

The Theater of Dionysus

The Theater of Dionysus was Europe's first theater, and stood immediately below the Parthenon in Athens, Greece. It was originally built in the late 5th century B.C. The theater was an outdoor auditorium in the shape of a great semicircle on the slope of the Acropolis, with rows of seats on which about eighteen thousand spectators could comfortably seat. The front rows consisted of marble chairs, and were the only seats in the theater that had a back support. The priests of Dionysus and the chief magistrates of Athens reserved these rows. Priests claimed 50 of the 67 front row seats, then came the officials, the guests of honor, then finally the ordinary citizens of Athens. Beyond the front row, stood a circular space called the orchestra where the Chorus would sing and dance, and in the center of which stood the altar of Dionysus. The orchestra level was around 3 meters higher than the shrine. Behind the orchestra, there lied a heavy rectangular foundation known as the stage on which the actors would perform their section of the play. The back of the stage had a building painted to look like the front of a temple or a palace. Here, the actors would retire when they were not needed on stage or would go to when they had to change their costumes. Above lay the deep blue sky, behind it was the Acropolis, and seen in the distance was the olive colored hills and lush green of the forests that surround.

The theater was built as a result of the Athenian's religious practice in honor of the god, Dionysos, who personified both wine and fruitfulness. Long before the theater itself was built, an annual ceremonial festival was held for Dionysus in the same spot. This ancient ceremony was performed by choruses of men who sang and danced in the god's honor. Spectators would gather in a circle to watch these dancers; that was the way that the theater took its circular shape. When the theater was built, the performers only sang and danced about the stories of Dionysus's life, then later the stories of other gods and heroes. The stories were told in the form of a song, chanted at first by all who took place, then later by a chorus of about fifty performers. During the intervals of a song, the leader would recite part of the story himself. As time passed, these recitations became more and more important, as it eventually overtook the chorus. They were now presented by two or three people, while the chorus consisted of only fifteen performers. A maximum of three speakers were allowed on stage at once, and only one story was told during one performance. The chorus, although less important, still set the atmosphere for the play, and as well gave the audience a time of relief from a tragedy.

The Festival of Dionysus was a great dramatic one that was held during March and April inside the theater. Three poets were chosen every year, and each wrote a series of three tragedies based on some well-known Greek legend. Originally, admission to the theater was free, but as the crowds grew, the leaders realized that a small entrance fee would be economically beneficial for the theater. Several plays were given in one day, and a prize was awarded to the best, so the audience was obligated to start at dawn and would remain until sunset. While watching the plays, the Athenian audience was very critical as they would bluntly show their signs of approval or disapproval by their applause, or lack thereof. The legends and traditions from which most of the Greek plays took their plots were well known to the Athenians. They were stories honoring some great event or explaining some religious observance. These legends were chosen by the different dramatists, each of whom brought forth a different side of the story to enforce some particular lesson he wished to teach the audience. The plays were written in poetry which deeply stirred the emotions of the audience. It gave the Athenians much to think about their eternal problems of human life and conduct, and the proper relationship between humans and gods.

Each play followed certain guidelines which created the culture of the theater. When the play began, only three actors were allowed on stage at once. They would usually wear very elaborate costumes, and on their feet would be a strange looking wooden sole called a buskin. This would add about six inches to their height to make them look taller and more impressive to the audience. A facial mask would also be worn to identify whom the character was, and the moods and feelings that the character portrayed. The mask included a wide mouth to project the voice of the actors so that everyone in the immense audience would be able to hear what the actor had to say. The actors would change their masks as they changed their characters. There were no curtains used, even though the plays were not divided into different acts. When there was a pause in action, the Chorus would fill up the time with their songs. When a tragedy was performed, the final calamity would never be shown on stage, but a messenger would appear to give the audience an account of what had happened.

The creation of drama and the theater was a very large stepping stone for the Greeks, as it showed surrounding and future societies many things about the Greek beliefs, lifestyles, and culture. The building of the theater itself showed their degree of engineering and architectural ability that they used in creating their structures. It also showed that they had a vague form of understanding the way that acoustics work, as all the seats, no matter where they were, could hear the sounds from the stage. The plays that were performed gave an insight on Greek history and mythology. Naturally, they would not have performed any plays which did not interest the audience. They would only display what they believed to be important for civilians to know, such as their heritage and religious beliefs. Finally, the innovation of the drama and the theater undeniably confirmed their absolute belief in religion, as the theater would never have come about if it weren't for the worship of Dionysus by the Athenians.

Bibliography

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