

The Odyssey: A Comedy, Mostly

From Homer's *The Odyssey*
Adapted for the stage
by Julia Romano

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DEDICATION

To Zach, Teddy, and the 2023-24 South High School Drama Club.

STORY OF THE PLAY

“The Odyssey: A Comedy, Mostly” is an adaptation of Homer’s *The Odyssey*. It follows the well-known story of Odysseus’s journey from the battlefields of Troy back home to Ithaca and features familiar characters such as Odysseus, Athena, Poseidon, Circe, Penelope, and the Cyclops. The play was written with casual and modern language and a comedic tone, but it involves some dramatic moments and routinely breaks the fourth wall. About 90 minutes.

ORIGINAL PRODUCTION

“The Odyssey: A Comedy, Mostly” was first performed as “The Odyssey: A Comedy, Sometimes” by the South High School Drama Club on March 1, 2024.

CHARACTERS

(In Order of Appearance)

(Flexible cast of 14 – 29 actors)

CORA #1, #2, and #3: The female Greek chorus.

MENELAUS: The King of Sparta.

AGAMEMNON: The King of Mycenae.

ODYSSEUS: The wily King of Ithaca. Can be split between two actors (ACT I and ACT II).

EURYLOCHUS: Odysseus's second in command.

MAN #1 and #2: Also play Suitor #1 and #2, respectively.

ATHENA: The bright-eyed goddess of wisdom and war.

MESSENGER

POLYPHEMUS: The Cyclops.

SHEEP #1 and #2

POSEIDON: The god of the sea, earthquakes, and horses.

LAESTRYGONIANS: Cannibalistic giants.

PENELOPE: The Queen of Ithaca.

TELEMACHUS: The Prince of Ithaca.

CIRCE: The Witch Queen of Aeaea.

SIREN #1 and #2: Can be played seriously (as beautiful creatures with beautiful singing voices) or comically (dressed up as chickens singing terribly.)

SCYLLA: A sea monster.

COW

CALYPSO: A nymph.

DRAMA TEACHER: Can be played by the drama teacher or by a student dressed as the drama teacher.

NAUSICAA: A Princess of Phaeacia.

ALCINOUS: The King of Phaeacia.

ANTINOUS: Suitor.

*Double casting opportunities:

Menelaus and Alcinoüs

Agamemnon and Antinoüs

Messenger, Polyphemus, and Telemachus

Cora #1 and Calypso

Cora #2 and Circe

Cora #3 and Nausicaä

Sheep, Laestrygonians, Sirens, Cow, and Scylla can be played by any actors not on stage.

PLAYWRIGHT'S NOTES ON THE ADAPTATION

In its original form, *The Odyssey* was an epic poem, not a play. Therefore, it is neither a comedy nor a tragedy. Instead, *The Odyssey* details the heroic and extraordinary deeds of a heroic and extraordinary person. This play is similarly neither a true comedy nor a true tragedy, but a journey along with Odysseus as he makes his way from the battlefields of Troy to his beloved home of Ithaca.

As a poem, *The Odyssey*, was much more likely to be heard performed—in song or chant accompanied by a lyre—rather than read. “The Odyssey: A Comedy, Mostly” is a continuation of a nearly 3,000-year-old legacy of performance of *The Odyssey*.

I drew on several translations of *The Odyssey* while adapting the epic poem for the stage, and I recommend Emily Wilson’s recent translation as the best.

THE FOURTH WALL

In theater, the fourth wall is the imaginary wall between the performers onstage and the audience: the characters are meant to live within the space on stage, while the audience is meant to watch. In ancient Greek plays, the Greek chorus would break the fourth wall by addressing the audience directly with their commentary of actions of the play. In more recent plays and films, the fourth wall is usually upheld, but some productions break the fourth wall sparingly for dramatic or comedic effect. This production has no interest in upholding the tradition of the fourth wall *at all!*

Scene 1: Greek Kings' Camp Outside of Troy

(THE CORAS enter DSR in front of the curtain.)

CORA #1: Tell me, muse! Tell me about a complicated man.
Tell me how he wandered and was lost. Where he went.
What he saw and who he met. The grief he suffered and the
battles he fought... to save his own life and to bring his men
back home.

CORA #2: But the man you speak of failed to bring his men
home, didn't he?

CORA #1: Yes, because his men did many horrible things.
They plundered and killed, fought and lied, forgot logic and
sense. But the worst? They believed they had the right to
take and eat the cattle of Helios, so *their* day of return was
taken from *them*.

CORA #3: But does he share some of the blame, this
complicated man?

