

Kristen Fang

Creativity and Connectivity in Re-living the Epic of Gilgamesh

It's one thing to read and hear about history in textbooks and lecture, but another to experience it firsthand. Perhaps one of the most interactive and complex final projects of Ancient Lives was the drama production, which gave students an opportunity to explore history first-hand from different cultural and social perspectives. Over half of the students took part in this ambitious project.

The students were divided into three Text & Scene Groups, responsible for adapting the Epic into a script; a Design Group; and a Music/Sound Group. Together, they sought to perform three different interpretations of selected scenes from the Babylonian Epic of Gilgamesh. Their work is more than simply reenacting the past. Alexander Su, a member of the Music/Sound Group described it like this:

“The Epic looks at how Mesopotamians view death—and more importantly, life.”

The whole production is led by Brenna Nicely, Education and Community Programs Manager and A.R.T. Dramaturg.

In preparing the performances, the students had to consider the various cultural and social aspects of Babylonian life. This influenced the whole process, from writing the script to acting out the roles, composing the music, and designing the costumes and props. Scott Sussex, member of Text and Scene Group 1, shared with me the multifaceted research project that influenced the writing of the script. Sussex says that his group focused on “developing mannerisms of Gilgamesh, [and] thinking about the costume of the god Shamash.” In doing so, they aimed to display the behavior of the characters as artistically and accurately as possible.

To emphasize the themes of each of the scripts, musicians wrote music to accompany the scenes and actions of the performances. Shirley Lin, a member of the Music/Sound Group, considered the themes of the story—death, mortality, and power—in writing the music. Alexander Su, another member of the group, emphasized the importance of researching the musical instruments of the Mesopotamians and the various music styles. In order to connect the past to the present, Lin said:

“We were looking for some way to integrate the type of music that people listened to back then, and the instruments and sounds we have to work with today.”

The actors focused on analyzing the characters in depth to gain a better understanding of the mannerisms, personality, and values of each character. Anthony DeNitto, a member of Text and Scene Group 3, is the actor for Gilgamesh. To better portray his character, DeNitto shared in his video log that he researched different accents to determine what mannerisms would be appropriate for his character. He found that the

mouth has different resonance points. By shaping the way words are pronounced, he could give Gilgamesh a very powerful and regal presence, or a harsher and cruder one.

To develop the characters' visual identity, designers worked closely with the actors to create costumes that fit how they wanted to portray each character. Erin Kim, member of the Costume Group, shared how she aimed to bring out the dichotomy between Gilgamesh and Enkidu. While Gilgamesh was mortal and striving towards immortality, Enkidu was originally immortal but then chained to immortality through his corruption. To highlight Gilgamesh's effort to gain immortality, Kim designed regal and stately attire with bright colors for him. For Enkidu, Kim chose costumes that resembled normal day-to-day clothing of the time with added rugged elements, such as clothes made of leaves. In this way, costumes reflect the transition from mortality to immortality and vice versa.

The whole process—especially decision-making—was not easy. Sussex spoke about the challenge of commentary for the gods. Keeping in mind what message his team would like to convey to the audience, Sussex's team decided to focus particularly on Enkidu's development through the story and also the development in the relationship between humans and nature. Sussex shared, "Having this focus meant discarding other ideas that focused with other aspects of the texts. This process of filtering through ideas was difficult because it meant not using some meaningful insights into the text, since not all were relevant to our theme." The Music/Sound Group also encountered a few challenges. Su shared, "The composing itself has definitely been a challenge, trying to work elements of the Epic into the music as well as coming up with musically creative ideas." The group also encountered difficulties in working with different scales specific to the Mesopotamian time period.

Overall, we students agree—this experience was a rewarding one. The final project component of this course not only helped to make the past more tangible but also helped students to develop new technical skills usually unrelated to a traditional history course. Many of the students did not expect to develop directing, acting, or composing skills as part of a class on Ancient Mesopotamian history. As Sussex said, "The subject knowledge from Ancient Lives and the group's willingness to work together on unfamiliar areas has helped us work through these gaps." From the music group, Lin shared, "This is my first time composing, so I've really enjoyed experimenting with sounds and trying to represent major themes in the epic with music."

By interacting with history through script-writing, acting, composing, and designing, the students made history come alive. Overall, the students agreed that this final project greatly helped them to solidify what Professor Gojko taught in lecture. Lin concluded:

"It's one thing to read about Mesopotamian beliefs and religion, but having to represent it in the context of the Epic of Gilgamesh has really encouraged me to think more deeply about these topics."

Su adds, "I think it's interesting to contextualize something we've read in something we can relate to. I look forward to seeing if the final performance can show some aspects of ancient Mesopotamian culture in the modern age!"