

Greek Theatre



OBJECTIVES

When you have completed this chapter, you should be able to:

- Explain why there are different theories of the origins of theatre and what some of those theories are.
- Discuss the relationship between theatre and religion in Greece.
- Discuss the role of competition in Greek theatre festivals.
- Describe a facade stage.
- Trace the development of the Greek physical theatres, plays, and playwrights.
- Identify the major periods of Greek theatres with approximate dates.
- Explain how a Greek performance would have looked in the principal periods—what masks and costumes were used, what a chorus did, and what acting space was used.
- Explain important differences between tragic and comic performances and occasions.

Context

The very first records of drama (play scripts) and theatre (performance) come from Athens, Greece, and date from the sixth century BCE. Within a hundred years, Athenian drama reached a peak of excellence seldom equaled since. The result is that when people speak of Greek theatre today, they are almost certainly referring to the plays and productions of the fifth century BCE in Athens.

Why drama and theatre should have arisen there and not in other civilizations of the time remains a mystery, but the position of Athens in the ancient world offered some advantages.

Greece, a peninsula about half the size of the state of New York, with numerous bays, harbors, inlets, and adjacent islands, has one of the longest coastlines in the world. Its geography made it, during the sixth century BCE (500s), the leading merchant of the Mediterranean, a role it took over from the Phoenicians. Exporting pottery, olive oil, wine, and slaves, Greece brought in a variety of items from North Africa and the East, where advanced civilizations were already flourishing in Egypt, China, India, and Persia (today's Iran). In fact, Greece formed the western edge of the then-civilized world and served as a crossroad for trade.

To speak of "Greece," however, is misleading because there was no unified nation. Rather, on the peninsula were organized individual city-states, each called a polis (pl. poleis) and each consisting of a town and its surrounding countryside, the residents of which spoke dialects of the same language and mostly worshiped the same gods. Each polis issued its own coinage, raised its own armies, mined silver, built ships, and the like. Several were important city-states, including Corinth, Sparta, and Thebes. But by the fifth century BCE (400s), Athens had emerged as both cultural leader and trading giant, with its own outposts in Italy, Sicily, France, and Spain. As the word *outposts* suggests, western Europe was at the time a cultural backwater. And Athens itself was a small city by modern standards—100,000 people, about the size of Utica, New York.



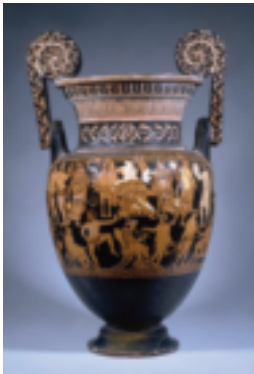
THE CIVILIZED WORLD

By the fifth century BCE (400s) Greek city-states influenced much of the Mediterranean, including some outposts on the Italian peninsula.

HOW WE KNOW

Paintings on Greek Vases

Scholars discovered this vase in 1836 in Italy, some calling it the most single important piece of pictorial evidence of ancient theatre to have survived from Greece. The vase, in a form called a *krater*, dates from about 400 BCE, close to the time Euripides's *The Bacchae* was first performed in Athens. The paintings depict what has been termed a "backstage" celebration after the successful performance of a satyr play. Seen are an entire chorus and cast along with a celebrated musician, Pronomos. The container is thus called the Pronomos Vase. Also pictured are Dionysus and two actors. The chorus of satyrs is depicted wearing woolly loincloths, horse tails, artificial phalluses, and bearded snub-nosed masks. Also pic-



tured in the close view of a portion of the vase are two actors, the one on the right clearly Heracles with the traditional lion skin and club. The actors hold their masks.

The masks are not the oversized, distorted masks of the Hellenistic era. Instead they appear to be made of light materials such as stiffened linen or thin, shaped

leather. The masks depicted seem to cover the entire head with openings for the eyes and mouth. Other evidence from excavations near the Acropolis by the American School of Classical Studies has corroborated this understanding of Greek masks in the classical era.



By the fifth century BCE, the golden age of Athenian theatre and drama, Athens had already established the world's first democracy, providing a model for the participation of citizens in the decisions and policies of government. However, women had no say in government and something like one-third of Athens' residents were slaves. Under Pericles, its great fifth-century BCE ruler, Athens created statues and buildings, arts, and philosophies whose excellence made them important in European culture for more than two thousand years. By then as well, Athens had developed an alphabet that included both vowels and consonants, becoming the first in history to represent speech both systematically and consistently. (Earlier there are languages with alphabets but not ones with both consonants and vowels.) An alphabet is essential for the consistent communication and continued development of culture that relies on words, theatre included.

Athenians took great pride in their civic accomplishments. To celebrate its culture, facilitate the exchange of goods, and pay tribute to various gods,

Athens sponsored a number of public festivals each year. At three of these festivals, each devoted to the god Dionysus, the earliest recorded theatre and drama appeared. Why did this new art arise? Why did it take the form it did? Why was Athens, rather than Egypt, Persia, China, or India, the birthplace of drama? We do not know although there are several theories.

Theories of the Origins of Theatre

There is almost no written evidence from which to draw information about the origins of Greek drama. The exception is Aristotle's *Poetics*, one questionable source of ancient evidence about the origins.

Aristotle's Theory

The earliest account is Aristotle's *Poetics*, written in 355 BCE. He claimed that "tragedy was produced by the authors of the dithyrambs, and comedy from [the authors] of the phallic songs." Dithyrambs were choral odes, poems performed by a chorus. Phallic songs were rites celebrating male sexual potency, but their precise nature is unknown because only fragments survive. Although tantalizing, Aristotle's account is not helpful; we cannot tell from his account which kind of dithyrambs or phallic songs he had in mind, nor can we discern *how* or *why* the authors changed the one to tragedy and the other to comedy. Moreover, Aristotle was writing about two hundred years *after* the first recorded theatre performance and we have no idea where he got his information.

