

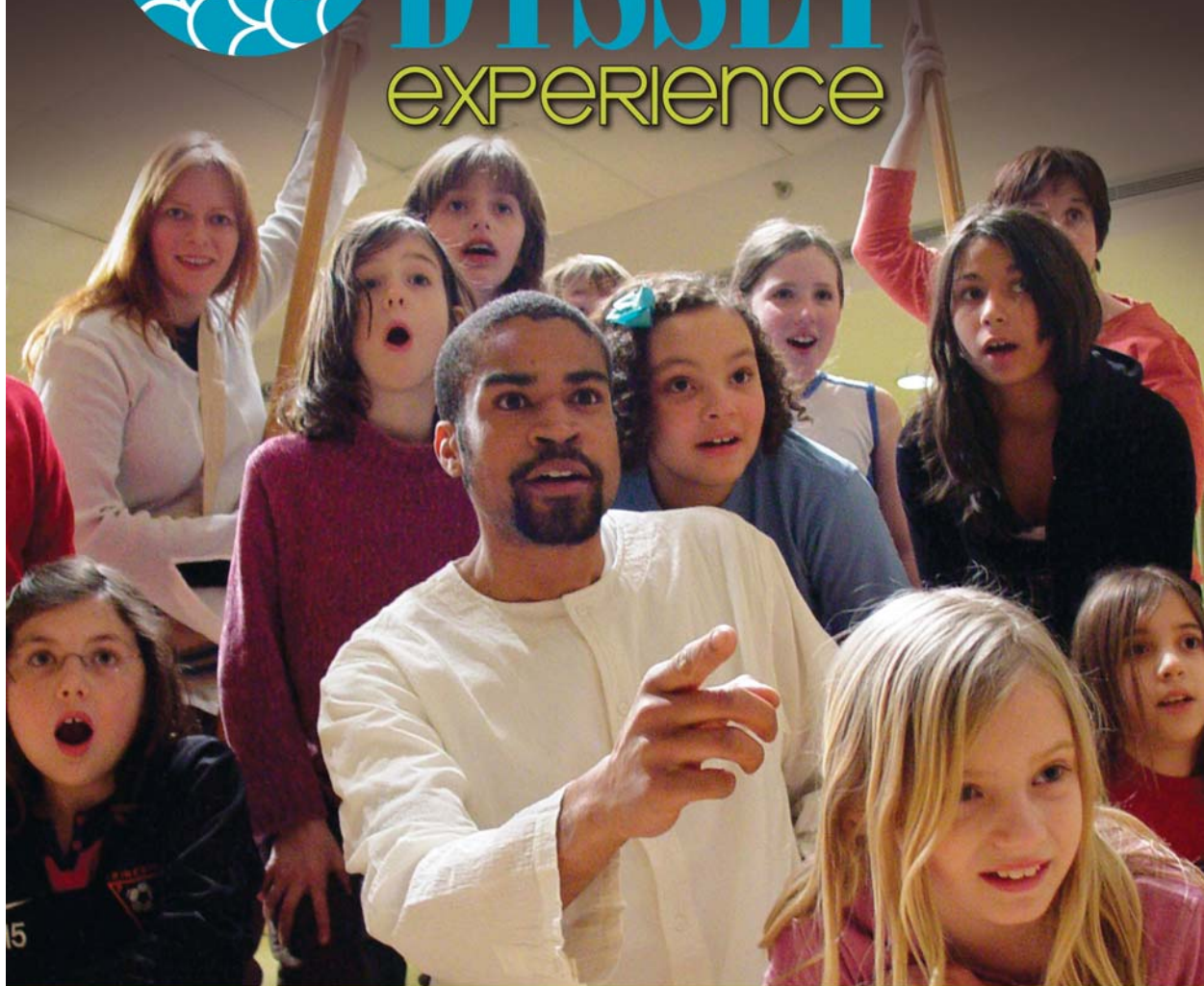


McCARTER THEATRE EDUCATION presents a Family Performance

DYSSEY

experience

written and directed by
Christopher T. Parks



A BRAND-NEW, COMPLETELY INTERACTIVE PROGRAM!

