

At the Isthmian Games

A Reconstruction of Aeschylus'
satyr play
Isthmiastai (Theoroi)

by

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DIONYSUS

Welcome to my humble abode
 The forest, from whence I will send my minions
 My satyrs, on a quest to pre-canal Isthmia
 To dance for the victors of the new athletic games
 Begun by clever Sisyphus
 Who swam in the sea to retrieve the body of Palaimon
 The glorious wrestler
 And to honor his untimely death
 Thus the Isthmian Games were born
 So that men could oil themselves up
 And assert their superiority
 Through tasks of great strength and discipline
 As if through these displays
 They live on in legend after
 Hades has taken them from the earth.
 Achhhhh! What a tiresome exercise.
 Why would man choose to deny himself
 Wine, women and ecstatic pleasure
 To throw a big ball?
 Or run around a post?
 How foolish man is
 But yet so taken in
 By this notion of valor –
 And it is Sisyphus who lays down the law
 For these games
 The very man who cheated death
 That devious trickster
 Who can easily sway the mind of any man.
 Oh, this will be certainly be entertaining
 At the very least
 For I will call my satyrs
 To disrupt and bring celebration instead
 To Isthmia.
 Satyrs Assemble!

The Satyrs, who have been sleeping around the playing area, wake, rediscover each other, and begin dancing. This continues until DIONYSUS interrupts them.

DIONYSUS

Very good, very good.
 Now my beloved followers
 I send you to the land of Isthmia
 To bring joy to men and women alike
 With your jubilant cavorting.
 Go at once
 And I will join you there
 Very shortly.
 Away!

*Exit DIONYSUS. The SATYRS run to Isthmia. On arrival, they are suddenly awestruck by the enormous Temple of Poseidon.
 Enter SISYPHUS.*

SISYPHUS

Here, athletes get over here. Take this javelin, let see how far you can throw it; take this discus; here's some weights for working out; come on, you two let's see some wrestling. Hup hup hup!
(Chaos follows. Mayhem.)
 What are you doing? That's not how you throw it, put your back into it!
 What the – you call that wrestling, hey? *(Adlib some.)* Hey, listen to...

SISYPHUS signals for the TRAINER to come over. The TRAINER walks up, intimidatingly, blows his whistle. The CHORUS freezes, subdued, scared; then huddles together, dropping everything.

SISYPHUS

I thought I was dealing with athletes, who do you presume to be?

SATYRS

W-w-w-w-w-e are s-s-satyrs. W-w-w-e dance for D-D-Dionysus!

SISYPHUS

Oh, oh, oh, you *dance*, you're *dancers* *(he laughs)* for Dionysus, that foppish vagabond. Well that explains why you all throw like a bunch of girls! My mistake, I thought you were athletes with actual skill.

SATYR

We have skills! Every worthwhile art is embodied in us!¹

SATYR

Singing.

SATYR

Dancing.

SISYPHUS

Those don't count! I'm talking about fighting with spears, wrestling matches, horsemanship, running, boxing...

SATYR

Biting?

SISYPHUS

No! No biting, and no testicle-twisting either! If you want to be men, you must listen to me.

SATYRS

We are men!

The TRAINER begins a series of 'Mr. Universe' poses.

SISYPHUS

You're not men. Men are proud, men are disciplined, men exert themselves in order to be the best, the fastest, the strongest in order to bring shame to their enemies and to triumph over all. And these men make women buckle at the knees, pawing at the hems of their robes, clamoring for their well-oiled muscles. To the victorious man all things come easy.

The CHORUS hoots and hollers.

SISYPHUS

Why do you make such an uproar? Do you want to be athletes?

¹ This, and the following few lines, are adapted from a fragment of a satyr play possibly by Sophocles.

SATYRS

Y-y-y-y-yessssss!

SISYPHUS

Well, alright. First things first, let's tie up those penises!

Shock! Horror!

