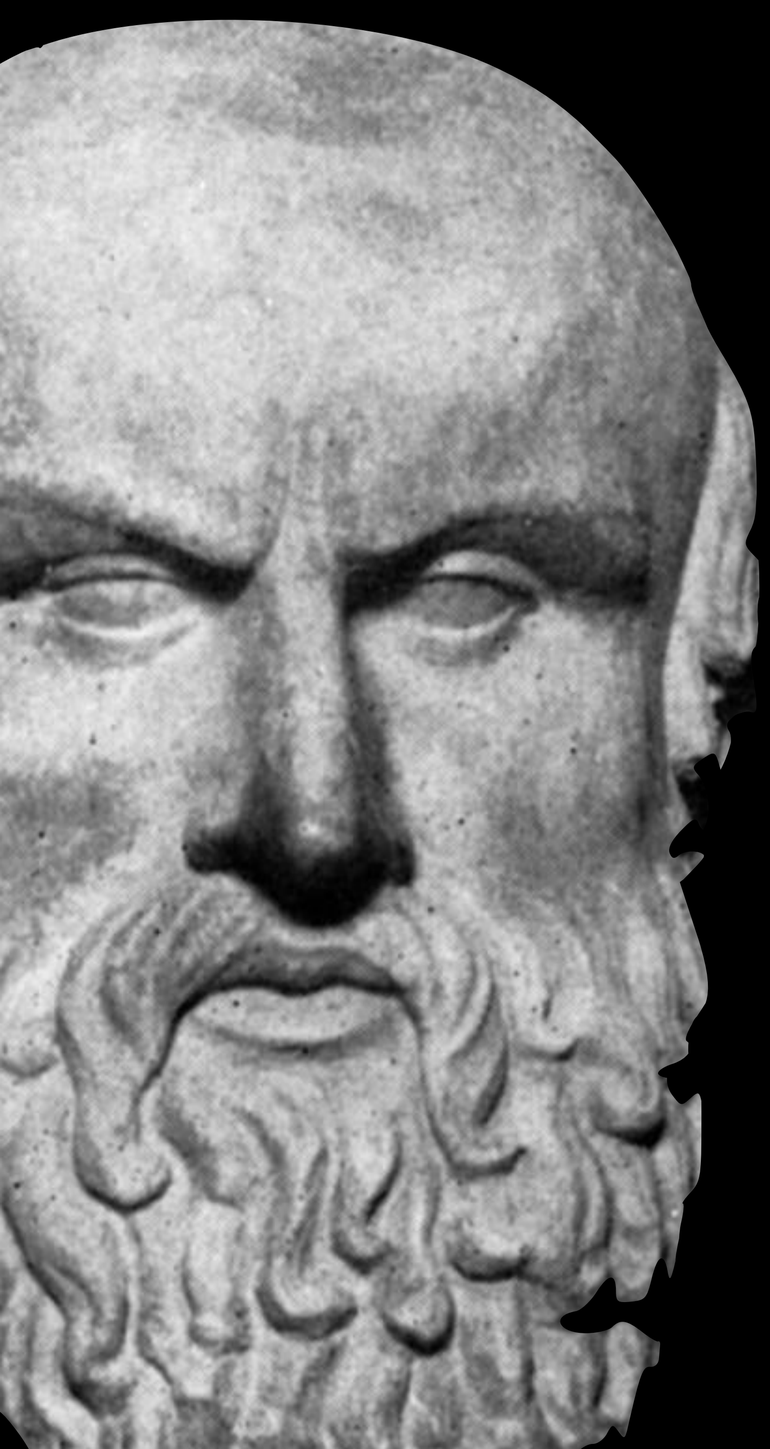
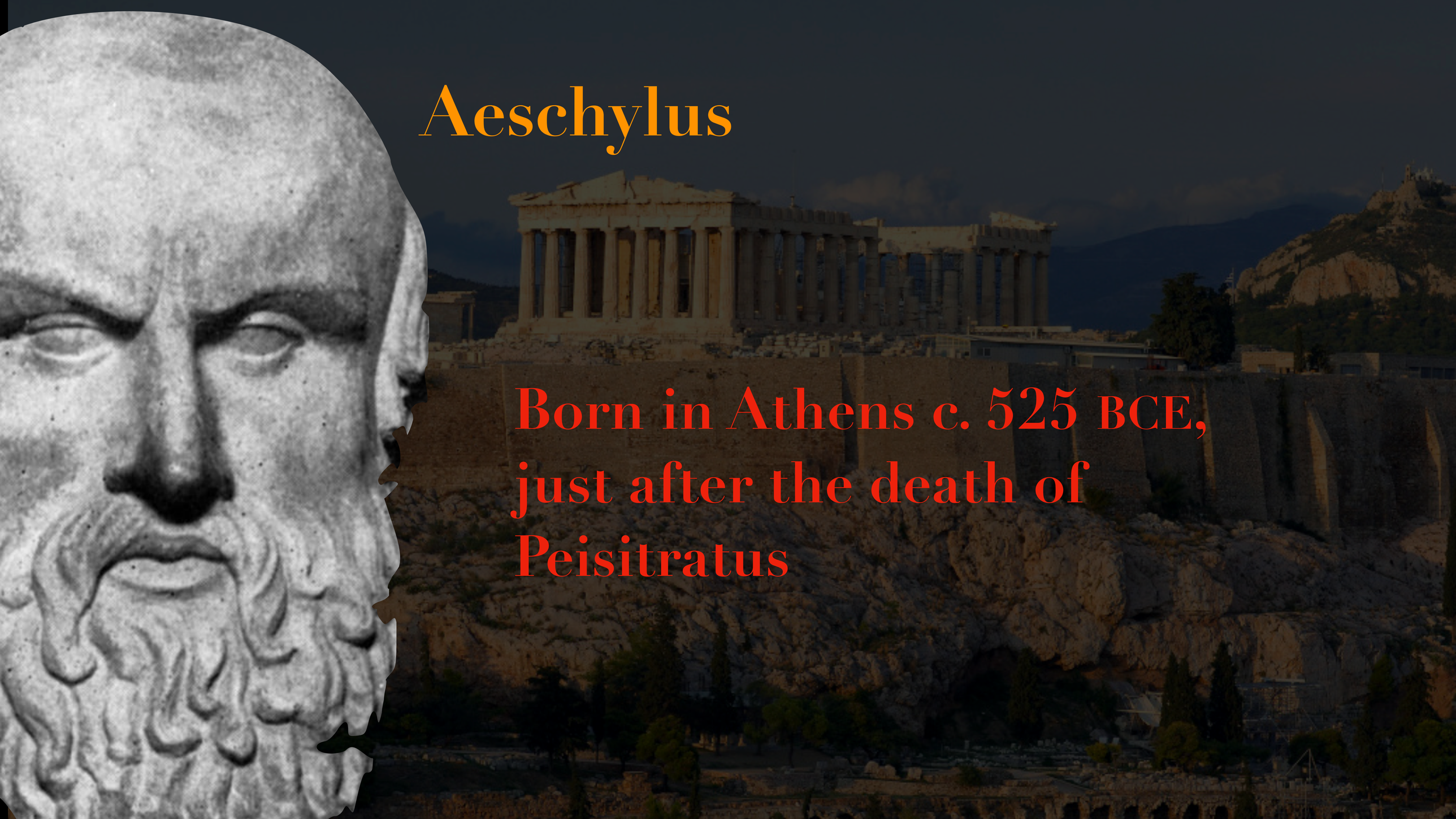
Aeschylus and the ORESTEIA