A McCarter Theatre Education Department production

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PLOT SUMMARY

The Odyssey Experience is an abridged telling of Homer's epic poem *The Odyssey*. After the carnage of the Trojan War, clever Odysseus, a Grecian general responsible for the Trojan horse and the Greeks victory, makes his way home from Troy to Ithaca, and encounters many obstacles along the way.

The *Odyssey Experience* opens with players invoking the muse and welcoming the students as participants in the theatrical experience.

We then shift to the hall of the gods on Mount Olympus. Odysseus's great ally, Athena, the goddess of wisdom, begs her father, Zeus, to protect him. Zeus tells her he can not, because Odysseus has angered too many other gods.

Meanwhile, back in Ithaca, Odysseus wife, Penelope, and their son, Telemachus, are struggling to cope with an invasion of unruly, impolite suitors, who assume Odysseus is dead and want to marry Penelope, and subsequently take the throne. Because of Greek rules of hospitality they cannot be thrown out, and they refuse to leave until Penelope agrees to marry one of them. She, however, has faith that Odysseus will return, and refuses.

Athena can no longer contain herself, she flies to the side of Odysseus hoping to aid him on his journey home from The Trojan War. He arrives on the island of the Cyclops, a race of giant, one-eyed, man-eating monsters. Odysseus and his crew are captured by the Cyclops Polyphemus but is able to overcome the monster. Odysseus and his men stab the giant beast in the eye and then escape from the cave. By doing so, however, they anger Polyphemus's father, who happens to be the great god of the sea, Poseidon—an unfortunate enemy to have if you are on a long ocean voyage. Their ship is thrown far off course.

Odysseus and his men arrive on the island of Aiolia, the god of the winds, who pities the sailors, and grants them a secret gift in a silvery bag, revealing its contents only to Odysseus. He warns them not to look inside the bag, and tells Odysseus to keep his sailors from opening it. Despite his efforts to stay awake, Odysseus finally falls asleep after nine days of travel, and his sailors, too curious to contain themselves, open the bag. They release its contents, the wind, which instantly blows them back to where they started. Aiolia is very angry at their disrespect of his gift, and refuses to replace it. Odysseus must then travel to Hades, the underworld populated by the dead to ask advice from the blind soothsayer, Tiresias, about how to get home.

The voyage continues and the crew is forced to sail past the island of the Sirens, who tempt men toward their rocks to wreck their ships. Odysseus orders the sailors to protect themselves by putting wax in their ears, but ties himself to the mast of his ship so he can hear the tempting cries of the Sirens. Having passed this challenge, the men face the sea monsters Scylla and Charybdis, and while a few of the crew must be sacrificed, the rest are finally able to escape.

Next, the crew arrives on the island of Helios, the sun god, where they have been warned not to eat his cattle. Only Odysseus resists the temptation and the others meet their demise. Alone, Odysseus continues his voyage home.

Back in Ithaca, the situation with the suitors has reached a breaking point. Penelope announces a contest, saying that whoever can string Odysseus's bow will be her husband. When an old beggar appears and the suitors mistreat him, Telemachus decides something must be done, and the contest begins at once. A number of suitors fail, and then the old beggar succeeds. Removing his disguise, the beggar reveals that he is Odysseus. He and the suitors draw their swords as Odysseus seeks revenge.

Finally, joyfully reunited with his family, having vanquished the suitors, Odysseus must walk inland until he comes to a place where no one has seen the ocean, and no one can identify an oar. When he does, he plants the oar as an offering to appease Poseidon, and his adventure comes to an end.

