

Ancient Greek Theatre

Greek theatre was acted out on stage and because there was no modern technology, acting had to compensate by becoming over-exaggerated. Masks and colours were used to represent characters so that the audience could identify them from a distance as the theatres were very large. Greek theatre used a chorus to feed back to the audience what was happening in the play, almost like a narrator, but instead it was a group of people. The chorus could also represent society's views as a whole.

In ancient Greece, theatre was a really big deal. Crowds of 15,000 people would gather to see a play. Theatre was so important to the ancient Greeks that prisoners would be released from jail temporarily, so they could also attend.

Every town had at least one theatre. The ancient Greeks were always bragging about the wonderful performances in their city-state. The ancient Greeks held drama competitions with winners for playwriting and performing. These competitions were not only held in their own towns, but also in competition with other towns. Theatre was a big, big deal.

Because so many people came to see the plays, the Greeks built huge outdoor theatres on hillsides, so that people could be seated in a way that let them see what was going on down in the orchestra pit - the stage area. The entire seating section was called the Theatron, which is the origin of our word "theatre".

Part of the reason plays were so important is that originally plays were performed to honour Dionysus, the ancient Greek god of harvest and wine. But over time, many different gods got in the act, so to speak, especially the 12 Olympians - the major gods of ancient Greece. The Greeks were always weaving the gods into their stories.

Sophocles was a famous ancient Greek playwright. He wrote 120 plays. But there were many Greek playwrights because plays were so popular. There were three types of plays.

Tragedies: The first type they invented was the tragedy. In tragedies, one or more major characters always suffered a disastrous end.

Comedies: Comedies were invented next. In comedies, plays always had a happy end. The third type was the satire.

Satires: Satires were plays that made fun of mortal legends and of real people. In ancient Greece, you did not poke fun at the gods - not in a play, not in real life, not ever. But you could poke fun at your leaders. And that was uniquely Greek. Satires in ancient Greece were often political in nature, and could indeed affect people's opinions about current events. In Greek drama, the chorus or the singers told the story, not the actors. Actors used gestures and masks to act out their parts. Actors changed roles by changing masks. Probably the most famous actor in ancient Greece was a man named Thespis. Actors today are called thespians in his honor.

The Greek theatre history began with festivals honouring their gods. A god, Dionysus, was honoured with a festival called by "City Dionysia". In Athens, during this festival, men used to perform songs to welcome Dionysus. Plays were only presented at City Dionysia festival.

Athens was the main centre for these theatrical traditions. Athenians spread these festivals to its numerous allies in order to promote a common identity.

At the early Greek festivals, the actors, directors, and dramatists were all the same person. After some time, only three actors were allowed to perform in each play. Later few non-speaking roles were allowed to perform on-stage. **Due to limited number of actors allowed on-stage, the chorus evolved into a very active part of Greek theatre.** Music was often played during the chorus' delivery of its lines.

Tragedy play

This is a form of drama based on human suffering that invokes in its audience an accompanying catharsis or pleasure in the viewing. Three well-known **Greek tragedy playwrights of the fifth century are Sophocles, Euripides and Aeschylus.**

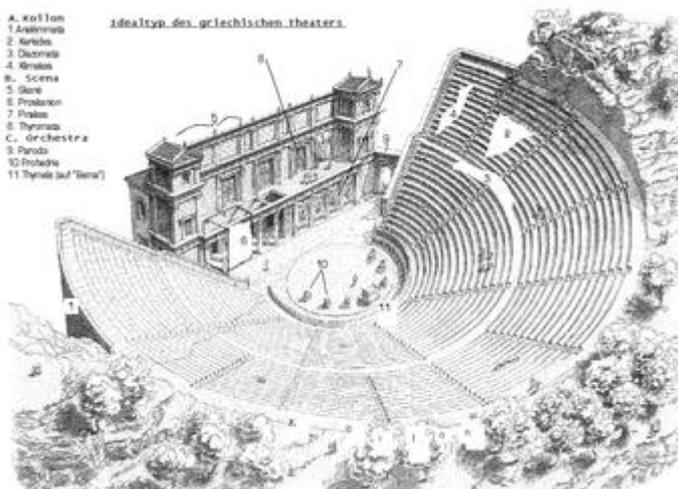
Greek Theatre

Theatre buildings were called a theatron or an amphitheatre. The theatres were large, open-air structures constructed on the slopes of hills. They consisted of three main elements: the orchestra, the skene, and the audience.

Orchestra: A large circular or rectangular area at the centre part of the theatre, where the play, dance, religious rites, acting used to take place.

Skene: A large rectangular building situated behind the orchestra, used as a backstage. Actors could change their costumes and masks. Earlier the skene was a tent or hut, later it became a permanent stone structure. These structures were sometimes painted to serve as backdrops.

Rising from the circle of the orchestra was the audience. The theatres 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.



Acting

Ancient Greek actors had to gesture grandly so that the entire audience could see and hear the story. However, most Greek theatres were cleverly constructed to transmit even the smallest sound to any seat.

Costumes and Masks

The actors were so far away from the audience that without the aid of exaggerated costumes and masks. Tragic masks carried mournful or pained expressions, while comic masks were smiling or leering. The shape of the mask amplified the actor's voice, making his words easier for the audience to hear.