

The History of Greek Theater

Theater and drama in Ancient Greece took form in about 5th century BCE, with the Sophocles, the great writer of tragedy. In his plays and those of the same genre, heroes and the ideals of life were depicted and glorified. It was believed that man should live for honor and fame, his action was courageous and glorious and his life would climax in a great and noble death.

Originally, the hero's recognition was created by selfish behaviors and little thought of service to others. As the Greeks grew toward city-states and colonization, it became the destiny and ambition of the hero to gain honor by serving his city. The second major characteristic of the early Greek world was the supernatural. The two worlds were not separate, as the gods lived in the same world as the men, and they interfered in the men's lives as they chose to. It was the gods who sent suffering and evil to men. In the plays of Sophocles, the gods brought about the hero's downfall because of a tragic flaw in the character of the hero.

In Greek tragedy, suffering brought knowledge of worldly matters and of the individual. Aristotle attempted to explain how an audience could observe tragic events and still have a pleasurable experience. Aristotle, by searching the works of writers of Greek tragedy, Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles (whose Oedipus Rex he considered the finest of all Greek tragedies), arrived at his definition of tragedy. This explanation has a profound influence for more than twenty centuries on those writing tragedies, most significantly Shakespeare. Aristotle's analysis of tragedy began with a description of the effect such a work had on the audience as a "catharsis" or purging of the emotions. He decided that catharsis was the purging of two specific emotions, pity and fear. The hero has made a mistake due to ignorance, not because of wickedness or corruption. Aristotle used the word "hamartia", which is the "tragic flaw" or offense committed in ignorance. For example, Oedipus is ignorant of his true parentage when he commits his fatal deed.

Oedipus Rex is one of the stories in a three-part myth called the Theban cycle. The structure of most all Greek tragedies is similar to Oedipus Rex. Such plays are divided in to five parts, the prologue or introduction, the "parados" or entrance of the chorus, four episode or acts separates from one another by "stasimons" or choral odes, and "exodos", the action after the last stasimon. These odes are lyric poetry, lines chanted or sung as the chorus moved rhythmically across the orchestra. The lines that accompanied the movement of the chorus in one direction were called "strophe", the return movement was accompanied by lines called "antistrophe". The choral ode might contain more than one strophe or antistrophe.

Greek tragedy originated in honor of the god of wine, Dionysus, the patron god of tragedy. The performance took place in an open-air theater. The word tragedy is derived from the term "tragedia" or "goat-song", named for the goat skins the chorus wore in the performance. The plots came from legends of the Heroic Age. Tragedy grew from a choral lyric, as Aristotle said, tragedy is largely based on life's pity and splendor.

Plays were performed at dramatic festivals, the two main ones being the Feast of the Winepress in January and the City Dionysia at the end of March. The Proceeding began with the procession of choruses and actors of the three competing poets. A herald then announced the poet's names and the titles of their plays. On this day it was likely that the image of Dionysus was taken in a procession from his temple

beside the theater to a point near the road he had once taken to reach Athens from the north, then it was brought back by torch light, amid a carnival celebration, to the theater itself, where his priest occupied the central seat of honor during the performances. On the first day of the festival there were contests between the choruses, five of men and five of boys. Each chorus consisted of fifty men or boys. On the next three days, a "tragic tetralogy" (group made up of four pieces, a trilogy followed by a satyric drama) was performed each morning. This is compared to the Elizabethan habit of following a tragedy with a jig. During the Peloponnesian Wars, this was followed by a comedy each afternoon.

The Father of the drama was Thespis of Athens, 535 BC, who created the first actor. The actor performed in intervals between the dancing of the chorus and conversing at times with the leader of the chorus. The tragedy was further developed when new myths became part of the performance, changing the nature of the chorus to a group appropriate to the individual story. A second actor was added by Aeschylus and a third actor was added by Sophocles, and the number of the chorus was fixed at fifteen. The chorus' part was gradually reduced, and the dialogue of the actors became increasingly important.

The word "chorus" meant "dance or "dancing ground", which was how dance evolved into the drama. Members of the chorus were characters in the play who commented on the action. They drew the audience into the play and reflected the audience's reactions.

The Greek plays were performed in open-air theaters. Nocturnal scenes were performed even in sunlight. The area in front of the stages was called the "orchestra", the area in which the chorus moved and danced. There was no curtain and the play was presented as a whole with no act or scene divisions. There was a building at the back of the stage called a skene, which represented the front of a palace or temple. It contained a central doorway and two other stage entrances, one at the left and the other at the right, representing the country and the city.

Sacrifices were performed at the altar of Dionysus, and the chorus performed in the orchestra, which surrounded the altar. The theatron, from where the word "theater" is derived, is where the audience sat, built on a hollowed-out hillside. Seated of honor, found in the front and center of the theatron, were for public officials and priests. The seating capacity of the theater was about 17,000. The audience of about 14,000 was lively, noisy, emotional and unrestrained. They ate, applauded, cheered, hissed, and kicked their wooden seats in disgust. Small riots were known to break out if the audience was dissatisfied. Women were allowed to be spectators of tragedy, and probably even comedy. Admission was free or nominal, and the poor were paid for by the state. The Attic dramatists, like the Elizabethans, had a public of all classes. Because of the size of the audience, the actors must also have been physically remote. The sense of remoteness may have been heightened by masked, statuesque figures of the actors whose acting depended largely on voice gestures and grouping. Since there were only three actors, the same men in the same play had to play double parts. At first, the dramatists themselves acted, like Shakespeare. Gradually, acting became professionalized.

