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Set Text Guide: Lysistrata

AS and A Level Drama and Theatre

Pearson Edexcel Level 3 Advanced GCE in Drama and Theatre (9DR0)

Pearson Edexcel Level 3 Advanced Subsidiary GCE in Drama and Theatre (9DR0)

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GCE Drama 2017: Lysistrata

Contents

Summary

In front of the houses of Lysistrata and Calonice, somewhere in Athens. The background building will later be re-identified as the west front of the Acropolis. It is early morning.

Lysistrata enters, annoyed and looking increasingly impatient. She bemoans the fact that the women she has summoned for a meeting are not here yet. Calonice, her neighbour, is the first to arrive. Lysistrata tells her how disappointed she is in the tardiness of the other women. She insists that the concern of the meeting is a very important one. She tells how she has been thinking it over for many sleepless nights, and that she has an idea which leaves the salvation of Greece in the hands of the women. She warns that the factions in Greece will wipe each other out unless they act. Calonice does not understand what women can do, assuming their purpose is to look attractive for the men. Lysistrata instructs her that this is precisely the weapon they are will use in their quest for peace.

The other women begin to arrive in dribs and drabs. They are from all the warring factions of Greece. Their classes and demeanours vary: the Spartans are more rugged and have a different accent from the Athenians. There is a superficial level of niceties between the Athenians and the Spartans, who are after all on opposite sides of the war. Lysistrata begins by asking them whether they miss their husbands when they are away at war. This rather facetious opening to her argument shows Lysistrata is well versed in the rhetoric of persuasion. She asks them what they would give for peace, to which they respond with hyperbolic statements such as that they would cut themselves in two for the cause. Lysistrata reveals that they must abstain from sex. The comical response of the other Athenians is that they won't do it and the war must go on. The comedy here is derived from the hypocrisy of their immediate rejection of the terms. Lysistrata turns to the Spartan, Lampito, who agrees to the plan, despite her disappointment at forgoing sex. Her agreement causes a ripple effect and eventually all parties agree to the plan. They take an oath over a cup of wine, representing their chastity.

As they finish the oath and drink from the cup, a triumphant cheer is heard offstage. Lysistrata informs them that on her orders, the old women have taken over the Citadel. The old women form the chorus, and it is obvious that they have been sent to take over the Acropolis as they will be of little use in the sex strike. Lampito is sent back to persuade the Spartan women to join, while the other Spartans remain behind as hostages. They all retire into the Acropolis to join the other women. Their siege begins.

There are two choruses: old men and old women. The old men enter behind their leader, carrying logs, torches and hot coals. They struggle as they approach the Acropolis. The age and frailty of the choruses provides a comedic element, while also serving as a contrast to the sexual tension between the younger men and women in the play. The men are advancing to smoke out the women. They initially have little success in lighting the coals, and repeated blowing just puffs smoke in their faces. These moments have real potential for slapstick comedy, and the men here are painted as buffoons. As their attempts fail, the Chorus of old women, led by Stratyllis, enter from the opposite direction carrying pitchers of water. Stratyllis calls them scum, asking how any man with respect for the gods could behave in such a manner. After a battle of wits, the women eventually extinguish the men's fires by dousing them with the water from their pitchers.

At this point the elderly magistrate enters, attended by policemen and slaves. He curses the women's impudence. The leader of the Chorus of old men asks him to punish the women for the 'brutal assault' which has left the old men drenched. The magistrate tells the slaves to use crowbars to open the doors to the Acropolis. Lysistrata emerges, insisting there is no need for forced entry. The magistrate orders a policeman to arrest her. However, the women come to her aid, and after a humorous confrontation of threatening words, they win with sheer power and strength of numbers, beating the policemen into submission.

