

# CIRCUS OLYMPUS

A MYTHICAL COMEDY IN TWO ACTS BY  
*Lindsay Price*



**CLASSROOM STUDY GUIDE: CIRCUS OLYMPUS**

## **Introduction**

*Circus Olympus* is a theatrical exploration of Ancient Greek myths, specifically Pandora's Box, Persephone and the Underworld, King Midas, and Athena and Arachne.

## **Playwright Bio**

Lindsay Price is the Vice President of Theatrefolk Inc. and the co-creator of the Drama Teacher Academy. She has been involved with theatre education for over 25 years as a playwright, adjudicator, workshop instructor, resource writer, curriculum supervisor, professional development creator and keynote speaker. Her plays have been performed in schools all over the world with over 1000 productions a year.

## **Synopsis**

The circus has come to town! Well... sort of. There's no elephant on a bicycle but there are the Greek Geeks and have they got a story or two to tell. More specifically, a myth or two: Pandora's Box, Persephone and the Underworld, King Midas, Athena and Arachne, and don't forget the Mythapalooza Slam Jam!

### **Demeter Versus the Underworld**

Hades has a crush on Persephone, so with the help of his brother Zeus they find a way to get Persephone to the Underworld. When Persephone goes to the Underworld Demeter grows sad and the earth begins to suffer. With the help of other Gods, Demeter devises a plan to get Persephone back from Hades. Once Demeter confronts Hades, they strike up a deal to split their time with Persephone.

### **Perseus and Medusa**

Polydectes asks Perseus to bring him the head of Medusa. The task is daunting but Perseus accepts. With his rhyming skills and some help from the Gods, Perseus successfully completes the task.

## Athena and Arachne

Athena hardly loses her temper, but when Arachne does not honor the gods for her weaving gifts she becomes enraged. Athena goes down to Earth and challenges Arachne to a weaving contest to see who is truly the best weaver. Who will win? What will become of Arachne after the contest?

## King Midas

King Midas shows kindness to Silenus when he shows up in Midas' fountain. To Midas' surprise, Silenus is Dionysus' servant, and Dionysus pays King Midas a visit. Dionysus thanks him for his kindness and offers King Midas a gift. King Midas asks that everything he touches turns to gold. This gift backfires on him as everything, even his daughter, turns to gold. King Midas regrets his gift and calls on Dionysus for help to return his gift. Once his gift is returned, the gold is gone and King Midas and his daughter are reunited.

## **Characters**

### Greek Geek Ringleaders

**MERVE:** Male. Narrator. The guy in charge. Fun.

**ISHY:** Female. Narrator. Responsible, but not restrictive.

**MANSO:** Male. Gets easily rattled. Nerdy looking.

**OSINA:** Female. Nothing rattles her. Sultry and strong.

**VIGIT:** Female. The youngest. Green, but not a pushover.

**ENSEMBLE:** There are roles for 12 males and 20 females in the ensemble. You will need a minimum ensemble of 10 (4m/6w) for the full version or 7 (3m/4w) for the one act version.