CHARACTER PROFILES

Some of the main characters who appear in the *The Odyssey Experience*:

- **Odysseus** – *The Odyssey* is the story of his journey home from the Trojan War. He is the king of Ithaca and is brave, loyal and above all else, clever.
- **Athena** – Goddess of wisdom. She comes to Odysseus's aid in spite of the rest of the pantheon of Olympus's unwillingness to aid him for fear of angering Poseidon.
- **Zeus** – King of all the gods on Olympus, and Athena's father.
- **Penelope** – The faithful, loyal wife of Odysseus. She patiently waits 20 years for his return.
- **Telemachus** – Son of Odysseus and Penelope. He was only an infant when his father left to fight in Troy, but is now a young man.
- **Cyclops** – A race of savage, one-eyed giants.
- **Polyphemus** – A Cyclops, son of Poseidon.
- **Poseidon** – God of the sea.

- **Aiolia** – Wind god.
- **Tiresias** – A famous, deceased Greek prophet.
- **Sirens** – Beautiful maidens who lure sailors to their deaths with an irresistible song.
- **Charybdis** – A violent whirlpool. It destroys all ships that get caught in it.
- **Scylla** – A six-headed monster.
- **Helios** – God of the Sun.

CORE CURRICULUM STANDARDS

According to the NJ Department of Education, “experience with and knowledge of the arts is a vital part of a complete education.” Our production of *The Odyssey Experience* and the activities outlined in this guide are designed to enrich your students’ education by addressing the following specific Core Curriculum Standards for Visual and Performing Arts:

- 1.1** All students will use aesthetic knowledge in the creation of and in response to dance, music, theater and visual arts.
- 1.3** All students will demonstrate an understanding of the elements and principles of dance, music, theater and visual arts.
- 1.5** All students will understand and analyze the role development, and continuing influence of the arts in relation to world cultures, history, and society.

Viewing *The Odyssey Experience* and then participating in the pre- and post-show discussions suggested in this resource guide will also address the following Core Curriculum Standards in Language Arts Literacy:

- 3.2** All students will write in clear, concise, organized language that varies in content and form for different audiences and purposes.
- 3.3** All students will speak in clear, concise, organized language that varies in content and form for different audiences and purposes.
- 3.4** All students will listen actively to information from a variety of sources in a variety of situations.

In addition, the production of *The Odyssey Experience*, as well as the resource guide activities, will help to fulfill the following Social Studies Core Curriculum Standards:

- 6.1** All students will utilize historical thinking, problem solving and research skills to maximize their understanding of civics, history, geography and economics.
- 6.6** All students will apply knowledge of spatial relationships and other geographic skills to understand human behavior in relation to the physical and cultural environment.

EXPERIENTIAL THEATER: A TUTORIAL FOR TEACHERS

Although McCarter Education's production of *The Odyssey Experience* is theatrically staged with professional scenery, music and actors, the root of the event we create derives from an in-class theater arts education exercise designed to empower students to react and interact within imaginary circumstances. In fact, the techniques we developed for the student interaction in our show began in residencies and workshops with as few as fifteen participants. Our initial objective was to create an opportunity for students to act out stories without needing any rehearsals or prior knowledge of the material. Through a series of prompts, the students portrayed characters and spoke lines of their own devising. Every "performance" was different, and the joy of the exercise was in observing students making decisions about their characters based upon their own perception of what it would be like to actually be the people they were portraying.

We hope that you can make use of some of our techniques and that they will inspire you to create your own productions in the classroom. Past participating classroom teachers have remarked that successful "experiential theater" can be a great new mode of learning for students of varying retention skills, as well as a fun diversion from other story exploration exercises that may already be employed in the classroom.

Step #1 Preparation:

Before involving students, some initial considerations are necessary. First, what is your students' level of familiarity with the source material? "Experiential theater" has primarily been created for stories that students are not already familiar with. If you select a story with which the students are already familiar for example, the *Three Little Pigs*, then students will simply speak the lines they know are expected ("Little pigs, little pigs, let me in.") and there will be no opening for imaginative exploration. However, if the students have little to no information about the story they are going to tell, then they will have opportunity to create their own words and help guide the emotional action.

