Welcome to Ancient Greece: Meeting the World of The Ember Thief

Greek Theater: The Ember Thief, Lesson 1 · 56 minutes · Grades 6–8 · Intro to Theater / Theater Exploration

Lesson Goals

Central Focus

Students are introduced to four conventions of ancient Greek theater (festival, theatron, chorus, and masks) and to the characters of the school play The Ember Thief. Using tableau and choral speaking, students prepare to watch the performance as informed audience members who can recognize how Greek theater traditions shape a modern play.

State Standards

California Arts Standards, Theatre (Grades 6–8)

- TH:Cn11.2 — Investigate the time period and place of a drama/theatre work to better understand performance and design choices.
- TH:Pr4.1 — Use physical choices (body, gesture, facial expression) to communicate character.
- TH:Re7.1 — Identify and describe artistic choices in a drama/theatre work through participation and observation.

Learning Objective

I will explain four features of ancient Greek theater and use my body and voice as part of a chorus to show characters from The Ember Thief.

Academic Language and Language Supports

Language function: Explain and Predict

Language demand: Students explain a Greek theater convention using its academic term, and predict a plot event using a sentence frame with a reason.

Lesson vocabulary (English / Spanish — note the cognates):

- Chorus / Coro
- Theatron / Teatro
- Mask / Máscara
- Festival / Festival
- Myth / Mito

- Tableau / Cuadro vivo
- Unison / Al unísono

Syntax (sentence frames):

- “A chorus is ___. Greek actors used it because ___.” / “Un coro es ___. Los actores griegos lo usaban porque ___.”
- “I predict Prometheus will ___ because ___.” / “Predigo que Prometeo va a ___ porque ___.”
- “One thing I will watch for is ___.” / “Una cosa que voy a observar es ___.”

Discourse (sentence stems):

- “I noticed ___’s statue showed ___ because ___.” / “Noté que la estatua de ___ mostró ___ porque ___.”
- “I agree with ___’s prediction and I want to add ___.” / “Estoy de acuerdo con ___ y quiero agregar ___.”

Materials

- Projector with photo of the ancient theater at Epidaurus
- Slide or poster: Four Big Ideas with terms, gestures, and Spanish translations
- Teacher character list for God Statues (descriptions in lesson details)
- Chart paper and markers for recording predictions (save for post-show lesson)
- Exit slips (half-sheets or index cards), bilingual prompt
- Grip socks

Differentiation

English Language Learners

Every academic term is paired with a gesture and a Spanish cognate (coro, teatro, máscara, mito). Choral speaking and whole-group freezes let students participate before speaking alone. Bilingual sentence frames are posted; students rehearse predictions with a partner before sharing in the circle and may share in Spanish.

Gifted/Advanced Students

Experienced Theater Exploration students act as statue callers and side-coaches, adding the next layer to each round. Introduce the term koryphaios (chorus leader): an advanced student conducts the unison variations of “First there was Chaos,” cueing the start and cut-off. Extension prompt: “Why might a modern playwright still use a chorus?”

IEP/504

Countdown cues (“3, 2, 1, FREEZE”) give predictable transitions. Statues may be done seated or with a partner. One pass is allowed in the prediction circle. Exit slip may be drawn

or dictated. Post the day's agenda as a visual schedule. Provide a quiet spot at the edge of the circle for students who need lower stimulation during the swirl.

Culturally Responsive Teaching

Connect the chorus to call-and-response traditions students already know (sports chants, church, family celebrations, music). Invite students to share origin stories from their own families' cultures, such as Maya creation stories from the Popol Vuh or the Korean legend of Dangun, as other ways people explained how the world began. Highlight that The Ember Thief was written by their own teacher for their school community: theater traditions are living and local.

