

## Greek Drama

### I. Origin of Tragedy

- A. Religious festivals in honor of Dionysus
  - 1. City of Dionysia—religious festival held in spring
  - 2. Dithyramb (dith' i ram)—hymn sung in honor of the god \_\_\_\_\_
  - 3. Chorus—group of about 50 who sang and danced
- B. Thespis (thes' pis)—“Father of Drama” (6th Century B.C.)
  - 1. Won prize for tragedy in 535 B.C.
  - 2. Said to have introduced first actor and, thus, dialogue
- C. Aeschylus (esh' ki lus)—(525–426 B.C.)
  - 1. Added second actor
  - 2. Wrote trilogies on unified themes
- D. Sophocles (sof' o klez)—(496–406 B.C.)
  - 1. Added third actor
  - 2. Fixed number of Chorus to fifteen
  - 3. Introduced painted scenery
  - 4. Made each play of the trilogy separate in nature
- E. Euripides (u rip' i dez)—(486–406 B.C.)
  - 1. Reduced participation of Chorus in main action
  - 2. Relied on heavy prologues and *deus ex machina* endings

### II. Structure of Theater

- A. Theatron (the' a tron)—*seeing place* where audience sat
- B. Orchestra (or kees' tra)—circular dancing place where actors and Chorus performed
- C. Thymele (thimə lē)—altar to Dionysus in center of orchestra
- D. Skene (ske' nē)—building used as dressing room
- E. Proskenion (pros' ka' ni on)—facade of skene building which served as backdrop
- F. Parodos (par' o dos)—entrance to the theater used by Chorus

### III. Actors and Acting

- A. Hypocrites (hip' o kri' tes)—*the answerer*—playing roles
  - 1. Actor and dramatist originally the same—playwright took leading role
  - 2. Never have more than three—changed characters
    - a. protagonist (pro' tag' ə nist)
    - b. deuteragonist (doo' tə rag' ə nist)
    - c. tritagonist (tri' tag' ə nist)
  - 3. All male performers—played female roles also
- B. Costumes and Masks
  - 1. Long, flowing robes—colored symbolically
  - 2. High boots, often with raised soles
  - 3. Larger than life masks—made of linen, wood, cork
    - a. identified age, gender, emotion
    - b. exaggerated features—large eyes, open mouth

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Date \_\_\_\_\_

#### IV. Chorus

##### A. Music and Dance

1. Musical accompaniment for choral odes—flute, lyre, percussion
2. Dance defined as expressive rhythmical movement

##### B. Function

1. Sets overall mood and expresses theme
2. Adds beauty (theatrical effectiveness) through song and dance
3. Gives background information
4. Divides action and offers reflections on events
5. Questions, advises, expresses opinion—usually through Chorus leader

#### V. Conventions

##### A. Unities

1. Action—simple plot
2. Time—single day
3. Place—one scene throughout

##### B. Messenger

1. Tells news happening away from scene
2. Reports acts of violence not allowed to be seen

##### C. Limitations of Theater

1. Continuous presence of Chorus
2. No intermissions; continuous flow of action and choral odes
3. No lighting; no curtains

