

Greek tragedy originated in religious festivals in honor of Dionysus, the god of wine and fertility. Dionysus was the suffering god who died each winter but was reborn each spring. The Great or City Dionysia of Athens was a festival in March or April lasting five days.

Dithyrambs, choral lyrics in honor of Dionysus, were performed by a chorus of fifty men who sang and danced around an altar

set up in a public place. According to tradition, a goat was sacred to Dionysus or perhaps was a sacrifice to the god; thus, tragedy (goat-song) was born.

An Athenian named Thespis won a prize for tragedy in 534 or 535 B.C. The first to introduce an actor (or answerer) who dialogued with the leader of the chorus, Thespis is credited with the invention of drama. To these early beginnings the three great playwrights of 5th c. B.C. Athens brought their own achievements.

Aeschylus' introduction of a second actor made possible dialogue independent of the chorus. Thus, as dialogue became more important, the chorus lessened in importance. Aeschylus wrote his plays to form trilogies, three plays based on a single story or having a unified theme. These three tragedies, along with a satyr play (a type of comic relief), were performed on a given day of the festival. Three dramatists each took one day to present their works with prizes distributed at the conclusion of the festival.

Sophocles wrote more than 120 plays, but only seven have survived. His contributions to the theater included the introduction of a third actor, the fixing of the chorus at fifteen men, and the use of painted scenery. *Antigone*, the play we will read, was said to belong to the *Oedipus* cycle. However, *Antigone* was presented in 441 B.C., *Oedipus Rex* in 430 B.C., and *Oedipus at Colonus* in 401 B.C. (after Sophocles' death). Thus, he did not follow the tradition of Aeschylus in presenting interrelated themes as contest entries.

A contemporary of Sophocles, Euripides has been called the most tragic of the three great playwrights. He sought to humanize his characters and make his conflicts more real; thus he reduced the role of the chorus, detaching it from the main action. He employed the device of opening drama with a speech reviewing events and was known for his use (and overuse) of "the god from the machine," an ending of his plays with intervention from heaven.

Thousands of Greeks attended the theater. Originally, observers probably stood to watch performances or sat on the hillside. Later, wooden seats (bleacher style) were installed and still later stone benches. This horseshoe-shaped viewing area was the theatron or "watching place" and held as many as 15,000-16,000 citizens. According to one tradition, only citizens (male, free Greeks) could attend. Another belief had certain sections of the amphitheater reserved for women and slaves. State officials, priests, and dignitaries had front row seats.

In front of and surrounded on three sides by the viewing area was the orchestra or dancing place. The thymele, an altar to Dionysus, stood in the center. It was here that the interaction between actors and chorus took place.

Behind the orchestra was a changing hut or dressing room, the skene building. After the inclusion of painted scenery, it was the facade of this building, the proskenion, which served as a backdrop for the plays. The parodos was the entrance to the orchestra used by the chorus, and often by the spectators. These entrances were at either end of the skene building.

Our word *hypocrite* derived from the word for actor because the actor played a role or deceived an audience. Originally the actor and playwright were one. Even after the second actor was introduced, dramatists continued to take a role in their own plays. Later the chief actors were paid by the state.

The leading role was given to the protagonist, meaning first contestant. This actor played not only the star role but also minor roles, perhaps a messenger. The second actor was the deuteragonist and the third was the tritagonist. A play could have many characters but all the characters had to be divided among these three actors. However, a play was allowed an unlimited number of extras or mutes, so the stage could have a dozen soldiers or village maidens without violating the rule of three. In addition, all roles were taken by men. However, shifts from one character to another by all male performers presented few problems because of costumes and masks. The actor's trained voice adapted itself to suit the character and situation. Robes with long flowing sleeves, boots often with raised soles, and larger than life masks combined with sweeping gestures and declamatory delivery to create a dramatic, believable impact. The masks identified the speaker as male or female, young or old, grief-stricken or hopeful. The open mouth of the mask was said to have increased the resonance of the actor's voice.

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The Greeks believed that musicians were an important part of celebrations, for each instrument had an emotional effect on the listener. It is difficult to imagine how the music sounded to the ears of the Greeks because the music we are accustomed to hearing today does not have the same tonal effect. However, instruments we would recognize are the flute, lyre, and trumpet.

Dance, too, had a special meaning for the Greeks. Dance was defined as "any expressive rhythmical movement." Thus, the chorus moved in *unison* in a stately manner from left to right and back again or gestured in *unison* with broad sweeping hand motions.

The chorus helped set the mood, added beauty to the production, provided background information, divided the action into episodes, and reflected on events and themes. The chorus was made up of "background" characters, such as town elders, young maidens, or captives of war. These "bystanders" asked questions, commented on actions, offered approval or criticism, and gave advice, usually through the chorus leader. Choral odes were an integral part of tragedy, not to be considered as "outside" the action.

Just as the concept of chorus is unfamiliar to 20th c. theater-goers, so, too, are some other conventions of the Greek theater. Greek tragedy usually followed what Aristotle called the three unities. Unity of action demanded a single action with no subplots or irrelevancies; unity of time limited action to a 24-hour period; unity of place decreed one unchanging scene, marketplace or temple or palace courtyard.

For a number of reasons relating to unity or to the religious nature of the theater, playwrights employed the convention of messenger. Properly used, this convention achieved both immediacy (through vivid reporting of off-stage events) and distance (violence suggested but not depicted).

Other limitations of the theater existed. Unlike other characters who entered and exited, the chorus (fifteen men in Sophocles' time) remained, a continuous presence throughout the play. For the most part, they stood in the background, occasionally speaking with a character but mainly silent until the recitation of an ode. Unlike the modern theater, there were no intermissions between acts, no opening and closing of a curtain, and no lighting effects since plays were performed in outdoor theaters during daylight hours.

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