

Theatre History

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Theatre History 1

An internet textbook by Scott R. Robinson and Kay Parisot

Based on *History of the Theatre* by Oscar Brockett



Chapter 1: Origins of Theatre

Little information about the origin of theatre has survived. The information we do have comes from wall paintings, decorations, artifacts, and hieroglyphics that show the importance of successful hunts, seasonal changes, life cycles, and stories of the gods. From these we see the necessity of passing along the experiences of the old to the young through art, storytelling, and dramatizing events. This practice gave the youth of a culture a guide and a plan for their own lives.

Theatre emerged from myth and ritual. Early societies perceived connections between certain actions performed by the group or leaders in the group and the desired results of the whole society. These actions moved from habit, to tradition, and then on to ceremony and ritual. The formulation of these actions, and the consequent repetition and rehearsal,

broke the ground for theatre.

According to the mythologist Joseph Campbell, rituals are related to three basic concerns: pleasure, power, and duty. Power- influencing and controlling events- was often the intention of rituals such as ceremonies to guarantee a successful crop or to please the gods. Usually societies had rituals that glorified supernatural powers, victories, and heroes. Often supernatural forms would be represented using costumes and masks. Rituals that were practiced as duty to the gods, also brought entertainment and pleasure.

These rituals were accompanied by myths. The myths enter the storytelling tradition, gaining a life beyond the original rites. This new life allows the myths to move towards entertainment and the esthetic. These stories now are performed for their own sake and move towards theatre.

Through these rituals, leaders, or actors of sorts, emerged. These acting/leadership roles were often filled by elders and priests. In addition, the beginnings of acting spaces or auditoriums developed as a result of more elaborate rituals.

The earliest example of ceremony and ritual evolving towards theatre comes from ancient Egypt. "Pyramid texts" dating from 2800 to 2400 B.C., contain dramas sending the dead pharaoh off to the underworld. These dramas also the continuity of life and the pharaoh's power. There is also the *Memphite Drama*, recounting the story of the death and resurrection of the god Osiris, and the coronation of his son Horus. The most important Egyptian ritual drama, though, was the *Abydos passion play*. Like the Memphite drama, the *Abydos passion play* concerns the story of Osiris. The paramount Egyptian myth, this drama was enacted at the most sacred place in Egypt, Abydos- the burial site of Osiris. Performed annually from 2500 to 550 B.C. and full of spectacle, this passion play is the first of its kind ever recorded and is the first example of "theatre".

Questions for Review:

1. How did ancient people pass along the experiences of the old to the young?
2. From what two sources does theatre emerge?
3. According to the reading, what is a ritual?

4. Who filled the acting/leadership roles that emerged through the practice of ritual?

5. What was the most important Egyptian ritual drama? What god does it tell the story of?



Chapter 2: Theatre and Drama in Ancient Greece

The Greeks' theatre history began around 700 B.C. with festivals honoring their many gods. One god, Dionysus, was honored with an unusual festival called the Dionysia. The revelry-filled festival was led by drunken men dressed up in rough goat skins (because goats were thought sexually potent) who would sing and play in choruses to welcome Dionysus. At the "Great" or "City" Dionysia in Athens, tribes competed against one another in performances, and the best show would have the honor of winning the contest. Of the four festivals in Athens (each reflecting seasonal changes), plays were only presented at one festival--the City Dionysia. Historians believe that the Greeks patterned their celebrations after the traditional Egyptian pageants honoring Osiris.

At the early Greek festivals, the actors, directors, and dramatists were all the same person. The cast consisted of one or more actors and a chorus of many. Later, only three individual actors were allowed in each play.

Because of the limited number of actors allowed on-stage, the chorus evolved into a very active part of Greek theatre. Though the number of people in the chorus is not clear, the chorus was given as many as one-half the total lines of the play. Music was often played during the chorus' delivery of its lines.

Although few tragedies written from this time actually remain, the themes and accomplishments of Greek tragedy still resonate to contemporary audiences. The term tragedy (*tragos* and *ode*) literally means "goat song," after the festival participants' goat-like dancing around sacrificial goats for prizes. Most Greek tragedies are based on mythology or history and deal with characters' search for the meaning of life and the nature of the gods.

Most tragedies that have survived from this period begin with a *prologue* that gives the audience exposition to the following action. The chorus then introduces a period called the *parados*. During this time introductions to characters are made, exposition is given, and a mood is established.