The Ritual Theory

Probably the most fashionable, but not necessarily the most correct, view of the origin of theatre is the ritual theory, which proposes that Greek drama evolved from early religious rituals devoted to the god Dionysus. The theory has strengths: drama first appeared in Greece only at great religious festivals and only at festivals devoted to the god Dionysus, who in Greece was associated with wine and sexuality. But it also has weaknesses: virtually no extant Greek tragedy features Dionysus as a central figure or displays the sort of orgiastic worship associated with Dionysus. On the contrary, Greek tragedy is serious and stately. Few reputable scholars still accept the idea that drama "evolved" in some organic, necessary way from religious ritual, although most acknowledge that ritual elements can often be found in tragedy.

The Great Man Theory

Some scholars propose that tragedy and comedy arose as creative acts of human genius. Such scholars search for the birth of drama by a revolutionary invention of a gifted human being, arguing that art neither evolves

AESCHYLUS'S *THE AGAMEMNON*

In 1968, the Guthrie Theatre produced a somewhat condensed *Oresteia* trilogy as *The House of Atreus*. The masks, designed by Tanya Moiseiwitch, left the mouth uncovered so the actor's articulation was not muffled. Directed by Tyrone Guthrie, the production toured Los Angeles and New York, among other cities.



like a biological organism nor happens by chance. According to this view, an artist purposefully synthesized elements that already existed in Athenian society into a new form, the drama. The theory has strengths: storytelling, music, and dance *did* already exist in Greek society and so were readily available for use. But this theory also has weaknesses: human genius is itself mysterious, and so the theory leaves much unexplained about the origins of theatre and drama.

The Storytelling Theory

Some scholars propose that Greek drama developed from storytelling. It is supposed that storytellers would naturally tend to elaborate parts of the telling by impersonating the various characters, using appropriate voice and movement. From here, it seems a short step to having several people become involved in telling the story; from this “telling,” it is thought, drama and theatre arose. This theory, which clearly emphasizes the role of actors and acting in drama, has strengths: Athenians had a rich and long tradition of epic singers—storytellers who gave public performances of works such as Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, for example. The theory has a major weakness, however: it fails to account for the prominent position played by the chorus in Greek drama.

The Dance Theory

Other theorists suggest that movement rather than speech was at the core of drama. The idea here is that dancers first imitated the physical behavior of animals and humans. When dancers costumed themselves in appropriate skins and garments, they came to impersonate the animals and humans. When several dancers joined together in impersonation and then embroidered this performance with sounds and words, drama was born. Again, this theory has strengths: it accounts well for the dancing chorus present in all Greek drama, and it explains the animal choruses of several comedies (e.g., *The Birds*, *The Frogs*). But it, too, has weaknesses: it suggests the chorus would

be the primary part of the production and Greek drama does not display a great emphasis on the chorus's role for the most part. Also, it fails to account for the separation between actor and chorus that began with the first Greek drama that we know anything about.

Uncertainty about Origins

In fact, no one knows the origin of Greek drama. The argument over origins is often an argument over the nature of theatre itself. To anthropologists, the essence of theatre is ritual, and so they tend to favor the ritual theory. Anthropologists cite rituals such as

- the Buffalo Dance of the Mandan American Indian tribes in which a group of men don buffalo skins and dance with rattles and rods, imitating buffalo and magically inciting the return of the important beasts.
- the False Face Society of the Iroquois, a group of medicine men who wear elaborate masks to impersonate a mythical hunchback man who aids in healing.
- and the Egyptian Osiris ritual, which reenacted the death and resurrection of Osiris, with mock battles that sometimes turned bloody at least according to a later account of a Hellenistic traveler to Egypt.

To artists who look at world theatre and see a form rich in human meaning, only an artist's creation can explain its beginnings, and so they favor the great man theory. For those who believe drama began with the actor, the storyteller theory works best; for those who find the essence of Greek drama in its chorus, the dance theory seems most persuasive.

The theory that is accepted often has real-world consequences in adaptations and stagings of Greek drama today. A director who prefers the ritual



A BUFFALO DANCE

The Mandan, a Native American people living in North Dakota, performed a dance each year to ask the gods for good luck in next year's hunting. The ritual, performed to drumming, includes a costume of buffalo skins with the heads forming a kind of mask.

theory, for example, might choose to insert ritual elements such as incense burning and incantation into a tragedy, whereas one who prefers the great man theory may stress instead the individuality of character. A director who prefers the dance theory may emphasize the centrality of the chorus, extending its opportunities for singing and dancing, and a director who favors the storytelling theory might shrink the choral odes and even the size of the chorus, throwing added emphasis to the actors.

Traits of Greek Theatre

During the preceding discussion, we have encountered three important traits of Greek theatre, traits that may seem odd when compared to current Western theatrical conventions. Greek theatre was different from contemporary theatre.

Closely Associated with Greek Religion

A form of polytheism (“many gods”), Greek religion was both private (a part of daily life and centered in the home) and public, expressing itself at a number of major festivals, each devoted to a specific god. Unlike Christianity, Judaism, or Islam, Greek religion was not built around a canonical book such as the Bible or the Quran so religious expression took many forms. Although Greek theatre was performed on religious occasions, it did not have the metaphysical purposes of ritual.

Performed on Special Occasions—The Festivals

During its golden age, drama appeared only in Athens and so far as we know only at three festivals of Dionysus: the City (or Great) Dionysia, the Rural Dionysia, and the Lenaia.

Choral

In addition to actors, the performance of Greek drama required a **chorus**, a group of men who dressed alike, who were masked alike, and who moved, sang, and spoke together most of the time. The chorus affected Greek drama in important ways. Its costumes, songs, and dances added much spectacle to the performance. Because the chorus danced as it spoke, chanted, and sang, its rhythms presumably indicated, both visually and orally, the changing moods within the play. Perhaps most important of all, the chorus in some plays—like the actors—participated directly in the action, providing information, making discoveries, deciding, and doing.