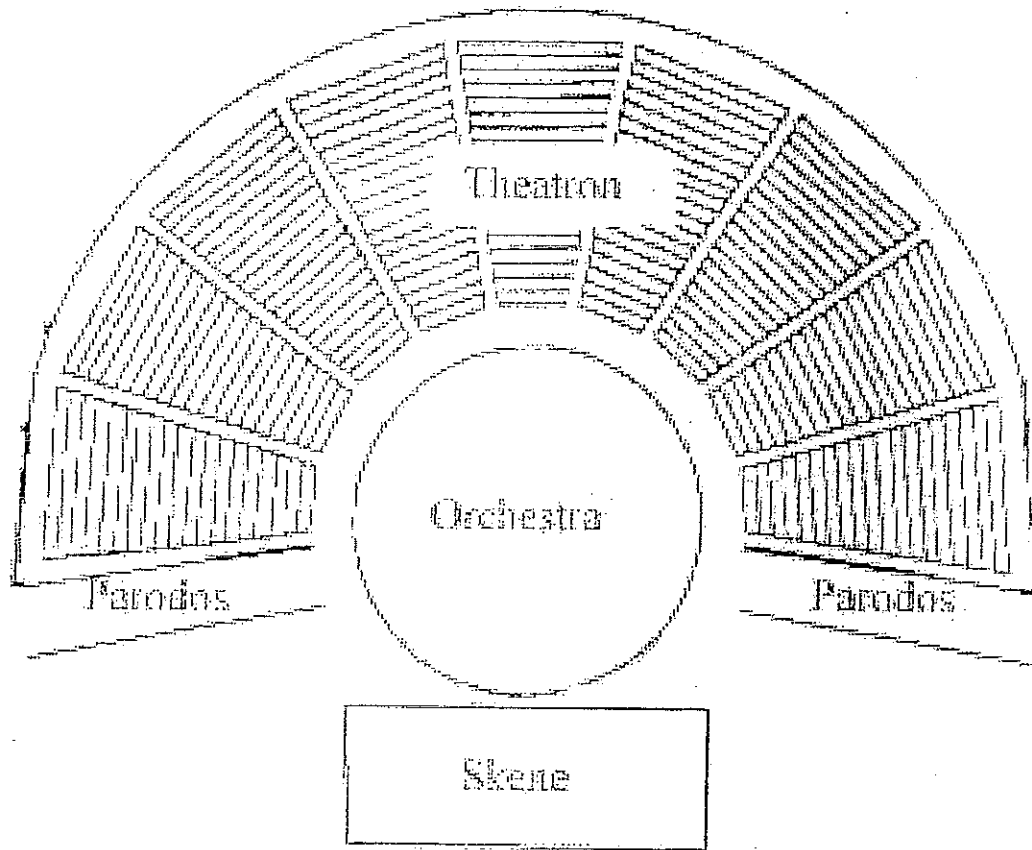
## Getting the Terms Straight (Aristotle's Poetics)

tragedy	an imitation of a serious action which will arouse pity and fear in the viewer
tragic hero	a character, usually of high birth, neither totally good nor totally evil, whose downfall is brought about by some weakness or error in judgment
hamartia (hām a(r) tē a)	a tragic flaw, weakness of character or error in judgment, which causes the downfall of the hero
hubris (hū bris)	arrogance or overweening pride which causes the hero's transgression against the gods; usually, the tragic flaw
anagnorisis (an ag nōr' i sis)	recognition or discovery on the part of the hero; change from ignorance to knowledge
peripeteia (per i pe tī a)	reversal of fortune
nemesis (nem e sis)	fate that cannot be escaped
catharsis (ka thar sis)	purgation of emotions of pity and fear which leaves the viewer both relieved and elated

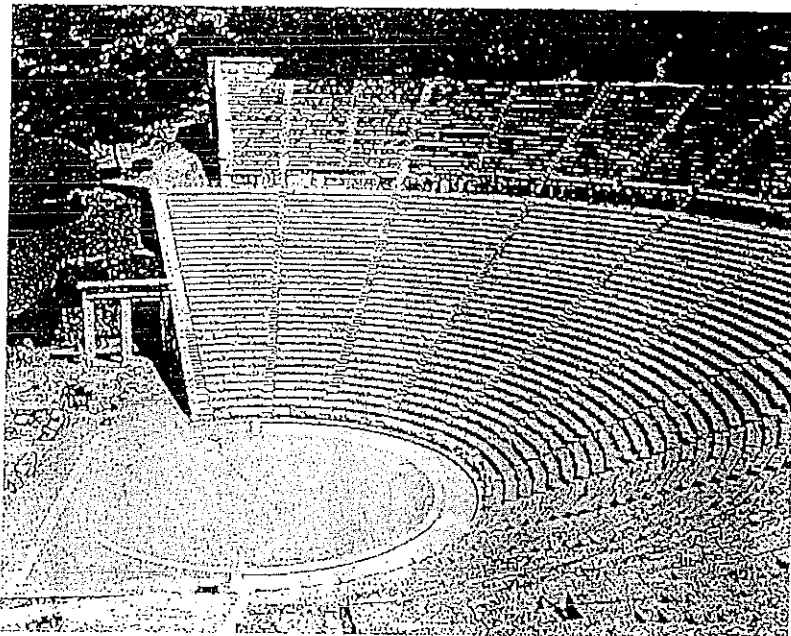
Dramatic Irony - The audience knows something that a character does not.

