

Ancient Greek Theater



This is where it all began:
the Theatre of Dionysus in
Athens.



Introduction to Greek Theater

2500 years ago, 2000 years before Shakespeare, Western theater was born in Athens, Greece. Between 600 and 200 BC, the ancient Athenians created a theater culture whose form, technique and terminology have lasted 2 millennia. They created plays that are still considered among the greatest works of world drama.

Scope of Influence

- The comedy and tragedy that developed in Athens and flourished in the fifth and fourth centuries BCE have influenced nearly all subsequent Western drama, starting with that of the Romans.
- When the Romans conquered Greece they brought Greek literature back to Italy and set about making it their own.

Origins of Theatre

- The earliest origins of drama are to be found in Athens where ancient hymns, called dithyrambs, were sung in honor of the god Dionysus.
- These hymns were later adapted for choral processions in which participants would dress up in costume and masks.
- In the 6th Century when the tyrant Pisistratus who then ruled the city, established a series of new public festivals.

Origins of Theatre

- One of these, the City Dionysia, a festival of entertainment held in honor of the god Dionysus, featured competitions in music, singing, dance and poetry.

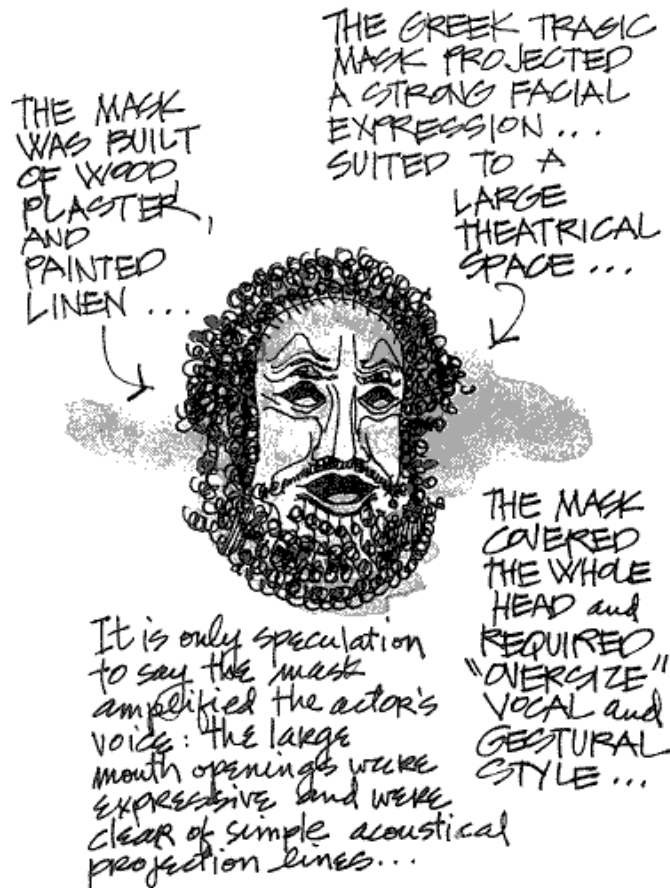


Origins of Theatre



- According to tradition, in 534 or 535 BC, **Thespis** astounded audiences by leaping on to the back of a wooden cart and reciting poetry, as if he was the character whose lines he was reading. In doing so he became the world's first actor and it is from him that we get the word thespian.

Thespis



- The "inventor of tragedy" was born in Attica, and was the first prize winner at the Great Dionysia in 534 BC.
- Thespis was an important innovator for the theater, since he introduced such things as the independent actor (as opposed to the

Development of Plays

- **Development of plays:**
- First plays had one actor (protagonist) and the chorus.
- Aeschylus added a second speaking role, called the antagonist, and reduced the chorus from 50 to 12.
- Sophocles went on to add a third actor.
- Euripides added both a prologue, introducing the subject of the play and the deus ex machina, a divine figure who wrapped up any loose end at the close.
- Drama was classified according to three different types of genre: comedy, tragedy and satyr plays.

Comedy

- **Comedy:**
- The first comedies were mainly satirical and mocked men in power for their vanity and foolishness.
- The first master of comedy was playwright Aristophanes.

Tragedy

- **Tragedy:**
- Tragedy dealt with the big themes of love, loss, pride, the abuse of power and the fraught relationships between men and gods.
- Typically the main protagonist of a tragedy commits some terrible crime without realizing how foolish and arrogant he has been. Then, as he slowly realizes his error, the world crumbles around him.
- The three great playwrights of tragedy were Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides..