Section Notes

For a large, enthusiastic section, use observer/performer halves during statues to manage space. For a less engaged section, run God Statues as a challenge (fastest freeze, longest hold) and keep each instruction to a single step. For a mixed-experience section, pair each new student with an experienced buddy for the Prometheus/Epimetheus round. For an experienced but less focused section, use tight countdowns and a "hold for 5" challenge, and assign callers and koryphaios roles to channel energy.

Lesson Plan Details

0–3 min Entry Routine & Purpose

Shoes off, grip socks on, circle up. Read the learning objective chorally in English, then Spanish. Frame the week: "On Wednesday and Thursday, our school performs a play based on Greek myths. This week we become experts so we can watch it like real theater artists."

3–8 min Hook: The Whisper Test

Project a photo of the ancient theater at Epidaurus (seated about 14,000 people). Tell students someone in the top row could hear a coin drop on stage. One volunteer stands center and whispers a word; the class slowly backs away until they can no longer hear it. Ask: "How could actors reach 14,000 people with no microphones?" Collect 3–4 answers; they set up the next section.

8–17 min Four Big Ideas (with gestures)

Teach each convention with a whole-class gesture:

- **Festival / Festival** — plays were part of a huge festival for the god Dionysus, and playwrights competed to win. Gesture: raise a trophy.
- **Theatron / Teatro** — "the seeing place": huge outdoor theaters. Gesture: hand shading eyes.
- **Chorus / Coro** — a group that speaks and moves as one voice. Gesture: link arms.
- **Mask / Máscara** — a few actors played many roles, and big faces read from far away. Gesture: hands frame the face.

Gesture Check: call terms out in random order, faster each round; students hit the gesture. Then reverse: do a gesture, students call the term.

> **Assessment (Informal): accuracy of gesture and term responses. Re-teach any term most students miss before moving on.**

17–32 min Meet the Cast: God Statues

Builds on Living Paintings tableau skills. Describe a character from The Ember Thief, count "3, 2, 1, FREEZE," and everyone freezes as that character:

- **Zeus** — king of the gods, throws lightning, short temper.
- **Athena** — goddess of wisdom.
- **Hephaestus** — blacksmith god with a hammer and forge; very lonely.
- **Hercules** — huge muscles, wears his trophies, a show-off hero.
- **Pandora** — holding a jar she must never, ever open.
- **Prometheus & Epimetheus** — save for last; introduce them as brothers: Forethought (thinks before acting) and Afterthought (acts before thinking). Partners freeze as the pair.

Add one layer per round: "Give Zeus one word." "Now make Hephaestus lonely." "Show Pandora REALLY wanting to open the jar." Half the room freezes while the other half observes, then switch.

> **Assessment: observation of physical choices (levels, facial expression, gesture). Observers give one peer glow using the stem "I noticed ___'s statue showed ___ because ___."**

32–41 min Chorus Warm-Up

Teach the play's opening line: "First there was Chaos." The whole group speaks it in unison several ways: whispered, booming, slow and creepy, like a sports announcer, like a robot. Then add movement: on the word "Chaos," everyone swirls, then freezes together. Stress the chorus skill: start together, end together, one voice.

> **Assessment: group performance – can the chorus begin and end the line in unison? Students self-rate with a thumbs up / sideways / down.**

41–50 min Prediction Circle

Tell the myth only up to the rule (no spoilers past this point): The gods put Prometheus and Epimetheus in charge of giving every creature on Earth one special skill. Zeus gives them one rule: "No fire. No matter what." Ask: "What do you think Prometheus does?" Students go around the circle using the frame "I predict Prometheus will ___ because ___." Students may pass once and return. Record several predictions on chart paper and save it for the post-show discussion.

50–56 min Closure: Exit Slip

Students complete: “One thing I will watch for when I see the show is ___.” / “Una cosa que voy a observar en la obra es ___.” Prompt choices: the chorus, how a god is shown, masks or costumes, how they show fire. Collect at the door; socks off, shoes on.

> **Assessment: exit slip – student names at least one Greek theater convention or character to watch for. Use responses to plan the post-show lesson.**