The magistrate asks Lysistrata what her demands are. She says the women want to keep the money safe to stop the war, as this seems to be the primary cause of it. The magistrate is dumfounded at her insolence. She tells him not to worry, and that

everything is in the hands of the women now, as the men have clearly failed. She asserts a high status over him, which is not what he is used to. The women mock him: Lysistrata puts her veil on him and another gives him her workbasket. He becomes increasingly incredulous at the women's cheek, and they are enjoying asserting this new-found power over him, as they dress him as a corpse during a song. He storms off, outraged.

Lysistrata goes back inside, and the two choruses face off against each other again. They engage in a bizarre striptease, in which their war of words escalates as they remove their clothing. Again, the women are victorious and the men retreat from the entrance.

Lysistrata re-emerges, distressed. When Stratyllis asks what is wrong, she explains that she is struggling to keep the women to their promise, and in no uncertain terms states that they are desperate for sex. She catches a woman sneaking past, who gives the feeble excuse that she must go home to save her fleeces from being eaten by moths. A second says that she has forgotten to peel her flax and must also go home. These excuses don't wash with Lysistrata, who orders them back. There follows a stream of comic innuendoes as they fight their cases. A third woman exits the Acropolis claiming to be pregnant, but this proves to be false as they discover a large bronze helmet concealed under her clothing. Lysistrata persuades them to stay by reading them a supposed 'oracle' that says they will triumph if they do not fall out with each other. They go back inside, leaving the naked choruses to confront one another again.

After the choruses have withdrawn, Lysistrata appears and spots a man approaching. Excited, she shouts for the other women. They establish that it is Cinesias, husband of Myrrhine. Lysistrata sends the women inside, and tells Myrrhine that she will 'turn the spit', in preparation to slow-roast him. He arrives, carrying his baby, and with a huge erection. From this point onwards, for much of the play, the men all have huge erections. It is a question for the designer and director to establish how this is conveyed. It may be, for example, that the soldiers' swords are used to symbolise this, or other phallic objects may give way to design inspiration for this challenge!

Lysistrata greets him, and inevitably their conversation is rife with innuendo. She is buttering him up, so to speak, ready for Myrrhine, who comes out and plays along. She takes her baby in her arms and demonstrably tells it that it has such a 'naughty daddy'. Her husband tries to caress her, but she dodges away. She insists he cannot touch her until they reach a settlement for peace. In his desperation, he agrees to do so. They send the baby home with a slave, and Cinesias is ready to get down to business. A comedic scene follows in which Myrrhine continually stalls as she remembers something else they need before they can have sex. She is working her husband into a fervour, only to leave him unsatisfied, with her reminder to vote for peace ringing in his ears.

A Spartan herald enters, also concealing a large bulge under his cloak. He has been sent to discuss a settlement. The two men from opposing sides find commonality in their lustful afflictions, and agree to bring together delegates to negotiate for peace. Both exit.

The choruses again face each other. The men are still naked, and the women dress them in their tunics. The women know they have won, and this act of dressing the men and their naked bodies is a final act of humiliation. The men are all indignant in their hatred for all women. However, the women have power over them now, and following Stratyllis' lead, they all kiss the men, causing the men to agree to make peace, and from now on to sing their songs in unison. This song is sung together as one.

The Spartan delegation enter and meet the Athenians. There is an underlying tension here, as until a peace agreement is reached they are still at war. They call for Lysistrata to help them negotiate. She enters, bringing with her Reconciliation, a beautiful, naked young woman who serves as another example of how the men are blinded by their lust. Lysistrata uses Reconciliation to bring the men together to negotiate peace. They discuss the boundaries of their agreement using Reconciliation's body as a map of Greece. Finally, the terms are agreed and peace is struck. The delegations are led into the Acropolis and a party ensues.

The Spartans sing and play bagpipes outside. Lysistrata gives the wives back to the husbands. She emphasises that they must not repeat the same mistakes and must ensure that peace lasts. A final song of celebration is sung and all the couples dance.

Characters

Lysistrata

An Athenian woman, the protagonist. Intelligent and driven, she knows exactly what she wants: peace – and ultimately gets it. She encounters opposition, but is wily and is able to enlist her sexuality, and that of her fellow women, in order to achieve her goals. She is quick witted and able to argue persuasively with ease and grace.

