

# THE ODYSSEIAD

Script and songs by Alex Thomas

Additional music and orchestrations by Joe Waymouth and John Mann

## SUMMARY

An ambitious adaptation of the Iliad and the Odyssey, with a rock music score. It follows the hero Odysseus and his wife Penelope through the end of the Trojan war and to his eventual homecoming, with a parallel plot set on an archaeological dig at Mycenae in 1902. A large ensemble piece with plenty of roles (singing and non-singing), puppetry, and epic set-pieces.

**ROLES:** 47 speaking roles (some can be doubled if necessary) with flexible ensemble.

**MUSIC:** 8 songs orchestrated for 7-piece band. The style is rock/epic/filmic. Mostly ensemble singing, some featured soloists. Other musical set-pieces, including opportunities for ambitious dance and physical theatre sequences.

## CHARACTERS:

### THE DIG

**Professor Henry Allen:** (male, 40) An eminent archaeologist, leading the excavation of Mycenae. Brilliant and irascible, an impressive figure but lacking empathy, especially as a father.

**Teddy Allen:** (male, 12) Professor Allen's son, sulky and defensive but loyal and passionate when pushed.

**Winifred Kennedy:** (female, 20) A spirited young woman fresh from university, determined to make her way in a man's world.

**Dr Julian Sherwin:** (male, 30) Allen's second in command on the dig. Awkward and a little infatuated with Winifred.

**Mr Harlow:** (male, 35-40) A wealthy American, financing the dig and determined to see quick and impressive results. Aggressive and domineering.

**Sofia Harlow/Helen of Troy:** (female, 25) Harlow's new Greek bride, but clearly more than a 'token' beautiful young wife. She becomes Helen (the beautiful woman who was stolen by a Trojan prince) when narrating this section of the story. Solo singing role.

**Pepper:** (m/f, puppeteer) A stray dog puppet, operated by an energetic handler who also provides realistic live dog noises.

**Dimitrios:** (male, 14) A Greek boy on the dig, ringleader of a gang, who antagonises Teddy.

**Asterios and Marinos:** (m/f 12-14) Young Greeks, part of Dimitrios gang

### THE EPIC WORLD

**Phemius:** (m/f, 30-50) A bard, who narrates and belongs in both worlds, with a supernatural air. Challenging solo singing/

**Odysseus, King of Ithaca:** (male, 40) Cunning, brave and charming. A born leader but always yearning for home, his wife and son. Challenging solo singing.

**Penelope:** (female, 35) Queen of Ithaca, she has a steely character and has run the kingdom for ten years in her husband's absence. She remains loyal to his memory, even when presuming him dead. Challenging solo singing.

**Telemachus:** (male, 16) Son of Penelope and Odysseus, desperate to prove himself against the arrogant suitors for his mother's hand.

**Achilles:** (male, 30) A legendary, almost invincible warrior, the best in the Greek army.

**Agamemnon:** (male, 40) Leader of the Greeks as high king of Mycenae. Arrogant and overbearing.

**Menelaus:** (male, 40) Brother of Agamemnon, king of Sparta. Aggressive and lusting after revenge on Paris, who stole his wife, Helen.

**Hector:** (male, 30) Heroic and doomed prince of Troy. He leads the Trojans even when sensing his impending death. Challenging solo singing.

**Andromache:** (female, 25-40) Hector's wife, mother to a young baby. She leads the women of Troy in their victory dance and later in their mourning for Hector. Challenging solo singing.

**Paris:** (male, 25) Handsome and vain Trojan prince who has stolen Helen from her husband, thus bringing war to Troy.

**Patroclus:** (male, 25) Achilles' favoured companion, always in his shadow but courageous and loyal

**Circe:** (female, 30-40) A beautiful and deadly enchantress

**Cyclops:** (m/f) A monstrous one-eyed giant, originally portrayed by a puppeteer, also voicing the character

**Calliope, Terpsichore, Euterpe:** (female, 20) Three muses who narrate through song and dance. They also become the sirens. Confident singers and dancers.