CORA #1: Let us decide for ourselves. Tell us this old story
for our modern times, so that we may learn from it.

CORA #2: Where would you like me to start?

CORA #3: The beginning?

CORA #1: The beginning.

CORA #2: We open our tale not at sea, but on the dusty
battlefields of Troy, where our flawed and brave hero, the
wily Odysseus, devises a plan to end the ten-year long war.

*(The CORAS exit DSR. The curtain opens to AGAMEMNON,
MENE LAUS, ODYSSEUS, EURYLOCHUS, and the TWO
MEN in a battle tent. They stand around a table, examining
maps and battle plans. Six cots / camping rolls surround the
table.)*

MENE LAUS: This war has gone on for far too long. We need
to find a way to end it. We can't go on with soldier after
soldier, hero after hero, being killed on this cursed
battlefield.

AGAMEMNON: Menelaus, how can you think about giving up when you should be thinking about revenge! Don't you have pride, brother? Paris had no right to take Helen from your home and play that she was his wife, when she was already married to you! Ten years of Greeks being slaughtered at the hands of these Trojan dogs will have been for nothing if you don't bring your queen back with you to Sparta. It's why I led this army to begin with! (*Slams hands on the table as he rages.*)

MENELAUS: (*Sighs.*) If a decade-long siege hasn't forced the Trojans to admit defeat, Agamemnon, I don't know what will. Their city walls are too high and too well-guarded for our men to scale. Even Achilles's defeat of Hector didn't bring us any closer to overtaking the city. (*Pauses to think.*) Odysseus, King of Ithaca, known throughout the world for your strength of mind and body, what do you think we should do?

AGAMEMNON: (*Sarcastically.*) Yes, let's ask *Odysseus* how to succeed, the man who didn't even *want* to join the war, not even to save his own wife's cousin, and tried a dozen dirty tricks to get out of it.

ODYSSEUS: (*Ignoring Agamemnon.*) I think we need to change our strategy. All that we've demonstrated in the last ten years is that our soldiers are brave and talented, and so are the Trojans'. If we want to win, we have to get *inside* the city and use the element of surprise to launch a final attack.

AGAMEMNON: (*Mocking Odysseus.*) "We have to get inside the city." Isn't that what we've been trying to do this whole time? (*To MENELAUS.*) Menelaus, you said this guy is "known throughout the land for his strength of mind as well as body?" and this is what he suggests?! No wonder we haven't won yet! Next, he's going to tell us that instead of climbing over the walls, the Trojans should just let us in.

ODYSSEUS: Maybe they will, Agamemnon.

AGAMEMNON: (*Laughs.*) I can't believe anyone would ever ask you for military advice.

ODYSSEUS: I'm trying to show a little ingenuity, okay? And what do *you* have to say for *yourself*? All that *your* ideas have done is lead to the death of thousands of our men!

(ODYSSEUS and AGAMEMNON look like they're about to fight.)

MENELAUS: Stop! Stop. Fighting amongst ourselves will not solve our problems. We're exhausted, no doubt from this constant warfare. Let's retire for the evening, and perhaps the answer will come to us in our refreshed minds, if not in our dreams.

ODYSSEUS: Yes, may wisdom come to us in sleep.

(ACTORS go to their cots and fall asleep. LIGHTS fade to purple to signify night, but the audience is still able to see the scene. CORA #3 enters DSR in front of the sleeping actors with a SPOTLIGHT on her.)

CORA #3: And wisdom did come, in the form of the bright-eyed Athena.

(CORA #3 exits DSR. ATHENA enters USR in her full battle armor and walks around the room, stopping to comment on various characters.)

ATHENA: Who do we have here... ah yes, Agamemnon—a consummate jerk, to whom wisdom has never paid a long visit. *(Addresses the audience.)* Things will not work out well for him, but that's Clytemnestra's story... *(Continues to walk around the stage.)* And here is Menelaus—Oh Menelaus, if that idiot Paris had the wisdom to pick me *(Flips her hair.)* instead of Aphrodite as the fairest goddess, none of this would have happened to you... or any of these people. But love rarely thinks, does she? *(Continues to walk around the stage until she stops at ODYSSEUS.)* And here is my favored one, the wily Odysseus. Oh, Odysseus, I've become bored with this war, and there's now a different type of fun to be had. So, when the rosy-fingered dawn appears, a sign will come to you for how to take the city of Troy.

(ODYSSEUS shifts in his sleep.)

ATHENA: *(Cont'd.)* Oh, and when they laugh at your idea, because Agamemnon wouldn't know a good idea if it punched him in the face, that's when you will know you have found the right one. Genius always looks a little bit like madness to the unimaginative.

