

# Ancient Greek Theatre

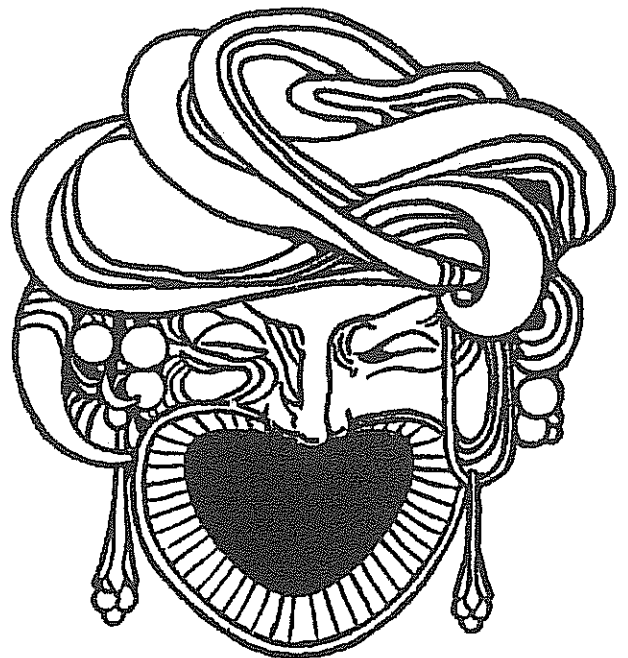
Despite the Egyptian performance, the Greeks are credited with giving theatre its start. About 1400 years after the reenactment of Osiris's demise, Greeks were paying tribute to their gods as well. In honor of Dionysis, the god of wine and fertility, and to commemorate his death, the Greek chorus danced around an altar, upon which a sacrificed goat was placed. They sang a song called a "goat song" or *tragos*. It is from this word that we get the word *tragedy*.

The chorus played an important role in Greek theatre, keeping the audience informed as to what was happening on-stage. However, in 534 BC, a man named Thespis did something no one had done before. He broke away from the chorus and held dialog with them on-stage. This action made him history's first actor. Today, actors are called *thespians*, and there is even a young actors' society named in honor of this trendsetter.

The development of the stage was one of the greatest contributions the Greeks gave to the theatre. Originally held with semicircular hillside seating, the addition of wooden and eventually stone seats added a sense of sophistication for the all-male spectators. By the time women attended the theatre around 400 BC, the theatre could seat over 15,000 people. It was large enough that those seated at the back had a hard time hearing and seeing. The large masks worn by the actors helped with this.

Elaborately decorated with exaggerated characteristics, these masks added size to the characters, making them easier to see. There were about thirty different types of masks worn by Greek actors on-stage. Believed to be introduced by Thespis, the masks were made of lightweight wood, cork, or linen and served many purposes. Because the plays had few actors (one early on and three later), the masks allowed one actor to play several roles. Also, because women did not act, these devices allowed men to play women's roles. Unfortunately the masks disallowed the actor's own facial expressions to be seen, so he had to rely on his voice to make his characters real and interesting.

The area where the chorus danced was called the orchestra. Behind the acting area was a small hut-like building called a *skene* (pronounced skānē). This served as the actors' dressing rooms. Eventually, several stories and wings were added to the building, the front of which was used to paint scenery. The roof was used as an acting area for the gods. If the gods needed to fly, a crane-like device called a *machina* (ma ke nah) would hoist them into the air. The term *deus ex machina* refers to the plot device originating in the Greek theatre in which a problem was resolved quite unexpectedly when a god would appear from nowhere and save the day.



A mask much like the ones worn by Ancient Greek actors. Note the large, hollow mouth which allowed actors to project their voices.

## Greek Playwrights

We still have many of the plays that were written by the Ancient Greeks, but because of the passage of time, many are fragments with the remainder of the play lost. It is believed that many great works are gone altogether. Despite their age, these classic plays remain popular, many based on universal and timeless themes that never seem to lose popularity.

There were many playwriting competitions held in Ancient Greece in which playwrights competed for prizes and public favor. The author of the competing play not only wrote the text itself, but he composed the music, choreographed the dances, directed, and often held the lead role. The entries were divided into two categories: *tragedies* and *comedies*. It was not uncommon for the great playwriting competitions to require writers to submit four plays in the tragic category — three tragedies and a *satyr-play* or a *trilogy* and a *satyr-play* — all related in theme. However, to compete for the comedy prize, a writer only had to submit one play. Hidden within these two types of Greek plays was a third type — the *tragicomedy* or *satyr-play*. This was a tragic story with comic undertones.

