

Greek Theatre

Greek Theatre - The Plays



All drama began in Greece thousands of years ago. The Greeks were performing plays about 500 years before Christ was born and before Julius Caesar even thought about coming to Britain.

The ancient Greeks believed in many different Gods and one of these was the God of wine and fertility called Dionysus. Each year, in the Spring, a great festival was held in honour of Dionysus and everyone would stop work and travel to Athens for the celebrations and religious ceremonies.

The festival lasted several days and, as well as singing dancing, poetry and rituals, there was a great play competition. Every year three well-known Greek dramatists would compete to see who could produce the best play. The plays were usually about the Gods or Greek heroes and told the stories of great Greek myths or legends. There would be very few actors but the plays always included a 'chorus' of about fifteen identically dressed people. Their job was to provide crowd scenes where necessary, sing and dance, comment upon the play and generally help tell the story. The plays were often very long and did not include much action at first. Violence and deaths were never acted out in front of the audience so either the chorus or a messenger had to report these events.

At first, all Greek plays were tragedies or serious plays but eventually comedies were introduced at these festivals too. Many of the ancient Greek plays have survived through the centuries and are still being performed today. One Greek dramatist called Sophocles wrote many tragedies and about seven of these are still known. His play 'Oedipus' is perhaps the most famous. This tells the story of how, when the King and Queen of Thebes have a son, a strange prediction is made that the boy will grow up to kill his father and marry his mother. On hearing this, the King decides to get rid of his son, Oedipus, by leaving him on a mountain side to die. Oedipus is discovered by a shepherd, however, who brings him up as his own son. Many years later, Oedipus does unknowingly kill his true father, the King, and then goes to the city, now ruled by his uncle. The city is threatened by a sinister monster that no one seems able to destroy. In desperation, an announcement is made that whoever manages to rid the city of this terrible monster will be rewarded by marrying the beautiful widow of the old King and so becoming the new King and ruler. Oedipus succeeds in killing the monster and so, without knowing it, ends up marrying his own mother. Later, when he finds out his true identity and realises what he has done, Oedipus unhappily tears out his eyes and the Queen hangs herself.

Another of Sophocles' sad plays is called 'Antigone', Antigones' father, the King, dies and one of her two brothers becomes the new King, however, when the second brother hears this, he returns to attack the city and overthrows the first. Sadly, both brothers are killed in this battle and so Antigone's uncle, Creon, a just and kind man, has to become the ruler.

To prevent further attacks on the country he rules that one of the brothers shall receive an honourable funeral while the other will be left to rot on the streets as an enemy of the State deserves. Anyone attempting to move or bury this body would be sentenced to death.

His own niece, Antigone, is so determined that both her brothers should get a proper burial, she deliberately tries to disobey this order and gets arrested. Creon tries to reason with her but Antigone remains stubbornly determined to succeed in giving her brother a proper funeral service even though her own life is at risk. Creon sadly decides he must keep to his ruling and Antigone is put to death.

The Theatres

The early Greek theatres were not at all like our theatres today. Greece is a warm country so the plays were performed out in the open countryside. The audience would sit on rows of seats carved into the hillsides in a huge semi-circle and down below, at the bottom of the slopes, a flat piece of land provided an area for singing and dancing, and for the chorus, called the 'orkestra' (orchestra). Just behind this, there was a raised platform or stage where the actors performed the main play. This was known as the 'proskenion', a word which still describes some modern stages.

About 20,000 people could be seated in the audience of these huge open air theatres and yet even those seated at the back, far above the actors, could hear every word of the play quite clearly because the sides of the hills naturally echoed and amplified the sound of the actors' voices.