Stichomythic Dialogue - Alternating, short lines of dialogue to reveal tension

Deus ex machina - miraculous, unexpected ending.



Parts of a Greek Theater



## The Theatre of Ancient Greece

Theatre finds its roots in ritual, and, in particular, religious ritual. What began thousands of years ago as dances and songs, or choral hymns, performed by man in honor of his gods eventually evolved into a distinct art form known as theatre. Historians of Western civilization credit the establishment of theatre as a significant independent art form to its beginnings and development in Classical Greece.

The origins of ancient Greek drama began with dances and songs performed in honor of the god Dionysus, the god of wine and procreation. To him were offered orgiastic revels celebrating the good life. What began as choric storytelling, inspired by Dionysian legends, evolved into serious enactment of the legends in Greek culture when the gods spoke and interacted with man.

Classical Greek drama is in actuality Athenian drama. Though theatre as an art form evolved over hundreds of years, throughout the many city-states that were to become Greece, formal records of its existence and influence on community life establish sixth century as its official debut. History indicates that Thespis, the legendary first actor, won an award in a religious festival in Athens about 534 B.C. for his performance of a tragedy. Theatre flourished, however, in fifth century, B.C., when Athens, under the leadership of Pericles, became the center of culture and governmental power for Ancient Greece.

Since ancient Greek society conducted most of its important activities outdoors, where the mass of its population could assemble in one location to observe religious ceremonies or conduct civic duties, it is understandable how the great outdoor theatres, such as the Theatre of Dionysus in Athens and the Theatre at Epidaurus, originated. Furthermore, ancient Greek society appreciated a sense of the dramatic in all activities of daily life, and thus, appreciated the dramatic recreation of human experience in the theatre.

Three week-long festivals were set aside each year for these dithyrambic or choric storytelling rituals. The first and principal festival, the Great City Dionysia, took place in late March, attracting audiences from other Greek city-states beside Athens and from foreign lands. The second festival, the Lenaia, in late January and early February, attracted a more local audience. The third festival, the Rural Dionysia, occurred at varying times and in the countryside outside of the city walls. These festivals sponsored competitions for both tragedy and comedy and inspired continued improvement of a rapidly growing art form.

