What is it that gives Greek tragedies, written and performed some 2,500 years ago, its continuing power to hold, enchant, shock, and unsettle? Why do we derive such pleasure from watching Greek heroes face impossible choices, immeasurable suffering, and destruction before our eyes? What is the purpose and value of tragedy? And how did ‘the tragic’ come to be seen as a fundamental and timeless feature of human existence?

The Athenian theater held ca. 15,000, a majority of the citizen body. Every performance involved, and appealed to, the whole community, unlike any play today. In this course, we will examine the themes that captivated such a broad audience and made tragedy a central medium of the exploration of the world and man’s place in it in ancient Greek culture.

We will study in translation some of the most famous, puzzling, provocative plays by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides in their historical, political, and intellectual contexts as well as the fascinating history of their reception in Western theatre and thought. We will also look at ancient and modern theories of tragedy – theories that attempt to make sense of Greek tragic poetry and, in so doing, conceptualize the relationship between tragedy and life.

Questions? Contact Professor Michael Lurie

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