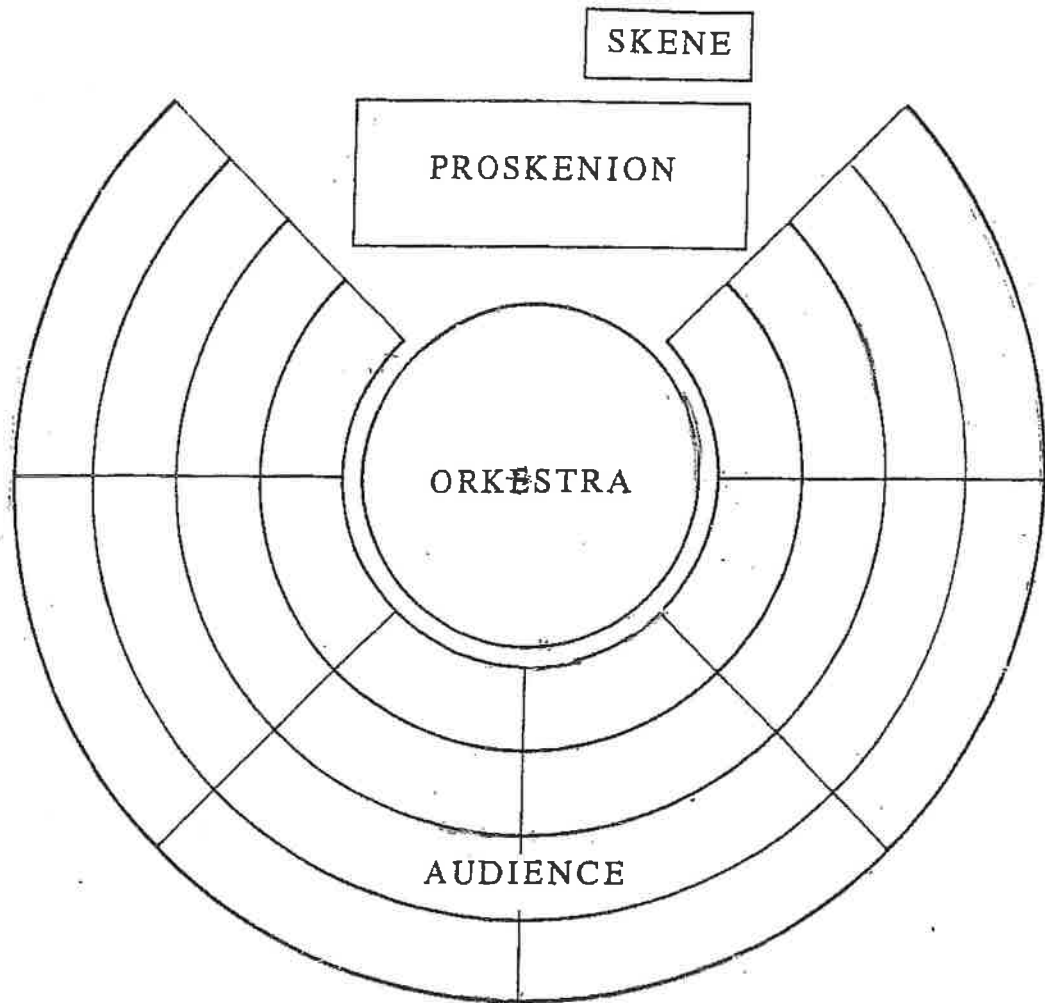
To make it easier for the audience far above to see the actors clearly, padding was sometimes added to the costumes to make the actors look bigger, and platform shoes were worn to make them appear taller. Facial expressions like crying or smiling cannot easily be seen from a distance, so all the actors, including the chorus, wore masks and wigs to help show their characters and feelings. Their masks also had specially shaped mouthpieces which amplified the sound of their voices. Wearing masks also meant that each actor could play more than one part in the play. A place was needed to store these masks and other props and where the actors could change masks quickly. A small building called the skene was therefore built at the edge of the proskenion (stage). At first was a wooden type of shed but later it was built of stone and beautifully decorated. It was then used as part of the play just as scenery is used today. Actors pretending to be Gods could be lowered from the top of the skene and other could enter or exit using this building.

Many words we in drama today came from the early Greek Dramas. 'Dialogue' was a Greek word meaning 'talk or backchat' - 'Drama' meant 'thing done' - 'Mime' meant 'imitate' - a 'Theatre' was a 'seeing place' and 'Audience' meant 'people hearing'.



Greek Theatre - Questions and Work

1. Copy out this diagram of a Greek Theatre.



2. Draw a Greek mask showing sadness, horror, evil or happiness.

3. Answer the following questions:-

A. Who wrote the play 'Oedipus'?

- a. Sophocles
- b. Antigone
- c. Dionysus

B. Why was it easy to hear the actors from so far above?

- a. they used microphones
- b. the hillsides naturally amplified the sounds
- c. loudspeakers were placed among the audience

- C. How many dramatists competed in the festival's Drama competition?
- a. 2
 - b. 5
 - c. 3
- D. The skene was a building to provide:
- a. refreshments at interval?
 - b. an actors' changing room?
 - c. a public entrance to the theatre?
- E. The actors acted the play on:
- a. the hillsides?
 - b. the orchestra?
 - c. the proskenion?
- F. The audience sat:
- a. on the hilltops?
 - b. in the skene?
 - c. on seats carved into the hillside?
 - d. on benches indoors?
- G. Which of the following are true?
- a. actors wore platform shoes
 - b. actors wore masks
 - c. most early plays were comedies
 - d. early plays told stories of Gods and heroes
 - e. the chorus helped tell the story
 - f. it was possible for each actor to play more than one part