**Aeschylus:** *Aeschylus* (es kil us) is the earliest known author of plays. Born in about 525 BC, he is believed to have written around ninety plays. Of those, only seven survive in their entirety. He is also credited with having the only surviving trilogy — the *Orestia* (a trilogy is a group of three plays related in theme). Because of his long career and the influence of his writings, we can see the development of Greek theatre in his works. His earlier plays have choruses of fifty and only one actor, but his later works show the trend of his contemporaries towards the smaller chorus and several actors. He died in 456 BC; his tombstone did not mention his career as a writer.

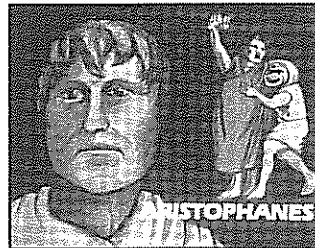
- His most famous plays are *Agamemnon*, the *Libation Bearers*, and the *Eumenides*.
- He is often referred to as the "Father of Tragedy."
- He wrote about the choices men make and the consequences that follow.

**Sophocles:** During Aeschylus's lifetime, the younger playwright *Sophocles* (sof uh clees) began his career. He wrote between ninety and one hundred and ten plays, but only seven survive today. He is said to have won the playwriting prize eighteen times! He compared the power of the gods to the importance of humanity, believing that humans possess god-like qualities that make them want to change fate. In a time when it was considered impious to doubt fate, Sophocles armed his characters with the power to challenge the paths the gods set before them. Many believe that this was what made his characters some of the greatest to take the stage.

- His most famous plays are *Oedipus* (eh di pus) *the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, *Electra*, and *Antigone* (an ti guh nee).
- He was born in 497 BC and died in 406 BC.
- He is often compared to Shakespeare as the greatest playwright of all time.

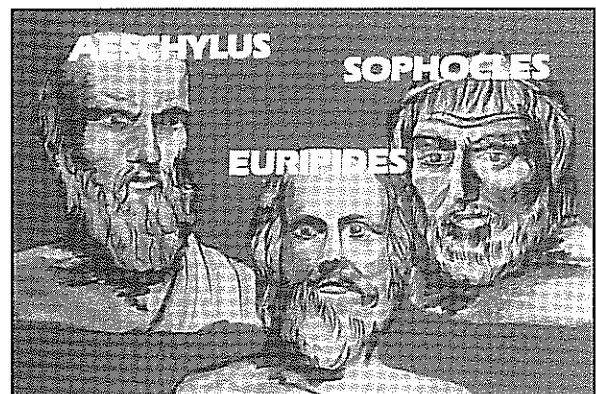
**Euripides:** The last great writer of Greek tragedy, *Euripides* (yoo rip eh dees) was born in 484 BC and died in 406 BC, the same year as Sophocles. He wrote about ninety plays, eighteen of which survive. Winning the prize only five times, it wasn't until after his death that his plays truly earned public appreciation. His exploration into the psychology of the individual, especially women, as opposed to the larger public issues taken on by his predecessors seemed to be a bit too modern for his time.

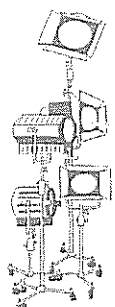
- His most famous plays are *The Trojan Women*, the *Medea*, and the *Hippolytus*.
- His *Cyclops* is the only complete satyr-play known to exist.
- He originated the use of the prologue to summarize the play for the audience before the action.



**Aristophanes:** Born in 448 BC, *Aristophanes* (air uh stah fuh nees) is the only writer of ancient Greek comedy whose works still exist in whole today. However, it is believed that like his tragic counterparts, three-fourths of his works are missing or incomplete. Furthermore, because his comedy is based on a type of wit that gets lost in translation, modern audiences have less appreciation than those of his day. He died in 380 BC.

- His most famous plays are *Birds*, *Clouds*, and *Frogs*.
- His plays made fun of the leaders of Athens, the gods, and even his playwright counterparts.





# Roman Theatre

Unfortunately, the theatre did not flourish in Rome as it did in Greece. Instead, it veered sharply into a bawdy and decadent form of base entertainment which appealed to the audience's sense of vulgarity, sensuality, and violence. Featuring obscene mimes, drunken horseplay, and dancers in meager bikinis, the performances rarely had plots that dealt with challenging issues. With plays based on the lowest aspects of human nature, it is not surprising that actors' reputations suffered. This set a trend that would take many years to change.

The Romans had great impact on the architecture of the theatre, bringing it closer to the stages of today. The theatres were built in a flat area instead of on a hillside, as had been done in neighboring Greece. The once-open space was replaced with an elaborately decorated wall which surrounded the seats and the stage. Because the chorus was no longer being used, the orchestra became obsolete, making the stage the central focus. The stage was positioned high off the ground with tiers of benches at the front and the *frons scaenae* (an elaborately decorated wall) at the rear. Later stages even featured curtains that could be closed at the end of a scene, awnings for the audience, concessions, and even perfumed water mists to cool and deodorize the audience on hot days.

