Theatre of ancient Greece

The theatre of Ancient Greece, or ancient Greek drama, is a theatrical culture that flourished in ancient Greece between 550 BC and 220 BC. The city-state of Athens, which became a significant cultural, political and military power during this period, was its centre, where it was institutionalized as part of a festival called the Dionysia, which honored the god Dionysus. Tragedy (late 6th century BC), comedy (486 BC), and the satyr play were the three dramatic genres to emerge there. Athens exported the festival to its numerous colonies and allies in order to promote a common cultural identity. Western theatre originated in Athens and its drama has had a significant and sustained impact on Western culture as a whole.

Etymology

The word τραγῳδία (tragoidia), from which the word "tragedy" is derived, is a portmanteau of two Greek words: τράγος (tragos) or "goat" and ᾠδή (ode) meaning "song", from ἀείδειν (aeidein), "to sing".[1] This etymology indicates a link with the practices of the ancient Dionysian cults. It is impossible, however, to know with certainty how these fertility rituals became the basis for tragedy and comedy. [2]

Origins

Martin Litchfield West speculates that early studies in Greek religion and theatre, which are inter-related, especially the Orphic Mysteries, was heavily influenced by Central Asian shamanistic practices. A large number of Orphic graffiti unearthed in Olbia seems to testify that the colony was one major point of contact.[3] Eli Rozik[4] points out that the shaman, as such, is seen as a prototypical actor influencing the rituals of early Greek theatre.[5] Greek tragedy as we know it was created in Athens some years before 532 BC, when Thespis was the earliest recorded actor. Being a winner of the first theatrical contest held at Athens, he was the exarchon, or leader,[6] of the dithyrambs performed in and around Attica, especially at the rural Dionysia. By Thespis' time the dithyramb had evolved far away from its cult roots. Under the influence of heroic epic, Doric choral lyric and the innovations of the poet Arion, it had become a narrative, ballad-like genre. Because of these, Thespis is often called the "Father of Tragedy"; however, his importance is disputed, and Thespis is sometimes listed as late as 16th in the chronological order of Greek tragedians; the statesman Solon, for example, is credited with creating poems in which characters speak with their own voice, and spoken performances of Homer's epics by rhapsodes were popular in festivals prior to 534 BC.[7] Thus, Thespis’s true contribution to drama is unclear at best, but his name has been immortalized as a common term for performer—a "thespian."
The dramatic performances were important to the Athenians – this is made clear by the creation of a tragedy competition and festival in the City Dionysia. This was organized possibly to foster loyalty among the tribes of Attica (recently created by Cleisthenes). The festival was created roughly around 508 BC. While no drama texts exist from the sixth century BC, we do know the names of three competitors besides Thespis: Choerilus, Pratinas, and Phrynichus. Each is credited with different innovations in the field.

More is known about Phrynichus. He won his first competition between 511 BC and 508 BC. He produced tragedies on themes and subjects later exploited in the golden age such as the Danaids, Phoenician Women and Alcestis. He was the first poet we know of to use a historical subject – his Fall of Miletus, produced in 493-2, chronicled the fate of the town of Miletus after it was conquered by the Persians. Herodotus reports that "the Athenians made clear their deep grief for the taking of Miletus in many ways, but especially in this: when Phrynichus wrote a play entitled "The Fall of Miletus" and produced it, the whole theatre fell to weeping; they fined Phrynichus a thousand drachmas for bringing to mind a calamity that affected them so personally, and forbade the performance of that play forever."[8]

He is also thought to be the first to use female characters (though not female performers).[9]

Until the Hellenistic period, all tragedies were unique pieces written in honor of Dionysus and played only once, so that today we primarily have the pieces that were still remembered well enough to have been repeated when the repetition of old tragedies became fashionable (the accidents of survival, as well as the subjective tastes of the Hellenistic librarians later in Greek history, also played a role in what survived from this period).

**New inventions during the Classical Period**

After the Great Destruction of Athens by the Persian Empire in 480 BC, the town and acropolis were rebuilt, and theatre became formalized and an even more major part of Athenian culture and civic pride. This century is normally regarded as the Golden Age of Greek drama. The centre-piece of the annual Dionysia, which took place once in winter and once in spring, was a competition between three tragic playwrights at the Theatre of Dionysus. Each submitted three tragedies, plus a satyr play (a comic, burlesque version of a mythological subject). Beginning in a first competition in 486 BC, each playwright also submitted a comedy.[10] Aristotle claimed that Aeschylus added the second actor, and that Sophocles introduced the third. Apparently the Greek playwrights never used more than three actors based on what is known about Greek theatre.[11]

Tragedy and comedy were viewed as completely separate genres, and no plays ever merged aspects of the two. Satyr plays dealt with the mythological subject matter of the tragedies, but in a purely comedic manner. However, as they were written over a century after the Athenian Golden Age, it is not known whether dramatists such as Sophocles and Euripides would have thought about their plays in the same terms.