## Demeter Versus The Underworld

**ZEUS:** Father of the gods. A schemer who sets the play in action.

**DEMETER:** Goddess of fertility. A real earth-mama type.

**PERSEPHONE:** Demeter's daffy daughter. Likes: flowers, meadows, and mysterious strangers.

**HADES:** Zeus' hopelessly nerdy brother, and god of the Underworld. Nursing a serious crush.

**HELIOS:** The sun herself, sees all.

**ECHO ONE:** Helios' booming voice.

**ECHO TWO:** Helios' booming voice.

**HERA:** Mother of the gods.

**ATHENA:** Goddess of Wisdom.

**APHRODITE:** Goddess of Love.

## Perseus and Medusa

**MEDUSA:** Snake-haired monster of the piece.

**POLYDECTES:** A slimy, scheming king.

**PERSEUS:** A dopey hero whose rhymes need some work.

**DANAE:** Perseus' faithful and long-suffering mother.

**ATHENA:** Goddess of Wisdom. Bringer of a gift.

**HERMES:** Messenger of the gods. Bringer of a gift.

**ENYO:** Grae sister. Horror.

**DEINO:** Grae sister. Dread.

**PEMPHREDO:** Grae sister. Alarm.

### Athena and Arachne

**ATHENA:** Goddess of wisdom and battle, with an emphasis on battle in this story.

**ARACHNE:** A vain weaver who spurns the gods. What doom looms over her loom?

**TOWNSPERSON ONE:** Wants an autograph.

**TOWNSPERSON TWO:** Excited to see the contest.

**TOWNSPERSON THREE:** Initiates the loom-off.

**DAMARA:** A young girl who reminds Arachne to be humble.

**IBRON:** Arachne's mother. Protective of her daughter.

**DEMETER:** Goddess of fertility. A voice of reason.

**HERA:** Mother of the gods. Quick to recommend harsh punishment.

**APHRODITE:** Goddess of love. Flighty and easily distracted.

### King Midas

**MIDAS:** A wise king who makes a terrible wish and gets the original guilt-trip.

**PENELOPE:** King Midas' daughter, who doesn't understand the ramifications of her father's curse.

**GUARD ONE:** One of Midas' guards. Gets to call someone a canker sore.

**GUARD TWO:** A second guard of Midas' castle. Gets to call someone a pile of refuse.

**SILENUS:** Dionysus' loyal servant.

## Pandora's Box

**ZEUS:** Father of the gods. Out to punish Prometheus and Epimetheus one way or another. Mimed.

**PROMETHEUS:** A forward-thinking brother. Keeps his guard up. Mimed.

**EPIMETHEUS:** An absentminded brother. Lets his heart get the best of him. Mimed.

**PANDORA:** A curious girl with an even-more-curious box. Mimed.

**DOORBELL:** This doorbell both dings and dongs.

**DOOR:** A multi-talented role — must creak open and slam shut.

**HOPE:** The final figure to spring from Pandora's ill-fated box.

## Themes

Death, family, greed, curiosity, gender issues, love, memory, quests, relationships

## Pre-Read Questions

- ★ What is your prior knowledge of Greek mythology?
- ★ What does it mean to be a hero? What's your definition?
- ★ What does it mean to take on a quest? What's your definition?
- ★ Who do you consider a hero?
- ★ What's an example of a modern quest?
- ★ What do you think of when you hear the word circus?

## Pre-Read Activities

### Making Inferences

- ★ Based on the title and students' knowledge of Greek mythology, have them draw what they think a poster of the show would look like.
  - » What do they think the set will look like?
  - » What characters do they think will be in the play?
  - » What does a circus make them think of?
  - » What do they think is going to be the main conflict of the play?
- ★ After making these inferences, have students present their drawings and ideas.

### Research Project

- ★ In small groups students will research a Greek god (Zeus, Aphrodite, Hades, etc.). Who were they? What did they represent in Ancient Greece? What are their stories?
- ★ After completing their research, students will create a presentation in which everyone in the group must take part. It can be:
  - » A live oral presentation with a visual component such as a slide deck
  - » An original scene theatricalizing their findings
  - » A recorded presentation (filmed scene, or oral presentation with visual component)

### Myth Adaptation Exercise

- ★ Divide students into groups. Give each group a version of a Greek myth of your choosing.
- ★ Discuss the definition of adaptation, and adaptations that students may know.
  - » Adaptation definition: to make something suitable for a new purpose, to modify, to alter

- ★ The goal of the exercise is to have students adapt the myth into a scene. They don't have to tell the whole myth. Perhaps they pick what they consider to be the most important moment. They don't have to specifically use the words of the story, but the scene must be connected to the myth.
- ★ Remind students that they are making something suitable for a new purpose. That means the scene must have characters and a conflict, and take place in a specific location.
  - » Who are the characters?
  - » What is the conflict?
  - » What location can the scene take place in, as indicated by the myth?
- ★ The scene should be approximately one minute, no longer. The point is for students to work quickly. Again, students do not have to stage the whole myth.
- ★ Give groups time to discuss, create, rehearse, and present.
- ★ Afterward, discuss the similarities and differences of the scenes. Hopefully there will be differences! This will show students that there is not just one way to adapt material.
- ★ Also, discuss the process. What were the challenges? How did they modify and alter for a new purpose?