Once you have decided on a story, try to evaluate what items you may need to help tell your story. Are you going on a journey on a boat? Then maybe some wooden dowels or yard sticks to represent oars might be good to have in the classroom. Are you going to encounter some superheroes? Maybe a few yards of cloth or bath towels to make some impromptu capes would be good to have around. In general, a box of rope and cloth, and sticks/dowels are useful as quick props or costumes.

Step #2 Preparing the Students:

Sometimes, particularly with smaller groups, we begin with discussion. Let us say, for instance, that we want to tell the story of *The Tempest* by William Shakespeare. Instead of just launching into the tale by starting to narrate it, we might begin by asking the students some questions to get them thinking about the world of the story. We might ask, "What is a shipwreck?" "Have any of you ever been in a really bad argument with one of your siblings? Do you still hold a grudge about it/the argument?" "What does it mean to be a slave?" "Do you ever feel like you are in servitude to people in your own lives?" After everyone is familiar with the basic subject matter and has a sense of the themes we are going to explore, we are ready to begin the program.

Alternatively, sometimes we simply begin the program. We don't even offer a "hello," or "how are you?" as is the case with *The Odyssey Experience*. The reason for this is we want to maintain a distance with the students to encourage a level of formality right from the start. With very large groups, it is easy to lose control if the students think that they have more freedom than you want them to have.

Step #3 Style of Interaction:

When we begin to bring our story to life it is not necessary that the students follow the "rules" of theater such as "don't turn your back to the audience" or "you must project your voice." Since there is no intended audience in the classroom, the whole activity is for the entertainment and edification of the participants exclusively.

The crafting of the script to be spoken by the teacher is the key to the success. Every line and every gesture will be the key to proper interaction with the students. Below are some examples of text from an experiential theater script with stage directions and explanations written in italics:

It was a dark and stormy night.

(Teacher cups hands next to her ear and uses her other hand to invite the students to make the sounds of the storm.)

...when smiling, old Bill Brown entered the house.

(Teacher makes eye contact with a student and presents hand as to invite that student to come into the playing area and enter as Bill.)

He was jovial and whistled as he entered. He called out to his wife Janet to let her know that he was home.

(Teacher's description of Bill's actions should prompt the student to go through the motions of his activity.)

His surly wife came down the stairs, unhappy with the world. When he went to greet her, she barely acknowledged him.

(Teacher's description of Bill's actions should prompt the student to go through the motions of his activity.)

She had had a horrible time dealing with their children and in spite of his positive tone, she decided to tell him all about her day.

(This is an open-ended line, so should yield some fun results. We know that we have an angry spirit who has a happy older husband. We also know that they have kids and that it was a rough day. The student should be able to cobble together some line. After she has spoken enough, the teacher should begin the next line.)

Suddenly, as to stop her from speaking, Bill put his hand up. She reluctantly fell silent. In the distance, they heard chanting, *whispered* "Old Bill Brown, old Bill Brown, the greatest man in all of town."

(The teacher puts her hands with her palms turned upwards and motions with her fingers for the rest of the students to join in.)

(Quietly) "Old Bill Brown, old Bill Brown, the greatest man in all of town." *(A little louder)* "Old Bill Brown, old Bill Brown, the greatest man in all of town." *(Louder)* "Old Bill Brown, old Bill Brown, the greatest man in all of town." *(Very loud)* "Old Bill Brown, old Bill Brown, the greatest man in all of town."

(Teacher puts her hand up to stop the chant, then:) Bill Smiled...And then opened the front door. There was the whole town smiling right back at him. *(The rest of the students can be the rest of the town.)*

Mr. Peterson came forward and emotionally thanked him.

