Educational Support Notes
Higher Drama Unit 3
Contemporary Scottish Theatre

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To accompany the publication by Capercaillie Books of

Oedipus The Visionary

by David Greig

and

The Tragedy of Electra

by Tom McGrath

These notes have been written with the aim of supporting teachers and students in the study of Contemporary Scottish Theatre (Unit 3, Higher Drama), in accordance with the SQA's Arrangements Document, seventh edition, published March 2004. As we go to press, SQA are undertaking another review of this Unit and certain elements may well change in the future. Any teacher or student using these notes as an aid to the study of Higher Drama should bear this in mind and first consult the most up-to-date edition of the Arrangements.

Greek Tragedy

§1 Introduction

For those teachers and/or students who want to use these two plays, either separately or together, knowledge of the genre to which both plays adhere in their original form might be a fruitful place to start.

§2 Aristotle's Poetics

Aristotle set out a blueprint for tragedy in his *Poetics*: it could easily be an appreciation of *Oedipus Rex*, so closely does it follow Sophocles' play.

The basic principles of Aristotelian tragedy are:

- *Mimesis* - The play is an imitation; this is the notion of *mimesis*, or the mimetic act, which underpins much of Aristotle's further ideas. As the theatrical experience was supposed to be both entertaining **and** educational, Aristotle thought that the action which an audience watched had to contain truth; the truth of the character's action, his speech, his language; his relationships and decisions; what is possible according to the 'law of probability and necessity'. Aristotle believed that we learn quickly, as children, through copying others. Therefore, learning was associated with *mimesis*. As Aristotle said, 'tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of an action and of life';
  The action must be serious; serious insomuch as a tragedy should examine universal truths, must be a complete whole (have a 'unity'), and should have a noble character at its core;

- The structure of the plot is important – it must have a beginning, middle and end;

- The plot is more important than the characters in it (leading to a concentration on the universal rather than the particular);

- The best tragic plots should be complex**:** simple plots operate without the necessity for recognition and reversal (see *Peripeteia* and *Anagnorisis*, below);

- The action of each part of the play must be logical – it must follow a strict cause and effect; one thing should lead to another (coincidence was frowned upon) and thus be an inevitable consequence. Moreover, the initial action (sometimes called the 'incentive moment') does not have to have been the consequence of a previous action; nor does the end, or resolution, have a consequence. The play is entirely self-contained. This is what Aristotle refers to as a 'unity of action';

- It should have a central character who is morally good and of high status;

- The action should have magnitude. Aristotle stated that 'beauty depends on magnitude and order'; that an object (like a play, or a bird, or any organism) which is either too small or too vast, cannot have magnitude because it cannot be viewed in its entirety in a single viewing. When applying this to drama, Aristotle means the play must have an appropriate length within which all the other

essential elements of the tragedy are ordered and unified into a single, satisfying whole;

- The language should be poetic. In order for the elements to reflect the intention of the whole, the mode of speech needed to rise above the ordinary everyday speech of men and women. Aristotle did, however, warn against 'riddles' and 'jargon'; the language should make use of 'anything, in short, that differs from the normal idiom';

- The beginning should set off the chain of events – the *desis* (literally 'tying up' but what we might more clearly recognise as 'winding up') – which is the complication leading to the climax. This is sometimes called the 'rising action';

- The climax should lead to the resolution – the *lusis* ('untying' or 'unravelling') – or denouement. This is sometimes called the 'falling action';
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(Note: This structure was given diagrammatic life by Gustav Freytag in his Technique of the Drama (1863). A quick Google image search will allow you to view what is known as 'Freytag's Triangle'.)

- *Hamartia* – sometimes, problematically, called the 'tragic flaw', though is usually an error rather than a flaw. The central character's action does not need to be made with malice but can be made merely through not having a full knowledge of events. However, the error can be made intentionally, though this may be an understandable error (the central character generally has high moral values) due to the circumstances. (This is certainly so in Oedipus' case, for it would be a harsh critic indeed who could interpret the 'flaw' of Oedipus - killing a group of aggressive men bent on killing him – as anything other than reasonable self-defence.) This leads to . . .