A presentation by Kevin Batton
January 22, 2021



I. Athens' Greatest Generation



Aeschylus

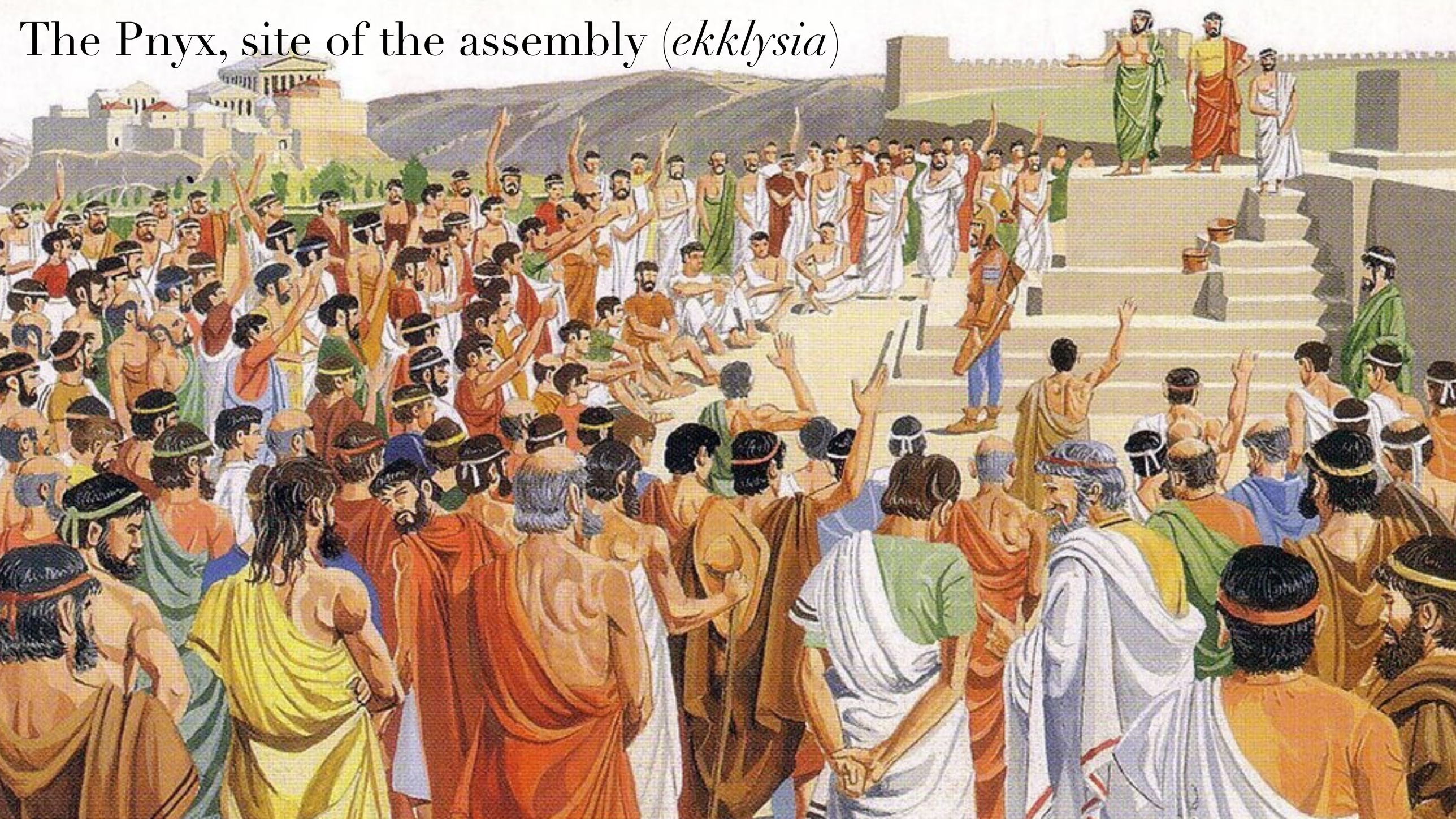
Born in Athens c. 525 BCE, just after the death of Peisitratus

Aeschylus was in his teens when Cleisthenes instituted democratic reforms of the Athenian constitution (508/7 BCE)—

74.AA.12

Athenian Democracy: A Timeline

The Pnyx, site of the assembly (*ekklysia*)



The Areopagus (“hill of Ares”), site of the eponymous council and courts

https://www.athenscitytours.com/tours/walking-tours/periclean-golden-age-tour/

The Persian Wars
(499 - 449 BC)

96.AE.98

The Greek World during the Persian Wars (500–479 BC)

- Ionian revolt
- *Main battle*
- Greek opponents of Persia
- Greek neutral states
- Persian empire
- Persian vassal states
- Ionian rebels (498 BC)
- Mardonius (492 BC)
- Artaphernes/Datis (490 BC)
- Xerxes/Mardonius (480 BC)

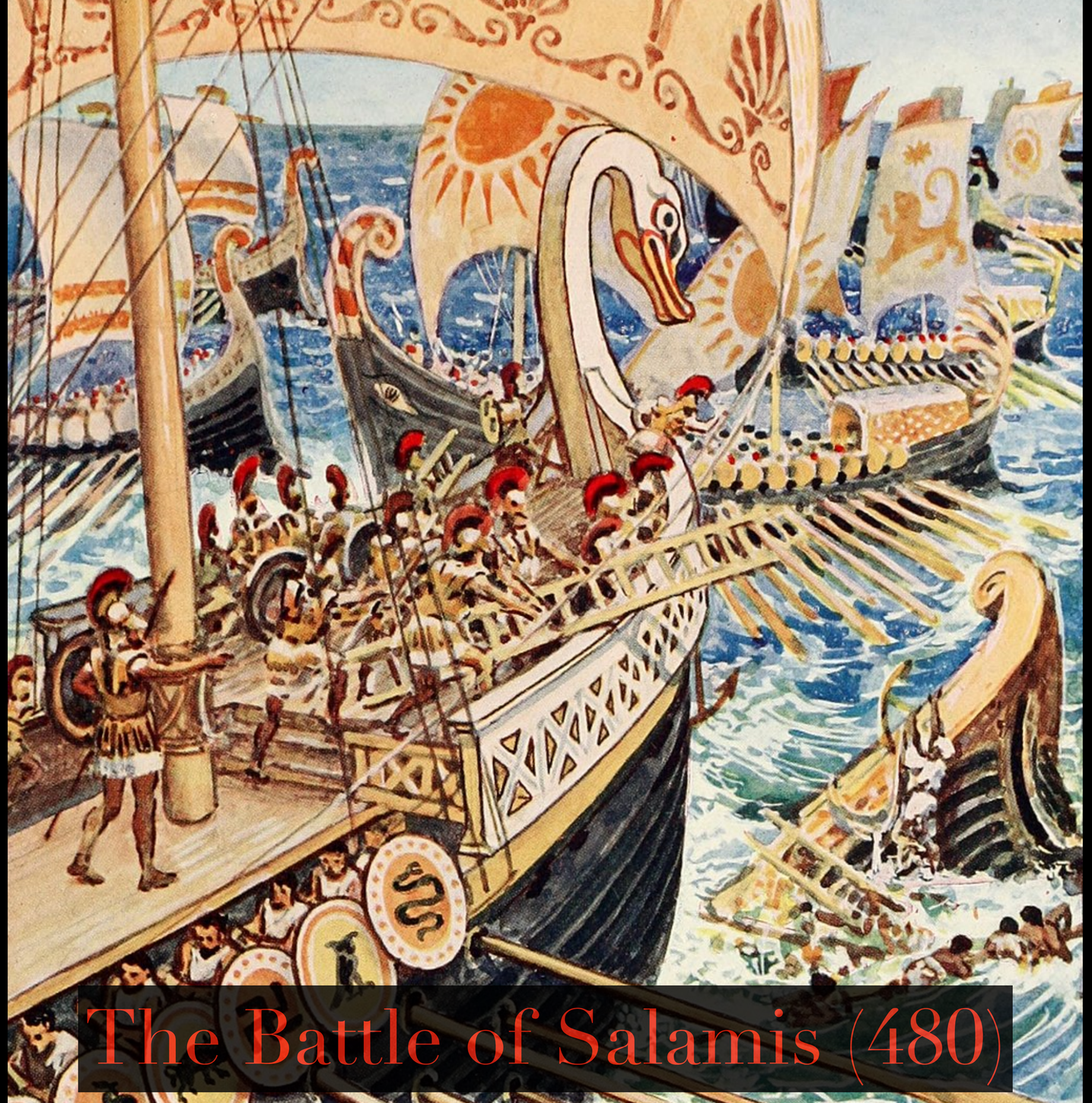
0 50 100 km

The Battle of Marathon (490)

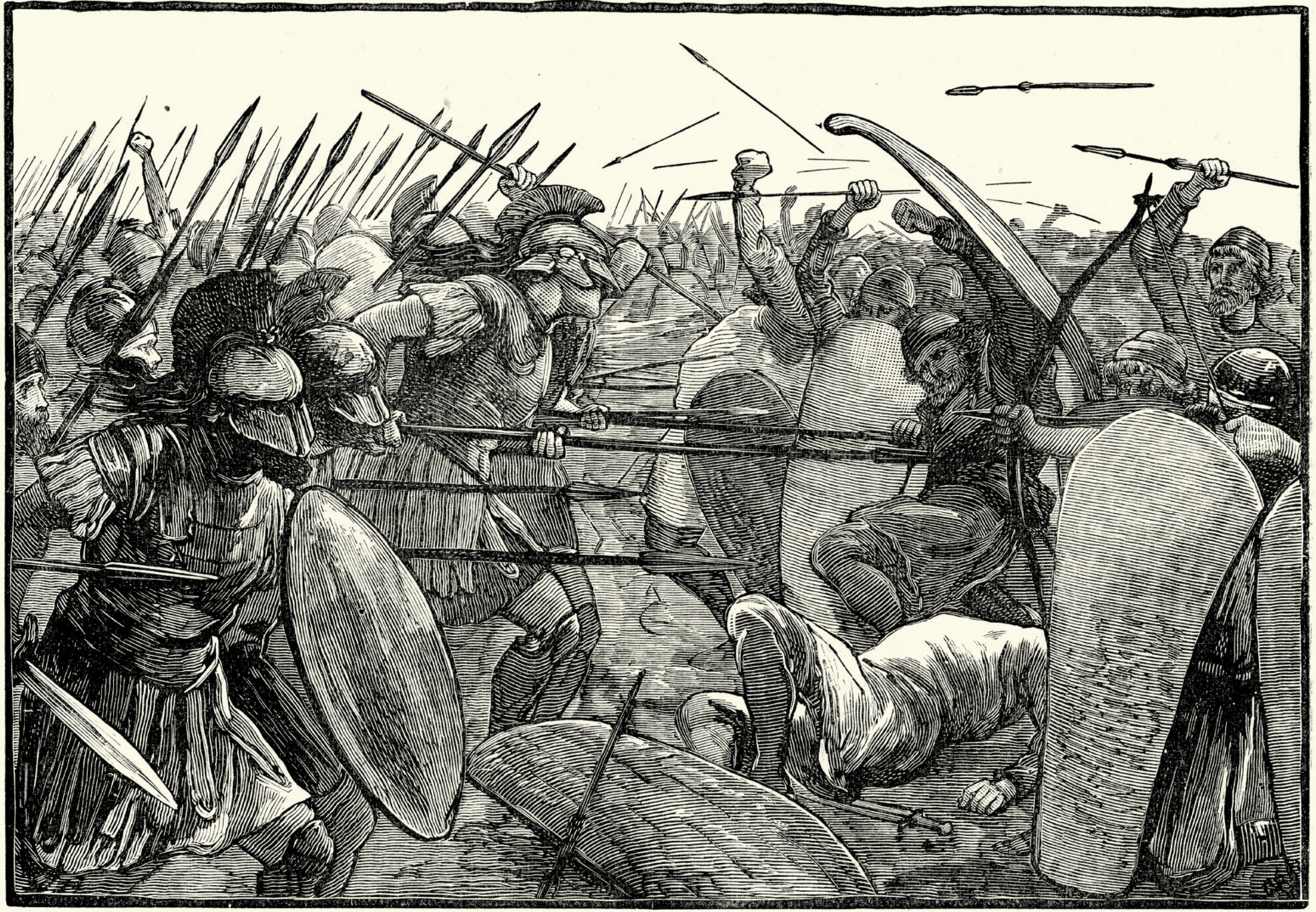
The Greek World during the Persian Wars (500–479 BC)