### **Myth Tableaux Series**

- ★ In groups, students will research and do a tableaux series on a myth of your choosing. What three moments would you choose to visualize the story?
- ★ In groups, students will identify and discuss the three moments that best represent the story. How will they visualize each moment?
- ★ Groups will then create a tableau for each moment.
  - » Emphasize to students any principles of tableau that you use in your class. Do they need to incorporate levels? Connection between individuals?
- ★ Lastly, groups will create transitions between each tableau to form a series.



- ★ Groups will present their series to the class. Those watching should try to identify the moments each group chooses to visualize.
- ★ Discuss afterward. What are the similarities and differences of the moments that the groups chose?

### **Compare and Contrast Discussion**

- ★ Share with students characteristics of the Ancient Greek hero. Who are some examples of the Ancient Greek hero?
- ★ Discuss with students: What are the similarities and differences between Ancient Greek heroes and modern heroes?

### **Hero Original Scene**

- ★ Discuss the definition of a hero. What is the personality of a hero? What are their characteristics? What do heroes do? How do they act? Who are modern heroes?
- ★ Based on the discussion, divide students into groups. Each group will create a one-minute scene that includes a hero.
- ★ Give students time to rehearse and then present.
- ★ Discuss the scenes afterward. What are the similarities and differences?

### **Greek God Character Profile**

- ★ Divide students into groups. Each group will create a character profile of one of the following Greek gods: Poseidon, Hades, Athena. Do some research and then create the following details as if they are applying modern character traits to the Greek god.
  - » Three physical traits
  - » Three personality traits
  - » Favourite outfit, which includes their favourite colour
  - » Favourite/least favourite food, movie, music

- » Pet peeve
- » Secret
- » Motto
- » Living environment
- » Significant relationship or object

## Close Reading Analysis Questions

Close reading is an analysis tool. Students read a text multiple times for in-depth comprehension, striving to understand not only **what** is being said but **how** it's being said and **why**. Close reading takes a student from story and character to drawing conclusions on author intention. Close reading prompts students to flex their thinking skills by:

- ★ Teaching students to engage with a text.
- ★ Teaching students to be selective. We can't highlight everything in the text, only the most important elements.
- ★ Teaching students to make educated decisions. All conclusions and opinions must be backed up with a text example.

Have students analyze *Circus Olympus* individually or in groups, using the following text-dependent questions:

### Read One: What is happening?

1. Who are the Greek Geeks? What do they do?
2. How does Hades feel about Persephone? What advice does Zeus give Hades?
3. Why is Demeter upset? What happens to the earth because of her mourning?
4. What plan do the Greek goddesses come up with to get Persephone back from Hades?

5. What does King Polydectes ask Perseus to do?
6. Who says they will help Perseus with his task? What gifts do they give him?
7. What do Enyo, Deino, and Pemphredo mean?
8. What is a slam jam?
9. What do the townspeople say Arachne forgot in her tapestry?
10. Why does Athena lose her temper?
11. Who wins the loom off?
12. What does Athena do for Arachne?
13. Who was supposed to play Dionysus? Who ends up playing him?
14. What does Silenus say happened to him?
15. What does King Midas wish for?
16. How does Zeus get his revenge on Epimetheus and Prometheus?
17. What happens when Pandora opens the box?
18. What is the last thing that comes out of the box?
19. What is the key idea of the play?

### **Read Two: How does it happen?**

1. How does the author use the Greek Geeks to keep the story moving forward?
2. What kind of narrator are they? For example, are they reliable? What point of view are they telling the story from?
3. How does Helios having an echo affect how you view them as a character? How does the echo set the tone for this character?
4. As a director, how would you stage Hermes going into the Underworld?

