

THE GREEK THEATRE

- 1400 B.C.** Cult of Dionysus, God of wine, intoxication and sexual vitality established In Greece
- 7th — 6th B.C.** Cult reaches its greatest power. Festivals started with choruses of satyrs dancing in the street followed by fat people wearing phalli. Dithyramb, hymn or song of praise to Dionysus started, celebrating his life, death and resurrection. Choral leader emerges. Becomes narrator, improvising the story in song while the chorus filled in the story with traditional song and dance
- 536** Great or City Dionysia Festival started
- 534** Competitions in tragedy and dithyramb started at festival. Thespis credited with creation of the actual creation of drama. Wrote prologues and Inter-linking dialogue. Acts out instead of narrating action as choral leader
- 536-336 B.C.** *Classical Athenian Theatre*
- Corresponds with great age of Greek philosophy and the height of Athens as a cultural and political—economic force in the Greek world
- Great age of Greek playwriting and criticism. more than 1 ,000 plays written between 500-400 BC. Amateur or semi-professional theatre co—sponsored by state and wealthy citizens (choregoi) on rotational basis as part of their civic and religious duties. Officials chosen by lot the preceding summer and three playwrights chosen to produce plays and compete for prize connected with the festival. Drama eventually presented at Lenaia and Rural Dionysia festival (442 B.C.). Actors as well as playwrights get prizes (449 B.C.)
- 336-1 B.C.** *Hellenistic Theatre*
- Begins with reign of Alexander the Great and the spread of Greek culture and learning Dominance of Athens challenged Thought becoming increasingly secularized and conservative. Festivals continue but religious sentiment fading. State takes over subsidization as private wealth of citizens declines
- Era of great playwriting over. Revivals of older works popular. Emphasis on developing the technical and acting arts and the growth of professionalism as the increased number of festivals increase opportunities for production.
- 1 B.C. - 5 A.D.** *Graeco-Roman Theatre*
- Romans and Roman architecture and culture take over.

II Dominant Themes and Concerns

Great Age of Greek playwriting corresponds to great age of Greek philosophy and growing clash between an older religious concept of the world emphasizing the power of an all-powerful, unchanging divine order over the lives of men, and a humanistic view celebrating man's power to analyze or understand his world through reason, and control and enrich his own life through application and discipline. Explores difficulty of being a rational, self-determining being in a universe full of irrational, unpredictable elements beyond human control, and constantly questions the relationship between the human and the divine. Fate versus free will.

Preoccupation with the tension between the rational and irrational forces within man and his universe. Attitude towards the irrational particularly ambiguous —source of sacred ecstasy and profane chaos and depravity. Happiness possible when a balance struck between the two but that

balance is easily upset when man's capacity for enlightened thought and behaviour is overwhelmed by his passions.

Preoccupation with scientific analysis and ordering of all aspects of the natural and human world leads to creation and definition of distinct genres of drama (comedy and tragedy) reflecting the view of man and the universe "proper" to each (sacred and profane, comic and tragic, the ridiculous and the sublime.), and the aesthetic "rules" governing the forms, structures and proper elements of drama. Concern with decorum.

III Dramatic Forms

Athenian Theatre

Tragedy (trilogy and satyr play)

Aeschylus (523-456)

Sophocles (496-406)

Euripides (480-406)

Old Comedy

Aristophanes (448-380)

Criticism

Plato (427-347)

Aristotle (384-322)

Hellenistic Theatre

New Comedy

Menander (342-291)

Plato and Aristotle on Theatre

Plato

"As I said, it is not skill that enables you to speak well about Homer, but a divine power that moves you, just as it does the stone that Euripides calls the magnet...This stone not merely attracts iron rings but extends its power to the rings so they can attract others just as the stone does.... The power of the stone reaches out to all of them. Thus the Muse inspires some and others are inspired by them until there is a whole series of the inspired....The craft of the poet is light and winged and holy; and he is not capable of poetry until he is inspired by the gods and out of his mind and there is no reason in him. Until he gets into this state, any man is powerless to produce poetry and to prophesy...Therefore the god, depriving these men of their reason, uses them as helpers in prophecies and divinations....But if anyone approaches the poetic doors without this madness of the Muses, thinking that he will be a good—enough poet through art alone, he is ineffectual and the poetry of the self-controlled man loses all of its splendor when compared with that of the madman. Poets do not compose their poems because of their wisdom but by genius and because they are inspired like prophets and givers of oracles.