Satyr Plays:

- **Satyr Plays:**
- These short plays were performed between the acts of tragedies and made fun of the plight of the tragedy's characters.
- The satyrs were mythical half-human, half-goat figures and actors in these plays wore large phalluses for comic effect.

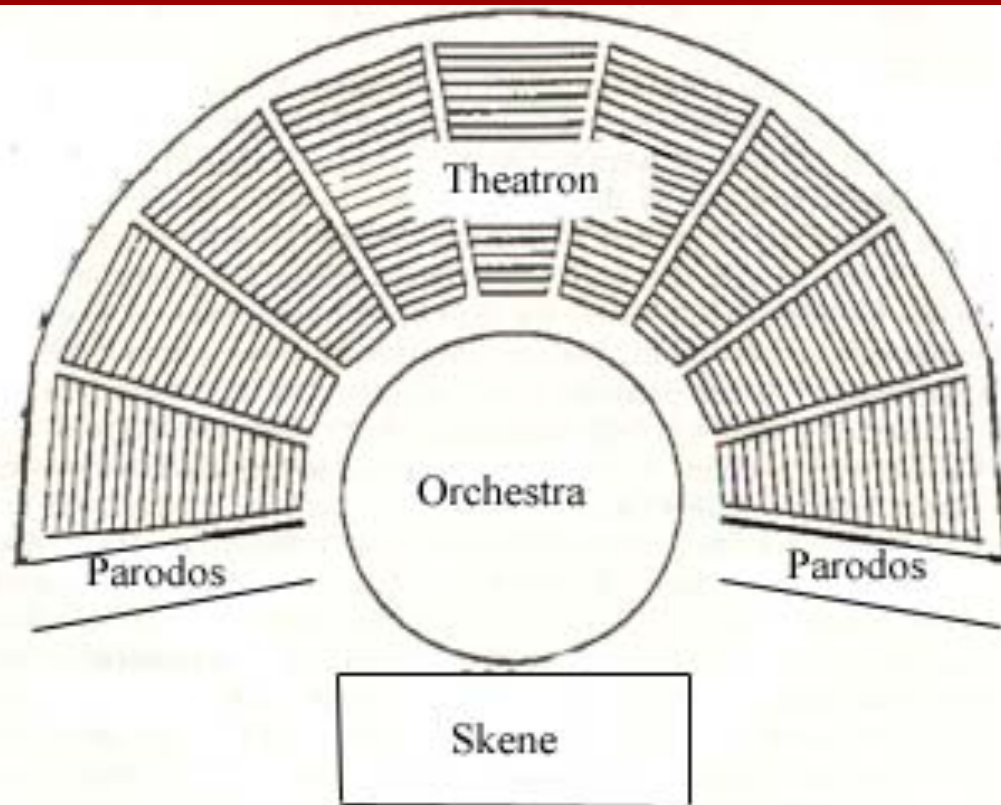
Staging of an Ancient Greek Play

- **Staging of an Ancient Greek Play:**
- Greek plays were performed in an outdoor theatre, used masks, and were almost always performed by a chorus and three actors.
- No matter how many speaking characters there were in the play, only three actors were used; the actors would go back stage after playing one character, switch masks and costumes, and reappear as another character.
- Greek plays were performed as part of religious festivals in honor of the god Dionysus and unless later revived, were performed only once.
- Plays were always presented in competition with other plays and were voted either the first, second, or third (last) place.

Parts of a Greek Theatre

- Parts of a Greek Theater Early Greek theaters were probably little more than open areas in city centers or next to hillsides where the audience, standing or sitting, could watch and listen to the chorus singing about the exploits of a god or heroes. From the late 6th Century BC to the 4th and 3rd Centuries BC there was a gradual evolution towards more elaborate theater structures, but the basic layout of the Greek theatre remained the same. The major components of Greek theater are labeled on the diagram above.

Parts of a Greek Theatre



Parts of a Greek Theater

Parts of a Greek Theatre

- **Orchestra:** The orchestra (literally, “dancing space”) was normally circular. It was a level space where the chorus would dance, sing and interact with the actors who were on the stage near the skene.
- **Theatron:** The theatron (literally, “viewing place”) is where the spectators sat. The theatron was usually part of a hillside overlooking the orchestra, and often wrapped around a large portion of the orchestra.