Calonice

An Athenian woman, Lysistrata's neighbour. She is initially excited about the prospect of the plan involving diaphanous clothing and fancy gowns, but does enlist in the cause.

Myrrhine

An Athenian woman. Like Lysistrata, she is smart and able to use her sexuality to manipulate her husband. She plays a pivotal role in the execution and success of the plot.

Lampito

A Spartan woman. She helps to achieve peace by enlisting the other Spartan women to join the chastity campaign. Blunt and coarse, but good natured, she is different from the Athenian women.

Chorus of old men

The Chorus of old men represent the frail old men of Greece. They are hopeless and bumble around, consistently losing out to the women at every turn.

Stratyllis and the chorus of old women

Stratyllis and her chorus of old women, unlike the old men, are clever and stubborn. They represent the women who are no longer fertile, and are sent by Lysistrata to occupy the Acropolis. They play a crucial role in the plot, though not explicitly using their sexuality.

Cinesias

Husband to Myrrhine. Blinded by his lust for his wife during her chastity, he represents all the warring men of the play. He is made a fool of by his wife.

Magistrate

The magistrate is knocked back by Lysistrata, who does not respect his authority at all and is able to outfox him in a battle of wits. He represents the status quo that men are in power and know best. He has his beliefs exposed for hypocrisy.

Social, cultural and historical background

Aristophanes is widely considered to be the greatest comedian of his age, though little is known about his life. It is estimated that he was born around 456 BC and died around 380 BC. Most of the information about him is deduced from references in his plays. He is thought to have written around 40 plays, many of which are set in and around Athens. They revolve around the Peloponnesian War (431–404 BC), which was fought between the two leading states of Greece: Athens and Sparta.

The majority of Aristophanes' plays were written at the end of the Old Comedy phase of comic dramaturgy. They have stood the test of time, and are still perceived as comical today. Aristophanes' witty dialogue drove action that was often farcical, though his plays lack structure and are often a series of inconsequential episodes which degenerate at the end into chaos. They do usually contain a chorus, however, and the structure of their songs would have been familiar to Greek audiences.

Lysistrata was written around 411 BC, shortly after the catastrophic failure of an Athenian expedition to Sicily. The play would have been performed in the open air during the day, at the Athenian religious festivals of the Dionysia and Lenaia. The festivals normally staged ten comedies, though during the Peloponnesian War this would have been reduced to six. At the time there were no female actors, and all roles would have been played by men, who often played the male roles wearing large artificial genitals.

Aristophanes clearly preoccupied with a desire for peace after the Peloponnesian War. Though truces were called, they often broke down, and Lysistrata's criticism of the men's petty quarrelling in the play can be assumed to be the views of Aristophanes himself.

Themes

Sex

This an obvious and driving theme of the play. It is often said that the two motivating forces of humanity are sex and money: Lysistrata denies the men sex and occupies the Citadel where the money is kept. Though the women struggle with chastity, they are able to maintain their determination, and thus the men succumb to their demands, blinded by their desperation for sexual fulfilment.

War and peace

The catalyst for the play's action is Lysistrata's frustration and anger at the needless war. It is a quest for peace which drives her, and this is her objective. We hear of the war between Athens and Sparta, but we also see a war of sorts between the male and female choruses. Though their battles are often light and humorous, there is certainly a war of words, and the battles of wits are where the women eventually win.

Women

When the play was written and first performed, women had a defined role in Greek society. Respectable women stayed in their homes, and did not go out into the world. Lysistrata, as a character, is a direct rebuttal of this convention. She is the most powerful character in the play, and gets everything that she wants. She uses numerous tactics, and knows exactly how to manipulate men. She is tired of a war-mongering patriarchy, and decides that she is taking over on behalf of women. The chorus of old women also win all their battles with the old men. It is important to note that it is not just sexuality, but intelligence and guile which ultimately achieve their goal. The old women are proof of this, as they play a crucial part in the strategy, without using sex as their weapon.