Episodes convey the action of the play through dialogue between the actors or between the actors and the chorus. The final scene is called the *exodus* when all the characters as well as the chorus depart.

Plays were performed in large, open-air structures consisting of a semi circular terraced *theatron* or "seeing place", and a round *orchestra*, the "dancing place" of the chorus and the chief performance space. An altar of Dionysus was usually located in the center of the orchestra.

Three well-known Greek tragedy playwrights of the fifth century are Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides.

Aeschylus, who was a competitor at the City Dionysia around 499 B.C., wrote some of the oldest tragedies in the world. Only a few of Aeschylus' plays have survived but they include *The Persians* and the *Oresteia* trilogy. Aeschylus is attributed with the introducing the second actor to the stage and inventing the trilogy.

Another Greek playwright was Sophocles, and only seven of his tragedies--including the still-popular *Antigone*, *Electra*, and *Oedipus Rex*--have survived. Sophocles won twenty-four contests for his plays, never placing lower than second place. His contributions to theatre history are many: He introduced the third actor to the stage, fixed the number of chorus members to fifteen, and was the first to use scene painting.

Euripides was another prolific playwright who is believed to have written 90 plays, 18 of which have survived, including *Medea*, *Hercules* and *The Trojan Women*. He was often criticized for the way he questioned traditional views of the role of women and obedience to authority. Euripides also explored the psychological motivations of his characters actions which had not been explored by other authors. His plays were used as pattern for other authors for many years after his death.

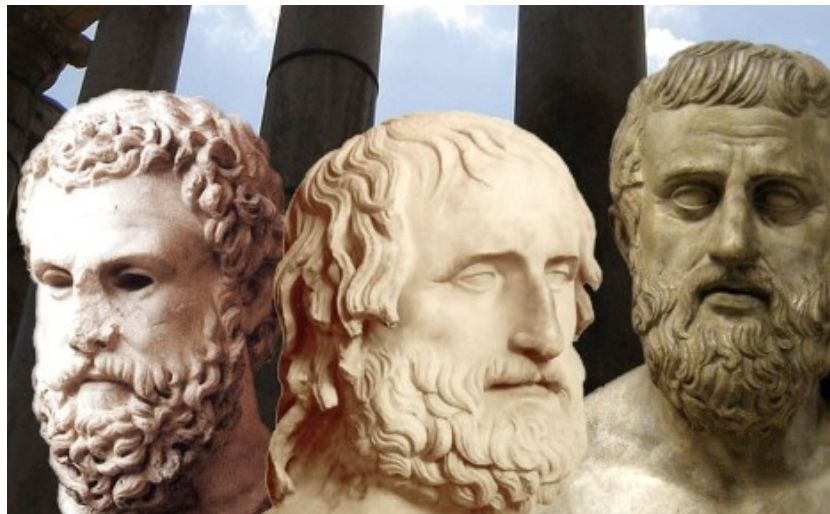
Comedy was also an important part of ancient Greek theatre. No one is quite sure of the origins of comedy, but it is said that they derived from imitation. All comedies of note during this time are by Aristophanes. Aristophanes, who competed in the major Athenian festivals, wrote 40 plays, 11 of which survived--including the most controversial piece of literature to come from ancient Greece, *Lysistrata*, a humorous tale about a

strong woman who leads a female coalition to end war in Greece.

Although only 33 tragedies and 11 comedies remain from such a creative period, the Greeks were responsible for the birth of drama in the Western world.

Questions for Review:

1. How does the text describe the festival of Dionysia? Which god did it honor?
2. Why was the Great or City Dionysia important in theatre history?
3. What does the term "tragedy" literally mean? Where does this come from?
4. Describe some parts of a typical Greek tragedy from this time period.
5. In a Greek theatre what was the "dancing place" of the chorus called?
6. Who were the three well-known Greek tragedy playwrights of the fifth century? Give one significant contribution they made or the title of a play that each wrote.
7. Who was the most important writer of comedy from that time period?



Chapter 3: Roman Theatre and Drama

Originally Roman theatre had been derived from religious festivals. The Romans' carnival-like festivals included acting, flute playing, dancing, and prizefighting. Almost all festivals used music, dance, and masks in their

ceremonies. The first Roman performance occurred in Rome around 364 B.C.

By the first century B.C., the Roman empire had displaced the Greek city states as the dominant power in the Mediterranean world. The Romans have been known for copying other cultures and practices and improving upon them, and the same can be said of their approach to the theatre. Romans borrowed Greek and Etruscan methods in their own theatre, but made them distinctly Roman by modifying those methods.