The chorus also influenced a number of theatrical practices. Because the chorus usually came into the performing space soon after the play opened and remained there until the end, its presence had to be considered in both the

physical layout of the theatre and the action of the drama. It required a space large enough to move about in. Its presence had to be justified and its loyalties made clear whenever characters shared secrets. Because the vocal and visual power of the chorus was great, the actors presumably adjusted their style of performance so as not to be overwhelmed by the impact of the chorus.

All Male

All actors, playwrights, and civic sponsors were male.

Competitive

Dramatists competed for awards in writing, and actors competed for awards in performing. To ensure fairness in the competition, various rules governed who competed, who judged, and who won.

Plays were produced by the city-state in cooperation with selected wealthy citizens. (Women were not considered citizens.) At the **Great Dionysia**, three tragic writers competed each year for the prize. Each submitted three tragedies—not necessarily a trilogy of *related* stories—and one **satyr play**, a short comic piece that followed the tragedies and occasionally burlesqued them. One day was set aside for the work of each tragic author; therefore, nine tragedies and three satyr plays were presented at the Great Dionysia each year. At the Lenaia, only four tragedies competed each year, each by a different playwright. At both festivals, five comic playwrights competed for a prize in a single day of competition.



ARISTOPHANES'S *LYSISTRATA*

“The Lysistrata Project: The First-Ever Worldwide Theatrical Act of Dissent,” a global peace action to urge an end to the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, was performed more than a thousand times in nearly sixty countries around the world on the same day, March 3, 2003. Here, an undergraduate production at the University of South Carolina.

Not a Commercial Activity

How the competitors were selected is unknown, but once chosen, each author was matched with a wealthy citizen-sponsor, who was then responsible for meeting the costs incurred by the chorus. These citizen-sponsors could have a major effect on the outcome of the contests. Legends tell us that Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* lost its competition because of a sponsor too stingy to fund a suitable production, but that Aeschylus's *Eumenides* had costumes and masks so spectacular and frightening that pregnant women miscarried when they first saw the chorus—legend, remember—the result of the lavish support of its sponsor. In modern times, *Oedipus Rex* is generally acknowledged as one of the greatest written works of Western art of all time.

Most sponsors took their responsibilities seriously, although there were both carrots and sticks to encourage them to do so. Carrot: Support of a chorus was one of the civic duties of a wealthy citizen; those not tapped to fund dramas might be asked to outfit a warship or fund some other equally important project. Considerable acclaim flowed to those who mounted successful productions. Stick: Any wealthy citizen pleading insufficient funds to sponsor a chorus could be challenged by any other citizen. Should the challenger win, he and the would-be sponsor exchanged assets.

The method of selecting judges was ingenious and complicated, devised to assure that all major units of the polis were represented and that the gods had some say in the final decision. First, the names of all eligible citizens were collected within each political unit, and one name drawn from each of the ten units. The votes of only five of these ten citizens actually counted, however, allowing the gods to determine which five votes determined the winner. To serve as judge was both a civic duty and an honor.

Audience members who attended performances, then, not only heard and saw the plays, but they also learned who won the contests. For this reason, attending Greek theatre probably had some of the elements of a long-standing sports rivalry, as well as those of theatre and drama.

Plays and Playwrights

Of the thousands of plays written for the Greek theatre, only forty-six survive complete, although many fragments have also become known to us. Most extant plays come from Athens in the fifth century BCE and from four authors: Aeschylus (seven), Sophocles (seven), Euripides (eighteen), and Aristophanes (eleven). From these four authors came some of the world's greatest plays: plays that are still performed for their powerful effects on audiences, plays that have provided other playwrights from William Shakespeare and Jean Racine to Eugene O'Neill and Wole Soyinka with stories, and plays that have given their names to underlying patterns of human behavior ("Oedipus complex," "Promethean struggle").



AN ALL-MALE PRODUCTION

The Guthrie Theatre's production of *The House of Atreus* cast all female roles with male actors. Here Clytemnestra appears before the doors of the palace. The actor is wearing elevated shoes, body padding, oversized gloves, and a headdress to add stature to his appearance. The effect is highly theatrical even though the costume does not accurately reflect the practices of classical Athens.

Thespis

A fifth name—the playwright and actor, Thespis—is important, although such a person may never have existed. The semilegendary Thespis supposedly wrote tragedies using only one actor and a chorus. Thespis is called semilegendary because

the references to his life and work are fragmentary and at best were recorded about two centuries *after* the time he is stated to have lived. None of Thespis's works survived. If they had, the questions regarding his existence would be more or less resolved. Some scholars presume the Thespis works were a series of monologues. With only one actor and a chorus, the opportunity to introduce new information into a scene and thus introduce change into a situation was severely limited. As such, it is difficult to have action on stage, that is, to have two characters acting on each other.

Aeschylus

Aeschylus (525?–456 BCE) probably introduced a second actor, thereby permitting change to occur within the play. Although a second actor would also allow conflict between two characters, Aeschylus still tended to depict a solitary hero, one isolated and facing a cosmic horror brought about by forces beyond his control. With such a grand tragic conception, Aeschylus required great scope, and so he often wrote trilogies, three plays on a single subject that were intended for performance on the same day. One of his trilogies, the *Oresteia* (458 BCE)—comprising the *Agamemnon*, the *Choëphoroe*, and the *Eumenides*—has survived intact along with several single plays: *The Persians*, *Seven against Thebes*, *The Suppliants*, and perhaps *Prometheus*. There is scholarly debate about whether to attribute *Prometheus* to Aeschylus or another unknown poet.

All of the surviving scripts display characteristics for which Aeschylus is admired: heroic and austere characters, simple but powerful plots, and lofty diction. His general tone is well summarized by an ancient commentator: “While one finds many different types of artistic treatment in Aeschylus, one looks in vain for those sentiments that draw tears.”

Sophocles

Sophocles (496?–406 BCE) was credited with adding a third actor and with changing practices in scenic painting and costuming. Less interested than Aeschylus in portraying solitary heroes confronting the universal order, Sophocles wrote plays that explored the place of humans within that order. The tragedy of Sophocles's heroes typically erupts from decisions made and actions taken based on imperfect knowledge or conflicting claims. Various aspects of the hero's character combine with unusual circumstances to bring about a disaster caused not by wickedness or foolishness but merely by humanness.

