

Learning while engaging during a pandemic

This is a paper about the challenges and opportunities that a one-person Classics program encounters when it commits to sustained community engagement with an external partner, in this case a local theatre company, dedicated to producing relatively recent works by female and BIPOC artists. It will argue that the pedagogical gains from such a partnership – for students, community members, and the lone wolf Classicist – far outweigh the logistical challenges. Such a partnership can produce through creative activities a critical understanding of experiences and forms of knowledge of 5th century BCE Athenians – and, if you are willing – of historically marginalized peoples in the US. Engaging regularly with members of the community disseminates knowledge about what Classicists do and why we do it at the same time as it permits the taxpayers who support our endeavors to communicate what values this knowledge has in their lives. What you learn may surprise you or be hard to hear, but you need to hear it.

Since May 2020 I have acted as historical consultant, quondam dramaturg, and discussion leader for monthly rehearsals and virtual readings of Greek tragedies by a local theatre company. Our past three years of partnerships focused on the postclassical reception of Greek myths in contemporary American theatre by female playwrights from underrepresented communities. As a teacher of courses in Greek civilization, Athenian democracy, and Greek tragedy I relished the opportunity to experience performances of Greek tragedies that would be accessible to my students, colleagues, and community members – as live-streamed events and as digital resources available on YouTube. Moreover, as a former radio drama producer and sound engineer I understand how the processes of rehearsal, discussion, and performance unlock new meanings in texts. In short, monthly virtual readings of Greek tragedy have been taught me never to underestimate a messenger speech again.

Both the producing artistic director and myself wanted to foster braver spaces for individuals to break their isolation, create community, and discuss contemporary issues during the pandemic. Discussions with stakeholders and attendees revealed how different generations in my community regard and evaluate Ancient Greece. The company did feel compelled to justify to the community their decision to produce readings of these millennia-old plays in “the Western canon.” And an initial public response was to attack Athens privileged position in a Western canon. This was therapeutic and liberating, especially for those who perceived no living members of that culture present who could be offended. Those who teach about Athenian democracy are aware of the ways in which it did not practice *isonomía*. We less often get to hear how the public connects sexism and systemic racism to Athenian practices.

Moderating these discussions often means getting out of the way of a free-flowing conversation. Stakeholders as well as participants have made it clear that discussions are not meant to be lectures. However, there is a persistent tension between those who want to learn – about Athenian culture or the actors’ approach or the director’s decisions – and those who expect these discussions to impact social justice in our community right now.

Choosing to make casting equitable and diverse has elevated performances, fronting multiple perspectives on national issues. Our conversations have included PTSD among those who serve and those who love them (May, Sophocles’ *Ajax*), the Me Too Movement and Black Lives Matter in an African-American mother’s lament for the children she cannot protect and for whose deaths she demands justice (June, Euripides’ *Hecuba*), the Expendables during the Coronavirus pandemic when a mother of color volunteers to die in order to save her white husband and his household (July, Euripides’ *Alcestis*), sexuality for middle-aged women as well as LGBTQIA+, Nonbinary, or Genderqueer individuals – stuck in rigidly binary, patriarchal

cultures (August, Euripides' *Hippolytus*), and expressions of rage among different generations seeking justice for the dead (September, Euripides' *Suppliants*).

The pivoting, doubt, and questioning we presently associate with the Coronavirus pandemic finds precedence in plays composed and performed by Athenians during their brief experiment with radical democracy, in particular during their great epidemic between 430-426 BCE. Over the past five months I have repeatedly witnessed the surprise and empathy that members of the public reveal when they connect their own personal experiences to those of long dead peoples – and I anticipate such moments will continue until our readings conclude in December 2020. These light-bulb moments can be especially satisfying for a teacher but at the same time deeply troubling for those who question humans' ability to solve systemic inequality. Nonetheless we living amid this pandemic are uniquely positioned to find new insights in these plays, which help us confront the persistence of systemic oppression based on race, gender, age, orientation, sex, and legal status within the American experiment in democracy.