

# Classroom Connections

Before the performance...



## Choral Performance Activity

The Greek chorus performed a myriad of tasks in the play. It gave advice, expressed opinions, offered background information and represented the common people of the story. The chorus not only entertained the audience with song and dance but also showed the audience how an ideal spectator would react. What would a chorus look like in modern theatre? How would they relate to the audience? What could the audience learn from them? Ask students to form a circle and decide upon a story to retell, as a chorus, like a Greek myth or fairy tale. The students should tell the story as a group, adding in any information they feel is necessary. Each student must add one sentence to the story. Students should not change the story but continue to honor all the contributions that came before. The last person must find a way to end the story that ties up all the loose ends and comes to a conclusion. Coach students to look for ways to speak together or vary their intonation to enrich the choral performance.



## Timeline of Recent History—Compare to Athens and Persia

*The Persians* is a play that focuses on a series of wars between Athens and Persia and the aftermath of those conflicts. Create a timeline of wars in which Americans have been involved, starting with the Revolutionary War. (this link may be helpful: <http://americanhistory.about.com/library/timelines/bltimelineuswars.htm>). Compare your timeline to a timeline of Athens and Persia. You can find the history of the Persian Empire in the First Folio, and you can look up a timeline of Greek history here: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/ancientgreece/timeline/index.shtml>. Are there any similarities between the events occurring in our recent history and events that took place in Athenian and Persian history? If so, what?



## Who Writes History? Recording World Events

Ask students to pick a person who is prominent in politics, government, science or literature and write a brief paragraph about this person's life or achievements. Ask students to discuss how and where they got their information. Assign students partners and ask them to now write a paragraph about the other prominent person. Compare stories. How were they similar or different? Ask students to consider their choices: If you lived in a different country, do you think you would have picked the same person to write about? Would you have written a different story? Why or why not?



## Why Do This Play Today?

Aeschylus mentions no Greek leaders in *The Persians*. Instead, the playwright evokes pity for the defeated enemy. The characters are shown respect throughout their sorrow and grief. In small groups, have students review the synopsis and then describe the story, action and plot. Lead a discussion with the entire class to consider what the play is about. Ask students to use descriptive words or phrases to describe how they feel about the play. Follow up the discussion with writing an essay or a journal response to the following questions: How is this play relevant to our own time and society? What is the message or moral of the play and how does it relate to current events? What do you expect to feel or think after you see this production?



## Performance in Aeschylus' Time

Aeschylus contributed more to theatre than his writing. In his time it was common for playwrights to serve as the directors of their plays, as well as actors, producers and designers. Ask the class to brainstorm on artists who "multi-task" in today's world on the stage or screen. What reasons can they come up with to explain why today's artists tend to stick to one job? Does it benefit actors to only be actors, writers only writers? Could there be benefits to contributing in many ways?



## Blame vs. Responsibility

When Xerxes enters the play, he cannot comprehend what caused him to lose the war. We are told the gods, offended by his hubris (excessive pride), gave the victory to the Athenians. After trying to place the blame for his defeat on others, Xerxes undergoes the *anagnorisis*. *Anagnorisis* is the recognition by the tragic hero of some truth about his or her identity or actions that accompanies the reversal of the situation in the plot. Xerxes realizes it was his own pride that lost the war and accepts responsibility. He ends the play more noble than when he entered. Discuss with your class what happens to Xerxes after the play ends. In modern movies and plays, what usually happens to villains who accept responsibility for their mistakes? What would have happened to Xerxes if he had not admitted his pride? In our time period? In Aeschylus?

# Classroom Connections

...After the performance

## Write a Story from the Enemy's Perspective

*The Persians* was written by Aeschylus, a Greek playwright and soldier who fought in the Battle of Salamis. Rather than a play relishing in the defeat of a major empire, *The Persians* is a moral lesson on the subject of tyranny. Why would Aeschylus choose to write a play from the enemy's perspective? What can be gained from exploring someone else's version of an event? Ask students to write a story from an "enemy's" perspective. How does it change their view of the event?

## The Role of the Audience

Theatre is a unique art form, meant to be a dialogue between performer and audience. The role of the audience has changed over time—from the several-day Greek festivals where the audience would celebrate through a full day of drama, to the Restoration where wealthy audience members would sit on stage, to today's traditional dimmed houses. After the experience of watching *The Persians*, ask students to journal about their experience in the theatre. What emotions did they experience during the show? Were there any ideas expressed in the play with which they strongly agreed or disagreed? Did they feel comfortable as an audience member? Did they wish they could have been more or less participatory in the production? Reread "A Brief History of the Audience," and ask students to write their guidelines of what they believe the audience's role should be during a show.

## Responsible Leadership

Xerxes returns home to his people in disgrace. He is the only survivor of the invasion of Athens. Having lost "thousands on thousands" of the sons of Persia, the Chorus defiantly refuses to bow to their king upon his return. Instead they rebuke him for the tragedy that he has brought upon their people. Xerxes accepts his chastisement and laments his shame. His mother soon leads him pitifully home. As a responsible leader, how else might Xerxes have returned home to his people? Must he accept the blame and reprimands of his councilors? What should he do or how should he act to pick up the pieces of his homeland? Ask the students to write another ending to *The Persians*. Have them create an alternate manner in which Xerxes returns to his people.

## Political Theatre

After attending the Shakespeare Theatre Company's production of *The Persians*, reread the First Folio article "The Body Politic." Ask students if they felt the production was relevant to politics today. What issues do students think the production was addressing? Why might a modern director use a piece of classic literature to express an opinion about current politics? Do students think classic theatre is an effective or appropriate forum for voicing opinions about current events? Why or why not? What similarities did the production of *The Persians* share with other types of socially conscious drama? Do students think that political theatre can spur social change?

## Director's Vision—What Would Your Play Be Like?

When preparing a play for production, it is largely up to the director to decide how to present that play to an audience. Directors decide what they want an audience to take away from the production as well as how to guide the actors in the play to tell the story. Directors also work very closely with set, lighting, costume and sound designers to create their concept of the play. If you were given the job of directing *The Persians*, what would your production look like? Where would it take place? What year would you set it in? What would the set look like? How would you want your actors to dress? What kind of music would you want to play or lighting would you want to use on stage? Write a proposal answering these questions and describing why you made these decisions with support from the text. Ask students to present their concepts in an oral presentation for the class, and then

## Comparing Translations and Adaptations

Read aloud two excerpts from *The Persians* (Lines 155-170). The following links will connect you to two different online versions.

Robert Potter's translation:

[www.acs.ucalgary.ca/~vandersp/Courses/texts/aescpers.html](http://www.acs.ucalgary.ca/~vandersp/Courses/texts/aescpers.html)

John Porter's translation:

[duke.usask.ca/~porterj/DeptTransls/Persians.html](http://duke.usask.ca/~porterj/DeptTransls/Persians.html)

What are the similarities? How are they different? Ask students to write their own adaptation using the same situation of Queen Atossa leaving her palace to speak with the Counselors of Persia.