The role of the chorus in Sophocles's plays remained important but not as central as in Aeschylus's. Conversely, the individual characters in Sophocles tended to be more complex, to display more individual traits, and to make more decisions. The result is that in Sophoclean tragedy, the actors, not the chorus, control the rhythm of the plays. Unlike Aeschylus, Sophocles did not

THE PLAY'S THE THING

Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, 427 BCE

Part of a group of three plays often referred to as the “Theban plays,” *Oedipus the King* is considered one of the greatest dramas ever written. The other two plays in this Theban cycle are *Antigone* and *Oedipus at Colonus*. (The three were not written as a trilogy). Sophocles is believed to have written more than one hundred plays, but only seven have survived.

The Story of the Play Oedipus, king of Thebes, is appealed to by the people (the chorus) to save them from the plague that grips the city. Oedipus has already sent his brother-in-law, Creon, to the oracle at Delphi for a solution; Creon returns and announces that the oracle says that the city must banish the murderer of the former king, Laius. Oedipus vows to “reveal the truth” and save the city.

He calls the blind seer Tiresias to ask his advice. Tiresias is evasive and then, pressured, says, “It is you.” Angered, Oedipus turns on Tiresias, saying that he and Creon are plotting against him. The old seer warns Oedipus of one who is “his children's brother and father, his wife's son, his mother's husband.”

Oedipus rages again against Creon. His wife, Jocasta, widow of the former king, Laius, tells him of another old prophecy: Laius would be murdered by his own child. When she describes Laius, Oedipus is

shaken. He tells of his own long-ago visit to Delphi and a prophecy that he would kill his father and sleep with his mother, which caused him to flee Corinth, his childhood home. He recounts the later killing of a stranger at a crossroads.

A messenger from Corinth comes with news that Polybus, the king of Corinth and Oedipus's supposed father, is dead. Oedipus is not to grieve, however—Polybus was not, the messenger says, Oedipus's real father; rather, the messenger as a young man got the infant Oedipus from a shepherd; the baby's ankles were pierced—hence the name Oedipus, “swollenfoot.”

Jocasta begs Oedipus to give up his quest for the truth. An old man, the survivor of the attack on Laius, is dragged in. He was the shepherd who gave the infant Oedipus to the messenger; now, hounded by Oedipus, he says that the infant was to have been abandoned in the wild because he was the child of Laius and Jocasta, and there was a prophecy that he would kill his own father, but the shepherd gave him away, instead.

Oedipus sees the truth: He is the source of the plague, the murderer of his father, later the husband of his mother. Jocasta kills herself.

Oedipus blinds himself with the pins in Jocasta's jewels. He begs to be driven from the city.

need a trilogy to contain his tragedies; his plays stood alone. Of the more than one hundred attributed to him, one, *Oedipus Rex* (c. 427 BCE), is recognized by most critics as among the finest tragedies ever written. The other six remaining tragedies are *Ajax*, *Electra*, *Trachiniae*, *Philoctetes*, *Antigone*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*. *Oedipus Rex*, *Electra*, and *Antigone* are all regularly performed in translation today throughout Western cultures.

Euripides

Euripides (480–407 BCE) was controversial during his lifetime but came to be highly regarded after his death. Growing up at a time when Athens was embarking on policies of imperialism and expansionism, Euripides became a pacifist and a political gadfly, a person who asked unusual or upsetting questions. The intellectual elite apparently admired him. It is reported, for example, that Socrates, one of the wisest men of the age, came to the theatre only to see the tragedies of Euripides and that Sophocles dressed his chorus in black on learning of the death of Euripides.

In comparison with the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles, those of Euripides are less exalted and more realistic. His characters seem less grand and more human; their problems are less cosmic and more mundane. Euripides tended to examine human relationships and to question the

wisdom of social actions: the purpose of war, the status of women, and the reasons for human cruelty. *Trojan Women* (415 BCE) is an example. The play takes place after the Trojan War is decided. The surviving women of Troy learn that their male children have been killed. Each awaits her fate at the hands of the conquering Greeks, learning whether they will be slaves or concubines and to which man. Helen and Menelaus are reunited, and despite his vow to slay her, Menelaus is again enraptured by Helen's beauty and takes back his wandering wife, whose abduction was the cause of the war



Matt Orton

EURIPIDES'S *THE BACCHAE*

Pentheus, a central character in *The Bacchae*, dressed as a woman at the urging of Dionysus. As shown here, he faced a chorus of maenads, the most important members of Dionysus's retinue. Later, the maenads ripped Pentheus's body apart piece by piece. Here, a production from Montavalo University.

and all the loss on both sides. *Trojan Women* is frequently revived today to express the profound human cost of war on women and children.

Euripides's iconoclastic outlook led to changes in dramatic technique. Replacing the philosophical probing common in the plays of Aeschylus and Sophocles, Euripides substituted rapid reversals, intrigues, and romantic and sentimental incidents of the sort much later associated with plays called *melodramas*. Euripides is said by some to be the father of melodrama. (More about melodramas in Chapter 8.) He further reduced the role of the chorus until sometimes it was little more than an interruption of the play's action. As the role of the chorus declined and the subjects became more personal, the language became less poetic and more conversational. Many of the changes that Euripides introduced into Greek tragedy, although denounced in his own time, became standard dramatic practice later during the Hellenistic period.

Although Euripides wrote about ninety plays, only seventeen tragedies and one satyr play survive. The plays most often revived in the last hundred or so years include *Medea* as well as *Hippolytus*, *The Suppliants*, *Electra*, *The Trojan Women*, and *The Bacchae*.

Aristophanes and Old Comedy

Comedy was introduced into the Great Dionysia in 486 BCE, fifty years after tragedy. It seems never to have been comfortable there, perhaps because the festival was an international showcase for Athenian culture and thus often visited by foreign dignitaries. The real home of comedy was the winter festival, the Lenaia, which only Athenians could attend, where a contest for comedy was established in 442 BCE. At both festivals, an entire day was set aside for competition among the comic playwrights, five of whom competed.