**Nausicaa:** (female, 18-20) Spirited and confident princess of Phaeacia

**Anticleia:** (female, 70) Odysseus's deceased mother, seen in the underworld

**Teiresias:** (m/f, 70) A deceased Greek prophet, seen in the underworld

**Chryses:** (male, 50-60) A Trojan priest

**Chryseis:** (female, 18-20) Daughter of Chryses, taken prisoner by Agamemnon

**Antinous:** (male, 20-25) The ringleader of the suitors, wealthy and arrogant, with some charm.

**Eurymachus:** (male, 20-25) Antinous' main henchman among the suitors, aggressive and spoilt.

**Leodes:** (male, 20-25) Another leading suitor

**Hecamede and Hemithea:** (female, 20-30) Trojan women

**Glaukos and Meges:** (male, 20-30) Trojan guards

**Eurylochus:** (male, 25) Odysseus' trusty second-in-command, loyal and rough tongued.

**Lykon, Pandion, Eudoros, Menesthius, Teukros, Phyleus, Tydeus, Dexios:** (male, 20-30) Greek soldiers who follow Odysseus home from Troy and share his adventures, some more willingly than others.

**Ensemble of Greeks and Trojans (including Trojan dancers)**

## **FULL SYNOPSIS**

This play is based on Homer's epic poems about the Trojan war *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. The gods and goddesses are mostly not presented in this adaptation - the only immortals depicted in the play are a trio of Muses, who are our companions through the story. Scenes from this epic world are interspersed with scenes from a semi-fictional archaeological dig at Agamemnon's palace at Mycenae. The characters in this more modern world are loosely based on real figures. Some characters cross worlds, notably Phemius (a bard) and Helen of Troy, who first appears as Sofia Harlow. So too does Pepper, the dog, who becomes Odysseus's faithful hound, Argos. Objects on the stage are also used in both worlds, such as drinking cups. The setting for both worlds is a stone amphitheatre, partially crumbling, with tents which belong in both worlds, and raised walls, which become the walls of Troy. Music, song and dance (and stylised fighting) plays a key role in the epic world; the modern world is notably quieter.

### **ACT I**

In the prologue we see Penelope, Queen of Ithaca, praying to the gods for her husband Odysseus's safe return from the Trojan War ('Whispers from the sea'). He has been gone for ten years, during which time his son, Telemachus, has grown into a young man, and his palace on Ithaca taken over by a crowd of impudent young suitors (led by Antinous and Eurymachus) demanding Penelope's hand in marriage. She calls down the wrath of the gods on them and a mighty storm breaks.

Under the same stormy skies we see Odysseus in the Greek camp at Troy praying to Athena, his protectress, for a conclusion to the endless war against the Trojans. His trusted second-in-command is Eurylochus, who tells him that trouble is brewing: Achilles, the best warrior in the Greek army, is refusing to fight on account of a quarrel with Agamemnon, King of Mycenae and the commander of the invasion force. They exit, as the storm climaxes.

A sunny dawn breaks in 1902. A dog (puppet) appears, scurrying among the debris of the dig. Its excited barking reveals the head of Winifred Kennedy, a new addition to the team, who thinks she has found something interesting. She shouts at Pepper the dog to leave off, just as Teddy enters. The two chat, and it emerges that Teddy is deeply unhappy at being brought out to the dig every school holiday to be with his father, Professor Allen. His mother is dead. The two bond over the ridiculous figure of Dr Sherwin, who tries to woo Winifred only to be distracted by Teddy while she makes her escape. Professor Allen remonstrates with Winifred against distracting the boy with fanciful ideas. Undeterred, Winifred repays Teddy by bringing to life the ancient world, reciting the opening of the *Iliad*...