SATYRS

What, what, what, what, what????!!!

SISYPHUS

Well, you can't be athletes with your schlongs flopping around all over the place! Come, come, let's tie 'em up.

SATYRS

But, but, but....

SISYPHUS

Don't you want to be winners, becoming glorious and magnificent in the eyes of all the world?

SATYRS

Uhhhhhhh....

SISYPHUS

Don't you want the women?

SATYRS

Yeah!!!

SISYPHUS

Then tie those dicks up and get out there! Prove yourselves to my trainer and I will give you gifts befitting of kings.

The CHORUS gets excited. With an excruciating effort, the SATYRS tie up their phalli.

SISYPHUS

Enough! Let the training begin!

Exit SISYPHUS. The TRAINER blows his whistle to establish order.

TRAINER

Alright, let's start with discus!² You, you, and you, get out there.

He points at three SATYRS.

Now, this is how you throw a discus. Take it in your right hand, twist around like this, and throw it.

He demonstrates the proper technique.

You start.

SATYR 1 twists too far around, a corkscrew, and collapses.

That was pathetic. You try.

SATYR 2 attempts a frisbee-style throw; the trainer gets him to mirror his [the TRAINER's] moves; SATYR 2 can't decode the mirror image.

Ela, ela, what is that? Come on, you show 'em how it's done.

SATYR 3 goes to throw, correctly, but does not release the discus; instead he goes into a break-dance-type spin.

The TRAINER blows his whistle.

Alright, alright, let's try something else. It's time for sprints!

You, you, you, and you, get on the line. Now get into position.

SATYRS 4, 5, 6 and 7 get into the modern sprint starting position, crouching down.

What is that? Who on earth would ever start a race like that? Here I'll show you how.

He demonstrates the Ancient Greek starting position, then makes sure they copy it, checking their toes.

Alright, now when I say *Epeita*, you're going to run, alright? You got that, the starting signal is *Epeita*.

The SATYRS start running.

No, no, no!

Whistle – the SATYRS stop.

² This scene runs through the events of the ancient pentathlon, using a particular variant of the long jump. Details of ancient practices are authentic.

I was just explaining it to you, you don't start running until I say *Epeita*.

The SATYRS start running.

No, no, no!

Whistle – the SATYRS stop.

I haven't said *Epeita* yet!

The SATYRS start running. Whistle.

Stop running! Get back in line! Alright, on your marks, get set, *Epeita*!

The SATYRS run chaotically in different directions, bumping into each other, ending in a heap on the floor. The TRAINER shakes his head.

Let's just move on to the javelin.

He blows his whistle.

SATYRS 8 and 9 come center.

Here's how you throw it.

He demonstrates the technique, without releasing the javelin.

Okay, that's the basic throw, but what you also have to do is use the thong, this piece of string here. First, you wrap it around your index finger like this, then around the middle of the javelin, so when you throw it, it makes the javelin spin. Simple. Got it? Now you try.

SATYR 8 wraps the string round his finger while SATYR 9, at a distance, wraps the other end round the javelin. They end up tied together in a knot.

Okay, okay, we're moving on. Long Jump!

He blows his whistle. SATYRS 10 and 11 step up.

This is long jump with jumping weights, okay? You're going to run, and then jump, and in mid air you propel yourself more by throwing the weights behind you, okay? It's very important to throw the weights at exactly the right time, got it? You try.

SATYR 10 runs, jumps, turns in mid-air and throws the weights facing the wrong way.

No! You always face front, okay? Throw the weights behind you but facing front. Your turn.

SATYR 11 runs, jumps, throws the weights after landing.

Here, let me show you.

SATYR 10 picks up the weights, hands them to him, dropping one on the TRAINER's foot.

Owwwww!

He starts hopping on one foot in agony. The SATYRS all copy this. It's a dance!

What are you doing? Stop it, stop it, stop it! Get back there.