All of the eleven extant ancient Greek comedies are by Aristophanes (448?–380 BCE). No comedies from the classical era other than Aristophanes's survive. (There is one comedy extant from the era following classical Athens, a Hellenistic comedy by Menander.) Thus, information about comedy during the classical period necessarily comes from these plays. It is possible, of course, that Aristophanes was atypical, and so the conclusions drawn from his works may not be generally applicable to all ancient Greek comedy.

Although no two plays are exactly alike, surviving examples suggest a set structure for **old comedy**, the political comedy of the classical period of Athens:

- A first part consisting of a prologue, during which an outrageous idea is introduced and then a debate as to whether the idea should be adopted, ending with a decision to put this “happy idea” into action. (In Aristophanes's *The Birds* [414 BCE], for example, the happy idea is to build a city in the sky.)

- Direct address by the chorus or choral leader to the audience, breaking the dramatic illusion.
- A second part made up of funny episodes and choral songs showing the happy idea at work.

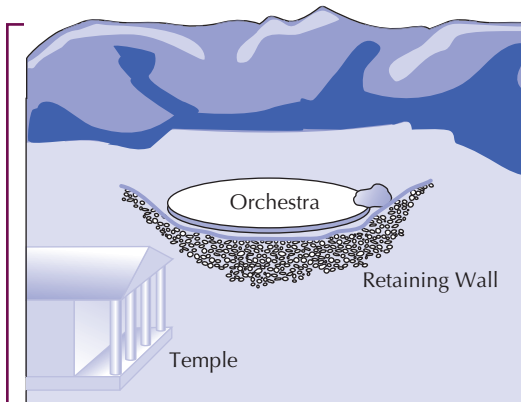
The happy idea is the heart of old comedy: It is outrageous and usually fantastic, and it contains social or political satire. Old comedy was scabrous, impolite, even profane, and could identify and lampoon living individuals. In *The Birds*, building the city in the sky is an attempt to get away from the mess on earth. The happy idea also enables the spectacular costuming and behavior of the chorus, which often gives the play its name. Aristophanes is believed to have written about forty plays. The eleven that survive include the often produced *Lysistrata* as well as *The Frogs*, *The Knights*, and *The Thesmophoriazusae* (*The Woman's Festival*). It is *Lysistrata* that receives the most revivals in the modern era. It is seen as an antiwar play whose happy idea is that women should withhold sex until the men give up war.

Theatre Buildings and Practices

Although almost all extant Greek plays date from the fifth century BCE (400s), the extant Greek theatre buildings date from later periods, sometimes much later periods. The result is unsettling: For the time when we know about theatre buildings and production practices, we know almost nothing about plays; conversely, for the time when we know a good deal about the plays, we know almost nothing about the theatre buildings. Theatres after the fifth century were made of stone, they were semipermanent, and so architectural examples of this later theatre have come down to us. The reason later play scripts do not survive is believed to be just historical bad luck.

In Greek, *theatron* meant “seeing-place” or “spectacle-place.” Athens’s first theatre was apparently in the market, but it soon moved to the outskirts of town. There, the Theatre of Dionysus, Athens’ first important theatre, was situated on a hillside at the foot of the Acropolis, where the audience sat, with a circular playing area (the **orchestra**) at its base; a path or road separated audience and playing area and provided entrances (*parodoi*). (The word *orchestra* today refers to the ground floor seating in an auditorium, a reflection of the Greek meaning.) This arrangement—hillside, orchestra, *parodoi*—was fundamental to all Greek theatres. In theatres of the time, some orchestras were circular and some rectangular.

By the middle of the fifth century, a scene house (**skene**, “tent” or “booth”) had been added at the edge of the orchestra opposite the audience. The existence of a skene is inferred from the staging requirements of some of



THEATRE OF THE 400S BCE

This conjectural reconstruction of the early Theatre of Dionysus (*left*) shows audience area, orchestra, rock outcropping, and temple. The theatre as it appears today (*right*) at the foot of the Acropolis after hundreds of years of “improvements.”

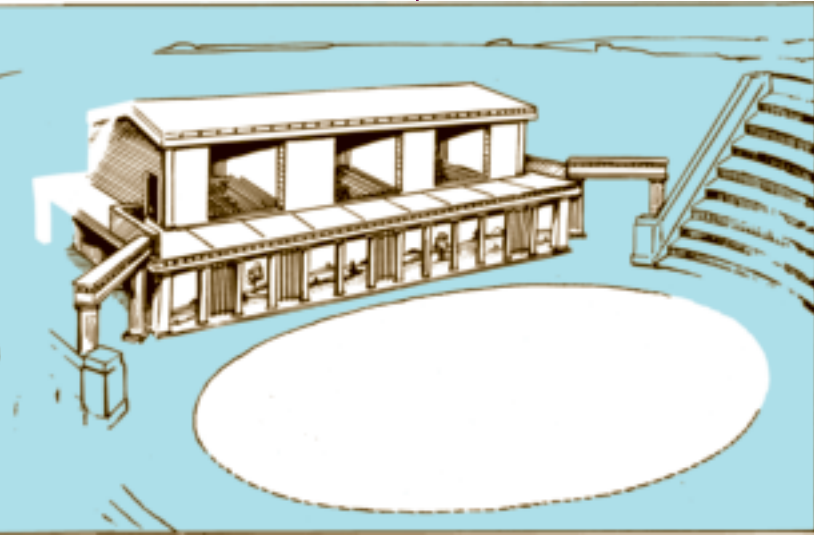
the extant plays. Its original layout is unknown. It may first have been cloth, in essence a tent, but may have later been constructed of wood, becoming stone only centuries later. Whether wood or stone, it provided background and acoustical support and allows us to call the Athenian theatre a **facade stage**—a conventional form in which actors perform in front of a nonrepresentational, often architectural, facade, with the audience arcing to three or fewer sides. The facade, then, does not change as the scene changes; it serves all plays performed in the space.