**Hellenistic period**

The power of Athens declined following its defeat in the Peloponnesian War against the Spartans. From that time on, the theater started performing old tragedies again. Although its theatrical traditions seem to have lost their vitality, Greek theater continued into the Hellenistic period (the period following Alexander the Great's conquests in the fourth century BC). However, the primary Hellenistic theatrical form was not tragedy but 'New Comedy', comic episodes about the lives of ordinary citizens. The only extant playwright from the period is Menander. One of New Comedy's most important contributions was its influence on Roman comedy, an influence that can be seen in the surviving works of Plautus and Terence.
Characteristics of the buildings

The plays had a chorus from 12 to 15 people, who performed the plays in verse accompanied by music, beginning in the morning and lasting until the evening. The performance space was a simple circular space, the orchestra, where the chorus danced and sang. The orchestra, which had an average diameter of 78 feet, was situated on a flattened terrace at the foot of a hill, the slope of which produced a natural theatron, literally "watching place". Later, the term "theater" came to be applied to the whole area of theatron, orchestra, and skênê. The choregos was the head chorus member who could enter the story as a character able to interact with the characters of a play.

The theaters were originally built on a very large scale to accommodate the large number of people on stage, as well as the large number of people in the audience, up to fourteen thousand. Mathematics played a large role in the construction of these theaters, as their designers had to be able to create acoustics in them such that the actors' voices could be heard throughout the theater, including the very top row of seats. The Greeks' understanding of acoustics compares very favorably with the current state of the art, as even with the invention of microphones, there are very few modern large theaters that have truly good acoustics.

The first seats in Greek theaters (other than just sitting on the ground) were wooden, but around 499 BC the practice of inlaying stone blocks into the side of the hill to create permanent, stable seating became more common. They were called the "prohedria" and reserved for priests and a few most respected citizens.

In 465 BC, the playwrights began using a backdrop or scenic wall, which hung or stood behind the orchestra, which also served as an area where actors could change their costumes. It was known as the skênê (from which the word "scene" derives). The death of a character was always heard behind the skênê, for it was considered inappropriate to show a killing in view of the audience. In 425 BC a stone scene wall, called a paraskenia, became a common supplement to skênê in the theaters. A paraskenia was a long wall with projecting sides, which may have had
doorways for entrances and exits. Just behind the paraskenia was the proskenion. The proskenion ("in front of the scene") was beautiful, and was similar to the modern day proscenium.

Greek theaters also had tall arched entrances called parodoi or eisodoi, through which actors and chorus members entered and exited the orchestra. By the end of the 5th century BC, around the time of the Peloponnesian War, the skênê, the back wall, was two stories high. The upper story was called the episkenion. Some theaters also had a raised speaking place on the orchestra called the logeion.

**Scenic elements**

There were several scenic elements commonly used in Greek theater:

- **mechane**, a crane that gave the impression of a flying actor (thus, *deus ex machina*).
- **ekkyklêma**, a wheeled platform often used to bring dead characters into view for the audience
- trap doors, or similar openings in the ground to lift people onto the stage
- **Pinakes**, pictures hung to create scenery
- **Thyromata**, more complex pictures built into the second-level scene (3rd level from ground)
- Phallic props were used for satyr plays, symbolizing fertility in honor of Dionysus.

**Masks**

**Masks and ritual**

The Ancient Greek term for a mask is *prosopon* (lit., "face"), and was a significant element in the worship of Dionysus at Athens, likely used in ceremonial rites and celebrations. Most of the evidence comes from only a few vase paintings of the 5th century BC, such as one showing a mask of the god suspended from a tree with decorated robe hanging below it and dancing and the *Pronomos* vase, which depicts actors preparing for a Satyr play. No physical evidence remains available to us, as the masks were made of organic materials and not considered permanent objects, ultimately being dedicated to the altar of Dionysus after performances. Nevertheless, the mask is known to have been used since the time of Aeschylus and considered to be one of the iconic conventions of classical Greek theater.

Masks were also made for members of the chorus, who play some part in the action and provide a commentary on the events in which they are caught up. Although there are twelve or fifteen members of the tragic chorus, they all wear the same mask because they are considered to be representing one character.