- *Peripeteia* – Reversal or change of fortune: a character produces an effect which is the opposite of his intentions (this element usually incorporates dramatic irony, i.e. when the audience knows more than the character). This then leads to . . .

- *Anagnorisis* – Recognition: a change from ignorance to knowledge, which in turn leads to . . .

- *Catastrophe* - The final scene of great suffering;

- *Catharsis* – though often defined as a 'purging of fear and pity', today some scholars would argue that *catharsis* (sometimes translated as *katharsis*) is not intended to eradicate these emotions from an audience but merely tone them down; to restore a balance to our emotions after the tempestuous and tragic events we have witnessed;

- Diction, Song and Spectacle are three more of Aristotle's dictums. These belong more specifically with the performance aspect of the tragedy. Suffice to say, a great Greek tragedy, according to Aristotle, should be spoken well and clearly (though 'Diction' also referred to the choice of language used, not just its articulation – Aristotle was very impressed by the judicious use of fine metaphors). It should contain song or melody recited by the Chorus, which should be an integrated part of the play and not a musical interlude. Though he

recognised the importance of performance, he warned against the over-use of stage spectacle in case it detracted from the integrity of the action.

§3 Exercise

As you read through the plays by David Greig and Tom McGrath, make notes on when each playwright adheres to the principles of ancient Greek tragedy.

Then, make more notes on those sections of the plays when the two playwrights seem not to have followed these principles.

Try to decide why Greig and McGrath have done either of these things.

You might find, for instance, that McGrath's *Electra* sticks more firmly to these principles than Greig's *Oedipus*. This would be a valid first impression, given that *Electra* seems much more traditional in its use of language, its use of setting and its use of the Chorus. And yet, the play is pared down to its purest elements: the family conflict and Electra's revenge. Does this resonate as widely as a more faithful version of Sophocles' play? You might even want to compare it to Aeschylus' *The Libation Bearers*, in which the same story unfolds or even Euripides' *Electra*, which is a very different interpretation of the story.

Greig's *Oedipus* seems, at first sight, to play more fast and loose with the principles of tragedy than *Electra* does. It is clearly set in modern times, its use of language, though poetic, is much more coarse and crude than we might expect of the play. And yet, it never loses that sense of the grand political implications within the original.

How, then, have these playwrights been influenced by both Aristotle's theories and the commonly-known translations of the plays? In what ways have they diverged from them and, more crucially, why have they made these decisions for a modern audience?

§4 Current Productions and Issues

(1) Exam questions

Greek tragedies remain hugely popular today. Many of the reasons may reside in our exceptionally brief survey of some of Aristotle's *Poetics*, above. The plays deal with important social and political issues: great men seeking power but being thwarted by either their own greed or through a lack of knowledge; the correct way to organise society; the relationship of the state to the people; the relationships between the sexes; relationships in general.

All of these issues remain important to us today. They are issues which may yield a great deal of material for a study of the plays in this section of the Higher Drama course. Current Productions and Issues is a more general area of study for students than any of the other three (Social, Political and Religious Dimensions; Use of History, Nostalgia and Popular Tradition; Issues of Gender). For this specified area of study, questions on an examination paper are likely to focus on:

- <u>The work of a specific playwright (or playwrights)</u> – what themes or issues interest them; what they have to say about Scotland, the Scots or being

Scottish; what makes their work important or interesting; how they employ conventions; their use of language, humour, characterisation, setting, etc;

- <u>The work of a specific Scottish theatre company (or companies)</u> – the importance of its work to Scotland; its place in Scottish theatrical life; the breadth, vigour and reception of its work; even, perhaps, its working conditions, its rationale, its marketing, its funding, etc;

- <u>A contemporary Scottish theatre production (or productions)</u> – its dramatic effectiveness; its context; its audience; its use of language, theme, set, staging, design, music, dance, genre, plot, etc.

As we can see, both *Oedipus* and *Electra* offer opportunities in virtually every aspect of this specified area of Contemporary Scottish Theatre.