Audience

The outdoor theatre put the audience at the mercy of the weather. Individuals may have used cushions, sunshades, umbrellas, and so forth. The Athenian hillside, some scholars estimate, could hold about fourteen thousand, and the audience was as visible as the actors in the natural sunlight. Theatre was apparently open to all, including women and slaves, but the exact social makeup of the audience is unknown. Records suggest that it could be unruly at times.

Acting

The first victor in the Athenian tragic contest is supposed to have been Thespis, who also acted in his play (c. 534 BCE)—hence *thespian* is a term still used for an actor. Acting, like playwriting, remained a competitive activity during the classical period, and rules governed its practice. For example, all actors were male. Apparently no more than three *speaking* actors were allowed in the



HELLENISTIC THEATRE BUILDINGS

Stone remains of several Hellenistic theatres have led scholars to speculate that a typical Hellenistic theatre looked something like the reconstruction shown here.

tragedies and five in the comedies, although any number of extras might be used. Because the leading actor, or **protagonist**, was the only one competing for the prize, he was assigned to the playwright by lot, so that chance rather than politics decided who got the best roles or which playwright would get the best actor. The second

and third actors were probably chosen by the playwright and the protagonist in consultation. With only three actors, doubling of roles is assumed to have been required because the plays themselves often had eight or more characters. If the protagonist had an exceedingly demanding role he might play only one character but the second and third actors were expected to play two or more secondary roles. Doubling, the use of masks, and the use of only male actors suggest that the style of Greek acting was more formal than realistic; that is, although the acting was true and believable *on its own terms*, its resemblance to real life was of considerably less importance than its fidelity to the dramatic action. Given the size of the audience and the physical arrangement of the theatre, it is believed that vocal power and vocal agility were the actor's most prized assets. Actors, like sponsors and chorus members, performed as part of their civic duties. They were not paid professionals, although chorus members were reimbursed some amount for the time they spent away from business.

Settings and Machinery

The skene was the essential setting. We do not know whether its appearance was changed to suggest different locations; that is, we do not know whether there was scenery in our sense of that word. We do know that some sort of a modern-day flat, a two-dimensional surface for the painting of scenic elements, called a **pinake** existed, but we do not know how or where it was used.

We do *know* that two machines provided special effects:

- The **eccyclema** was a movable platform capable of being rolled or rotated out of the skene to reveal the result of an offstage action. In Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*, for example, the body of the murdered Agamemnon

HELLENISTIC MASKS AND COSTUMES

By the 300s BCE, tragic masks and costumes had become more exaggerated with high headdresses and enlarged eyes and mouths on the masks and perhaps elevated shoes on the actors, all of which served to enlarge the actors's physical presence. Comedic masks and costumes, on the other hand, seem to have moved in the opposite direction, becoming more natural looking.

is “revealed,” and in the *Eumenides*, the Furies, the avenging goddesses, seem to have entered first while asleep so they may have been rolled into view.

- The *mechane* (“machine”) was some sort of crane that allowed people and things to “fly” in and out. In Aristophanes’s *The Clouds*, the character Socrates hangs over the performing space during some of his dialogue, and in Euripides’s *Medea*, Medea flies away to escape her pursuers. In fact, Euripides often has gods fly down to sort out the characters’s problems at the end of his tragedies. Much later a Roman critic called a too-obviously-contrived ending of a play (in Latin) a *deus ex machina* or “god from the machine.” The phrase is used still today to refer to any arbitrary, contrived plot turn in a play, movie, or novel.

Properties were numerous, and play scripts suggest altars, tombs, biers, chariots, staffs, and swords being used in tragedy. Comedies often required furniture, food, clubs, and so on.

Costumes and Masks

Because in Greek theatre one actor played several roles, costumes and masks were exceedingly important; they enabled audiences to identify quickly and certainly which character in the play the actor was impersonating. The mask and the costume, in a sense, were the signs of character. A different principle governed the chorus, whose goal was to make its individual members appear to be a group, and so choral costumes and masks were similar. Although historians once argued for a typically tragic costume for tragic characters, most now agree that some version of normal Athenian dress seems likelier. In tragedy, such dress was perhaps more elegant than normal, and in comedy it was certainly altered to make it laughable—ill-fitting, exaggerated, and so on—but the basic look was recognizable.





GREEK PERFORMERS

These are among the earliest known statuettes of actors, dating from the late fifth to early fourth century BCE. Fourteen of these were found in a burial in Attica, the area of Greece that includes Athens. Originally they were brightly painted.

From references in plays, we know that a costume's appearance allowed audience members to know a character's traits:

- Ethnicity: references are made to some dressed as Greeks and to others dressed as foreigners.
- Gender: males and females are identified as such at a distance.
- Social role: military heroes, servants, shepherds, and so on were visually identifiable.

In the case of comedy, the costume for certain male characters featured a stuffed, oversized penis, or phallus. The color of costumes was also a sign: Reference is made to black for characters in mourning and yellow for an especially effeminate male character, to cite only two examples.

All performers, both actors and chorus members, wore masks. They were full-faced masks, and they carried their own hairstyle, and of course, their own set facial expression. During the fifth century BCE, the masks looked natural in tragedy, although in comedy they could distort features to provoke laughter. Again, masks for actors aimed for individuality and quick recognition of character, whereas choral masks stressed resemblance, membership in a group. Occasionally, comic masks resembled the faces of living people, a fact we glean from an account of Socrates, who, from his seat in the audience, stood up and turned so that others could see that the mask worn by the actor in a comedy mimicked his own face.

The Hellenistic Period

At the end of the fifth century BCE, Athens lost its premiere position among the Greek poleis. At least part of the reason for Athens's decline was a series of devastating plagues. We now know that as a trading power Athens was vulnerable to plagues, brought by fleas that lived on rats that came into port with the cargo. Athens was defeated by Sparta, a militaristic state with few aspirations to high



culture. With Spartan influence came some sort of censorship, which had the immediate effect of toning down the political satire of Greek old comedies and substituting comedy with a less biting tone called **middle comedy**. Then, near the end of the fourth century BCE (300s), Philip II of Macedon and his son who eventually became known as Alexander the Great (356–323 BCE) overran all the Greek poleis except Sparta and folded them into a single, centralized government.