The Ion -Plato

The Platonic Attack on Theatre

Concerned about dramatic arts offenses against:

(1) Truth as an imitative art

Truth is contained in the eternal, unchanging universal realm of Ideas. The world is but a shadow of that divine reality —transient, corporeal, flawed and limited - and art simply a shadow or an imitation of that shadow. Worse yet, art is not only a distorted, incomplete, impractical version of the truth but one whose seductive beauty ultimately distracts man from pursuing truth and life. The pleasure of the imitative aesthetic form and its emphasis on role-playing too often encourages people to devote their energy to the art of seeming virtuous instead of being virtuous, or to settle for imaginatively becoming a dazzling variety of great human beings doing great actions instead of mastering the more difficult art of being a great human being in one's own person and doing the great actions in reality.

(2) Rationality as an affective art

Drama suspect even at its best because it bypasses reason, and most of us, not being geniuses, acquire wisdom through reason. Moral and social order relies on reason, control, discipline and restraint. Drama bypasses the rational and appeals to the emotions, a dangerous, unruly side of human nature. Emotions proper enough when strictly disciplined by the mind or indulged in in private may become dangerous when aired violently and in a public forum.

(3) Morality as a violent, disorderly art

Concedes that drama can inspire admiration for noble virtues and spur people to imitate them in real life, if it portrays noble men doing noble actions and employs a simple, artless style. But too often, because vice and conflict are more exciting on stage than virtue and harmony, the Gods are portrayed as evil, bad or treacherous, men as murderers and villains, and the plots revolve around violent and conflicting passions — often dished up with such aesthetic beauty as to make them seem attractive — that lead to conflict and destruction. This inspires an audience to imitate and indulge in bad, deceitful or disruptive behaviour antithetical to their social and moral well-being and that of a rational, moral society.

Aristotle

The six elements of dramatic art:

Plot

Character Content: the imitation of men in action using men (character and thought) in action (plot)

Thought

Diction

Song

Means: the visual and aural means by which the imitation is portrayed

Spectacle

The Aristotelian Defense of Theatre

Defends art as the protector of:

(1) Truth as an imitative art

Perhaps the realm of Ideas is eternal and fixed, but both we and our knowledge of them are in a constant state of changing, evolving and becoming — and the only way most of us can come at that divine knowledge as flesh and blood creatures is by continually knowing, observing and experiencing the world around us. Abstract thinkers, like philosophers and historians, may be able to make a direct leap to the divine or at least sort out the essentials from the minutiae of everyday life, but most of us cannot. We learn through observing men in action, and drama is the best art because it actually shows men in action within the framework of a powerful compact aesthetic form that distills, condenses and makes essential those main and universal truths into a pleasing and accessible form for us.

(2) Rationality as an affective art

Agrees that moral and social order relies on reason, control and restraint and that drama does stir up dangerous emotions. However, drama holds the strong emotions it evokes in check by containing them in an aesthetic form that simultaneously appeals to our natural sense of harmony, rhythm, order and symmetry. As carefully contained by the aesthetic form, dangerous emotions such as our dread of catastrophe, either for ourselves (fear) or others (pity) can be drawn to the top and communally shared by the intensity and immediacy of the performance in such a way that they are safely purged (catharsis) - and the person leaves the theatre less likely to disrupt the social or moral order than if those emotions had been suppressed or denied and had to find another less safe or socially acceptable outlet.

(3) Morality as a violent, disorderly art

The instinct towards imitation is what distinguishes us from the animals, and is a universal source of both pleasure and teaching in human beings. The tension between familiarity and distance not only delights us by mirroring ourselves back to us, but teaches us by mirroring the familiar back to us in an unfamiliar or different way.