(ATHENA exits DSL. LIGHTS change from purple to pink to signify day. Once she's cleared the stage, MESSENGER enters USL.)

MESSENGER: Kings of the Greeks, awake! There is chaos in the camp!

(ACTORS wake up at various speeds, in line with their characters.)

AGAMEMNON: *(Grabbing his sword.)* What's going on?

MESSENGER: A horse has gotten loose and has been running rampant through the camp all morning. It destroyed several tents, ate some of the soldiers' food, and nearly kicked one of your horsemen. No one seems to be able to tame it!

AGAMEMNON: Well, tell whoever's horse it is to get their steed in line! We shouldn't be bothered with such little things.

MESSENGER: It doesn't seem to belong to anyone, King Agamemnon. Ajax says he noticed it was carrying a mantle from Troy while it trampled his tent. He then sent me here to tell you about it. He is... unhappy.

ODYSSEUS: An enemy's horse, you say? In our camp?

MESSENGER: Yes, King Odysseus. Some said it came from the grove of the sacred Cornel tree beyond the battlefields, but Ajax said it probably belonged to a fallen soldier.

ODYSSEUS: *(Aside.)* And it has not been struck down because it is a *horse*.

MENELAUS: I will go see to it, brother. Come, messenger, show me where it last was.

(MENE LAUS and MESSENGER exit SL. ODYSSEUS sits on his cot, while the others go back to the war table. AGAMEMNON, EURYLOCHUS, and the TWO MEN pantomime discussing battle plans.)

ODYSSEUS: *(Aside.)* The horse was allowed into the camp and caused all of this chaos because it was a *horse*. An enemy soldier would have been killed on sight, but something innocent like a horse would not be bothered—it may have even been welcomed. *(A realization creeps onto his face.)* Agamemnon! I have an idea!

(ODYSSEUS rushes to the table with his back to the audience and pantomimes with comedic undertones, explaining the “Trojan Horse” plan to the group. At one point, he should act out being a horse. AGAMEMNON should look annoyed and/or skeptical. Separately, ATHENA enters DSL in full armor with her owl and spear, invisible to the characters on stage.)

AGAMEMNON: *(Laughs rudely and loudly at Odysseus’ idea.)* That’s the dumbest idea I have ever heard.

ODYSSEUS: It is not! It’ll work, I promise. The worst they will do is leave the horse outside the city, and we’ve lost nothing.

AGAMEMNON: No, the worst they can do is torch the horse with our best fighters, including you, inside.

ODYSSEUS: Not if we build the horse from the wood of the sacred Cornel tree. They love that tree! They make all of their spears out of it. They’ll want to bring the horse inside, either to keep as a gift or use the wood to build more spears. Trust me—I’ve worked it all out. The Trojans *will* accept the horse as a gift.

AGAMEMNON: *(Considers it.)* Fine. We’ll do it. But I won’t join you in the horse. I’ll provide reinforcements once the fighting begins. I’ll let you be responsible for all of this, especially when it fails.

ODYSSEUS: It won’t!

(ALL exit, except for ATHENA, who remains DSL, watching the scene. FX: The stage goes dark, an image of the Trojan Horse outside the city walls appears on the cyclorama. STAGE CREW removes everything on the stage quickly. When everything is cleared the CORAS enter DSR.)

CORA #1: And so begins the story we all know well. The Trojans celebrated the end of the decade-long war and the retreat of Agamemnon's armies. The celebrations lasted well into the night, until the soldiers and townspeople fell under the—what's the best way to say this while keeping it school appropriate— influence of their own *revelry*.

(FX: The image on the cyclorama changes to the horse inside the city walls. Lights are white/normal and the sounds of cheering/partying are played on the loudspeakers. After three seconds, the lights turn purple, and the sounds of fun fade to quiet.)

CORA #2: The greatest warriors of Greece waited for the silence of a city asleep and emerged under the cover of night from the belly of Odysseus's horse. Then, they sacked the city of Troy.

(FX: Lights turn red, the sound of a battle plays over the loudspeakers. The CORAS exit SR, but ATHENA still watches with delight. After a few seconds of noise and effects, the TWO MEN and EURYLOCHUS run on to the empty stage SR holding swords. ODYSSEUS enters SL, also with a sword. They are all out of breath. The LIGHTS change to yellow.)

EURYLOCHUS: The war is over, Odysseus! The city is aflame! Menelaus has already boarded his ship to take Helen back to Sparta, and Agamemnon is planning to return to Mycenae and his wife Clytemnestra once he raids the treasury. It's time for us to do the same and sail for Ithaca!

End of Freeview

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