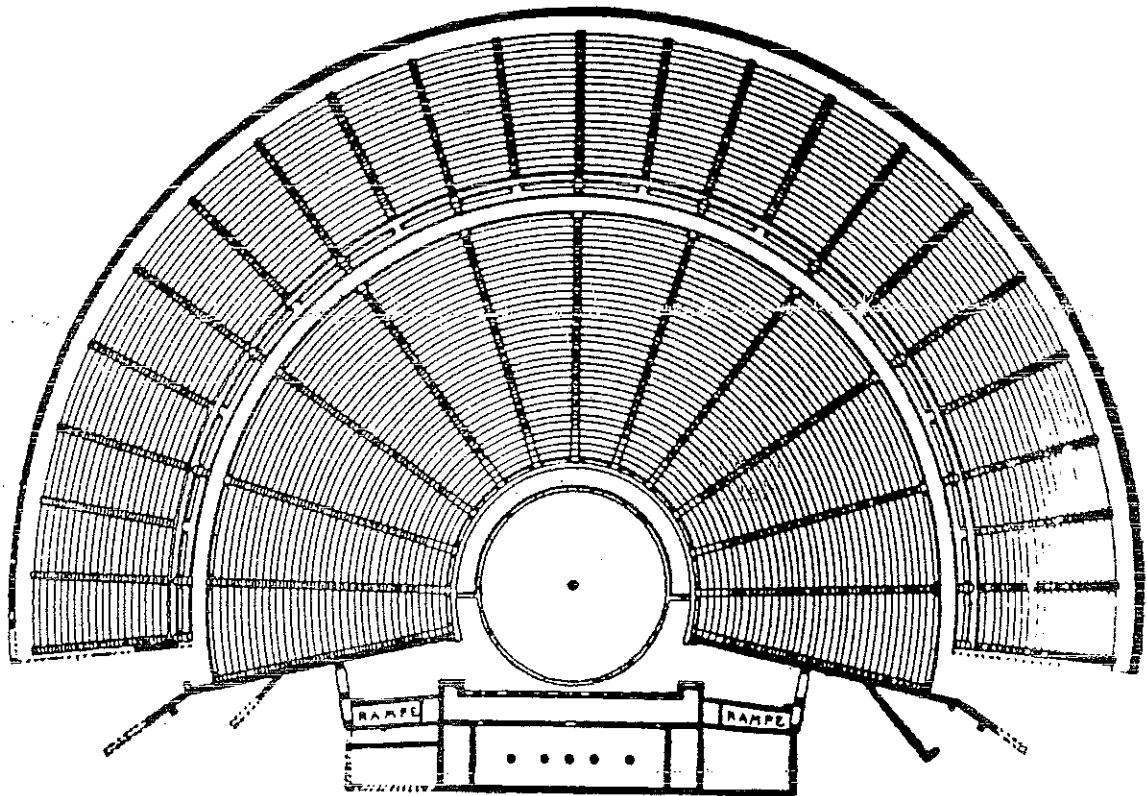
## The Greek Theatre

Historians believe that drama was first performed on the stone threshing floors in the countryside of Greece. Eventually historians surmise that this circular "dancing place," or **orchestra**, was moved to the foot of the temple of the god being honored. The temple then served as a background for early theatrical performances. By the fifth century B.C., the design of the Greek theatre was complete with its early connections to the rural stone threshing floors incorporated.

Using the hilly terrain of Greece, the builders of Greek theatre positioned the orchestra, where the chorus danced, at the foot of a semi-circular hillside into which stone benches were built. The audience sat on these benches in the **theatron**, "the seeing place." Extending from the orchestra to each side of the theatron were two broad aisles, the **parados**, a term which also identified the entrance song of the chorus in a tragedy. Perpendicular to the orchestra was the **skene**, a rectangular building with three doors in front, providing a generic backdrop for the action of the play as well as an area into which actors could exit to disappear from the scene and to change costumes, masks, and roles. Toward the end of the century, a small platform in front of the skene appeared to give actors more visibility and to separate them from the chorus in the orchestra below. This platform was called the **proskenion**.

The performances began at dawn and lasted the entire day. The light of the sun illuminated performers and audience alike, uniting them uniquely into the drama.

**Directions:** Label the drawing below. Identify the theatron, the orchestra, the parados, the skene, and the proskenion.



Kenneth MacGowan and William McNitz, *Golden Ages of the Theater* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall)

## The Greek Actor

Participating in Greek drama was considered to be a citizen's civic duty. Citizens were expected to volunteer to perform in the chorus. Experienced performers, especially citizens trained in oratory, elevated to the status of actor. The Greek actor, who might also be a governmental official or influential businessman, was highly regarded in Greek society. So revered, the actor was often exempted from military duty.

In this male-dominated society, women were not allowed to act. They were often excluded from the audience, or when allowed to attend, were relegated to the upper rows of seats.

The actor portraying the god, king, or legendary hero needed to appear larger than life. As a symbol, he reflected a grander status than mere mortals, like those appearing in the chorus. He needed to be seen by the audience who were at a great distance from the stage. Therefore, the actor donned a costume which added size and distinction to his role.