Alexander then conquered many of the advanced civilizations that abutted this greater Greece, south through Egypt and east as far as India and modern Afghanistan and Pakistan. Founding Alexandria, Egypt, as his capital, he ruled one of the world's great empires in a brief age now called the **Hellenistic period**. (“Greek” is from the Latin term for the people of the peninsula. They called themselves and their language *Ἕλληνες*, pronounced by non-Greek-speakers as “Hellenes,” hence the period being called Hellenistic.) As Alexander and his armies conquered lands, they exported Greek culture to them. Original editions of Greek dramas were transferred to Alexander’s library in Alexandria. The library purchased Aristotle’s collection of books after his death. Sadly for future scholars, the library burned in 48 BCE.

The culture of Hellenistic Greece, however, differed from that of Athens. The individuality of the various poleis declined, replaced by a cosmopolitan culture centered in Egypt. Gone were Athenian democracy, its great drama, and the centrality of its gods. The trend was toward a common government, common civilization, and common religion. The empire’s center of gravity shifted away from the Greek peninsula, which now rested on the westernmost edge of Alexander’s holdings, and toward the east, where different religious and philosophical systems were already highly developed. Towns and then cities grew up, as trade competed with agriculture for attention. Within a hundred years, the Hellenistic world had more than four hundred cities with populations more than 200,000, that is, twice the size of Athens during its golden age, the fifth century BCE.



THE THEATRE AT EPIDAURUS

By the beginning of the fourth century, the seating was connected to the skene by two portals, seen here. Some scholars believe that the audience as well as the chorus at the play's beginning entered through these archways. A well-preserved example of a Greek theatre of this era is the one at Epidaurus, seen here with a setting for Aristophanes's *The Knights*.

An Altered Greek Drama and Theatres

Plays began to be performed throughout Greek lands—which is to say, the Hellenistic lands—not merely at Athens, and they were now performed on special military and civic occasions as well as during Dionysian festivals. Satyr plays disappeared. Tragedy declined in popularity; such tragedies as were written apparently modeled themselves on Euripides's plays, with a reduced emphasis on the chorus and an increased emphasis on sensation, realism, and melodrama. Only fragments of such tragedies exist today. Tragedies from the fifth century BCE continued to be revived, however, attesting to their power to move audiences. Comedy remained popular, but it abandoned both its political bite and its formal structure. **New comedy**, as Hellenistic comedy is now called, told domestic tales of middle-class life structured as a series of episodes interrupted by incidental choral songs. New comedies took as their subjects such things as love, money, and family, often including intrigues involving long-lost children and happy reunions. They resemble some of the situation comedies of today's television. Although there are many fragments, only one complete new comedy remains, *The Grouch* by Menander.

Actors remained exclusively male. They became professionalized, organizing themselves into a performing guild called the Artists of Dionysus. From changes in the plays (and also in theatre buildings, costuming conventions, and masks), we can infer that the acting style changed, becoming grander, showier, and more formal in tragedy and probably less boisterous, more restrained, and more representational in comedy.

HOW WE KNOW

Menander and *The Grouch*

New texts and fragments of texts from Hellenistic Greece continue to emerge from their eccentric hiding places. The Greek playwright Menander, from the late fourth century BCE, is said to have written more than one hundred comedies. None of his plays were extant prior to the twentieth century CE. All that was available of his writings were some fragments quoted by other writers. Through discoveries made in the last one hundred years, virtually all of one Menander play is known; there are substantial chunks—enough to surmise the plots—of five others.



THE BODMER PAPYRI

Here, a page from the twenty-two papyri that Martin Bodmer bought in 1952. Originally discovered in Egypt, the collection contains three plays by Menander.

The chronology of discovery tells a compelling story of how time and technology has played a part in a detective story.

In 1907, a papyrus called the Cairo Codex of Menander dating from the fourth century CE was discovered. This document gave the text of parts of four Menander plays.

In 1952, essentially all of another play, *The Grouch*, and substantial parts of two more were found in a hoard of documents known now as the Bodmer papyri. This cache of documents dates to the seventh century CE and earlier, having been placed in a clay jar to protect the writings from invaders.

In the late 1960s, parts of another play turned up in papyrus that had been used as filling in a mummy case. One person's packing material became an historian's treasure.

As recently as 2003, extensive parts of two Menander plays were found on palimpsest manuscripts within the collection of the Vatican museums. Palimpsest refers to a document where a piece of parchment was erased so it could be used again. Parchment was manufactured from goat or sheep skin and was costly. In this instance, in 886 CE the texts of Christian sermons were written over the Greek comedies, originally copied on the parchment in the fourth century CE. Special cameras and computer pattern-recognition are enabling experts to read the erased text. This discovery is allowing scholars to refine the text of *The Grouch* and other Menander fragments.

The discovery of the palimpsest manuscripts holds out hope that more ancient Greek texts may already be in our libraries and museums and will emerge as technology advances.

Theatre buildings also changed. Great stone theatres sprang up both on the Greek peninsula and on conquered lands and they tended to share common features:

- A two-storied skene.
- A long, narrow, high stage attached to the skene, usually with steps or ramps at the ends but sometimes with entrances and exits only through the skene.
- An orchestra, as before, but now of uncertain use.

Unfortunately, we do not know how plays were staged in Hellenistic theatres. Were actors on stage? In the orchestra? Some combination of the two? Where was the chorus?