(If the teacher knows her students, she can pick someone who will really put a lot of emotion into this part.)

And, after seeing Mrs. Browns' surprise at this, he asked her if she knew why they were chanting. *(Give a moment for "Mr. Peterson" to ask her and for her to respond. Whether or not she does, the teacher then says:)*

She didn't know, ...so Mr. Peterson explained why the whole town thought her husband was the greatest! *(Again, depending on the student, this can be a great opportunity for improvisation.)*

The instruction outlined here is very simple and seems mostly intuitive. Once the teacher begins to craft his or her scripts to create succinct narrative riddled with description, the students will be able to interact and bring to life whatever scenario the teacher might care to create.

Step #4: Post-Activity:

Whether in the process of creating the "performance" or afterwards, the teacher should feel free to assess the actions and decisions the make as characters. If, for instance, Mrs. Brown had said that her day was terrible because she won the lottery, then it would be perfectly within the right of the teacher to ask, "Why would that be terrible?" If the student is trying to sabotage the exercise inadvertently or otherwise, then the teacher needs to address the issue right away. However, if the student has some odd reason for winning the

lottery being a terrible thing, then it falls to the teacher to draw that reason out in the moment, so that the exercise stays on track for the other possibly confused listeners.

In the event that there is nothing that warrants discussion over the course of the play the teacher should take mental note of what the students say and create, so that at the end, positive and enigmatic choices can be discussed and analyzed through discussion with the rest of the participants.

POST-SHOW DISCUSSION IDEAS AND ACTIVITIES

Note to Educators: Use the following questions for discussion and activities to have students reflect upon their experience of The Odyssey Experience, as well as to encourage their own imaginative and artistic projects through further exploration of the play, its characters and themes.

1. JOURNEYS AND HOMECOMINGS.

At the heart of *The Odyssey Experience* is the story of a person on a journey just trying to get home. Have your students consider the two major themes of journey and homecoming in both the story of Odysseus and in the story of their own lives.

JOURNEYS

Every journey has a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning of every journey is prompted by a “call to adventure” or a reason for going, and a departure. The middle of a journey is made up of different roads, places on the way, people who either help or hinder the voyager, and sometimes other trials and/or obstacles that slow down or stop the journeyer’s progress. The end of the journey is just that: the place of arrival, the goal or endpoint. Some journeys have two legs: the journey to a place and then the journey back home.

- Have your students discuss the beginning, middle and end of Odysseus’ journey home as enacted in *The Odyssey Experience*.
 - Ask your students what events mark the beginning of his journey home—his reason for going and point of departure.
 - Next, have them chart out (preferably on the classroom chalk or white board) the middle of his journey, including the places he stops on the way, the people he meets (who either help or hinder him), and any other or trial or obstacle he experiences.
 - Then ask your students to describe the end of Odysseus’s journey.
- Ask your students to consider a journey that they, or someone they know family member or friend) have taken.

- Have them outline the details of the journey's beginning, middle and end (as indicated above) on a sheet of paper.
- Then give your students an opportunity to free write about this journey for ten minutes. If appropriate, students may volunteer their compositions to be read aloud to the class and discussed.

HOMECOMINGS

Odysseus has been absent from Ithaca for twenty years. Ask your students to put themselves into the shoes of Odysseus, as well as those of Telemachus and Penelope, to consider what this situation must be like for this specific family.

- Ask your students the following questions:
 - What thoughts and feelings must be going through each character's mind and body?
 - What must Odysseus do, now that he is home, to reclaim his standing as king, husband, and father (beyond killing the suitors)?
 - How will the lives of Telemachus and Penelope change now that Odysseus has returned?

- Ask your students if they have ever experienced an important homecoming in the life or history of their own family. Ask them to describe the event to their classmates, considering:
 - What was the setting of the homecoming?
 - What was the scenario/situation?
 - Who were the "characters" involved?
 - What happened?