Men

All the men in the play are portrayed as bumbling and incompetent fools. They are the opposite of the women in every way. They are unable to control their sexual desires, so are outdone in the battle of the sexes. They are all constantly under the control of the women, in a direct reversal of the conventional paradigm of power in society.

Perseverance and persuasion

It is through Lysistrata's perseverance and powers of persuasion that she initially enlists the help of the other women. Then the women themselves use these tactics to help achieve the peace settlement.

Resources

Recommended edition

Lysistrata by Aristophanes

It is advisable to use the Edexcel version of the script, which can be downloaded free of charge from the Drama section of the website.

Further reading

Greer, Germaine. *Lysistrata: the sex strike: after Aristophanes*. (London: Aurora Metro Press, 2000.)

Kotzamani, Marina Anastasia. L*ysistrata, Playgirl of the Western World: Aristophanes on the Early Modern Stage*. (Dissertation Abstracts International. Ann Arbor, MI. March 1998.)

MacDowell, Douglas. *Aristophanes and Athens*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.)

Taaffe, Lauren. *Aristophanes and Women*. (London and New York: Routledge, 1993.)

Van Steen, Gonda Aline Hector. *Venom in Verse: Aristophanes in modern Greece*. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000.)

Online resources

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GsZLw3KcRdg – though this is not useful in terms of context, it is worth noting the style of innuendo comedy used.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KyZgXIipLcg – again, though the context of this film is set 500 years later, there are similarities in the way women use their sexuality to control the men, in a comedic way.

Useful soundtracks to use in the classroom

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RsxjXArvdXU – if going with the suggested Spartans as Celtic warriors, this might help students get into character.

Practical exploration activities

Actors

The following exercises are designed to help theatre makers practically explore some of the key characters, themes and ideas that are central to *Lysistrata*. Some of the exercises may help actors to consider how key roles might be communicated and realised from 'page to stage'.

An important thing to remember when approaching a Greek comedy is that, unlike modern plays, the characters are not given a deep psychological life by the playwright. Don't be scared by this as actors, instead see it as a gift. You are free to interpret the character's drive, motives, and emotions the way you see them. Ultimately the character is only really defined by their actions, and it is your job and pleasure to discover how and why they behave as they do.

Off-text improvisation is a useful explorative technique to consider the 'before and after' life of the play. You might explore moments from the play that are alluded to but not seen, for example:

- the women with their husbands during the war in the rare moments the men are at home
- Lysistrata as she develops the plan (maybe vocalising her internal monologue)
- the men discussing their plight after first discovering that their wives are abstaining from sex
- Does the peace last? Might we see tension in a scene between Athenians and Spartans the morning after the party at the end of the play?

Hot-seating is a valuable and exciting method to develop characterisation. It helps actors to 'flesh out' their understanding of the characters. Using their imagination and the information provided in the given circumstances will allow the actors to consider the voice, attitude, and physicality of the character they are exploring.

A more theatrical way to explore hot-seating might be to combine it with an off-text improvisation. For example, following on from the examples above, after we have watched a scene play out, we could immediately interview the character and ask them probing questions to discover thoughts the actor may not have considered.

Exploring accent and dialect can also help actors to consider character choices. There is no way of knowing for certain how the Greek accent sounded two and a half millennia ago, so there is freedom in the choices one can make here. Try not to make accent and dialect decisions insular, as the way in which they differ from other characters can inform an audience's perception on their relationships and status. For example, in this adaptation the Spartan dialect appears to be of Celtic origin. Accent may be a useful way of distinguishing between the warring factions. However, this must be consistent in order to be realised successfully: it is often advisable to go for all or nothing in situations such as this. Ultimately, if the actors do not feel they can all accurately depict recognisably similar accents, then look for mannerisms that they can collectively find. For example, might the Spartans all have deep and gruff voices?