- Ionian revolt
- *Main battle*
- Greek opponents of Persia
- Greek neutral states
- Persian empire
- Persian vassal states
- Ionian rebels (498 BC)
- Mardonius (492 BC)
- Artaphernes/Datis (490 BC)
- Xerxes/Mardonius (480 BC)

0 50 100 km



The Battle of Salamis (480)



THE SPARTANS AT PLATÆA.

300: Rise of an Empire (2014)

This day is call'd the feast of Crispian.
He that outlives this day, and comes safe home,
Will stand a tip-toe when this day is nam'd,
And rouse him at the name of Crispian.
He that shall live this day, and see old age,
Will yearly on the vigil feast his neighbours,
And say "To-morrow is Saint Crispian."
Then will he strip his sleeve and show his scars,
And say "These wounds I had on Crispin's day."
Old men forget; yet all shall be forgot,
But he'll remember, with advantages,
What feats he did that day.
—*Henry V* iv.3

“This tomb in grainbearing Gela covers an Athenian, Aeschylus son of Euphorion, who died here. The famous grove of Marathon could tell of his courage and the longhaired Mede knew it well.”

—Aeschylus’ epitaph

“This tomb in grainbearing Gela
covers an Athenian, Aeschylus
son of Euphorion, who died here.
The famous grove of Marathon
could tell of his courage and the
longhaired Mede knew it well.”

—Aeschylus’ epitaph

(pause for questions)

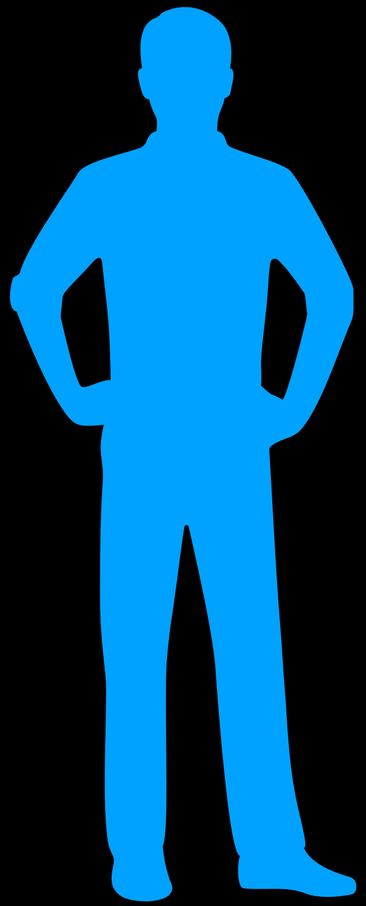
II. Aeschylus
the Playwright

In the beginning, there was the *dithyramb*

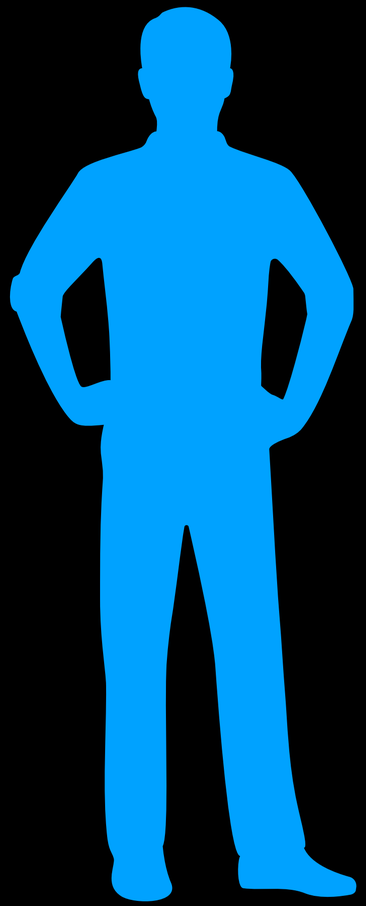
In the beginning, there was the *dithyramb*