**Mask details**

Illustrations of theatrical masks from 5th century display helmet-like masks, covering the entire face and head, with holes for the eyes and a small aperture for the mouth, as well as an integrated wig. It is interesting to note that these paintings never show actual masks on the actors in performance; they are most often shown being handled by the actors before or after a performance, that liminal space between the audience and the stage, between myth and reality. This demonstrates the way in which the mask was to 'melt' into the face and allow the actor to vanish into the role. Effectively, the mask transformed the actor as much as memorization of the text. Therefore, performance in ancient Greece did not distinguish the masked actor from the theatrical character.
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Bronze statue of a Greek actor. The half-mask over the eyes and nose identifies the figure as an actor. He wears a man's conical cap but female garments, following the Greek custom of men playing the roles of women. 150-100 BCE.

The mask-makers were called *skeuopoioi* or "maker of the properties," thus suggesting that their role encompassed multiple duties and tasks. The masks were most likely made out of light weight, organic materials like stiffened linen, leather, wood, or cork, with the wig consisting of human or animal hair.[18] Due to the visual restrictions imposed by these masks, it was imperative that the actors hear in order to co-orientate and balance themselves. Thus, it is believed that the ears were covered by substantial amounts of hair and not the helmet-mask itself. The mouth opening was relatively small, preventing the mouth to be seen during performances. Vervain and Wiles posit that this small size discourages the idea that the mask functioned as a megaphone, as originally presented in the 1960s.[15]

Greek mask-maker, Thanos Vovolis, suggests that the mask serves as a resonator for the head, thus enhancing vocal acoustics and altering its quality. This leads to increased energy and presence, allowing for the more complete metamorphosis of the actor into his character.[19]

### Mask functions

In a large open-air theater, like the Theater of Dionysus in Athens, the classical masks were able to bring the characters' face closer to the audience, especially since they had intensely exaggerated facial features and expressions.[19] They enabled an actor to appear and reappear in several different roles, thus preventing the audience from identifying the actor to one specific character. Their variations help the audience to distinguish sex, age, and social status, in addition to revealing a change in a particular character's appearance, e.g. Oedipus after blinding himself.[20] Unique masks were also created for specific characters and events in a play, such as The Furies in Aeschylus' *Eumenides* and Pentheus and Cadmus in Euripides' *The Bacchae*. Worn by the chorus, the masks created a sense of unity and uniformity, while representing a multi-voiced persona or single organism and simultaneously encouraged interdependency and a heightened sensitivity between each individual of the group. Greek theatre has many unique conventions. Only 2-3 actors were allowed on the stage at one time, which meant that masks provided an efficient solution to quick transitions from one character to another. Masks were a great way of playing female characters since only male actors were allowed.

### Other costume details

The actors in these plays that had tragic roles wore boots called *cothurni* that elevated them above the other actors. The actors with comedic roles only wore a thin soled shoe called a sock. For this reason, dramatic art is sometimes alluded to as "Sock and Buskin."

When playing female roles, the male actors donned a “prosterneda” (a wooden structure in front of the chest, to imitate female breasts) and “progastreda” in front of the belly.

Melpomene is the muse of tragedy and is often depicted holding the tragic mask and wearing cothurni. Thalia is the muse of comedy and is similarly associated with the mask of comedy and the comedic “socks”.
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References

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[13] Liddell & Scott via Perseus @ UChicago (http://perseus.uic.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/getobject.pl?c.62:2:190.LSJ)

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External links

- Ancient Greek theatre history and articles (http://www.theatrehistory.com/ancient/greek.html)
- Drama lesson 1: The ancient Greek theatre (http://www.iolani.org/usacad_eng_eng10dterms_cv9404.htm)
- Ancient Greek Theatre (http://www.greektheatre.gr/
- The Ancient Theatre Archive, Greek and Roman theatre architecture (http://www.whitman.edu/theatre/theatretour/home.htm) – Dr. Thomas G. Hines, Department of Theatre, Whitman College
- Greek and Roman theatre glossary (http://www.whitman.edu/theatre/theatretour/glossary/glossary.htm)
- Illustrated Greek Theater (http://people.hsc.edu/drjclassics/lectures/theater/ancient_greek_theater.shtml) – Dr. Janice Siegel, Department of Classics, Hampden-Sydney College, Virginia
- Searchable database of monologues for actors from Ancient Greek Theatre (http://www.actorama.com/monologues/ancient-greek-plays.html)
- Logeion: A Journal of Ancient Theatre with free access which publishes original scholarly articles including its reception in modern theatre, literature, cinema and the other art forms and media, as well as its relation to the theatre of other periods and geographical regions. (http://www.logeion.upatras.gr)
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