- Both are written by contemporary Scottish playwrights
- Both are adaptations of Greek tragedies
- Both share common generic traits
- Both dramatise myths
- Both were commissioned by a contemporary Scottish theatre company;
- Both make use of a theatrical convention less common to us today – the Chorus

(2) Female characters
It might be profitable, also, to examine the way in which the playwrights convey female characters – in terms of their role within the drama, their social status, their political status, their status within the family, their personalities, their motivations and their use of language. In McGrath's version, both Electra and Clytemnestra are capable of extreme acts of brutality: in past versions of the story, this is an unusual behavioural quality for the character of Electra; of course, for her mother, Clytemnestra, acts of cruelty are common behavioural traits in renditions of this myth.

(3) Relevant themes and issues
The themes and issues in the plays are more areas which could provide material for Current Productions and Issues. For instance, we can study the way in which 'justice' is sought in the plays; we can look at the notions of 'revenge' and 'vengeance'; other issues and themes could be studied, such as 'slavery', 'prejudice', 'myth', 'religion', 'intolerance'; as could the ideas behind the plays' resolutions – in what ways are the plays concluded? Has justice been delivered? Has order been restored?

Perhaps greatest of all, though, is the area of political corruption and its purging. Civic authority is challenged throughout the plays.

- Argos - the land to which Agamemnon returned in triumph, where he was slain by his wife and her lover, and to where Orestes must return to join Electra and exact revenge - is in disarray not through strife or disease but through the underlying fear the people feel. As the Chorus tell us at the beginning:

  Violence begets violence. Power snatched
  Unjustly is always held in fear

This can only be resolved when the wrong is righted by the slaying of both Clytemnestra and Aegisthus. One could, of course, assert this to be a religious theme: most mythologies and orthodox religions from every culture across the world contain stories in which a chosen representative carries away the sins or problems of his – it's usually a man – community: an act of martyrdom which restores order, wealth, health and happiness.

- Plague, famine, drought and poverty are rampant throughout Thebes, the land over which Oedipus rules. This is a land which suggests South Africa (in its references to townships, in Greig's description of it as resembling the area of the Matibo/Drakenseberg mountains, and in its references to men gaining culture and education by visiting Europe) but which also retains its Greek place names – Oedipus was brought up in Corinth; Laius was killed on the road at Phocis.

  To make matters even more interesting, McLaren decided to set the play in another colonial setting – India (see 'Performance' below).

  Oedipus must sacrifice his domestic, social and political status – his symbolic martyrdom, perhaps – by putting out his eyes and by going into exile, hoping to leave the city to a better future under the rule of Creon (students of *Antigone* will know this is not what happens).

  It is this moment when the full power of the subtitle arrives. Oedipus, of course, has been unable to see the truth. It is only when he blinds himself that he is able to 'see' the truth of his actions (and the truth of the original prophecy).

§5 Commissioning of the Plays

To provide a context for students, a little information regarding the origins of the *Greeks* project might be helpful.

In 2000, one of Scotland's leading theatre companies (theatre babel) and three of its leading playwrights – David Greig, Tom McGrath and Liz Lochhead – won Lottery Funding to produce three modern versions of Greek tragedies for a contemporary Scottish audience. (*Medea* was Lochhead's contribution.)

The plays had already received an airing in public when students of the Royal Scottish Academy of Dramatic Arts in Glasgow piloted them in trial runs, in 1999. The full, finished products went on to be performed the following year at The Old Fruitmarket, The Tramway, also in Glasgow.

Theatre babel's Artistic Director, Graham McLaren, directed all the plays, which were performed over several nights (with a triple bill night) under the title *Greeks.*

Theatre babel was founded in 1994. Its stated artistic policy is:

> *To reinvestigate and reinvigorate classical theatre. Theatre babel employs an ensemble approach and frequently engages leading Scottish playwrights to create new versions of classical pieces, with the goal of producing work that speaks directly to and about a contemporary audience. Theatre babel's*

> *productions have a distinctive style that is visually powerful and uses minimal sets.*

In his introduction to Lochhead's *Medea*, McLaren says:

> *With this project I wanted to create lasting work that would impact on Scottish culture. I wanted to commission writers that could truly articulate the principal elements of the myths, and so create plays that would transform great and ancient classical works into pieces that would speak not only directly to a Scottish audience but also of universal modern experience.*

§6 Performance

Decisions made by a director and his/her design team are central to the overall impact a production makes on an audience. The following information will be particularly useful for students looking at the performance elements for questions on the plays' dramatic effectiveness and their use of theatre arts.

