


Ancient Greek Theatre

 The English words for tragedy and comedy come from the language of the Ancient Greeks. Although the Greeks were not the first to perform plays, they were very interested in the origins of tragedy and comedy. In their writings, the philosopher Aristotle and other Greek writers proposed theories and created stories of how the art form of theatre was developed.



The Outdoor Theatre

Greek plays were performed in outdoor theatre. At the start, the theatre were in open areas located in the centre of the city or next to hillsides. The audience would stand or sit to listen and watch the chorus sing about the adventures of a god or hero. Toward the end of the 6th century B.C.E., theatre structures became more elaborate. As the theatre became more and more popular and competitive among cities, theaters became larger with some structures accommodating as many as 15,000 people at one time.



The Architecture of the Greek Outdoor Theater

The orchestra



The outdoor theatre was divided into four distinct areas. The orchestra, which comes from the Ancient Greek words for "dancing space," was a circular area where the chorus would dance and sing. The earliest orchestras were made of very hard earth but eventually, as the theatre evolved, the orchestra was paved with marble or other flooring. The centre of the orchestra usually contained an altar to the gods. The orchestra was generally about 60 feet in diameter.

The theatron

The viewing place or theatron was usually built on a hillside that overlooked the orchestra. The seats in the theatron were stepped up the hillside and fanned out around the orchestra so that the audience could see the actors and chorus below. In the fifth century B.C.E. the audience would have been seated on boards or cushions but a hundred years later the audience would have had seats made of marble. The curved structure of the theatron amplified the sound so that even if you were seated up the hillside you could hear what the actors were saying and what the chorus was singing.

The skene

The skene was a building that was on the side of the orchestra that was the furthest distance away from the audience. About 25 feet wide and 10 feet deep, the stage was raised 2-3 steps higher than the orchestra. The skene was directly in back of the stage and was decorated as a temple or palace as a backdrop for the play. The skene contained a set of doors for the actors to make exits and entrances. Their masks and props would be stored inside the skene for easy access. There was also access to the roof of the skene. If an actor played a Greek god in the play he might be seen on the roof. At the beginning, the skene was just a tent but as Greek theatre evolved, the skene became a permanent stone structure.

The parodos

The parodos were passageways on either side of the orchestra between the orchestra and seating area. The chorus and some of the actors, such as those who played messengers, made their entrances and exits using these passageways. The parodos were also used by the audience to enter and exit the theatre.



The Structure of a Greek Tragedy

The structure of a Greek Tragedy was simple. The play began with a beginning speech spoken by one or two of the actors. This beginning speech or prologue gave background information about the characters and setting of the play. The actors were always men. Even the women's parts were played by men. Tragedies almost always were based on myths and stories from the past.

Next came the parodos named after the entrance passageways. This was the song that the chorus sang when they first entered the orchestra area. The job of the chorus was to comment on the drama in the play. There were usually 12 to 50 players in the chorus and they spoke their lines in unison. Like the actors, they sometimes wore masks. In a sense, they were considered to be a group acting as one individual.

After the parodos came the first episode. There were only three male actors performing. These characters and the chorus would perform the story together.

After each episode there was a choral ode called a stasimon. During this song, the chorus would sing and dance. Their performance was a reflection of what had been discussed in the episode. Once again, mythology would be the framework for the songs and dances.

These alternating episodes and odes would continue until the play was completed. Then at the end of the play, the exodos, there would be a wrap-up processional song that offered the moral of the story and summed up the wisdom that the audience should take away with them.



The Structure of a Greek Comedy

Unlike the Greek tragedies, comedies were based on events that were occurring in that time period instead of on myths of the past. The first part of the comedy was the parodos. The chorus of performers would wear crazy costumes such as bees with giant stingers or kitchen utensils and would perform a number of song and dance routines.

The second part of the comedy was the agon, which was a witty debate among the main actors. Scenes changed fast and the actors may have done some improvisation which just means they made up their lines as they went along. Since there were only three actors and they had a number of parts to play, they were always changing costumes and masks. Because the audience couldn't see the facial expressions of the actors, the use of the actors' voices and their gestures were very important.

The actors would poke fun at politicians or other well-known citizens who may have even been in the audience. The third part of the comedy was called the parabasis. During this part, the chorus spoke directly to the audience. The comedy was wrapped up with the exodos, which was a lively song and dance routine from the chorus.

The Greeks took their comedies and tragedies very seriously and would hold competitions for the best plays.