Costumes and masks also changed. Those in tragedy tended toward greater size and grandeur. Unlike the masks of the golden age, based on our limited information about the golden-age masks, the masks of tragedy during the Hellenistic period are the familiar masks of cliché, having a high headdress termed an *onkos* as well as exaggerated, often distorted, eyes and mouths. Footwear for tragedy may have featured a high platform boot, called a *cothurnus*, rather than the soft slipper of former days. Such changes enlarged the physical appearance of the actor and brought him greater focus, suggesting an altered acting style. Comic masks ranged from somewhat lifelike to quite outrageous, matching the types of characters that began to repeat in comedies of the period.

Truth be told, drama and theatre from the Hellenistic period would not be of much importance to theatre historians except for three things:

- The promulgation of Aristotelian theory (when it was rediscovered beginning in the fifteenth century).
- The mistaken assumption that the buildings and practices of the Hellenistic theatre represented the buildings and practices of fifth-century BCE Athens.
- The strong influences of these plays, buildings, and practices on Roman theatre.

Aristotle's *Poetics*

Of far greater consequence than the drama itself during these years was Aristotle's theory of drama, the *Poetics*, written very early in the Hellenistic period (335 BCE). Providing a theoretical definition of the form tragedy, Aristotle set the boundaries for the next two thousand years of dramatic theory, with the following major points:

- Tragedy imitates "action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude."
- Tragedy is told in language that is "embellished with... artistic ornament."
- Tragedy takes "the form of action, not narrative."
- Tragedy produces "pity and fear and the catharsis"; the last being a word meaning "cleaning" or "purging."

The meaning of Aristotle's definition has been endlessly debated, especially the phrase about catharsis, which some scholars believe refers to the response of audiences (though elsewhere Aristotle said he did not intend to talk about audiences), and other scholars think refers to emotions embedded within the episodes of the play itself.

Aristotle then defined and discussed the six parts of a play, the **elements of drama**. The following are just a few of his many comments on drama, especially tragedy:

- Plot: Plot was the most important to Aristotle. He therefore discussed it in the most detail, considering its *wholeness* (having a beginning, a middle, and an end, connected by causality); its *unity* (so that if any part is removed, the whole is disturbed); its *materials* (suffering, discovery, and reversal, meaning a change in heart for the protagonist); and its *form* (complication, climax, and the events that follow the climax which later came to be called, from the French for “unraveling,” the *denouement*).
- Character: The main character of the tragedy, the protagonist, is best if he is a great man who causes his own downfall through some great tragic error (*hamartia*), according to Aristotle.
- Thought: The ideas that are encompassed in the play, the thought or reasoning that is spoken by the chorus or characters.
- Language: The play’s language should be both clear and interesting.
- Music: The choral odes that were sung and danced to musical accompaniment. The chorus should be treated as part of the tragedy and add to its effect.
- Spectacle: Spectacle is the business of the stage machinist rather than the poet, Aristotle said. Again, spectacle must match the play in quality for the play to be successful with audiences.

The order of the six parts is important because it suggests the precise nature of the relationship among them, plot being primary.

The six parts should not be thought of as boxes into which sections of the play are placed; rather, they are parts of a system, a network of interrelationships so connected that a change in any one effects all others. For example, plot controls the kinds of characters that must appear in it, the kinds of characters control the kinds of ideas possible in the play, and so on. Note that Aristotle’s theory treated neither comedy nor mixed forms.

Because the *Poetics* is so packed with ideas and its translation is so difficult because the ideas are so complex and concentrated, its meaning has been debated for centuries. Certainly, it remains the base from which most discussions of dramatic theory proceed, through either acceptance or rejection of all or some of its primary tenets.

Mime

There existed alongside the state-supported festival theatres another kind of theatrical activity, the **mime**, which refers to the presentations performed as well as those who performed them. Very little is known

about mimes except that they seem to have been popular, professional, and perhaps slightly disreputable. Its troupes included women, its actors apparently often played barefoot, and mime troupes were not allowed to perform as part of the state-supported festivals. This fact may explain why so little evidence about them has come down to us. What little evidence there is indicates troupes performed short plays (skits?) and paratheatrical entertainments such as mimetic dance, singing, acrobatics, imitations of animals and birds, and juggling at banquets and other special occasions.

The literature of the Hellenistic era is little known, and thus, Western theatre makers are dazzled by the drama of the earlier classical era. Yet, the Hellenistic period is the one that spread Greek arts and culture to distant lands and established them as models to be emulated by civilized Western countries. When Rome accepted Greek models, they were often those of the Hellenistic era.



GREEK MIME

This detail from a painted vase may show a dramatic scene from mime as played in Greek outposts on the Italian peninsula. The appearance of comic nudity, including the oversized phalluses of many male comic figures, was likely achieved through costume tights and padding.

The Shift to Rome

After Alexander died, his Hellenistic empire soon collapsed. By a hundred years before the Common Era, Greece had fallen within the sphere of a spreading Roman influence. Roman theatres were built on Greek lands and Hellenistic theatres began to be remodeled to make them more like Roman theatres, producing hybrids that we now call Graeco-Roman theatres. The era of transition between the dominance of Alexander and the centrality of Rome is sometimes referred to as the **Graeco-Roman period**.

Although records show that theatre performances persisted in Hellenistic Greece, the center of cultural influence—and with it the theatre—had clearly shifted west to Rome itself.

KEY TERMS

Key terms are in boldface type in the text. Check your understanding against this list. Persons are page-referenced in the Index.

chorus, p. 17	middle comedy, p. 29
<i>cothurnus</i> , p. 32	mime, p. 33
<i>denouement</i> , p. 33	new comedy, p. 30
<i>eccyclema</i> (eh-KIH-kleh-ma), p. 26	old comedy, p. 23
elements of drama, p. 33	<i>onkos</i> (AHN-kohs), p. 32
facade stage, p. 25	orchestra, p. 24
Graeco-Roman period, p. 35	pinake, p. 26
Great Dionysia (dye-un-NEE-see-uh), p. 18	<i>Poetics</i> , p. 32
Hellenistic period, p. 29	protagonist, p. 26
<i>mechane</i> (MEH-kah-neh), p. 27	satyr play, p. 18
	<i>skene</i> (SKEE-nee), p. 24

Chapter 1 at a Glance