(1) Electra

Electra's reception by its audience and reviewers was, for the most part, focussed on the many aspects which made it a more faithful interpretation of the Sophocles version of the myth.

<u>Portrayal of Electra</u>

The Sophocles version is considered to have placed Electra more centrally and more heroically; less morosely and grief-stricken, than either Aeschylus in his *Libation Bearers* or Euripides in his *Electra*. McGrath stated his own *Electra* was adapted 'mainly' from Sophocles and he has certainly taken his portrayal of Agamemnon's daughter a stage further by making her a central, motivating force, and a joint killer of her mother, along with her brother Orestes – the character who usually carries out the play's concluding matricide on his own.

Electra is often portrayed as a rather young, overly emotional character. Her dilemma is likewise portrayed as a rather domestic affair, even though placed in a large political arena.

In theatre babel's production of McGrath's version, Electra, though still embroiled in a domestic quarrel, was given a much harder edge. Her costume was a military greatcoat (perhaps her late father's, perhaps her own) and worn, battle-hardened boots. She was no shrinking violet and took a full, active part in her mother's destruction. She also carried a photograph of her father as a memento and reminder of her loss; this image also carried with it images of the Argentinean mothers whose children had 'disappeared' during the military dictatorship in the late 1970s and early 1980s; of image-carrying mass mourners at the funerals of religious 'martyrs' . . . the iconography was a deliberate attempt to amplify and modernise the political magnitude of the play.

<u>The Chorus</u>

In contrast, the Chorus wore costumes which clearly resonated with images of refugees in the many war-torn parts of Europe and beyond in our own time. The larger political implications of the play were always to the fore. (Interestingly, Chrysothemis was costumed as a young girl, switching any impression of 'girliness' away from Electra even further.)

The Chorus added to the aural impact of the production by, at various moments in the play, changing pace, tone, volume and intonation. At times, with their rhythmic quality, they could even have been the Furies to whom Clytemnestra refers on the brink of her own death. (The Furies were snake-haired goddesses who pursued unpunished criminals to wreak vengeance upon them.)

Music

The use of music was also central to the production. When Chrysothemis described Clytemnestra's dream to Electra, the cello used in the production had an ominous tonal quality to underscore the mood of the piece and to add a layer of commentary on proceedings.

Later, when Clytemnestra reveals the true fate of Electra's sister, Iphigenia (she was sacrificed by her father, Agamemnon), this mournful cello was accompanied by an undulating percussive sound, adding to the episode's narration and, perhaps, providing a level of empathy for Clytemnestra which would not usually be present in the play.

Political implications

All of these elements helped raise the political implications of the play and emphasise its central refrain, '*Violence begets violence*'.

In the programme notes, McGrath gave us an insight into his intentions with the characterisation of his central character:

> *I have four daughters, so I'm acutely aware of things that women have to face up to in society. I think Electra's defiance is amazing . . . when I think about Electra I think of Aung San Suu Kyi, the woman leading the opposition to the regime in Burma . . . This is the kind of woman Electra is, although Electra is more motivated by revenge.*

If nothing else tells us, this statement reveals the clear political implications of McGrath's *Electra*.

(2) Oedipus

Set design

Graham McLaren used a similar set for all three plays in the *Greeks* season. The minimalism of theatre babel's set design is a feature of their work. Minimalist settings create a sense of clarity; they allow the actors' performance to be the centre of the spectacle; they focus attention on the narrative.

On a political level, this helps to create an increased sense of objectivity among the audience. Without the distractions, an audience may concentrate on the 'how's' of the play rather than the 'what's'.

This is an influence directly derived from Brecht's Epic Theatre – where distancing devices (*Verfremdungseffekte*) were employed to lower the empathetic responses of the audience and raise their critical judgement. Interestingly, this is employed in this version of *Oedipus*, the archetypal Greek tragedy, the genre of theatre to which Brecht was most opposed.

Oedipus used a bluish backcloth and gave its lower area a low-lit, red-pink hue. This gave a kind of regal aspect to the proceedings, which has a degree of appropriateness, but also added a creeping sense of the catastrophe that lay ahead for the characters.