- sung by a chorus of 50
- performed at festivals in honor of Dionysus

Thespis invented tragedy ~534 BCE

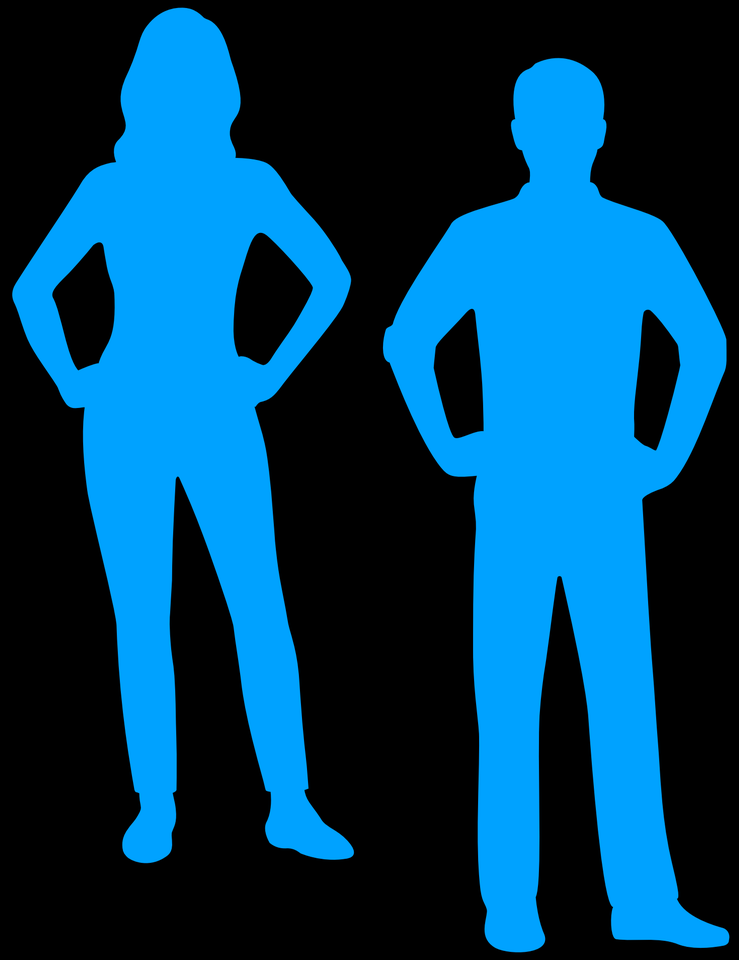


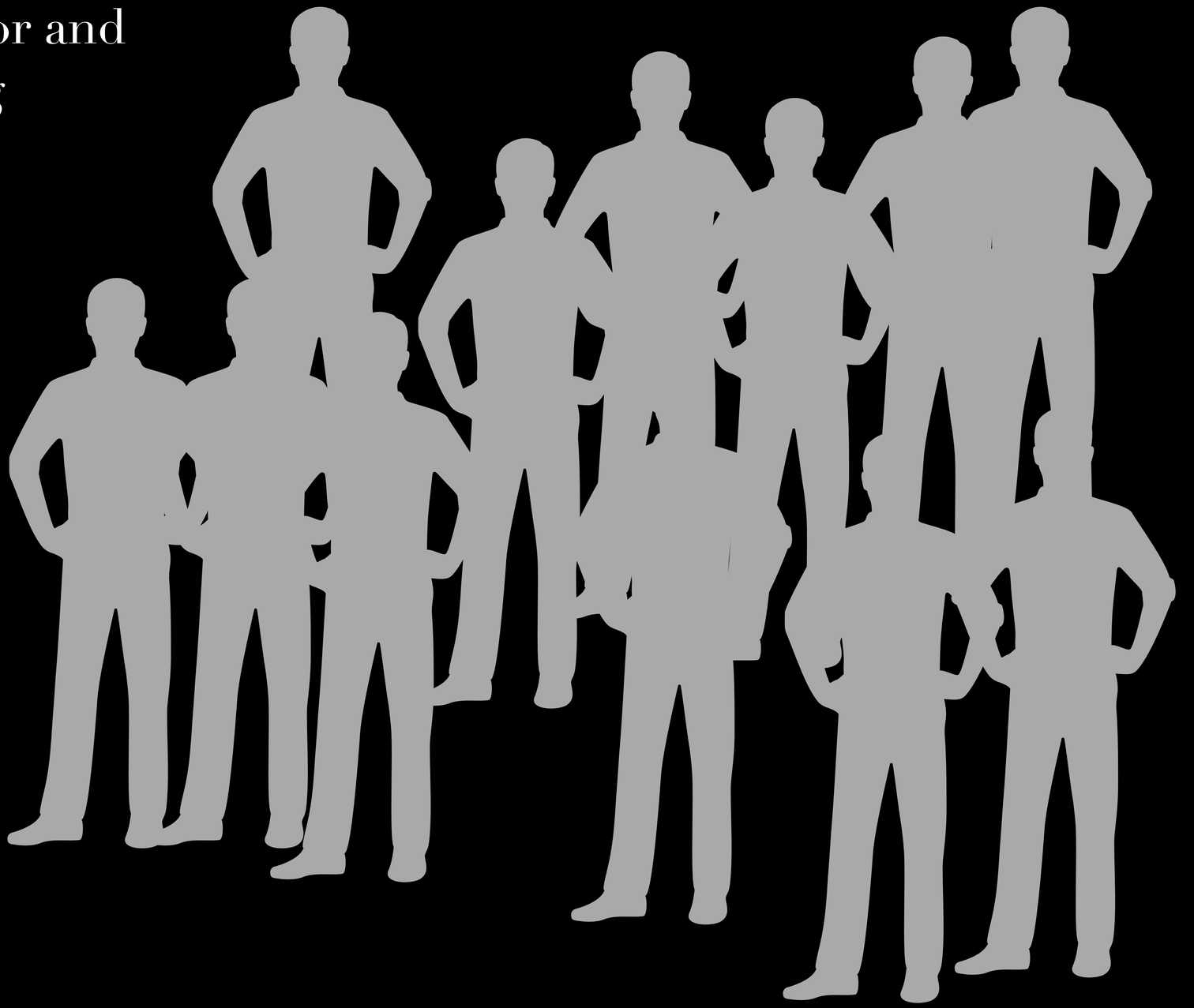
Thespis invented tragedy ~534 BCE



(hence *thespian)*

Aeschylus introduced a second actor and reduced the chorus to 12, inventing tragedy *as we know it*.





Aeschylus

First tragic production in 499

Aeschylus

First victory in 484

Aeschylus

First victory in 484

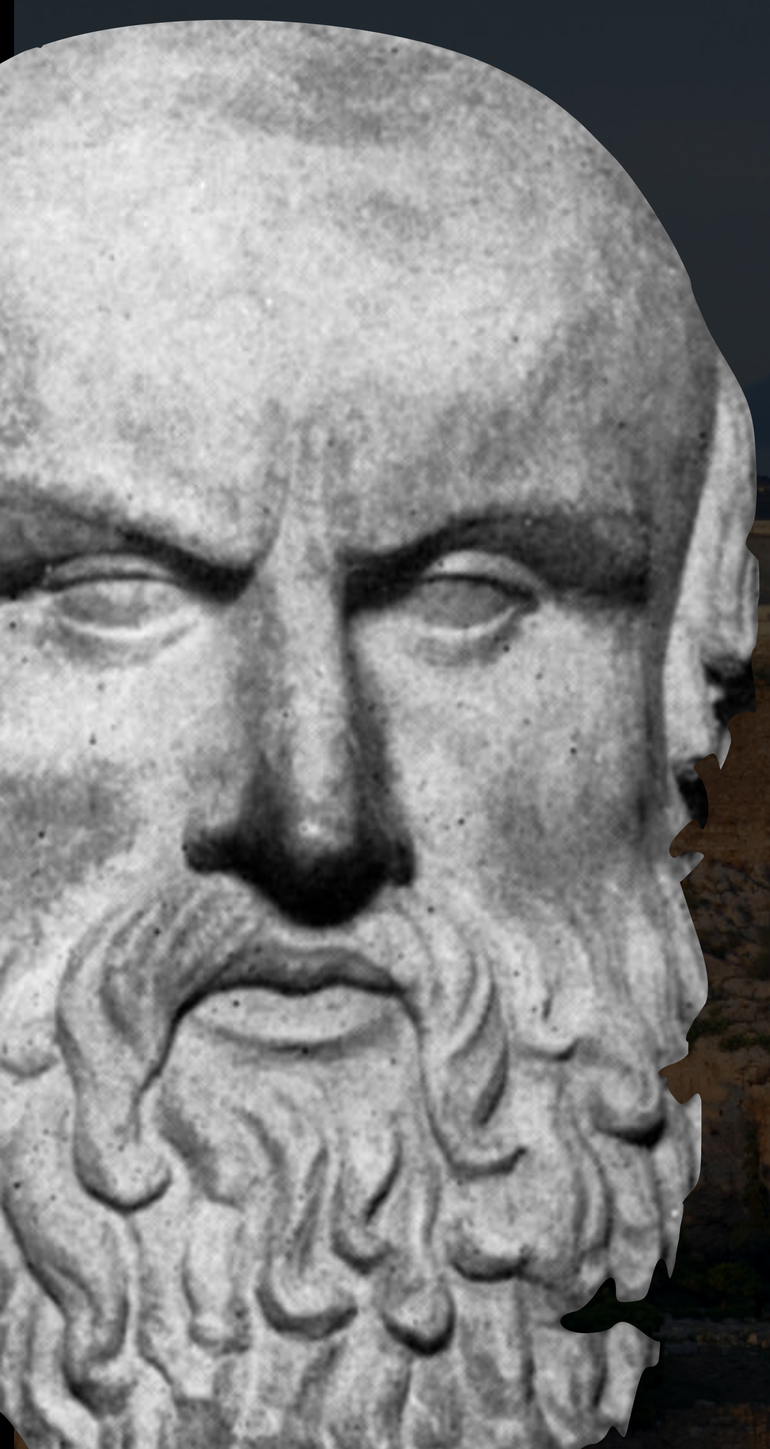
…twelve more victories followed

Aeschylus

First victory in 484

…twelve more victories followed

at least 77 plays produced throughout his career



Trilogies

Phineus (472)
Persians
Glaucus
Prometheus*

Laius (467)
Oedipus
Seven Against Thebes
Sphinx*

Suppliants (?)
Egyptians
Danaids
Amymone*

Agamemnon (458)
Choephoroi
Eumenides
Proteus*

*satyr play

The Persians

- Set at the Persian capital of Susa
- Depicts the Queen receiving the news of Xerxes' armies defeat at Salamis and Plataea

The Persians

A messenger describes the battle of Salamis (396-405):

"At once… they all pulled their oars together, struck the deep sea-water and made it roar… and from all of them together one could hear a great cry: "Come on, sons of the Greeks, for the freedom of your homeland, for the freedom of your children, your wives, the temples of your fathers' gods, and the tombs of your ancestors!"