Blows whistle.

Alright, I know you can do this one, guys, come on. Wrestling!

You and you. You and you. And you and you.

He puts three pairs of SATYRS together.

The goal is to take your opponent down to the ground, okay? You can't mess this one up, all you have to do is grab each other, pull, trip, drag, whatever. Come on now! Get ready, arms up, no, out in front of you, like this, okay, now, start!

SATYR PAIR 1 start something like wrestling, but then it seems to 'get intimate'.

One of SATYR PAIR 2 jumps on the other and seems to ride him, impossible to dislodge.

SATYR PAIR 3 grab each other, start spinning round, with big kicks high in the air.

The other SATYRS see this as a dance and all join in.

The TRAINER starts talking to himself.

Enough! Finished! That's it.

He leaves.

The CHORUS collapses in exhaustion, groaning.

After a few moments, enter SISYPHUS, bringing masks.

SISYPHUS

Have you made my trainer proud?

SATYRS

(Shattered) Y-y-y-yes.

SISYPHUS

An excellent first day, you must have worked very hard. We will train every day and in a month you will be ready to compete with the boldest of men.

The CHORUS barely stirs.

SISYPHUS

And I just want to remind you that, for athletes in training, there will be no drinking, no staying out late, and definitely no sex.

Shocked, the CHORUS jumps to its feet in protest.

SATYRS

But, but, but...!

SISYPHUS

Ahhh, excellent, you're all up. Ready to see your gifts?

SATYRS

Oh? Yes. Yeah!

SISYPHUS

Here take this.

One SATYR takes a gift, suspiciously but also eagerly. It's a mask (supposedly a lifelike image of a satyr). He's never seen anything like it! Suddenly he reacts in complete terror, running to get away from the mask which he still keeps hold of! His reaction then becomes a fearful kind of curiosity. Then it shifts to pure curiosity. Then recognition. Childish delight takes over. Lastly, it's pure narcissism. Seeing this, the other satyrs rush to take their masks and start to play with them. It's a dance – again!

SISYPHUS

Stop dancing! You can't resist reverting to your bestial ways, seeing likenesses of more than human craftsmanship?³ Control yourselves.

SATYR

I'm really indebted to you for this!

³ The surviving fragments of the play begin with this phrase (from "seeing likenesses..."). Some 95 continuous but lacunose lines exist; note 6 indicates where they end in this text. The following text largely follows Alan Sommerstein's translation (*Aeschylus III*, Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 2009, 85-99), but has been amended and supplemented as was felt appropriate or necessary.

SATYR

It's really very kind of you!

SISYPHUS

However you act, all must stay within the bounds of piety.

Exit SISYPHUS.

SATYRS⁴

Now listen, everyone
 And pay attention to my speech
 In silence!
 Look
 And see
 Whether you think at all that Sisyphus' models are
 A closer image of my form
 Than this!
 It only lacks a voice!
 Come on now!
 These offerings as an adornment
 I bring to the god
 A beautifully painted votive.
 For my mother what a matter this would be!
 If she saw him, then certainly she'd turn and wail
 Imagining the presence of me whom she nurtured.
 He's so alike!

(Very rhythmically – a chant) Ho there!
 Set your eyes on the house of the Sea-god
 the Earth-shaker
 the Ground-quaker
 and each of you
 Fix up there an image of your fair form
 as a messenger
 A voiceless herald, a stopper of travelers
 to make visitors halt in their tracks
 By the fearsome look in its eyes.
 Hail, lord!

⁴ These lines should be divided between individual satyrs and small groups of satyrs to generate a very energetic and rhythmical effect.

Hail, Poseidon,
And undertake to be our guardian!

During the following the CHORUS forms a chain gang and attaches the masks to the temple. Repeat the following chant as necessary. When all masks are attached, this becomes a celebratory dance.

Hail Lord
Hail Poseidon
Hail Lord
Be our guardian....