There was a simple entrance and a Beckettian tree onstage. A traditional theatre-going audience is clearly asked, through this point of reference (the tree), to consider the desperation of existence (i.e. Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* is set on a country road with merely a bare tree for the set). However, the tree also underlined elements of Greig's interpretation: the parched, drought-afflicted land.

Tragedy and political theatre

There is an interesting duality at work here, particularly when we consider the play (and, for that matter, *Electra*) seems to intentionally carry political aspirations. This duality arises as a result of a 'tragedy' employing conventions of a political theatre which is opposed to one of the basic tenets of tragedy.

Tragedy posits an inevitable outcome. This is due to its central, noble character having no alternative but to fulfil his destiny or fate. 'Inevitability' is a concept which Brecht's political theatre (and all its subsequent devotees) would find disagreeable due to its belief that, contrary to tragic principles, man is capable of change and capable of effecting change. Oedipus cannot alter the course of his life. Whatever he does, whether by accident or design, he will inevitably kill his father and marry his mother. Brecht, as a Marxist, believed that man should be shown as able to change the way the world is ordered. Brecht, indeed, referred to his theatre as 'Anti-Aristotelian'.
What we observe in Greig's Oedipus, is a tragedy utilising the armoury of anti-tragedy. This is indicative of either political theatre's conventions having become a plaything of the bourgeoisie, or a sign of the maturity of a political theatre being able to deal with tragic issues. It is an interesting question for students to consider.

Costume

The Chorus were barefoot and dressed in white: a far more traditional Greek Chorus design than the highly modern *Electra* Chorus. As a design idea, the *Oedipus* Chorus contains a stimulating juxtaposition with the *Electra* Chorus: whereas the more traditional version of a Greek tragedy (*Electra*) used a 20th Century costume, the more 20th Century version (*Oedipus*), used more traditional costume for its Chorus. McLaren seems to have been intent upon playing with an audience's expectations and not conforming to stereotypes and clichés.
In contrast to *Electra's* militarism, the costume for *Oedipus* seemed to place the play somewhere on the Indian subcontinent. By doing so, McLaren's team seemed also to be asking its audience to consider other political questions – the question of imperialism/colonialism. Britain, of course, was an imperialist nation, settling in other people's lands and colonising them. Greek myths are brimful of one nation or state going to war with another and laying waste to its people and cultures.
It is tempting to suggest that, at the turn of the century, Scottish theatre workers were considering this question, along with the place of Scotland as a nation: it had been given its own Parliament and it may have been natural to reconsider its position as a nation and its long-held suspicion of the 'colonisers' over its southern border; maybe even to consider its own collaboration in the colonisation of others by Britain.
In the programme, McLaren alluded to this:

> *Politically Scotland is changing and with the millennium the world is changing. Now is the time to be defining what it is to be, not just a Scot in Scotland but what it is to be human in the world . . . Oedipus is as close to a universal text as you'll get. It starts off with the simple mystery of who killed Laius but finishes up by asking absolute questions about what it is to be human.*

In the same programme, Greig developed this further:

> *It is not Sophocles' work but nor is it entirely mine. It belongs neither to Greek culture nor to Scots. It is neither truly old nor truly new. It is a hybrid, a mongrel creation. But mongrelisation is, of course, the secret of survival in a species.*

§7 David Greig on Oedipus

Question How did Oedipus emerge? What was the spur to write a modern version of the play?

David Greig I was asked to write it as part of a project which Theatre Babel initiated to have contemporary Scottish writers rework the Greek classics. Tom McGrath was offered *Electra*, Liz Lochhead *Medea* and they asked me to do *Oedipus*. I was intrigued by the prospect – I enjoy adapting work because it gives me a chance to exercise different writing muscles and to engage with a great writer of the past and a great play. You learn so much from the process for your own writing.

Question In what way do you think *Electra* and *Oedipus*, in particular, and Greek tragedies in general, are relevant to a contemporary Scottish audience?

David Greig Greek drama is about families, government, power, god, love, children rebelling against parents, the past coming back to haunt you, wives hating husbands... and so on. The point is that Greek drama is about the great universal themes that will always speak to us because they are about being human. In my version of *Oedipus* I tried to draw attention to the way Oedipus is unaware of his guilt - this seemed to me to link to citizens in rich western cultures who slowly begin to realise that their lifestyle is responsible for the suffering of others... the individual hasn't committed any crime and yet they are still guilty.