5. What is the significance of the pomegranate seeds? What do they symbolize?
6. How does the playwright use rhyme to create Perseus' character?
7. Based on her language and movements, how would you costume Medusa?
8. How does pacing affect the show? How would you describe the pacing the playwright uses?
9. What is the significance of the line, "I guess the only thing to do, sire, is to show you"?
10. How does the playwright break the fourth wall? How does this affect how you view the story from an audience perspective?
11. How would you describe Arachne? Is she brave? Why or why not?
12. Choose one of the myths in the play. What did you learn from this myth by it's staging?
13. How do you think the playwright decided which Greek Geek played a role in the myths? How does the role the Greek Geek played reflect their personality? Cite the text to support your answer.
14. Why do you think an actor plays the Door and Doorbell instead of using a sound effect?

### **Read Three: Why does it happen?**

1. In your opinion, why is the play called *Circus Olympus*?
2. What is the playwright trying to say about Greek mythology? Cite the text to support your answer.
3. What is the author trying to say about hope? Cite the text to support your answer.
4. How does the playwright want you to respond to this play?

## Post-Read Questions

- ★ Which was your favorite myth? Why?
- ★ Do you recognize yourself in any of the characters?
- ★ What is one question that you still have about the play?
- ★ What did you learn from reading the play? What lesson(s) are you taking away?
- ★ What surprised you about the adaptation?
- ★ What is one thing you would change about the adaptation?

## Post-Read Activities

### Greek Mythology Comparison

- ★ Put students in groups of four and assign each group a Greek myth that appears in the script.
- ★ Have them research the original Greek myth and compare it to the version in the play.
  - » What was similar? What was different?
  - » Is there a version you prefer? Why?
  - » What surprises you about the way the playwright adapted the original myth?
- ★ After completing their research, students will create a presentation in which everyone in the group must take part. It can be:
  - » A live oral presentation with a visual component such as a slide deck
  - » An original scene theatricalizing their findings
  - » A recorded presentation (filmed scene, or oral presentation with visual component)

## Character Costume Design

- ★ Choose a character and design their costume.
- ★ Based on their personality, what would they wear? What pieces of clothing define them? What colours and textures would they choose?
- ★ Draw a colour costume rendering.

## Poster Design

- ★ In the pre-read activity students created a poster based on inferences they made based on the title of the show. Have students reflect on the poster they made. What do they like about it? What would they change?
- ★ Now based on what students read, edit the poster they made for the play. Students can also choose to design a new one. How would you visualize the play in a single image that would attract an audience? Would you use a box? What box would it be? What font would you use for the title? What information other than the title would you include?

## Staged Scenes

- ★ Divide students into small groups and assign each group a scene from the play, or a short moment within a scene.
- ★ Give students time to rehearse.
- ★ Each group will present their moment.
- ★ Discuss the scenes afterward.
  - » How did seeing the scenes acted out differ from reading them?
  - » Why is it important to act a scene as well as read it?
  - » Did any of the presentations offer a different interpretation of the characters than yours?

## Rewrite Adaptation

- ★ Now that students know the story, have them rewrite a section of it. All the gods are modern characters, the situations are modern, and the locations are modern.
- ★ Divide students into groups and emphasize that they must adhere to the definition of adaptation: to make something suitable for a new purpose, to modify, to alter.
- ★ Groups will rehearse and present their new version of the story.

## Title Exploration

- ★ As a class, discuss what students think of when they hear the word circus. What are some jobs people have in a circus?
- ★ Now discuss how the Greek Geeks reflected a circus.
  - » Who was the ringleader?
  - » What are some similarities and differences between how they ran their show and how a circus runs?
  - » After reading the play, why do you think the playwright named it Circus Olympus? Would you have come up with a different title? Why?

## Slam Jam

- ★ Now that students have read the play, have them reread the Slam Jam section of the play. As a class you are going to create your own slam jam.
- ★ Divide the class into two groups to hold your own slam jam. Remind them of the rule listed on page 36 of the play.
- ★ Pick a list of myths the students are familiar with and go team by team for the slam jam. Let them know that the scenes they do should be no more than a minute long.