The Persians

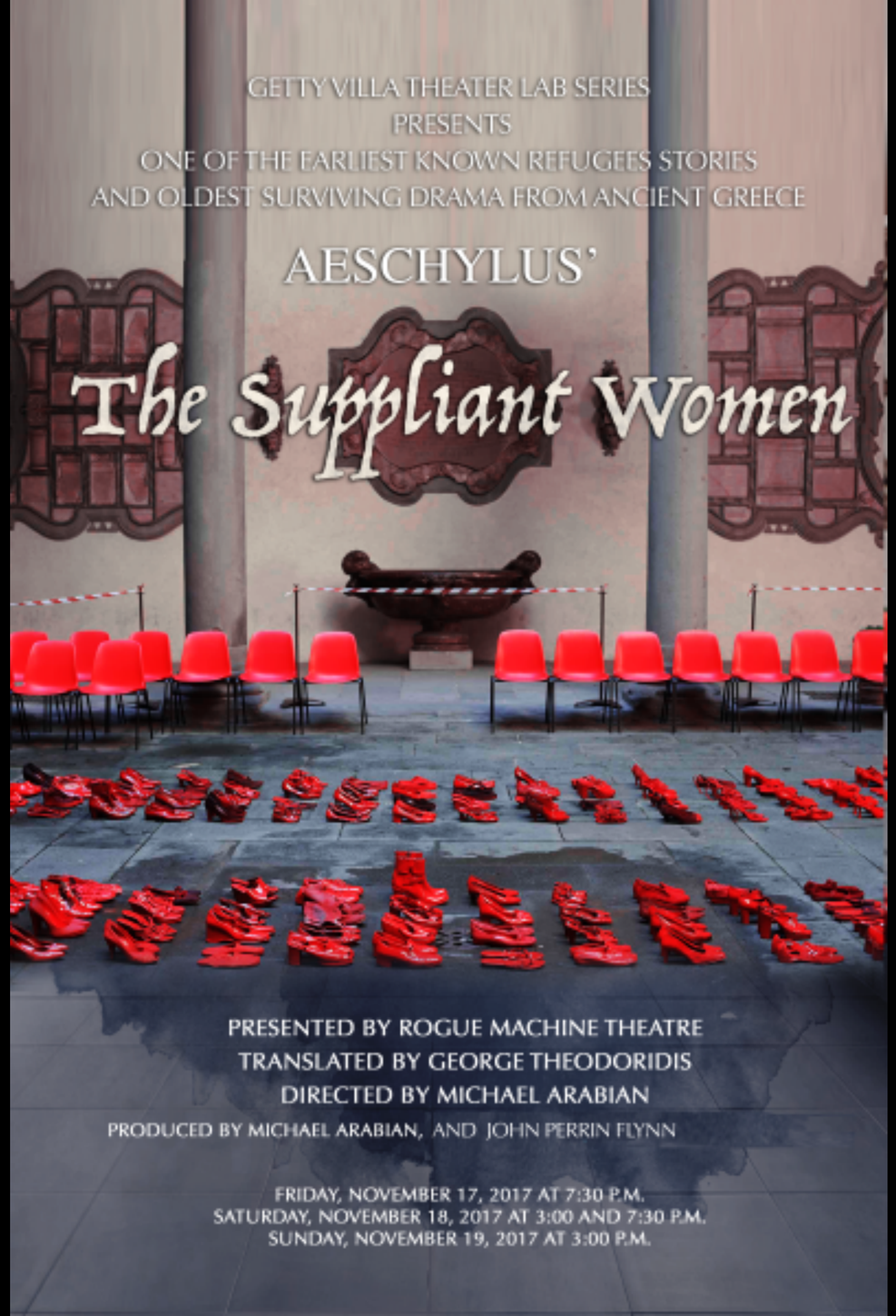
A messenger describes the battle of Salamis (418-432):

"The hulls of our ships turned keel-up, and the sea surface was no longer visible, filled as it was with the wreckage of ships and the slaughter of men; the shores and reefs were full of corpses…. Our sufferings were so multitudinous that I could not describe them full to you if I were to talk for ten days on end: you can be certain that never have so vast a number of human beings perished in a single day."

Seven Against Thebes

- Set in Thebes, as the sons of Oedipus battle for the city's throne

92.AE.86



Suppliants

- Set outside Argos, as the daughters of Danaus seek refuge from Egypt
- Pelasgus, king of Argos, puts the fate of the Danaids to a democratic vote

Suppliants

Pelasgus says to the Egyptian herald (942-9):

“That is the unanimous vote that has been passed and enacted by the people of the city, never to surrender this band of women by force. This decision has been nailed down with a nail that has pierced right through, so it stays fixed. These words are not written on tablets, nor sealed up in folded sheets of papyrus: you hear them plainly from the lips and tongue of a free man.”

▽ The theatre of Dionysus in the second half of the fifth century. The *skene* at this time must have been made of wood. The arrangement shown here has three doorways and the actors can appear on the roof. The Odeon of Pericles is in the background.

△ A conjectural reconstruction of the theatre of Dionysus in the early fifth century BC. It is possible that there was no *skene* at all at this time. The temple of Dionysus is on the right.

ヨーロプと浮気

Prometheus Bound

- Scholars dispute Aeschylus' authorship
- May have been an unfinished play completed and produced under Aeschylus' name by his son Euphorion

(pause for questions)

III. Aeschylus' Masterpiece

Photo of the cast of *The Oresteia* by Scott Suchman.

The Oresteia

- Aeschylus' final production in Athens
- Won first prize
- Makes use of three actors, stage building (*skēne*), probably *ekkyklēma*, possibly flying machine (*mēchanē*)

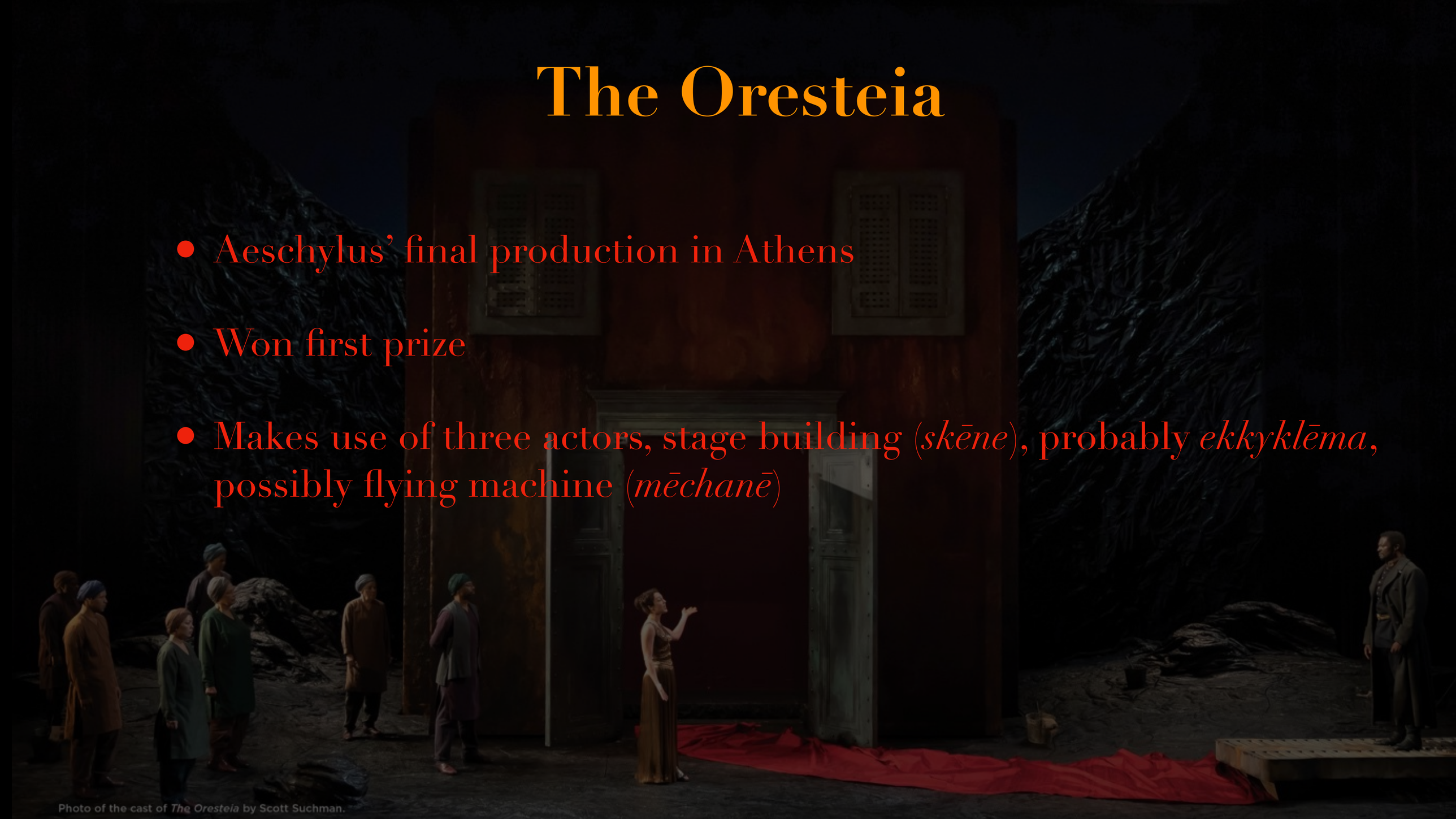
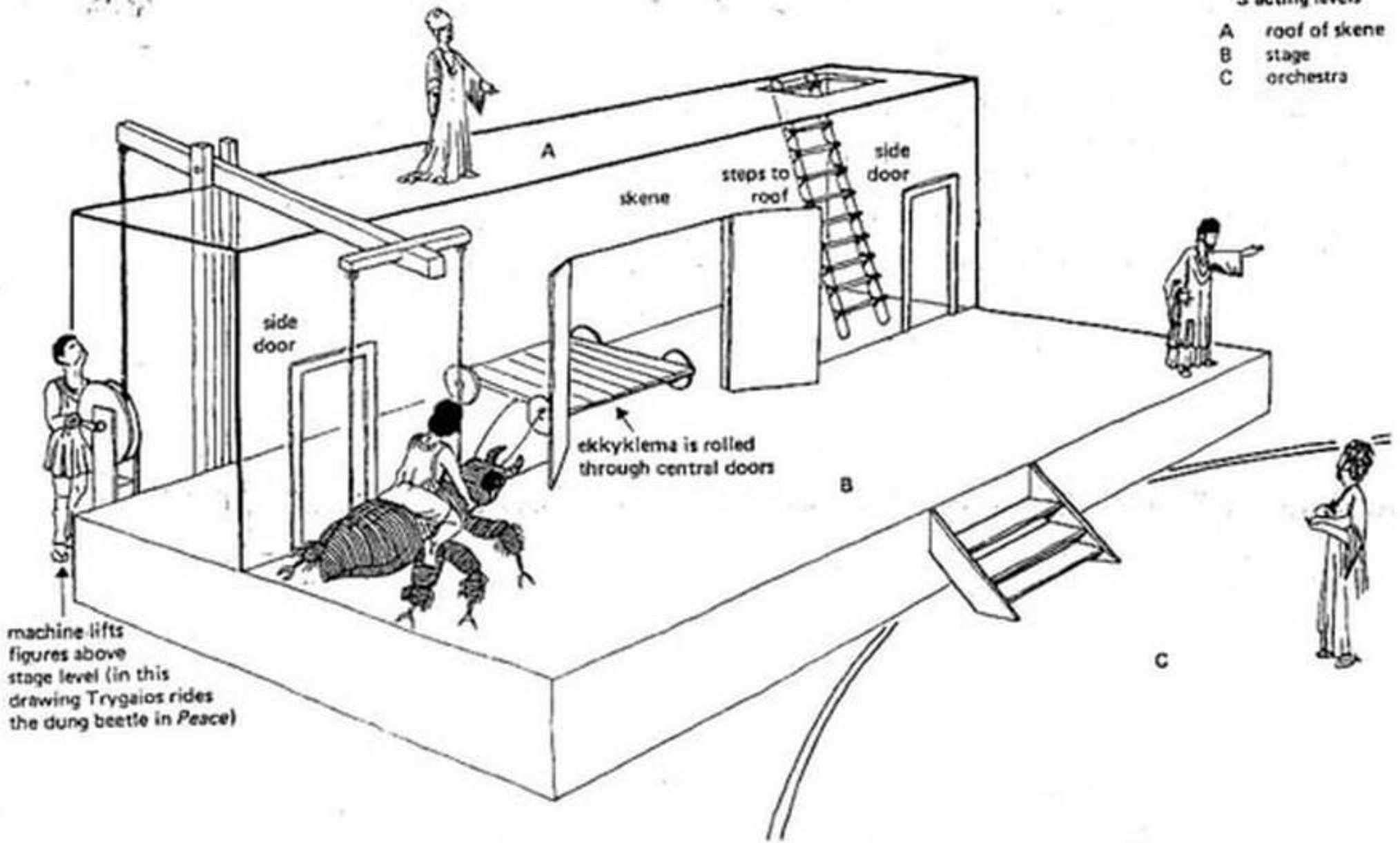


