

Theatre

In ancient Greece the theatre was very important. This was where the whole community could go to feel united and connected. A way for both the authors, actors, and audience to express themselves, the theatre was truly something that held Greece together.

So ... without further ado let me introduce you to the world of Greek theatre.

The theatre was a big deal in ancient Greece. The plays happened ten times each year and went on for the whole day, with everyone attending. Even the poor were given the admission fee of two *obols* so that they could participate.

An *obol* was a form of Greek currency equal to 1/6th of a drachma.

Theatre architecture



Figure 1: Greek Theater - <http://users.otenet.gr/~tzelepisk/yc/art53.jpg>

To enhance acoustics and visibility, theatres were usually built into hillsides with many rows of seats surrounding the circular orchestra or "dancing place" where the chorus was. Since the seats that surrounded the orchestra were carved from stone and very hard, the audience brought their own pillows. In the very front stood the stone seats reserved for foreign or important visitors. In the center of the orchestra stood an altar to the god Dionysus* and above the orchestra stood the stage where the actors performed. The back wall of the stage was called the *skene*¹.

Dionysus was the Greek god of revelries and wine and was also the patron god of theater arts. The people of Athens honoured him every year at the spring festival of Dionysia.

Acting

The actors in every play were always men but that doesn't mean that the plays only had male characters. Two to three actors would play every character, male or female.

They wore masks made of clay or stiffened linen so they could switch parts easily. The masks had large open mouths that would amplify the actor's voice.




¹ *Skene* is the origin of the modern word *scenery*

Types of Plays

The three different types of play that were mainly performed were comedies, tragedies, and satires. Comedies made fun of famous people like royalty and the gods and had actors wearing tight costumes with padded bottoms and stomachs for a comic affect. Tragedies tended to be about the mythical past or a conflict between human action and divine law. Satires tended to mock legends. When performing a satire the chorus would dress as satyrs*. The chorus was a group of people that sang, danced and spoke to narrate the play.

Satyrs were nature spirits that inhabited the mythical forests of Greece. From the waist up they were humanoid but from the waist down they had the hindquarters and hooves of a goat. Many satyrs followed the god Pan or the God Dionysus. Sayers are not to be confused with centaurs which are horse from the waist down.

Sometimes actors used special-effects to make scenes more believable. For instance, people flashed mirrors and rolled pebbles on copper to imitate lightning and thunder. Sometimes actors were hoisted up on a crane. Though special effects were used, actual violence was never shown on stage. Instead they had an "eyewitness" come onstage and tell the events of a battle. Then they brought out a dummy to imitate someone who was fatally wounded or perhaps dead.



An amphora was a Greek storage jar.

Plays sometimes became competitive. Audiences would stay in the theatre for days on end watching play after play. The prize for the best comedic play would be an *amphora* of wine and a basket of figs while the prize for the best tragic play was a ram and an olive wreath.

The olive tree was said to be created by the goddess Athena to the city of Attica. They liked it so much that they decided to name their city after her. They also gave out olive wreaths as prizes to champions. They were worn on the head like a circlet.

The Greek theatre was a safe place for the poor to express any resentment against their leaders and for leaders to have fun and mingle with commoners. It was a time where everyone was a citizen and status did not matter.

Sections of a Play

Greek plays had a common structure depending on the type play.

Tragedy

1. Prologue
 - This is a short speech given by a single actor (a monologue) describing the upcoming play.
2. Parode (also called Entrance Ode)
 - The chorus marches onto the stage chanting and dancing. The chorus stays on the stage, wearing masks, throughout the play to provide expressions and dance.
3. Episode
 - Usually between 3 and 5 episodes, these are where the actors interact with the chorus using singing and chanting to a rhythm.
4. Stasimon (Stationary Song)
 - Each episode ends with a stasimon where the chorus reacts to the episode.
5. Exode (also called Exit Ode)
 - The last song of the play, and the chorus exits.

Comedy

1. Prologue
 - The prologue is the same in comedies as in tragedies
2. Parode
 - Similar to the parode in a tragedy, but the chorus chooses a side (against or with the "hero")
3. Agôn
 - The contest or debate between two actors. The actors then leave the stage
4. Parabasis
 - The chorus removes their masks and discuss the debate with the audience.
5. Episode
 - Similar to the episodes in a tragedy and also discuss the result of the agôn
6. Exode
 - A celebratory exit of everyone involved.

Playwrights

While many Greek playwrights would have existed, only some works have survived through history. We have evidence of three great tragedians and a few comedy writers, the most significant of which was Aristophanes.

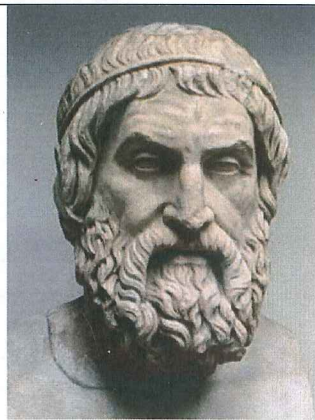
Leah Egery-Haley

Show Your Thinking

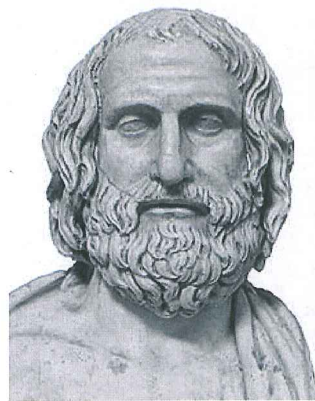
- 1) Why do you think the chorus was so important in Greek theatre?
- 2) Why do we value ancient Greek theatre?

Figure 1 shows a listing of the most significant playwrights.

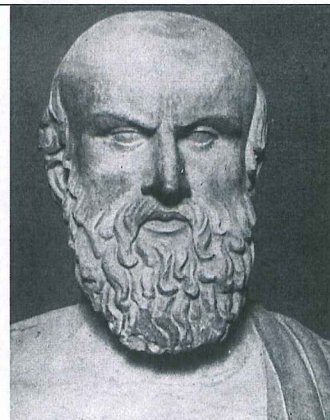
Playwright	Type of play	Era	Famous Works	Fun Fact
Sophocles	Tragedy	496 BCE – 406 BCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Antigone • Oedipus • Ajax • Electra 	Fought alongside Pericles
Euripides	Tragedy	484 BCE – 407 BCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Helen • Medeia • Heracles • Trojan Woman • Orestes 	Demonstrated sympathy towards victims of society, including women
Aeschylus	Tragedy	525 BCE – 456 BCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Persians • Seven Against Thebes • Agamemnon, Chophor, Eumenides 	First known playwright to write trilogies
Aristophanes	Comedy	460 BCE – 380 BCE	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Wasps • The Birds • The Ecclesiazusae • Peace • The Clouds • Plutus • The Frogs • Lysistrata 	Used bold language, puns and exaggeration to make fun of famous public figures.



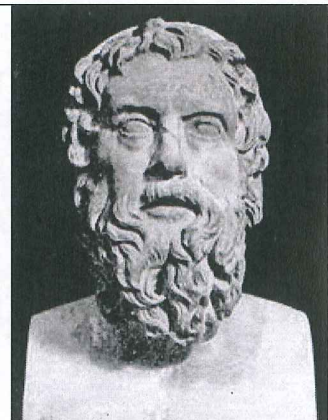
Sophocles



Euripides



Aeschylus



Aristophanes

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