Parts of a Greek Theatre

- **Skene:** The skene (literally “tent”) was the building directly behind the stage. It was above the level of the orchestra and was perhaps 25 feet wide and 10 feet deep.
 - It had at least one set of doors, and actors could make entrances and exits through them. There was also access to the roof of the skene from behind, so that actors playing gods and other characters could appear on the roof, if needed.
- **Parodos:** The paradoi (literally “passageways”) are the paths by which the chorus and some actors made their entrances and exits.

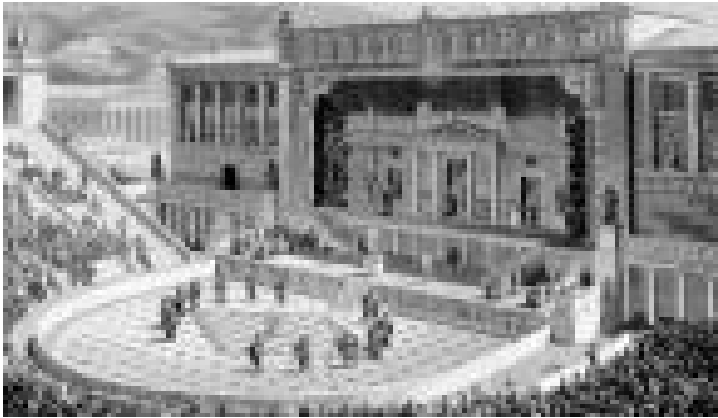
Greek Amphitheatres

- The Theater of Dionysus, built at the foot of the Acropolis in Athens, could seat 17,000 people.
- During their heyday, the competitions drew as many as 30,000 spectators.
- The words theater and amphitheater derive from the Greek word theatron, which referred to the wooden spectator stands erected on the

The Physical Structure of the Greek Theater

- Approx. 15,000 people fit in the Theater of Dionysus in Athens.
- No sets, props, etc.
- Actors' lines marked the passage of time and the setting.
- Design of theatron was important for acoustics – no microphones.

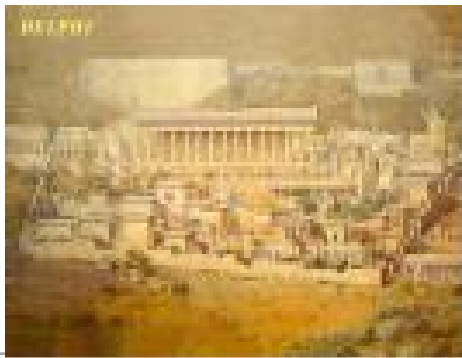
Amphitheatres



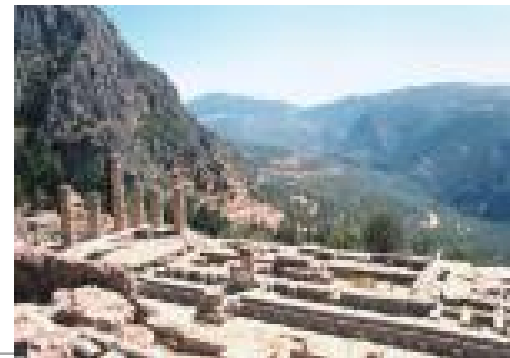
•Artistic replica of the Theater at Dionysus



•Current day Theater at Dionysus



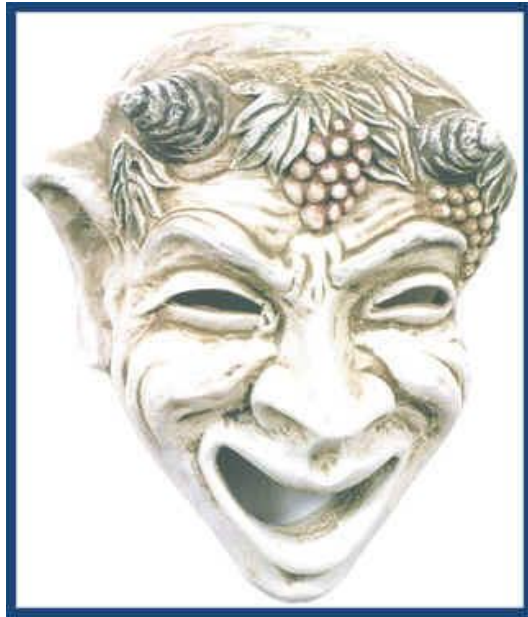
•Delphi Theater reconstruction and current day ruins