Photo of the cast of *The Oresteia* by Scott Suchman.



14 The stage and stage-building (*skene*), showing the *mechane* and *ekkyklema*, and the three acting levels

The Oresteia

ΑΓΑΜΕΜΝΟΝ		**Agamemnon**		*Agamemnon*
ΧΟΗΦΟΡΟΙ	=	**Choephoroi** (*Libation Bearers*)	=	*Women at the Graveside*
ΕΥΜΕΝΙΔΗΣ		**Eumenides** (*Kindly Ones*)		*Orestes at Athens*

Photo of the cast of *The Oresteia* by Scott Suchman.

AGAMEMNON

AGAMEMNON

Scene 1 (Prologue, 1-39)	Watchman
Choral Song (*Parados,* 40-257)	Chorus
Scene 2 (First Episode, 258-354)	Clytemnestra, Chorus
Choral Song (First Stasimon, 355-487)	Chorus
Scene 3 (Second Episode, 488-680)	Herald, Clytemnestra, Chorus
Choral Song (Second Stasimon, 681-783)	Chorus
Scene 4 (Third Episode, 784-975)	Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Chorus
Choral Song (Third Stasimon, 976-1034)	Chorus
Scene 5 (Fourth Episode, 1035-1072)	Clytemnestra, Chorus
Scene 6 (*Kommos* 1, 1073-1354)	Cassandra, Chorus
Choral Chant (Fourth Stasimon, 1355-1368)	Chorus
Scene 7 (Fourth Stasimon)	Chorus
Scene 8 (*Kommos* 2, 1369-1475)	Clytemnestra, Chorus
Scene 9 (*Exodos*, 1476-end)	Aegisthus, Clytemnestra, Chorus

AGAMEMNON

The Sacrifice of Iphigeneia

- Clytemestra seeks revenge for their daughter's death

The House of Atreus

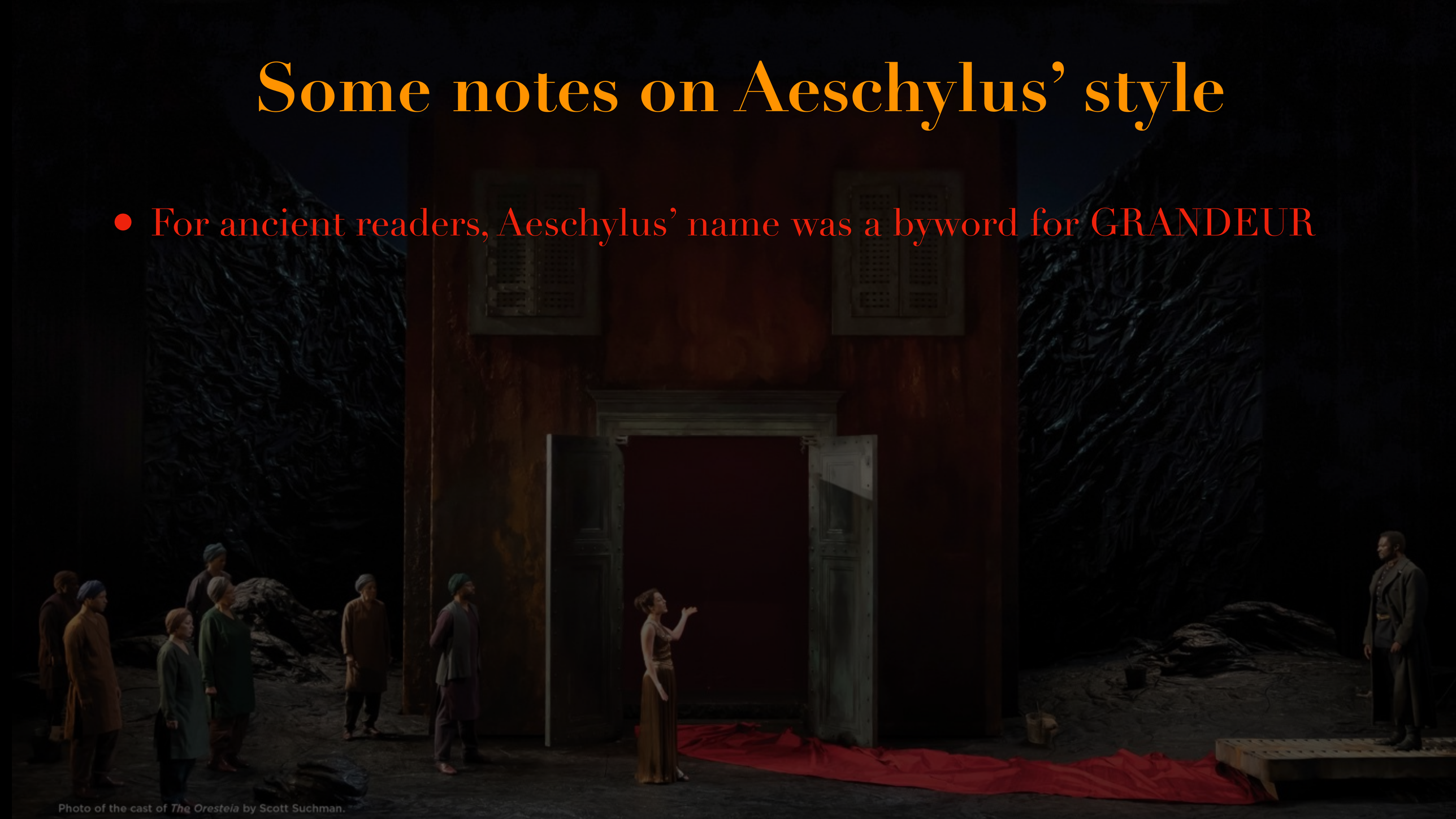
- Agamemnon is the son of Atreus, who murdered his brother Thyestes' children—except Aegisthus

The Fall of Troy

- Agamemnon has brought Cassandra back from Troy as his concubine

Some notes on Aeschylus' style

- For ancient readers, Aeschylus' name was a byword for GRANDEUR



Some notes on Aeschylus' style

- For ancient readers, Aeschylus' name was a byword for GRANDEUR

A scene from Aristophanes' Frogs

Photo of the cast of *The Oresteia* by Scott Suchman.