2. A CLASSROOM PANTHEON OF EPIC HERO(IN)ES.

The hero in an epic poem or story is known as an "epic hero." An epic hero, male or female, is a person who is able to overcome most problems that s/he encounters without any supernatural powers. The epic hero is faithful to family, country, and the gods. In addition, the epic hero is brave. Although the epic hero often feels fear, s/he overcomes the fear, knowing that s/he has important responsibilities, which include defeating evil and allowing good to triumph. The epic hero is also intelligent; without supernatural powers, the epic hero must rely on smarts to get out of tough situations. Sometimes, however, a higher force or being serves as the epic hero's guide. This greater force does not do things for the hero, but rather helps the hero do things for her/himself.

- Utilizing the criteria of the epic hero above, ask your students to provide evidence from *The Odyssey Experience* to support the nomination of Odysseus into the "Pantheon of Epic Heroes."

- Then ask your students to name additional literary or fictional heroes (from books, plays or films they have read or seen) for nomination to the classroom’s “Pantheon of Epic Heroes.”
 - Generate a list of fictional heroes on the board.
 - Ask each student to pick one hero to research.
 - For homework, each student should write up a report supporting their nominee. Students should utilize the epic hero criteria and provide evidence or an explanation from their book, play or film for each criterion.
 - The next time class meets, students should present their reports.
 - A hero’s admission into the Pantheon should be based upon a vote of hands following each nomination report.

3. **MY ODYSSEY EXPERIENCE: “TODAY WE RAN INTO A SMELLY CYCLOPS...”**

Have your students relive *The Odyssey Experience* by asking them to assume the personae of one of the members of Odysseus’s crew and to create a journal of the journey from Troy back to Ithaca. This will be a record of their “personal” fictional Odyssey.

- First, students should choose or create/imagine a name for their persona and a personal biography or back-story for her or him; which could include:

○ Gender	○ I.Q./Intelligence
○ Age	○ Ambitions
○ Appearance	○ Abilities
○ Occupation/job (on board ship)	○ Disappointments/regrets
○ Home life (family, quality of existence)	○ Peculiarities
○ Upbringing	○ Most prized possession
	○ Deepest secret

- Next, students should choose three different adventures/events from Odysseus’ and his crew’s journey to reflect upon and journal about. Each journal entry should include:
 - The imagined date of the entry/event
 - Interesting facts about the island or place where the event occurred
 - A brief recounting of the adventure that happened at that location (be creative)
 - A reflection upon the importance or significance of that event in the overall journey

- Finally, students should create a cover for their journal and a few illustrations to accompany their entries. Completed journals can be displayed in the classroom so that students can appreciate the imaginations and work of their fellow students.

WHO'S WHO IN THE PRODUCTION

THE COMPANY

Lorna Howley	<i>Touring Performer</i>
Rahsaan Kerns	<i>Touring Performer</i>
Patti Murtha	<i>Touring Performer</i>
Paul Thureen	<i>Touring Performer</i>

ARTISTIC STAFF:

Christopher T. Parks	<i>Director & Playwright</i>
Lorna Howley	<i>Co-Creator</i>
Jim Murtha	<i>Co-Creator</i>
Francine Schiffman	<i>Tour Manager</i>
Laura Fasano	<i>Props Builder</i>
Buck Linton	<i>Set Design</i>
Patrick Ahearn	<i>Puppet & Prop Builder</i>
Jim Parks, Jr.	<i>Sculptor</i>
Adam Immerwahr	<i>Producing Associate</i>
Carrie Hughes	<i>Production Dramaturg</i>
Elizabeth Malta	<i>Stage Manager</i>
John Ludwig	<i>Artistic Consultant</i>
Rey Kaplan	<i>Artistic Consultant</i>
Jeff Van Velsor	<i>Artistic Consultant</i>
Emily DeCola	<i>Artistic Consultant</i>
Mary Kowal	<i>Artistic Consultant</i>

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

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