

# *A Long Way From the Acropolis*

## **A Screenplay Proposal**

by Liam Chamberlin

### **Abstract:**

I am proposing to write a screenplay about Ancient Greek theater titled *A Long Way from the Acropolis*, set in Athens, 405 B.C.E.. The plot will center around the debut of Euripides' infamous tragedy, *The Bacchae*, which won grand prize at the Great Dionysia, an annual theater festival held in the city. The heroes of the story are two Athenian adolescents, Polluck and Sephony, who, despite many obstacles, miraculously land roles in the play. Just like *The Bacchae*, my screenplay will explore themes of gender, sexuality and xenophobia. I also intend to imbue the story with analogies to the current political climate in the United States.

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**Introduction:**

For centuries, Greece was the greatest empire on the face of the earth. The Ancient Greeks revolutionized countless fields of academia, discovered scientific and technological marvels, built beautiful cities, and created art that is still priceless and relevant in today's society. One of their greatest achievements was the invention of theater. Storytelling is at the core of human identity, dating back to the prehistoric scenes etched on the walls of caves. It evolved with each great civilization, from oral traditions to epic poems scratched on stone tablets, and finally to the cinematic wonders that we consume today. As a storyteller, I have always been fascinated by this evolution, and recently I began to research the place where storytelling flourished: Ancient Athens. I propose to write a screenplay set in late fifth century Athens titled *A Long Way From the Acropolis*.

**Background:**

Nowhere in Ancient Greece were art and culture more prolific than in Athens, birthplace of democracy, stoicism, and drama (Duncan). Athenians would gather each year for a festival called The Great Dionysia, which was in honor Dionysus, the god of wine and revelry. Of the festival, Academic and Classicist Oliver Taplin writes, "For the Athenians the Great Dionysia was an occasion to stop work, drink a lot of wine, eat some meat, and witness or participate in the various ceremonials, processions and priestly doings which are part of such holidays the world over." (162). This festival became deeply rooted in Athenian culture, influencing and

influenced by the democratic ideology that the polis valued so highly. At the end of the festival Athenians would vote on their favorite comedy and their favorite tragedy. The most popular playwrights would be crowned champion. This competition survived for over a century, lasting long after Athens fell to Sparta at the end of the Peloponnesian War in 405 B.C.E (Atkinson).

While researching Ancient Athens, I became interested in the final years of the war, especially in the day to day lives of Athenians who live through the fall of a democracy. I saw many parallels between this era in Ancient Greece and our current political climate in the United States. However, it was difficult to imagine the day to day lives of fifth century Athenians by piecing together research. I began to wonder, how could I reconstruct this turbulent time in history into a product that is more accessible and relevant than dense, esoteric scholarship? To answer this question, I am proposing to write a screenplay that explores this era through the most popular and culturally significant art form of the day. I have decided to center my screenplay around Euripides' infamous tragedy, *The Bacchae*. I believe this play will provide the intrigue and political relevance necessary to access the milieu of fifth century Athens.

Art is a reflection on the world in which it is created, and the plays of fifth century Athens were no exception. Warring nations and warring ideologies plagued the Mediterranean, drawing foreign influences into the minds of Greek artists (Atkinson). Greek Playwrights had a rich heritage of culture and mythology to draw from, but they also had new and controversial ideas to explore in their work. However, due to the democratic nature of the Great Dionysia, Playwrights had to be careful not to alienate their audiences with controversial and subversive content. To succeed in competition, their plays had to walk a fine line, pleasing a crowd of commoners while simultaneously pushing the boundaries of the medium. Athenians were

famously xenophobic and nationalistic (Atkinson). Criticism of their proud city state would be sure to enrage any audience at the Great Dionysia. Still, playwrights found clever ways to satirize the hypocrisies of Athenian society. Euripides was perhaps the most famous and successful playwright to achieve this precarious balance. His final play, *The Bacchae*, which debuted posthumously, only a year before the fall of Athens (Atkinson), will be central and driving force in screenplay.

*The Bacchae* tells the story of Pentheus, the adolescent king of Thebes, whose city is plunged into chaos by the arrival of the god Dionysus (Euripides). It is a story of warring ideologies. Pentheus represents the rational, orderly control imposed by the oligarchs of late fifth century Athens, while Dionysus represents the irrational, animalistic passion that struggles to be free within all of us (Scott). The play also explores gender, sexuality, and national identity. My proposed screenplay, which centers around the first performance of *The Bacchae*, will explore these same themes with modern interpretations and implications.

### **Methods:**

In order to write this screenplay, I have begun to outline of the plot. *A Long Way From the Acropolis* will star two adolescent Athenians, Polluck and Sephony. Polluck belongs to a lower class family. His father is a cobbler, and through years of penny pinching, has cobbled together enough drachma (Ancient Greek currency) to afford his son a meager education. Polluck's mentor is an elderly scribe, who teaches Polluck to read and write. Polluck falls in love with the power of words, and dreams of one day writing and performing at the Great Dionysia.

However, his father wants him to apprentice under the scribe and land a secure job in the palace of a wealthy politician.

Sephony is the daughter of a wealthy politician. She has always enjoyed the greatest privileges in life, except, of course, the privilege of being a man. While her younger brothers are outside shooting bows and riding horses, Sephony is trapped indoors learning to be a proper lady. When she is alone she practices her singing. Her voice is stunning, but women do not belong in the arts, her father scolds. Youthful and rebellious, Sephony sneaks out at night, disguised as a man, and drinks at seedy taverns. One night she finds herself at the Great Dionysia, and instantly she knows that she belongs on the stage.

The plot thickens when the two teens sneak away to tryout for an up and coming production, *The Bacchae*. Because women are not allowed to act, Sephony arrives disguised as a man. Polluck arrives disguised as the son of a wealthy merchant, wearing clothes that he stole. Both are miraculously cast in the play, and quickly develop a friendship in their mutual deceit. The play was directed by Euripides' son (Atkinson) who will be a manic visionary in my screenplay. I intend to imbue the story with references to the political climate and the ongoing war. I see Sephony's father as an excellent character to access the social and political themes in the story. His high class perspective will be juxtaposed against the humble views of Polluck's father, and the snappier views of his mentor. I also hope to satirize modern media through archaic methods of communication. The story will culminate with the legendary performance of *The Bacchae*, during which Polluck and Sephony reveal their true identities.

When I have synthesized all my research into a stronger outline, I will write a treatment (prosaic summary) of the screenplay. I may require several drafts to hammer out all the details,

as historical accuracy must be carefully balanced with fanciful reimagination. Once the story is solid, I will begin to draft the screenplay. I anticipate that several drafts will be necessary before I have a product ready to share with the world.

### **Expected Results:**

I expect to have a completed screenplay by the end of this process, at which point I will need to find a means to disseminate it. There are countless resources available online, festivals, and contests to which I could submit my work. However, it may take me a long time to complete this project, at which point I will have more industry connections and potential employment to aid me in getting my screenplay sold and produced.

### **Budget:**

Other than the extortionate cost of living in Los Angeles, I do not anticipate that this project will require any funding. All of the materials necessary are in my possession or available online. I will however, need to budget a great deal of time to complete this project. It is difficult to estimate, but I am sure it will require hundreds of hours to produce a polished screenplay.

### **Conclusion:**

This project will require much more reading before I can capture all the details of fifth century Athens accurately. While I do not anticipate it to be an easy process, I am confident that I have the skills and talent to synthesize my research into an educational, politically relevant

screenplay. I hope that *A Long Way from the Acropolis* will be a resource for the general public to access a fascinating time in history and the political implications that are still relevant today.

Works Cited

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