Question What did you find challenging about adhering (or not) to the Aristotelian principles of tragedy?

David Greig: I didn't find it challenging - partly because it was Sophocles who created the structure of the play which I followed so the struggle and success was his. Also, though, Aristotelian principles are sometimes overestimated - even Sophocles didn't stick rigidly to the rules.

Question What was theatre babel's relationship with you, the play and its journey to public performance?

David Greig Unfortunately it wasn't a great relationship for me. I felt that the theatre company had wanted a more traditional version of the play which stuck to the setting of the original. That process never interested me - there are existing translations which do that job better than I ever could. I wanted to create a hybrid -

something new. I found the production to be too traditional. The actors spoke in received pronunciation, there were no black actors in the cast, and my stage directions weren't followed. Also, a lot of my choruses were cut. All in all I think they tried to make the play into something it wasn't - I still long for a radical, bold production of the play.

Question How would you say your Oedipus differ from Sophocles' ?

David Grieg As I say, I think it is a hybrid. There are a great many differences of detail but overall I hope that there is a truth of spirit which I am loyal to in my adaptation. I simply wanted the audience to see the play new, with fresh eyes - like when you move the furniture around in room and suddenly you see the space differently.

Question The issue of class seems to be a central concern of this version of Oedipus. Would you agree? If so, why did you adopt this strategy?

David Grieg Class is very important in this version. This is also reflected in thinking about colonisers in a land where there were existing power structures. So, for example, Oedipus is the landowner but the local indigenous people have their own 'King'. He doesn't have Oedipus' power but he does have authority. This is something we see even now in Iraq for example - the American Ambassador has the military power, like Oedipus, but to work they have to negotiate with local Sheikhs, or religious leaders.

Question In what ways would you say this is a political version (if, indeed, you would say this)?

David Grieg I think Sophocles' *Oedipus* is political. I think all plays are political in that they reflect the doings of people and the economic conditions that shape people. My *Oedipus* speaks about race and class. It also speaks about how powerful people become corrupted by power even though they aim to do good.

Question The use of a Chorus is an interesting structural device for drama students today. What did you find interesting about it?

David Grieg Choruses were useful for me because they allowed me to make heard the voice of the 'ordinary' people: the citizens of Thebes. In Greek drama the choruses were sung and danced. In a way they were like the big numbers in a west end musical! They are a break from the main action and they allow the audience to reflect on what is happening.

Question The setting of Oedipus is very specific (i.e. Matibo/Drakenseberg mountains). Why did you choose this?

David Grieg I chose the setting because I had recently visited that area and stayed for a while with my brother who was working there. I found many things fascinated me. It helps me as a writer to have a clear picture of the landscape in which the action is taking place.

Question You use blank verse. Much of the play is written in short, staccato lines. Some language - particularly Creon's - is extremely earthy. Why did you choose to write the play this way?

David Grieg My line breaks tend to divide the text into 'thoughts.' It can be helpful for actors in finding a rhythm in which to say the lines and it alerts the actor and the reader to the fact that this is not 'naturalistic' language but is poetry - written to be spoken.

Creon speaks in a very coarse, violent language. I imagined him as a drunk, cynical, beaten man. I felt this made an interesting contrast when he assumed power at the end and had to find his own, inner nobility. Also, coarse language reminds us that these mythic archetypes are simple human beings. It can shock us out of our own complacency. British theatre has always mixed high and low language to forge its stage poetry. Even Shakespeare used earthy language which we often miss because we don't know the puns or the references.

Question Jocasta is an interesting character, particularly being a strong woman in a myth largely populated by males. How did you find building her role in the drama?

David Grieg Jocasta's is a very harsh tragedy. I loved writing her. She is a step ahead of Oedipus and her death is one of the saddest in drama. She loses a child twice, once when he is taken away as a baby, then again when she realises who he is. She loses a husband twice - her first husband is killed and her second husband turns out to be her son. She is an incredible portrait of a soul scourged by fate. Her suffering is primal and extreme.

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