Enter DIONYSUS, at a distance – in time to see the SATYRS dancing. After some moments, the CHORUS sees DIONYSUS. A mass panic follows. Finally, the CHORUS huddles together in terror. Then the SATYRS find enough courage to defy the god.

DIONYSUS

Ah, I was bound to find you at some time, my lads. Come to me, my satyrs, come on, don't be shy. I can't say that "the traveler came unseen" for the path itself (*he gestures to the masks on the temple*) informed me! I knew when I saw your phalli short "like a mouse's tail," that you were practicing your Isthmian wrestling. You haven't slacked but you're beautifully gymnastic. Had you kept to your old drunken ways, it's more likely I'd have seen you dancing (!), but I see you're learning a new life, that of athletes, exercising your arms and damaging what's rightly mine by handing it over to the one who's backing you in this. Well, if you're absolutely certain you want to be my enemy, may you perish in misery – along with your beloved slave-driver!

SATYRS

(Lines should be divided among individual SATYRS.)

What can I say in response to what you have said?
A slave, once or three times over, that is our choice!
We have relinquished the tyranny of our former lord!
Justly living instead!
With scanty bedding!
And poor lodging!
A life of discipline!
And arduous training!
For which I will receive
Prizes!

Prizes! And, and, and...
 Glory!
 Glory! And, and, and, and, and, and...
 Women!
 WOMEN!!!
 Yeah!!!!!!

DIONYSUS sighs audibly.

SATYRS

But it's also difficult to be an athlete.
 You take no pity on me when I am wrestling.
 And I wouldn't expect a pansy like you to understand what it's like to
 complete these laborious tasks!

DIONYSUS

(Pointedly ignoring the last remark) Is it after having something dreadful
 done to you that you're appealing to me; isn't it rather after *doing* too much,
 for which you'll soon pay the penalty?

SATYR

Don't confuse us with your verbal wiles and foreign proverbs!

DIONYSUS

Oh, you'd rather hide behind a shield and utter words against me that are out
 of order, that I am no good at fighting with iron, that I'm a cowardly,
 effeminate being who doesn't belong among males. And now you make
 these further, fresh accusations, more vile than any of your previous insults,
 and you slander both me and the choral festival for which I am assembling a
 multitude. No one, young or old, willingly abandons the two rows of my
 chorus, yet you are Isthmiizing, garlanding yourselves with pine branches
 and not paying ivy its due honor at all. For this you'll shed tears but it won't
 be because you've got smoke in your eyes!

SATYRS

No, I will never depart from the sanctuary!
 Why do you keep threatening me like this?
 In response I call on Poseidon of the Isthmus.
 He will protect me....

DIONYSUS

Since you are set on learning these new ways, I've brought you some new toys, freshly fashioned on the adze and the anvil. This, here, is the first of the playthings for you.

SATYR

Not me! Give it to one of my friends.

DIONYSUS

Don't refuse, there's a good fellow, just because of a bad vibration. Accept these gifts which I bestow upon you.

*DIONYSUS gives the SATYR a hoplite helmet.*⁵

SATYR

To get what pleasure out of this? And what am I supposed to do with it?

DIONYSUS

It fits your new profession.

SATYR

But what do I do with it exactly? I don't like this equipment!

DIONYSUS

You join in the Isthmian Games. It's just the thing.

SATYR

Nobody's going to enter the contest with this on.

DIONYSUS

Never fear. You'll still advance at a 'steady' pace.

SATYR

(He puts the helmet on) I can barely walk, my ankles are about to give way.⁶

DIONYSUS

I have enough for all of you.

⁵ It's not clear from the fragments that this is the nature of the metallic 'novel toy'. However, racing in hoplite armour was an event in the Isthmian Games.

⁶ Surviving fragments of the play end here.

SATYRS

Stop laughing at us!
 We're athletes!
 We're strong
 And we will triumph!
 (*Together*) Poseidon we summon you!