There were two great writers of Roman comedy, *Plautus* and *Terence*. During their time, Rome lacked the elaborate stages that were yet to come (as were the large audiences). Later, *Seneca*, a writer of larger-than-life dramas, wrote plays that are better read than produced. Consequently and ironically, none of Rome's esteemed playwrights benefited much from the great architecture of the period.

**Plautus:** Twenty of this writer's plays are still in existence today. Because they were not published in his lifetime but left in the hands of actors, it is believed that a great deal of Plautus' work has been modified. Regardless, at a time when the audience seemed indifferent to political issues, his plays found popularity and longevity. Like Terence and Seneca, he borrowed his plots from the Greeks, but he added a personal touch to them that made them uniquely his. He used poetic devices (which

would get lost in translation), proving that he was an artist, and the subsequent imitation of his plots by later writers like Shakespeare and Molière, prove that he had a profound historical impact.

- His most famous plays are the *Menaechmi* (The Twin Brothers) and the *Amphitryo*.
- Despite his borrowed plots, his plays paint an accurate picture of life in his times.

**Terence:** Born an African slave to a Roman senator, Terence exhibited brilliance early in life, winning for himself an uncommon education and his subsequent freedom. Using applicable plots and a universal dialog, he had less popularity with the Roman audiences who craved buffoonery and vulgarity. Having written all six of his plays by the age of twenty-five, he left Rome under suspicion of plagiarism, never to return.

- His most famous plays are the *Andrian* and the *Eunuch*.
- He was paid 8000 sesterces for the *Eunuch*, which was the greatest sum ever paid for a comedy at that time.

**Seneca:** A native of Corduba in Spain, Seneca was born with fragile health. As a result of this and the fact that his father was a great speaker, he devoted himself to the spoken word and to the study of philosophy. He was banished in 41 AD by Claudius, but recalled by the Empress Agrippina eight years later and employed as her son Nero's tutor. Seneca was devoted to the family for many years but when mother and son broke apart, he sided with Nero, drawing up all of his state papers and defending him in his mother's murder. After falling out of favor with the new ruler, Seneca was forced to commit suicide rather than be subjected to a more humiliating death.

- His most famous plays are *Octavia*, *The Phoenician Women*, and *Hercules*.
- His plays are generally considered *closet dramas*, plays which are meant to be read rather than acted.

## Early Theatre Review

1. How did the earliest performances probably originate?
2. A stone tablet is the first record of a theatrical performance in \_\_\_\_\_, dating back to about \_\_\_\_\_ BC. It describes a \_\_\_\_\_-day performance by \_\_\_\_\_ of Abydos.
3. Describe the Egyptian performance.
4. The \_\_\_\_\_ are credited with the origins of theatre, despite the earlier Egyptian performance. They were honoring their god of wine and fertility, \_\_\_\_\_.
5. The word tragedy comes from the Greek word \_\_\_\_\_ which means \_\_\_\_\_.
6. The \_\_\_\_\_ played an important role in Greek theatre, keeping the audience informed of the action on-stage. In 534 BC, \_\_\_\_\_ stepped from the chorus and engaged in dialog with them, making him the first actor. It is from him that we get the word "thespian," a term used today which means actor.
7. What was the purpose of the Greek mask?
8. Define:
  - a. Orchestra
  - b. Skene
  - c. Machina
9. \_\_\_\_\_ is the earliest recorded Greek playwright. His trilogy, \_\_\_\_\_, is the only one known to have survived. He is often referred to as \_\_\_\_\_ of \_\_\_\_\_. His plays include \_\_\_\_\_, the \_\_\_\_\_, and the \_\_\_\_\_.
10. \_\_\_\_\_ is often referred to alongside Shakespeare as the greatest writer of all time. He took a great risk when he gave his characters the power to change the \_\_\_\_\_ the \_\_\_\_\_ had put before them. He wrote \_\_\_\_\_ *the King*, \_\_\_\_\_ *at Colonus*, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_.
11. \_\_\_\_\_ earned public appreciation for his writings only after his death. While other playwrights of the time dealt with larger \_\_\_\_\_, he explored the psychology of the \_\_\_\_\_, especially women. His \_\_\_\_\_ is the only complete satyr play known to exist.
12. \_\_\_\_\_ is the only writer of Greek comedies whose plays are still known to exist today. His plays, which included \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and \_\_\_\_\_, poked fun at Athenian leaders and the gods at a time when free speech was not well accepted.
13. Roman performances included a great deal of mime, dancing, and \_\_\_\_\_.
14. Roman playwrights included ex-slave \_\_\_\_\_, \_\_\_\_\_, and the Spanish-born \_\_\_\_\_.