Non-verbal communication is often a highly effective way to explore character, subtext, tension and silence. How does each character behave in moments of silence? For example, you might see how different characters behave when they are on their own. How does this differ, if it does, from how they behave when they are with other characters?

Key scene work / alternative viewpoints

Another useful exercise to consider involves **staging and rehearsing a key scene with a particular focus** and then trying it in an alternative style. For example, the actors might explore status in conjunction with the director. The director calls out numbers from

1 to 20 for the actors in the space: 1 is the lowest status, that of a slug, if you will; 20 is the highest status, the king, perhaps. By playing this game we can begin to discover how bodies in space can signify status, and this might give us a good indication of how to stage certain pivotal moments in the play, where status plays a crucial role. This is especially interesting for exploring how Lysistrata ascends to the powerful position she holds at the end of the play. When she confronts the magistrate early on, though outwardly of lower status than him, she boldly asserts her inner status over him and is able to stand up to him. This is how she achieves her goal.

Designers

The following exercises and ideas are designed to help theatre makers explore some of the opportunities, themes and ideas that are central to *Lysistrata*. Some of the suggestions may help designers to consider how key aspects of the play might be communicated and realised from 'page to stage'.

It might be useful to **set up a production meeting and pitch** for your student designers, as this will help them to consider the play as a whole and root their practical ideas in aims and intentions. Remember that audience impact is key, and that setting up small groups of potential theatre makers might help students to consider the text in a holistic way. For example, a group could consist of a set, costume, sound and lighting designer; smaller groups simply take on more than one area of responsibility. It is important that each designer questions the aims and intentions of the others, so that each member of the production team is able to think in a holistic and collaborative way. The design 'pitch' could then be offered to the teacher (producer). This is a useful discussion exercise that also lends itself to research, images and presentations. It can work at the start of a scheme of work to initiate ideas/contextualise themes and key moments, or at the end of a scheme of work as a way of ensuring all aspects of production are considered. It would also make an excellent 'active' revision session in time for the exam. TIP – each member of the production team should justify their ideas with key moments from the play.

Creating a model box of a potential set design is a useful exercise and can be as simple or as elaborate as required. It is often useful for students to see how each scene will be played in a potential space, and by creating a model box they will be able to refer more easily to their ideas in a specific space. *Lysistrata* takes place outside the Acropolis, so the set has the potential to be static if the designer chooses. It is important that the designer considers entrances and exits, as characters are often entering the space from different directions.

Exploring different music and sound effects for key scenes is another effective way of considering how design can play an important role in the development of a key idea or theme. As the play was written two and a half thousand years ago, there is nothing stopping a sound designer from using any genre of music that has been written since. When developing a sound design, don't just think in terms of music, maybe work from the sounds of war? How might the sound of swords clashing be used to punctuate the piece, for example?

How can lighting help to create shadow and suspense? Have a **look at previous productions and lighting designs** to see how other theatre makers have used lighting to create impact. If you don't have access to lighting, you might want to consider the effect of torches or candles. (Safety first!) Again, though the play is set in one place, how might the light change the space, both literally in terms of the time of day, but also metaphorically as the climax of the play approaches? But remember, the play was originally performed in the open air, so you don't need incredible technology to achieve spectacular results.

Another useful exercise that helps to build the world of the play and develop ideas for performance is **sourcing and designing potential costumes**. Research is key, and will help students who are initially daunted about the thought of 'designing'. They don't have to be great artists to create great designs. The main thing is that they approach the design of the production in a holistic way. Is their costume design expressionistic,

representational, or more naturalistic? What is their aim and intention? Does their costume design root the production and performance in a particular time period or style? The fact that it is a Greek play doesn't mean all characters must wear tunics. Though this is a reasonable option, don't feel trapped by stereotypes, and see if you can get more creative and show an audience something they haven't yet seen in a play which has been performed for over two thousand years! As highlighted in the summary, the issue of how to deal with the men all needing huge erections for the second half of the play is one to be tackled by the designers and director. Get creative with the phallic symbolism!

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