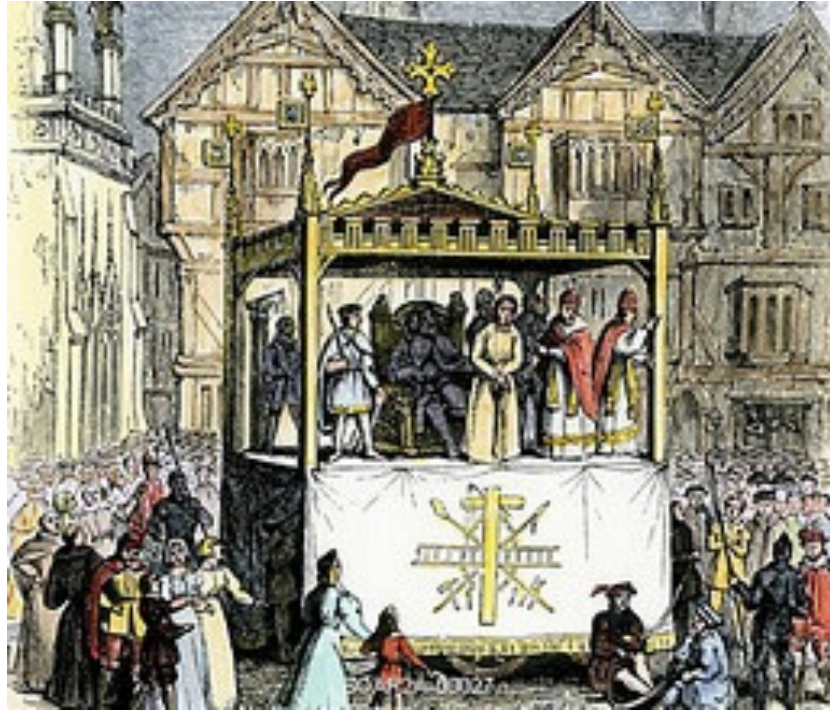
In contrast to ancient Greece, comedy was more popular in Rome than tragedy. Titus Maccius Plautus was an extremely popular Roman comedy writer. He is attributed with 130 plays including *The Braggart Warrior*, *The Casket and Pot of Gold*. Publius Terentius Afer was another Roman comedy writer who wrote six plays, all of which have survived including *Mother-in-Law*, *Self-Tormentor* and *The Brother*. Terence wasn't as popular as Plautus but his critics consider his writing deeper and more developed.

Only three names of Roman playwrights of tragedy are known from the early times: Quintus Ennius, Marcus Pacuvius, and Lucius Accius. The later Roman period had a few surviving plays by Lucius Seneca who wrote his own versions of *The Trojan Women*, *Medea*, *Oedipus*, *Phaedra* and *Hercules on Oeta*. Seneca's popularity later declined and he committed suicide in 65 A.D.

The theatre was certainly not the only form of entertainment in Rome. Roman theatrical entertainment included the popular chariot racing, horse racing, foot races, wrestling, fights between wild animals, and fights between gladiators. Chariot races were held in the *Circus Maximus* which could accommodate 60,000 people. It also housed wrestling, fighting, and wild animals like lions. The Romans also staged sea battles in which lakes were dug or amphitheaters like the *Colosseum* were flooded for the occasion. Christians were often the victims of the Romans' thirst for blood, and many were sentenced to battle to the death in the *Colosseum*.

The first permanent theater structures in Rome were dedicated to the god Venus. Roman theaters were similar to the Greek design but the stage was more elaborate. The theaters had a stage house, or *scaenae frons* which provided rooms for dressing, balconies to set scenes upon, tunnels for access to the orchestra area or auditorium, and the only scenery. The *pulpitum* or stage in front of the *scaenae frons* was raised about five feet.





Chapter 4: European Theatre and Drama in the Middle Ages

After the fall of the Roman Empire, small nomadic bands traveled around performing wherever there was an audience. Traveling with their portable stage or *Pageant Wagons*, they consisted of storytellers, jesters, jugglers and many other performers. Later, festivals cropped up where entertainers would show their talents. However, the powerful Catholic Church made headway during the Middle Ages to stamp out such performances and convert the entertainers who were thought by some to be possessed by evil spirits.

Despite its insistence that acting and traveling performances were sinful, the Church was actually instrumental in reviving theatre in the Middle Ages. In one type of church service, called *The Hours*, Bible stories were dramatized. Music often would be incorporated into the dramatizations.