Her recitation is echoed by Phemius (in Greek) who starts narrating the story of Troy from the beginning ('To Troy!') as the Greek army emerge in their ferocious sailing ships. The soldiers join in the warlike song, and we are now in the Greek camp, where Agamemnon is holding court and refusing to return a captive Trojan girl, Chryseis, daughter of the priest Chryses, who begs for her release. His refusal draws a curse from Chryses, which prompts Achilles to challenge the wisdom of Agamemnon's decisions. This becomes an angry confrontation between the army's finest warrior and its commander-in-chief. Agamemnon's brother is Menelaus, King of Sparta, whose wife Helen ran away with a Trojan prince, Paris, thus starting the Trojan War. Achilles accuses both brothers of fighting only for themselves. Odysseus prevents the argument from escalating, for now, but Achilles storms off, refusing to fight until he has received an apology. His best friend, Patroclus, tells Odysseus that he can lead Achilles' men, wearing his armour: Odysseus tells him this is sheer folly,

for he will be killed by the great Trojan prince Hector. Odysseus rallies the men for another assault ('To Troy! reprise')

Evening in 1902. The wealthy American, Harlow, who is financing the dig arrives for dinner with his beautiful younger Greek wife, Sofia. He immediately begins to argue with Allen about the slow pace of the dig. Allen becomes defensive, backed up by Sherwin. Winifred shows astute judgement and a feisty streak by contradicting both men, to Sofia's amusement. Harlow tries to calm the situation by reminding them what they are trying to achieve: the bringing back to life of a miraculous and epic ancient world, proving that the Trojan war happened. Sofia steps into the arena and becomes Helen; Paris appears, and the two sing of their doomed love ('Burnt wings') accompanied by the Muses.

Menelaus appears to bellow out a challenge to Paris to fight him man to man. Hector remonstrates with Paris for not fighting, when all Troy seems doomed to be destroyed, including Hector's wife and child. Paris, riled, accepts the challenge and goes to fight Menelaus, who humiliates him until Hector rescues him and embarks on a deadly killing spree ('Hector's rampage'). The Greeks fall back until Patroclus appears, dressed as Achilles; the men rally but Hector kills Patroclus in single combat. Hector immediately realises his mistake and secretly realises he will have brought Achilles' wrath on himself, but encourages the Trojans to celebrate this great victory ('Trojan battle hymn'), which leads to a bacchic dance ('Trojan victory dance').

As the dance ends we are back in 1902; the dinner has ended, and Sherwin brings his gramophone to play dance music. Sherwin grabs Winifred for an over-enthusiastic waltz; Harlow and Sofia join in. The good mood is shattered by Teddy and Dimitrios, a Greek boy, fighting through the camp over the fact that Dimitrios has been treating Pepper roughly. Harlow insults Allen over his son's behaviour, Allen retaliates and the evening ends with Harlow telling the whole dig to be gone by noon the next day. Winifred tries to console Allen, and learns a little of his difficult family history. There is a spark of mutual respect for the first time.

Penelope sadly watches her son practising sword-fighting while Phemius sings a folk song ('Home'). She challenges Phemius over men's obsession with war, then quickly disarms Telemachus, showing skill with a blade. Back at Troy, Achilles learns of Patroclus's death from Odysseus. Hector bids farewell to his wife as he watches Achilles run towards the city walls, bringing doom. The two armies gather to watch the ultimate battle between these two great warriors. It starts in slow-motion as Winifred narrates to Teddy from The Iliad, then we burst into real time, climaxing in Hector's death. Achilles bellows his triumph, only to be suddenly brought down by arrows fired by Paris from the walls. Achilles dies in Odysseus's arms. Andromache leads the women and armies in mourning for the dead heroes ('Fallen heroes').

## ACT II

The dig has been packed up. A pile of packing cases sits in the arena. Winifred and Teddy discuss the previous evening, and a sheepish Sherwin comes to bid farewell to Winifred. Teddy asks her to finish the story of Troy's fall. She tells him about Odysseus' plan to hide a force of Greeks in a gigantic wooden horse, which the Trojans unwittingly lead into their city.

The horse appears (in the form of a descending wooden horse head) and the Trojans, led by Chryses, celebrate the end of the war ('Trojan battle hymn' and 'victory dance' reprise). Only Paris is dubious, suspecting a trap, but Helen calms him by singing a familiar folk tune ('Home' – in a duet with Penelope, far away), to lure any Greeks out from the gift horse. Paris is convinced and they depart. The pile of packing cases is lit from within to reveal Odysseus and Menelaus, with a band of men.