The actor wore a long, flowing robe, dyed in symbolic colors, called a **chiton**, with a great deal of padding underneath to give a broader than natural appearance. To add height, high, platformed shoes called **cothurni** were worn.

Though the actor gained in size, he lost mobility, which led to a more declamatory style of acting which required the actor to move little and to face his audience for delivery of his speeches. Because of distance from the audience and limited mobility, actors developed stock, broad, sweeping gestures and general movements which signified particular emotions, such as lowering the head to indicate grief, or beating the breast and rending their clothes to indicate mourning, or stretching out arms in prayer.

Actors carried **properties** (props) to indicate roles. A herald might wear a wreath, a traveler a broad-brimmed hat. Kings customarily carried scepters and warriors carried spears. The elderly carried sticks serving as canes.

The most distinctive feature of the actor's costume was the mask. Paradoxically, the mask both limited and broadened the audience's understanding of the role portrayed. The mask helped to identify the specific character, yet generalized the features enough to indicate a virtual **Everyman**, helping the audience to glean that personal message the Greeks intended to impart in their drama.

## The Mask

Born of man's use of the mask in religious ritual to inspire awe in the congregation by appearing more than mortal and to hide his face from the gods as he impersonated them, the theatre adopted the mask as one of its more significant conventions. To complete the larger-than-life picture, the actor wore a large **mask** which served both as a megaphone with its large aperture for the mouth, and as a symbol to distinguish the role. It identified age, sex, mood, and rank. Fully hooded, it rested on the shoulders of the actor. Usually the mask was constructed of bark, cork, leather, or linen. The most beautiful were tragic; the grotesque and bizarre depicting creatures like frogs and birds were reserved for comedy. The flexibility of changing masks allowed actors to change roles easily. A mask was called a **persona**.

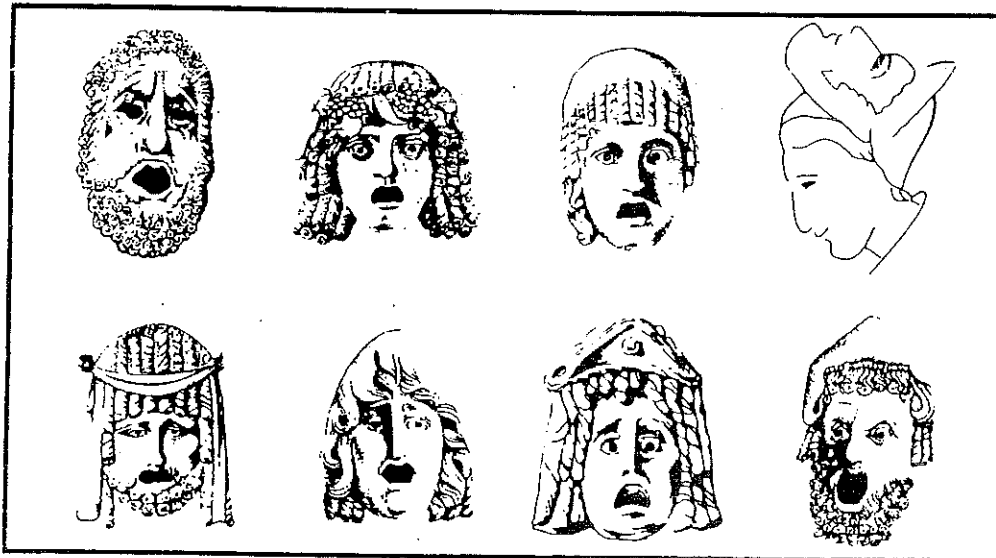
Tragic Mask



Comic Mask



Masks



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<sup>1</sup> Phyllis Hartnoll, *The Concise History of Theater* (New York: 1969. Harry N. Abrams, Inc.) 19.

<sup>2</sup> George R. Kernoodle, *Invitation to the Theatre*, (New York: 1967. Harcourt, Brace and World, Inc.) 163.