast and vague polemical notions that we can forget the magnitude of its terror. We forget the real color of blood. 

Excerpts from *American Theatre* and *The Greek Plays*, both published by TCG.