Some notes on Aeschylus' style

- For ancient readers, Aeschylus' name was a byword for GRANDEUR
- His plots generally deal less with twists and reversals of fortune than the steady build-up of intensity toward an anticipated climax
- Choral songs are longer, denser, and more prominent than in later tragedians

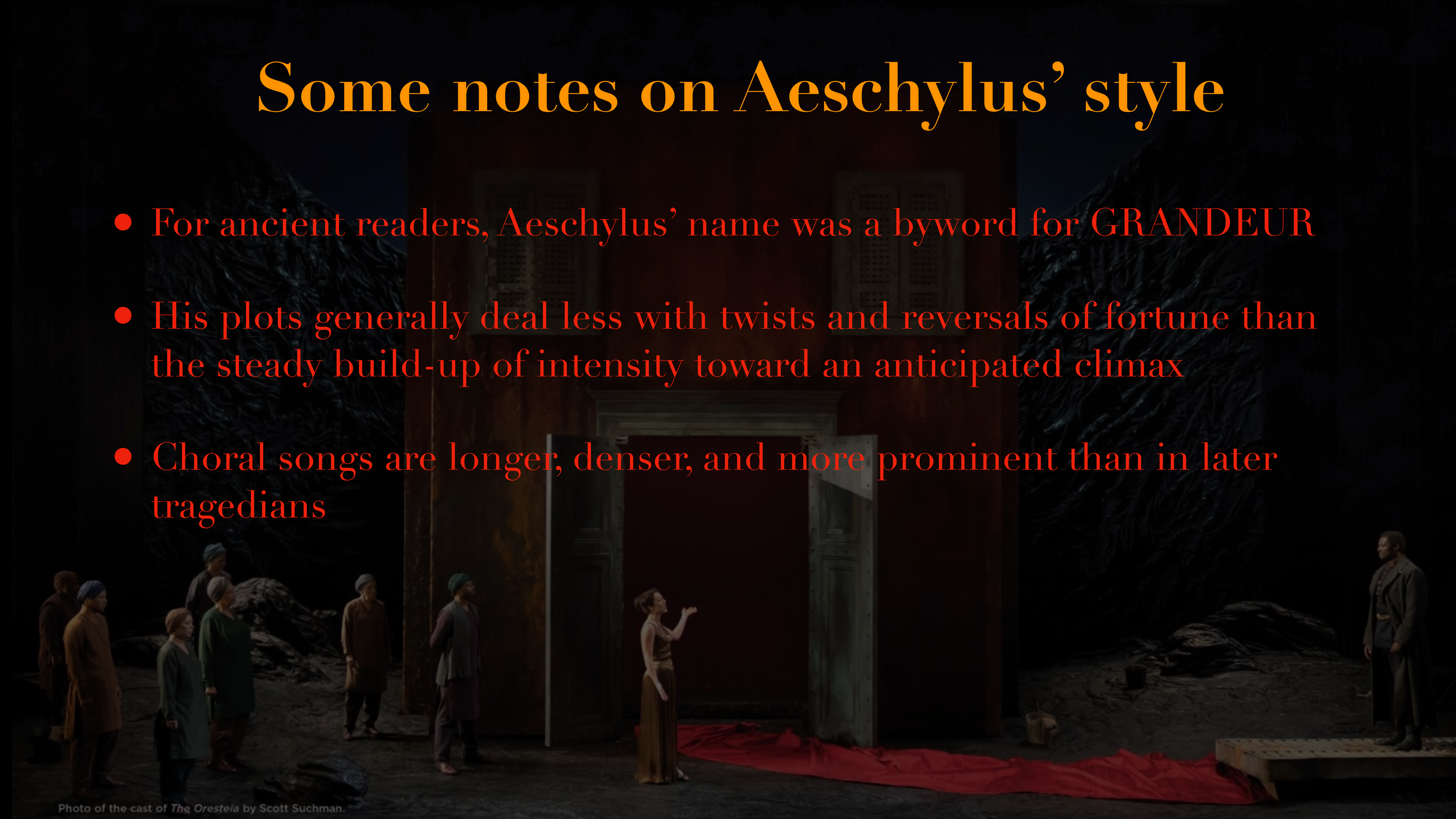


Photo of the cast of *The Oresteia* by Scott Suchman.

- The language in both song and dialogue is lofty and poetic—dense in imagery, allusion, symbolism, and wordplay

ὧδε γὰρ κρατεῖ
γυναικὸς **<u>ἀνδρόβουλον</u>** ἐλπίζον κέαρ.
(10-11)

And in control of this there waits a heart in hope,
a woman's heart <u>that organizes like a man</u>.

androboulon
andro- man
boulē counsel, plan

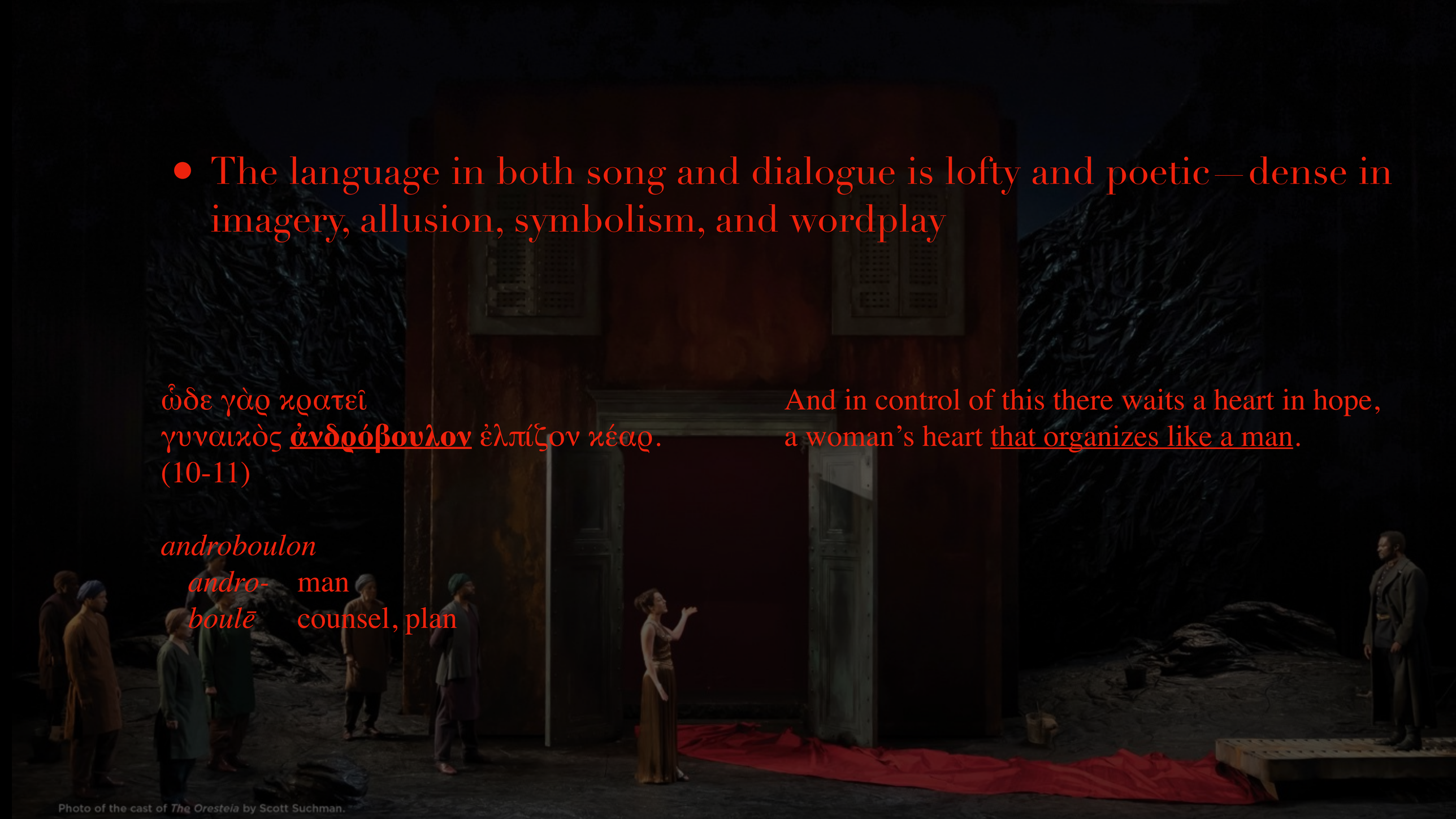


Photo of the cast of *The Oresteia* by Scott Suchman.

