

# THE GREEK THEATRE

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**Y**ou may not be a theatre person. You may not enjoy dramas, comedies, one-acts, or musicals. Maybe you haven't even seen a stage-play before, but you surely enjoy the theatre's modern-day descendants. Movies and TV owe everything to theatre. They're just fancier, flashier versions. And theatre? Theatre owes



everything to the Greeks. The Classical Greeks understood that people need entertainment. People have problems, people have cares, and people need a way to forget about them—just for a while. They need a way to be temporarily transported from their world to a different one. There they can watch fictional characters battle fictional problems and detach themselves from their own. Although there were other ancient cultures that invented their own mass entertainment (like the Romans, who liked nothing better than seeing gladiators rip one another limb from limb—an ancient, better-acted version of Wrestlemania), the Greeks were more intellectual and understood that carnage, while exciting, isn't soul-cleansing.

It's been a long journey from the drama of the Greeks to modern films. Greek plays would bore most modern audiences stiff. They had no gory death scenes (all the carnage occurs off-stage), no sex, no special effects (unless you count lowering someone in on a rope). If the plays were missing all these, did anyone come to see them? They did en masse. The theatron (hillside theatre) in Athens, which seated 14,000 spectators, was frequently filled to capacity—an impressive crowd even by our standards.

There were no sound guys in ancient Greece. Actors were required to have massive lungs in order to reach “the cheap seats.” Their costuming did give them a bit of help. All actors wore masks, usually with exaggerated features (those at the top needed to be able to make them out), and the mouthpiece cut into each mask acted as a megaphone, projecting the actors' voices even further than they could on their own.

The masks also helped for those problematic female roles, because women were not allowed to participate in the theatre. An actor wearing a feminine mask with blonde tresses attached played the female roles. (Even 1,500 years later in Shakespeare's time, women were still forbidden to act.) Some parts required actors to wear padded robes and raised boots to increase their size. Acting (as we know it) would be nearly impossible in this get-up. While modern actors rely on facial expression, Greek actors had to rely on hand gestures and voice inflection. Yet, because of the limitations put on acting, the playwright's words gained optimum importance.

The chorus was an integral part of every Greek play. As the name suggests, the chorus was a group of 12 to 15 men who sang and danced in response to the actor's words and actions. During the events of the play, they were the voice of the people and public opinion. The democratic Athenians would want to know, "What do Oedipus' subjects think of his actions? What do the people of Thebes think?" In fact, the very first plays were probably just a chorus, relating all the events of a story solely through song and dance. Thespis, a legendary playwright, allegedly first came up with the idea of adding a speaking part, or an actor who was not a part of the chorus. This revolutionary idea is why actors are now called thespians.

Before drama really hit its peak, only one speaking character inhabited the stage at a time. Because characters didn't interact and were differentiated by masks, one actor could play all parts. Just imagine a movie made up entirely of monologues—not the most interesting way to tell a story. Modern audiences want to see how characters interact, but the Greeks were so used to the old way, they never dreamed it could be improved upon.

When the playwright Aeschylus came up with the idea of adding a second character to the stage, it again revolutionized the industry. Now there was the interaction the audience never knew they were missing. Of course, once this innovation hit the scene, no one thought the two-actor approach could be topped until Sophocles wowed them again by introducing a third character to the stage. In this period of rapid innovation, drama was truly born.

As I mentioned before, what we would consider special effects were almost nonexistent. They had effects, but they weren't very special. The only device that could remotely qualify was a crane called the mekhane, which allowed gods or magical characters to "fly" out from behind the skene (painted backdrop) and give the audience a shock. Characters committed their grisly murders, suicides, or eye-pluckings entirely off-stage, leaving it to their servants to run back in and recount what happened in full detail. In *Oedipus Rex*, Oedipus leaves the stage to see the dead body of his wife for himself. A servant re-enters and tells how Oedipus took up Jocasta's brooch to put out his kingly eyes. Only then does Oedipus re-enter—with fake blood running from the eye-sockets of his mask.

For the Greeks drama offered catharsis, an emotional purging. By going through the suffering of Oedipus with him, the audience felt pity and sadness, ridding themselves of these negative emotions. When the play was finished, even though the events of the play were depressing, the audience would actually be happier than when they came. In a simpler way: Next to Oedipus' problems, everyone else's looked pretty minor.

The Greeks perfected the art of tragedy, retelling ancient myths like that of Oedipus to reflect modern concerns. Through these continued successes, the idea of the tragic hero was formed. This is the character placed at the center of the play's tragic events. He is typically a king or nobleman who undergoes a fall. Sometimes this fall concludes

with his death, or in Oedipus' case, utter misery. This breakdown is caused by the hero's tragic flaw, an imperfection in his character. All of his decisions are influenced by this flaw, and before the end of the play, he has locked himself into a series of events from which there is no escape. The most common flaw selected by the Greek tragedians was hubris (overweening pride, which placed one on level with the gods).

The Athenian festival of Dionysus meant a full day of plays, a kind of ancient movie marathon. Playwrights were chosen to compete for the prize of tragedy. The three tragedy playwrights (only three were selected to participate in a single festival) presented four works: three original tragedies and a satyr play. A satyr play was a crude parody of a famous myth, presented with a chorus of anatomically correct satyrs who humorously participated in the actions. Satyrs were half-men, half-goat creatures associated with the god Dionysus, the patron of the festival. After all that emotional purging (not to mention hours sitting in the sun), the audience needed something light and raunchy to wrap things up and lift their spirits before the long walk back to their homes.

The Greeks may have adored their soul-cleansing tragedy, but they enjoyed comedy too. Comedies were presented at the Dionysia, and playwrights fought for the prize of comedy. While tragedies and satyr plays often used the old myths as their source, comedies were contemporary jabs at daily life in Athens. The comedic playwrights took shots at everything from philosophers to the city assembly to their fellow playwrights. And, for all their intellectual superiority, the Greeks weren't above crude humor. The "fart joke" is much older than most people think, with the Greek comedies using flatulence to its full potential.

Today we are merely adding more bells and whistles to what the Greeks started long ago. Television and film may seem far removed from those humble beginnings, but beneath it all, the goal is still the same: To trigger human emotion (whether it be gasps, screams, tears, or laughter) and give the mind a temporary escape.

## **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS**

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1. What elements of theater (or dramatic entertainment in general) have changed over the last 2,500 years? Explain.
2. Horrific acts of violence were committed offstage in Greek theatre. Does modern entertainment use the opposite technique? Explain. Which is more effective? Explain.
3. As a society, do we prefer tragedy or comedy? Why?
4. Have the formulas for comedy and tragedy changed since ancient Greece? Explain.
5. Were the Greeks right about catharsis—can feeling emotion over a tragic fictional story relieve you of your own sadness? Explain.