As soon as the auditions were announced for the UCL Classical Play 2019: Oedipus Rex, I was ready to “perform”. I say this not because I thought I would be successful (on the contrary, it was my first week of university and I had already auditioned for three other plays only to receive three miserly rejections). Rather, my chosen degree subject of classics, a subject which I already had developed a passion for in secondary school, combined with my natural propensity for performing meant that even auditioning would be an experience. And it certainly was. I had to choose between two monologues: an advisory speech by Creon and a rousing prophecy by Tiresias. Foolishly, I chose the former, worried that the latter would expose a fatal flaw in my acting i.e. the inclination to “go over the top”. I had not realised at that point that the spirit of the Classical Play lent itself to “going over the top”. Essentially the Classical Play is a product of fifth century Athens, whose literature, steeped in the Homeric tradition, generally entails catalogues of anthropomorphic gods, leaders and kings abundant in virtue and vice and everything in between. Anyway, I delivered the Creon monologue, interpreting the character of the speech as what I can only describe as “mild Machiavellian” (a manipulative yet timid speech designed to allay Oedipus’s fears of any ambition and conspiracy on Creon’s part). It was certainly a very lacklustre performance (the person who was eventually cast as Creon did a much better job!) and so I was rather surprised that evening when I was invited to a call back. Unfortunately, I felt out of my comfort zone again as to begin with we were thrust into the world of interpretive dance, asked to devise movements to accompany choral lyrics. Needless to say, I can’t dance and ended up almost dropping my partner. It was a wonder, therefore, that I was even allowed to participate in the second part of the call back which entailed another round of monologues. I was given a monologue this time (so at least there was no scope for making the wrong choice) and the monologue incidentally was the rousing prophecy of Tiresias, the one I had discarded (I think the director was trying to tell me something). I thought I had delivered a much more convincing performance this time round (I suppose the bar of expectation was rather low already). The following morning, I awoke to the extremely exciting news that I had been cast as the prophet himself, Tiresias.

I have digressed in an attempt to convey how much this casting meant. Despite my passion for acting, it had never translated into being cast as a main role (or any role for that matter). But here was the opportunity I had been waiting for. My name was fourth from top in the cast list. An additional bonus, which I did not appreciate at the time but certainly did so when it came to performance week, was that I was going to be performing at the Bloomsbury Theatre, a theatre recently renovated with a seating capacity of 535. Throughout the rehearsal process, I delved deeper into the character of Tiresias. I had discussions with the amazing production team about the character and his backstory. I was asked to perform Tiresias’s monologues in various ways. I was at first given a walking stick to convey the age of this character but soon the easy option of the walking stick was dispensed with and instead I was required to contort my body into various, uncomfortable positions. After what amounted to almost four months of rehearsals, Tiresias had almost become an alter-ego. I was extremely nervous on opening night, and my nerves were exacerbated when twenty minutes before I was due to appear on stage for the first time, I was given a blindfold to put around my eyes. Unfortunately, during that first performance the blindfold came off and I was forced to improvise. Luckily, for the other four performances (the Classical Play does indeed have five performances in total, which certainly makes for a rigorous performance programme) the blindfold stayed on, although for one of those four performances the blindfold nearly slipped off again, and I had to stoop down to avoid a second embarrassment.

During those four performances, I really did feel (cliché coming up – apologies) in my element. The music, the chorus and the actors really did recreate the almost supernatural, theatrical atmosphere of ancient Athenian drama. The production team infused such an atmosphere with early twentieth century motifs, conveyed through the rags of the chorus, drenched in blood, and the military outfit of Oedipus, both of which evoked the interwar period.

After what was such an incredible experience in my first year, auditioning for the 2020 Classical Play was inevitable. This time it was Aristophanes’ Frogs. Again, my role proved to be “an out of body experience”, though this time literally. I was to be a maid who tries to seduce the slave Xanthias, who at this point is in the guise of Heracles. It was a fun role (with a great, suitably racy, neon costume to go with it). The production team was different, but the creative impulse was just as good, if not better. Instead of the traditional setting of the underworld, this rendition of Frogs took place at a fictious night club. Instead of the lyric contest between Aeschylus and Euripides over who was the best practitioner of tragedy, a rap battle. Cue my second role, albeit a minor one, but important, nonetheless. Disguised as a slave of Hades, I took charge of the microphones. In what was a carefully choreographed operation (although this was a last-minute addition to the play and so for the second, consecutive time in the space of one year, I was certainly kept on my toes) I would appear from behind a massive wooden throne (another artistic triumph) and either give or receive the microphones at certain intervals in the rap battle.

Frogs received many positive reviews like Oedipus Rex, and it was a great honour to be part of both plays. When the 2021 Classical Play was announced as Homer’s Odyssey, I auditioned. It was the perfect trilogy. A tragedy in first year, a comedy in second year and an epic in third year. I was successful. Even more exciting was that my varied roles included the following: an undisciplined sailor, malicious suitor, an oriental king, a Cyclops and last but not least, Tiresias! The production was underway. The creative ideas were there. The production team and cast were amazing. Classical scholars, all of whom were very much accomplished in their field, had been enlisted to give pre-play talks. Unfortunately, events happened. However, having been a cast member in three, consecutive Classical Plays, what I can say is that it has been an amazing experience. What gives the Classical Play its vitality is that the directors and producers have all been (intelligent) Classicists with a huge passion for making Classical drama accessible to everyone. The Bloomsbury theatre itself (just opposite the Classics Office) is really a privilege to be in with an expansive stage at the centre of what looks like an arena from the performer’s perspective, a great sound and lighting system and a fabulous team on hand every step of the way. Without a doubt, the Classical Play has been the highlight of my degree. I would thoroughly recommend it to anyone not only interested in classics but drama in general, and to general members of the public, the UCL Classical Play really is a unique, dramatic experience, which I doubt could be replicated anywhere else in London (except at KCL but they don’t count!).