## **Playwright Process**

*Playwright Lindsay Price talks about her process writing Circus Olympus. Have students read and then discuss/reflect on how their perception of the writing process compares to the playwright's.*

### **What was the inspiration for writing this play?**

Circus Olympus was in the works (from idea stage to published product) for about two years. The initial idea was to stage Pandora's Box as a circus show, with the gods as the aerial acts (trapeze, high wire) and the mortal characters as clowns. This expanded to the larger idea of doing a full length play covering a number of myths within the circus arena.

I spent a lot of time reading various myths and versions of myths to come up with a list of which ones would work well with large casts, which ones had good (and concise) stories to them and choosing on a combination of the and the not so familiar. I think everyone knows the Medusa myth (if perhaps not the Perseus side of the story) and not so many people know the Arachne/Athena myth. The one story I would have liked to include but could never quite make work is the Theseus and the Minotaur myth, chiefly for the possibilities for mask and physical work. But the Medusa story also offers some of that too, so there you go.

### **What challenges did you encounter during the writing process?**

Initially I thought I wanted the gods themselves to be running the circus and playing themselves in the myths with a group of "mortal" clowns playing all the other parts. The idea being that Greek gods aren't as relevant as they once were, and the circus was a way to get their stories back into the mainstream. I liked the concept a lot and I went through two drafts with this idea in the forefront of my mind. While the myths themselves came together nicely, the prologue and exposition outside of the myths - the main concept - wasn't working at all. I could not for the life of me figure out why. It's always a little bit freaky when your main concept, the reason you're writing the play, doesn't hold up. Do you keep hammering away at it? Toss everything out the window? A tough pill to swallow when you've invested so much effort into the play.



I was wrestling with some dialogue where the gods were bickering and it hit me - these characters are really not nice. The gods don't like each other and they don't like the other characters and they especially don't like the audience. In and of itself, that's fine. But these are supposed to be the hosts of the show. The audience is supposed to like them. That's the whole point! I knew then that I had to scrap the concept and start anew. A tough decision, but I knew it was the right one. That's how the current narrators, the "Greek Geeks" came into being. These characters also bicker, but there is the sense that they love the stories, they love telling them and they want the audience to feel the same love. And it works so much better.

### **What was it like to see the play performed?**

It's a joy! I love this play so much, especially after wrestling with it in the writing process. The actors are having fun, the audience is having fun - it's a win-win!

### **As a playwright, what is your favourite moment/character in the play and why?**

One of the greatest discoveries while writing the play was the Mythapalooza Slam Jam. The origin of this was exactly as it plays out in the text - I had roughly ten minutes left in the first act and I didn't think that was enough time to fully get into a myth. I didn't want to end the act without something interesting, so I came up with the slam jam. It turned out to be a great way of adding more myths to the story (there are 6 in the slam) and it was such a fun section to write. I had to distill each myth into about a half a page, and that's with each character saying a sentence or two at a time. A fabulous writing challenge.

Originally the slam was played by six teams of two, with each team performing one myth. At the first test reading, there weren't enough actors for all the parts, so I told two actors to take care of all the parts in the slam jam. One actor played all the A parts and one actor played all the B parts. Well, it was so exciting to hear two actors jumble around and move from one part to another that I decided to change the script. Now there are only two teams battling it out. It helps with the pace of the slam and creates a wonderful push toward intermission. It just goes to show you how a play is never finished till you get it on its feet and hear it. You never know what you're going to discover.

### **Which is harder for you, first drafts or rewrites?**

I adore first drafts. The act of getting everything on the page without judgement is freeing and fun. I fully embrace messy first drafts with lots of plot holes and things that need to be solved. And then you actually have to solve those problems in the rewrites, which is always more a challenge for me.

### **What's your writing process like?**

I love to write initial ideas down in notebooks. I always start with pen and paper. I keep writing notes and ideas and characters until I feel that pen and paper is actually getting in the way of my progress. That's when I know I'm ready to move to the computer and start compiling a first draft. I often start my writing process thinking about the play and letting it roam in my head for a while. So after thinking and taking notes I'm ready to dive into something more tangible.

### **What engages you about playwriting?**

I love seeing characters live a story and I love watching it happen right in front of me (rather than be distant from the experience through a movie screen). It's an intimate experience and that is very engaging!