Eurylochus distracts the Trojan guards as the Greeks erupt and put Troy to the sword ('The fall of Troy').

Winifred and Allen meet; he has been down in the town trying to find Pepper, who has disappeared. Winifred is touched by his new concern for his son's feelings. They dance privately to the gramophone until Harlow interrupts, prepared to make amends. But Allen is not prepared to back down, and the two depart acrimoniously, though Harlow offers Winifred a job, as she has impressed him. A storm breaks.

Odysseus is on a raft, hurled about in the sea by the Muses ('The Storm'). He is flung onto a beach, where he is discovered by Princess Nausicaa of Phaeacia. He tells her and her companions about his adventures after Troy, during which he and his men encounter the one-eyed giant Cyclops and meet the enchantress Circe, who sends them to the Underworld to consult the dead prophet Teiresias. Odysseus also sees the ghosts of former comrades and his own mother, Anticleia. These episodes are all enacted by Odysseus's companions, including Eurylochus, who becomes increasingly angry at Odysseus' callous disregards for his men's lives. Odysseus regains control by offering his sword (and life) to Eurylochus. His story reaches its climax in the terrible whirlpool, Charybdis, where the sailors, including Eurylochus, are swept to their deaths. Odysseus refuses to give in ('Surrender to the sea').

Winifred tells the last section of Odysseus's story to Teddy, just before they part. Dimitrios appears with Allen, offering an apology, and presenting Teddy with a newly found Pepper. Dimitrios also reveals that Pepper has dug out an interesting artefact from a trench, and they all rush to see it, past enmity forgotten. Only Pepper remains, and (as Argos, the dog) is the first to recognise Odysseus, his master.

Finally back home in Ithaca, Odysseus is reunited with Telemachus, who initially disbelieves this shabbily dressed man can be his famous father. The two plan their revenge of the suitors, who continue to abuse Penelope's hospitality ('Suitor's dance'). Back in the palace Penelope has finally decided to grant her hand in marriage to one of the suitors and presents a challenge: the first man to string Odysseus's famous bow can claim her. The suitors fail, but the disguised Odysseus succeeds, shooting Antinous then Eurymachus. The other suitors battle for their lives, then flee in terror ('The final battle'). Penelope is at last reunited with her husband though she first puts him to a test to reassure herself of his identity ('Homecoming').

In the epilogue we see Winifred, Allen and Teddy finally bidding each other farewell, before Odysseus, Penelope and Telemachus reappear in familial bliss.

## **ORCHESTRATIONS**

Lead guitar  
Guitar 2  
Bass guitar  
Keyboard/synth 1  
Keyboard/synth 2  
Drum kit  
Percussion

## **MUSICAL NUMBERS**

Whispers from the sea – Muses, Penelope, Odysseus  
To Troy! – Phemius and the Greeks  
Burnt wings – Helen, Paris and Muses  
Hector's rampage – Instrumental (action sequence)  
Home - Phemius  
Trojan battle hymn – Hector and Trojans  
Trojan victory dance – Instrumental (dance feature)  
Fallen heroes – Andromache and ensemble  
Home (reprise) – Helen and Penelope  
The fall of Troy/Odysseus' prayers – Instrumental  
The storm – Instrumental  
The blinding of Cyclops – Instrumental (action sequence)  
Siren song – The Muses  
Surrender to the sea – Muses, Odysseus, ensemble (action/dance sequence)  
Suitor's dance – Instrumental (dance feature)  
The final battle – Instrumental (action sequence)  
Homecoming – {Penelope and Odysseus}  
Finale – Ensemble

## **PRODUCTION HISTORY**

This adaptation was first performed in the Oxford Playhouse, June 2024, by pupils from Magdalen College School, Oxford. It was directed by Alex Thomas, produced by Leah O'Grady and designed by Christianna Mason. It received significant press attention, not least being featured on Times Radio, with the writer being interviewed live. Over two thousand people saw the sell-out run of four performances.