- The language in both song and dialogue is lofty and poetic—dense in imagery, allusion, symbolism, and wordplay

τὰν δορίγαμβρον ἀμφινει-
κῆ θ᾽ **Ἑλέναν**; ἐπεὶ πρεπόντως
ἑλένας, **ἕλανδρος**, **ἑλέπτολις**,
(686-9)

…spelling
her proper name for conflict: Helen,
which predicts hell for ships and sailors,
and hell for soldiers, hell for cities.

tan dorigambon amphinei-
kē th' ***Helenan****; epei prepontōs*
helenas*,* ***helandros****,* ***heleptolis****…*

hel- from the verb meaning to destroy or kill

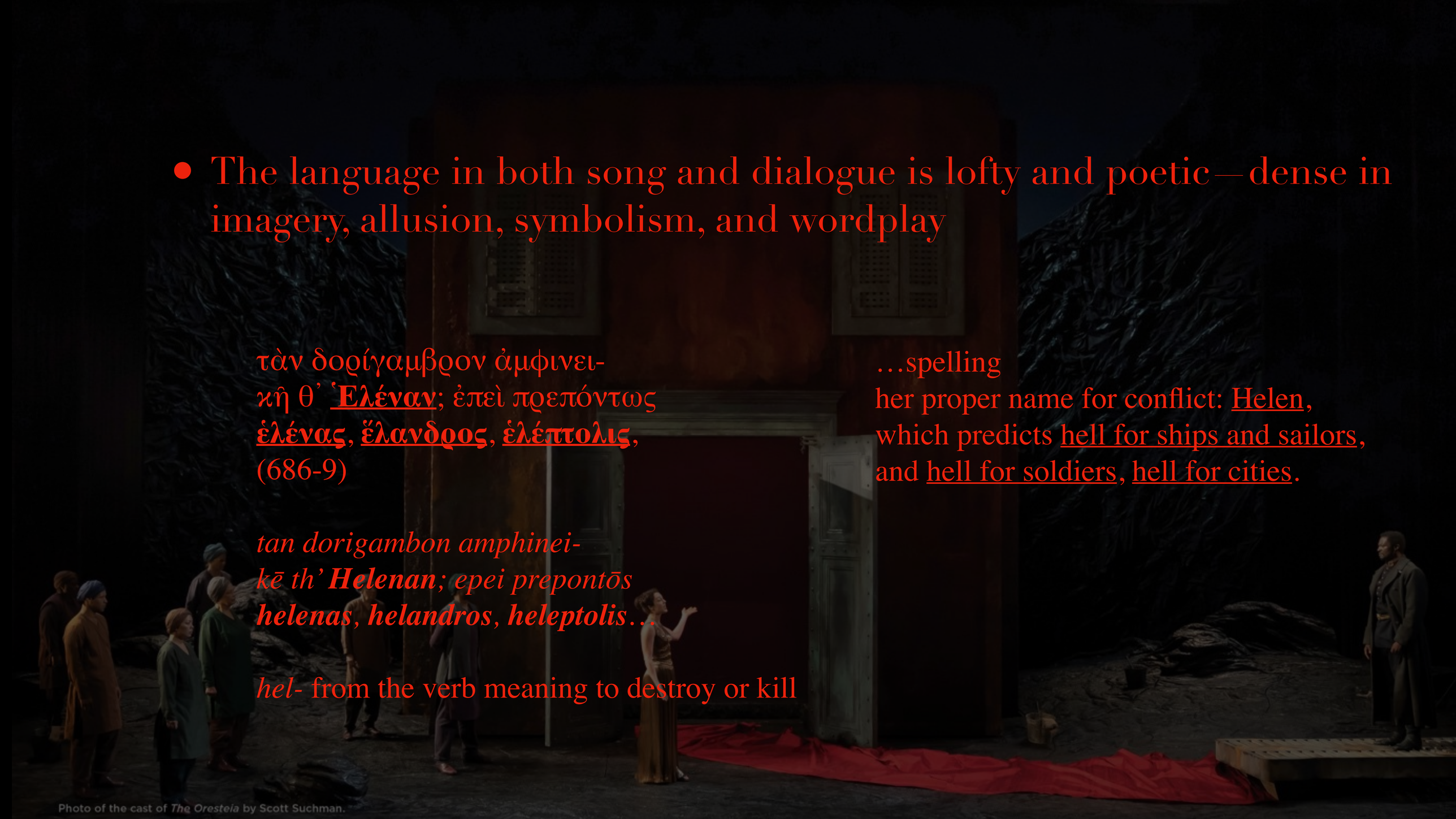


Photo of the cast of *The Oresteia* by Scott Suchman.

- “Aeschylus was the first to enhance tragedy with highly heroic effects and to decorate the stage and to astound his audience’s eyes with splendor, through pictures and devices, with altars and tombs, trumpets, images, and Furies.”

- “Some say that during the performance of the *Eumenides*, when he brought the chorus [of Furies] on one by one, he so frightened the audience that children fainted and unborn infants were aborted.”

—*Vita Aeschyli*

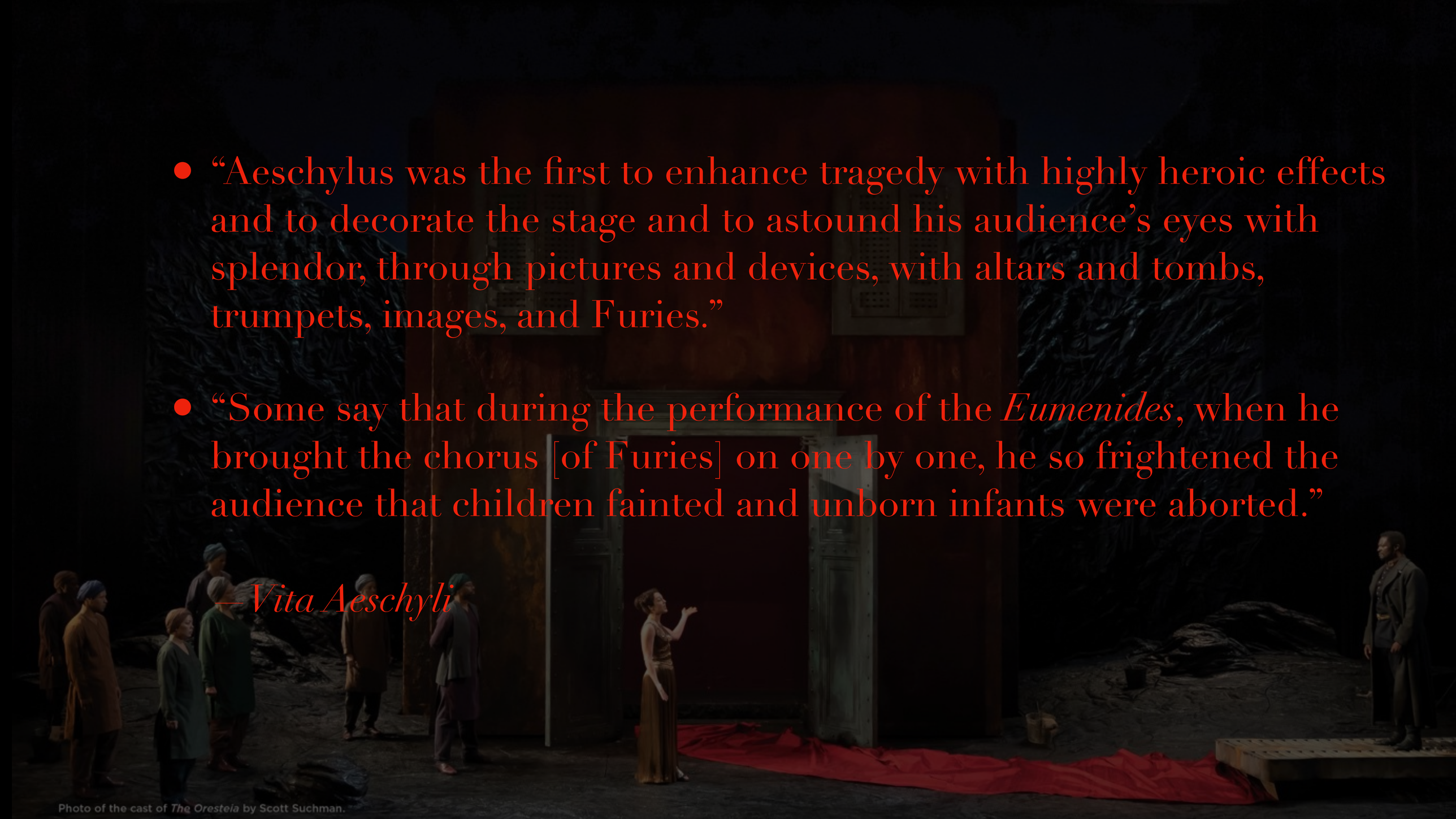


Photo of the cast of *The Oresteia* by Scott Suchman.

Photo of the cast of *The Oresteia* by Scott Suchman.

IV. Epilogue

- Aeschylus helped popularize tragedy outside of Athens, traveling to Sicily in 470 to stage *Persians* at Syracuse and debut a specially commissioned play, *The Women of Aetna*.

- Aeschylus helped popularize tragedy outside of Athens, traveling to Sicily in 470 to stage *Persians* at Syracuse and debut a specially commissioned play, *The Women of Aetna*.

- Aeschylus' career overlapped with the start of Sophocles', who may have defeated Aeschylus for his first win in 468.

- Aeschylus helped popularize tragedy outside of Athens, traveling to Sicily in 470 to stage *Persians* at Syracuse and debut a specially commissioned play, *The Women of Aetna*.

- Aeschylus' career overlapped with the start of Sophocles', who may have defeated Aeschylus for his first win in 468.

- After his death, the Athenians decreed that producers could enter revivals of Aeschylus' plays into the annual tragic festival contest, leading to as many as fifteen further victories.

- Aeschylus helped popularize tragedy outside of Athens, traveling to Sicily in 470 to stage *Persians* at Syracuse and debut a specially commissioned play, *The Women of Aetna*.

- Aeschylus' career overlapped with the start of Sophocles', who may have defeated Aeschylus for his first win in 468.

- After his death, the Athenians decreed that producers could enter revivals of Aeschylus' plays into the annual tragic festival contest, leading to as many as fifteen further victories.

- His son, Euphorion, was also a tragic poet who both produced posthumous productions of his father's unfinished plays and may have submitted his own plays under Aeschylus' name.