Beat, then an earthquake! The SATYRS – but not DIONYSUS – are violently shaken. They fall to the ground. Enter POSEIDON. He takes one hard look and sneers at the masks.

POSEIDON

Who are you?

SATYRS

W-w-w-we're your athletes lord.

POSEIDON

My athletes are men, what are you supposed to be, little ones?

SATYRS

We *are* men!

POSEIDON

Men? You'd be better off convincing me you were nymphs!

SATYRS

Nymphs!

POSEIDON

Or mermaids.

SATYRS

But we are men!
 We can throw!
 We can run!
 We got muscles!
 Yeah, and the ladies.
 Ladies, ladies, ladies!

POSEIDON

(To DIONYSUS) Are these your creatures?

DIONYSUS

Yes they are, or, they *were*.

POSEIDON

Ah, ha, ha, Dionysus, god of drunken merriment and patron of the theatrical arts, did you call me here to show me this riotous spectacle of your subjects warped by inebriated delusions, so that I could watch their wasted ways and have myself a chuckle?

DIONYSUS

I've done nothing of the kind. My satyrs have forsaken all liquid spirits and instead dedicate their lives to competing in your honor.

SATYRS

Yes, yes, yes, yes!

And we will serve you very well

By becoming the strongest

Yeah and the fastest

The biggest!

And then we'll win at every sport

And be the best!

And then we will dance for you in celebration!

(Together) Wooooo!

(Chanting) Hail Lord! Hail Poseidon! Hail Lord! Be our guardian!

Hail Lord...

POSEIDON

Enough! Cease that infernal rhythm and end these contorted movements, which you shamelessly enact in my name. I want no part of your gypsy magic. To think, a new temple is built in my honor and I come forth from the sea to find it defaced with your brutish faces? I am the patron of valiant strength and stoicism, and I only smile upon those who leave the games donning the crown of the pine tree. Take back your silly dogs, Dionysus, lest they create more harm and continue to anger the gods.

DIONYSUS

I will do as I like.

POSEIDON

Very well. (*He takes one more look at masks.*) But will someone please take those down? They're awful!

Exit POSEIDON

DIONYSUS

My, my, how the tides have turned.

The CHORUS acts bashful, then slowly starts sidling up to DIONYSUS, trying to get round him. DIONYSUS breaks away.

DIONYSUS

No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, that's not how this is going to work, no, no, no...

The CHORUS keeps following him.

DIONYSUS

Nope, absolutely not, you can't forsake me and then try to get back into my good graces, no, no, no.

Dejected, the CHORUS starts to give up. Then one of the SATYRS decides to untie his phallus. This gives him enormous relief. The others see and follow suit. Liberated like this, the SATYRS begin a wild, ecstatic dance.

DIONYSUS watches.

After a few moments he can't stop himself joining in.

The dance continues.

END

APPENDIX
The May 11th, 2011 Production
at the International Centre for Hellenic and Mediterranean Studies

CAST LIST

DIONYSOS...Evie Garreau

ATHLETIC TRAINER...Max Ginsberg

POSEIDON...Dan Lamp

SISYPHUS...Kate Wilkinson

SATYRS...Nick Clarke, Annie Comperchio, Jenny Dexter, Alexa Gianaris, Brittany Johnson, Sally Meehan, Michelle Meyers, Chrysanthe Oltmann, Alex Scheidemantel, Ricardo Villamil, Maggie Wydysh

BEHIND THE SCENES

PLAYWRIGHTS...Brittany Johnson, Dan Lamp, and Chrysanthe Oltmann

MAKEUP/COSTUME DESIGN...Brittany Johnson and Kate Wilkinson

PROPS MANAGEMENT...Christian Siskos

PROGRAM DESIGN...Michelle Meyers

PHALLUS MOLDER/CONSTRUCTOR...Chrysanthe Oltmann