One of the most popular of the Bible stories that were dramatized was the story of Mary visiting Christ's tomb to discover Christ's resurrection. Jesus' crucifixion, however, was rarely dramatized. Other stories that were often dramatized were Daniel in the lion's den, Lazarus raised from the dead, and the conversion of St. Paul.

Small scenic structures called mansions were used to illustrate the surroundings of a play. Small plays had only one mansion, longer plays had two or more. Costumes for liturgical drama were church clothing to which real or symbolic accessories were added. Most of the lines of the drama were chanted in Latin rather than spoken.

Liturgical drama was performed exclusively in churches until around 1200 when they were performed outside during the spring and summer months.

One form of liturgical drama, the cycle plays, became popular with the common people around this time. The cycle plays were composed of many short plays or episodes. Cycle plays could take a few hours or 25 or more days to perform. Like other liturgical dramas, the cycle plays varied but usually all dealt with religious figures, biblical writings and sermons of the church, though some episodes were on hardly religious themes. The plays had little sense of chronology and most of their authors were anonymous.

The popular cycle plays opened the door for many other more significant changes in medieval drama. With the formation of guilds, the growth of towns, and a decline in feudalism, theatre had great opportunities to flower. Between the years 1200 to 1350 vernacular- non-religious plays in the common languages of the people- gained popularity over liturgical plays.

Around the end of the 14th century the church was controlling less and less of the production of plays, but it always kept an eye on the contents of plays and their presentation. Sometimes towns would put on shows, but often individuals would arrange a production. The church always reserved the right to approve or disapprove a script before it became a production.

Directors emerged to handle the sometimes large numbers of actors, special effects, and money that would be put into productions. Sometimes a committee of overseers was put together to stage productions. These overseers would have duties such as directing the erection of the stage, constructing seating for the audience, casting and rehearsing the actors, working with actors on refining roles, assigning people to take up money at the door, and addressing the audience at the beginning and end of the play.

Actors and the number needed changed for each play. For instance, the cycle plays needed as many as 300 actors. Most actors were found in the local area where directors would hold auditions. Most of the time the actors were boys or men, but in France women were occasionally allowed to act. Often an actor would have multiple roles in a show.

Morality plays emerged late in the middle ages. Much like the cycle plays, morality plays centered around men's continuous struggle between good and evil. One of the most influential morality plays was *Romance of the Rose*. This play had characters such as Slander, Danger, and Fair Welcome. Another interesting morality play which was written in 1425 was *the Castle of Perverserance* which depicted mankind's progress from birth to death and showed the final judgment.



Chapter 5: The Theatre of the Orient

Various theatrical forms developed throughout Asia. Most Asian cultures had traditional or village theatrical forms such as the Korean *Tal' Chum*- or mask dance drama- in addition to highly formalized court theatre such as the Ayutthaya period Thai dramas.

Among the most notable were the highly developed forms of India and Japan.

Indian drama was spoken in *Sanskrit* which was the most commonly spoken language in India. *Sanskrit* performances were usually given on special occasions such as religious festivals, marriages, coronations, or victory celebrations. No scenery was used but the stage had painting or carvings that would have symbolic value. *Sanskrit* drama emerged sometime between 1500 to 1000 B.C. and could not be classified as comedy, tragedy or melodrama, but was based on the concept of *Rasa*. All the *Rasa* relate to human emotions. The eight *Rasa* are erotic, comic, pathetic, furious, heroic, terrible, odious, and marvelous. Two famous Indian plays which deal with the *Rasa* were *The Little Clay Cart* by Bhasa and *Sakuntala* written by Kalidasa.

In Japan, three classical forms of theatre exist: *Noh* theatre, *Bunraku* theatre and the most classical form, *Kabuki* theatre. *Kabuki* is a highly stylized form of theatre that employed lots of scenery and elaborate sets and costumes. *Kabuki*, like most oriental theatre, did not use women in its theatre performances. Another classical form, *Bunraku*, is puppet theatre. Each puppet had three operators, but only the master puppeteer's face could be seen. The classic form of *Noh*, however, started as religious ritual. It had a shite, who was the lead actor, and waki, who was the sidekick or confidante of the shite. *Noh* theatre utilized an orchestra which had a special position on-stage, but *Noh*, like *Kabuki*, did not use women in its performances. Besides the enduring influences of its stylized classical theatre, the Japanese also introduced to the world the revolving stage, a design which is used worldwide.



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