Declamatory Acting Style

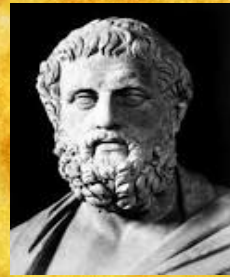
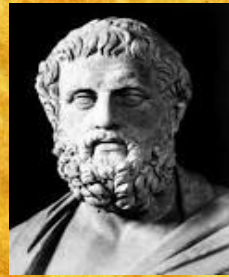
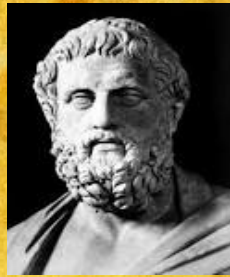
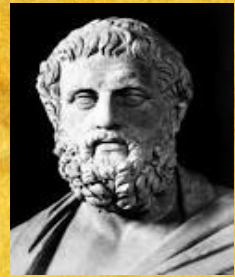
- Actors could not move easily, so lines were delivered in a “speech” style.
- Broad sweeping gestures.
- General movements to express emotions: Bowed head – grief; beating chest – mourning; stretching arms – prayer.
- Minor props – scepter – king, spear – warrior elderly – cane

Greek Theater Masks



Paradox of the Mask

- The most distinctive feature of the mask was its ability to limit and broaden at the same time.
- It identified a specific character, but it also had generalized features which gave an “Everyman” quality. This allowed the audience to “get” the personal message intended for each member of the audience.



Sophocles

- Born in 495, about a mile northwest of Athens, Sophocles was to become one of the great playwrights of the golden age.
- By the age of 16 he was already known for his beauty and grace and was chosen to lead a chorus of boys at a celebration of the victory of Salamis.
- In his first competition, Sophocles took first prize – defeating none other than Aeschylus himself.
- An accomplished actor, Sophocles performed in many of his own plays.
- However, the young Athenian's voice was comparatively weak and eventually he would give up his acting career.



Sophocles

- One of the great innovators of the theatre, he was the first to add a third actor.
- He wrote more than 120 plays, but only seven have
- Survived in their entirety. Of these, *Oedipus Rex* (*Oedipus the King*) is generally considered his greatest work.
- *Oedipus Rex* is the first in a trilogy. The 2nd is *Antigone* and the 3rd is *Oedipus at Colonus*.

Oedipus Rex

- This tragedy of fate explores the depths of modern psychoanalysis as Oedipus unwittingly kills his father and marries his mother in an attempt to avoid the very prophecy he ultimately fulfills.
- Greek Tragedies were based on widely known myths or famous historical events, so the audience would know the characters and outline of the story they were about to see.
- Heroes were mortals, such as Helen of Troy or Achilles, who were worshipped as demigods after their deaths.
- Murder and incest violate natural law as well as human law, so these crimes were seen to offend the gods.

Oedipus Rex

- The Greeks believed that, when a murder was committed, the murdered, the place of the crime and any place the harbored the killer were polluted that is, outside the favor of the gods. A proper ritual cleansing (catharsis) was necessary to restore both person and place to an acceptable state.
- Apollo's oracle at Delphi was the most important place of prophecy in the Greek world.
- Seeing a play about Oedipus, for instance, Sophocles' Athenian audience would already know that this story came from the cycle of myths about the city of
- Thebes, one of Athen's rivals in the 5th Century.

Oedipus Rex

- The Oedipus story is set a few generations before the Trojan War, which the ancient Greeks placed at 1184 BCE.
- King Laius of Thebes received a prophecy that his son would kill him. So King Laius tries to avoid this prophecy.

Tragedy of *Oedipus Rex*

- Tragedy lies in Oedipus learning of his guilty deeds rather than the committing of them.
- Shows Oedipus at war with himself
- Tension lies in the first realization of outcome and his push for full truth and proof.
- Free will cannot blame fate.
- “Reason is man’s greatest possession and power.” – Sophocles.

Tragedy of *Oedipus Rex*

- Oedipus shows how man's strength becomes his weakness
- Loss of eyesight is symbolic regarding Oed.'s abuse of Teresias, Oed.'s own blindness to his fate, and our blindness to our own calamities.

Format of the Play

- Prologue
- Parados
- Scene
- Ode
- Exodos



Format of the Play

- The prologue and pathos provide the audience with a summary of past events that have led up to the moment of the play. They also build pace and anticipation for the entrance of the central character. The chorus normally makes their entrance during the parados.
- There then follows six episodes (scenes) that develop the plot and character, and these are interrupted by six choral odes.
- Then the exodus in the final scene.