Simple scenery began with Sophocles, but changes of scene were rare and stage properties were also rare, such as an occasional altar, a tomb or an image of gods. Machinery was used for lightning or thunder or for lifting celestial persons from heaven and back, or for revealing the interior of the stage building. This was called "deus ex machina", which means god from the machine, and was a technical device that used a metal crane on top of the skene building, which contained

the dressing rooms, from which a dummy was suspended to represent a god. This device was first employed by Euripides to give a miraculous conclusion to a tragedy. In later romantic literature, this device was no longer used and the miracles supplied by it were replaced by the sudden appearance of a rich uncle, the discovery of new wills, or of infants changed at birth.

Many proprieties of the Greek plays were attached to violence. Therefore, it was a rule that acts of violence must take place off stage. This carried through to the Elizabethan theater which avoided the horrors of men being flayed alive or Gloucester's eyes being put out in full view of an audience (King Lear). When Medea went inside the house to murder her children, the chorus was left outside, chanting in anguish, to represent the feelings the chorus had and could not act upon, because of their metaphysical existence.

The use of music in the theater began very simply consisting of a single flute player that accompanied the chorus. Toward the close of the century, more complicated solo singing was developed by Euripides. There could then be large-scale spectacular events, with stage crowds and chariots, particularly in plays by Aeschylus.

Greek comedy was derived from two different sources, the more known being the choral element which included ceremonies to stimulate fertility at the festival of Dionysus or in ribald drunken revel in his honor. The term comedy is actually drawn from "komos", meaning song of revelry. The second source of Greek comedy was that from the Sicilian "mimes", who put on very rude performances where they would make satirical allusions to audience members as they ad-libbed their performances.

In the beginning, comedy was frank, indecent and sexual. The plots were loosely and carelessly structured and included broad farce and buffoonery. The performers were coarse and obscene while using satire to depict important contemporary moral, social and political issues of Athenian life. The comedy included broad satire of well known persons of that time.

Throughout the comedic period in Greece, there were three distinctive eras of comedies as the genre progressed. Old comedy, which lasted from approximately 450 to 400 BCE, was performed at the festivals of Dionysus following the tragedies. There would be contests between three poets, each exhibiting one comedy. Each comedy troupe would consist of one or two actors and a chorus of twenty-four. The actors wore masks and "soccus", or sandals, and the chorus often wore fantastic costumes. Comedies were constructed in five parts, the prologue, where the leading character conceived the "happy idea", the parodos or entrance of the chorus, the agon, a dramatized debate between the proponent and opponent of the "happy idea" where the opposition was always defeated, the parabasis, the coming forth of the chorus where they directly addressed the audience and aired the poet's views on most any matter the poet felt like having expressed, and the episodes, where the "happy idea" was put into practical application. Aristotle highly criticized comedy, saying that it was just a ridiculous imitation of lower types of man with eminent faults emphasized for the audience's pleasure, such as a mask worn to show deformity, or for the man to do something like slip and fall on a banana peel.

Aristophanes, a comic poet of the old comedy period, wrote comedies which came to represent old comedy, as his style was widely copied by other poets. In his most famous works, he used dramatic satire on some of the most famous philosophers and poets of the era. In "The Frogs" he ridiculed Euripides, and in "The Clouds" he mocked Socrates. His works followed all the basic principles of old comedy,

but he added a facet of cleverness and depth in feeling to his lyrics, in an attempt to appeal to both the emotions and intellect of the audience.

Middle comedy, which dominated from 400 to 336 BCE, was very transitional, having aspects of both old comedy and new comedy. It was more timid than old comedy, having many less sexual gestures and innuendoes. It was concerned less with people and politics, and more with myths and tragedies. The chorus began its fade into the background, becoming more of an interlude than the important component it used to be. Aristophanes wrote a few works in middle comedy, but the most famous writers of the time were Antiphanes of Athens and Alexis of Thuri, whose compositions have mostly been lost and only very few of their found works have been full extant plays.

In new comedy which lasted from 336 to 250 BCE, satire is almost entirely replaced by social comedy involving the family and individual character development, and the themes of romantic love. A closely knit plot in new comedy was based on intrigue, identities, relationships or a combination of these. A subplot was often utilized as well. The characters in new comedy are very similar in each work, possibly including a father who is very miser like, a son who is mistreated but deserving, and other people with stereotypical personas. The chief writer of new comedy was Menander, and as with the prominent writers of the middle comedic era, most of his works have been lost, but other dramatists of the time period, like Terence and Plautus, had imitated and adapted his methods. Menander's *The Curmudgeon* is the only complete extant play known by him to date, and it served as the basis for the later Latin writers to adapt.

Adventure, brilliance, invention, romance and scenic effect, together with delightful lyrics and wisdom, were the gifts of the Greek theater. These conventions strongly affected subsequent plays and playwrights, having put forth influence on theater throughout the centuries.