Thus drama, as an imitation of life, allows us to vicariously experience the great passions and experiences of life and humanity — even the manifestly dangerous ones — while keeping us safe enough from those experiences that we can observe and learn from them without being destroyed. Thus, provided the dramatist chooses his content and characters carefully and uses the aesthetic form - and the action of the play in particular — with skill, whatever conflict, disorder, violence and passion that is evoked can be tightly enough controlled that the spectator will not only enjoy but learn from and be morally bettered by the performance.

IV Acting and Actors

Athenian Theatre

Actors amateur or semi-professional at best because of absence of commercial stage. Playwright-director (didaskalos - teacher) primary source of unity. In Aeschylus' time, acted, trained the chorus, invented the music and dances and supervised every aspect of production. Aeschylus added a second actor and Sophocles a third. After 468, number fixed at 3 though they could assume multiple roles and supernumeraries could take non-speaking roles.

Style

Evidence suggests high degree of stylized or conventionalized acting, especially in tragedy. Partially because of (1) roots in religious ritual (2) decorum and (3) production conditions

(1) Roots in religious ritual

Puts emphasis on heightened, formalized use of gesture, movement, and voice; symbolic representations of supernatural or non-human forces; and the presentation of human characters as ciphers for the desires, hopes and actions of the entire community or congregation. Strong emphasis on song, dance, recitative, choral passages, dance and use of masks pushes towards stylization.

(2) Decorum

Art superior to history insofar as it distills human experience into a compact, aesthetically pleasing form that clarifies the essential moral, social and metaphysical Truths underlying the muddle of life's surface realities. Emphasis on "correct" conventions connected with each genre. Costume and acting style should clarify to the spectator (1) the genre the play is working within, (2) the rank and gender of the characters and (3) the human, social and mythic attributes proper to them.

Leads to use of symbolic properties (King-sceptre, warrior-spear, suppliant-branch). Tragedy-presents man "as better than he is" -idealization-sleeved, highly decorated tunic derived from robes of Dionysian priests. Short cloak (chlamys), long cloak (himation). Comedy—presents man "as worse than he is-burlesque- short tunic, phallus.

(3) Production Conditions

Same actor usually had to play several roles in one play, and men played all roles, including women
Theatres had perfect acoustics but were very large

Masks heightened visibility but made facial movement unimportant Movement simplified, broadened, symbolized and formalized. Joy-pirouette, mourning - veil Prayer to the gods - uplifted arms. Prayer to the chthonic/gods - stomping feet, lowered hands, palms down.

Emphasis on voice. Beauty of vocal tone, ability to adapt manner of speaking to mood and character, especially since actor may have to assume several roles during play. Trained carefully for power, beauty and flexibility of voice.

Hellenistic Theatre

Professional "trainers" and "star" professional actors replace amateurs. 277 B.C. —The Artists of Dionysus, pan-Hellenic Theatre Guild formed —actors, poets, readers, choral members, trainers, musicians and costumers all members. Artists alter texts to suit their tastes and display their vocal virtuosity on the increased festival market. Thought that many of the innovations devised to make actors more visually impressive — kolthoranoi(built-up boots), large, exaggerated masks and onkos (built-up headdress) come from this time.

V Audience

Worship of Dionysus open to all including slaves and women, and attendance by all elements of society at the festival plays was encouraged as a part of their religious and civic duties. Huge auditorium could accommodate up to 1/10 of the Attic population at any one time in the 5th Century.

Seating admission uniformly set at 2 obols (equivalent of a working man's salary) and some subsidized seating for the poor provided around 450 (Pericles' theoric fund). Nonetheless, evidence that seating may have been organized according to tribe and divided further by gender, with best seating reserved for state and religious officials and honored guests, including foreign ambassadors.

Violence within the theatre punishable by death, but day long performances guaranteed a great deal of coming and going, eating and drinking within the theatre, and audiences very vocal in their opinions about the quality of the production and the acting

VI Theatre and Staging

Athenian Theatre

(1) 6th century — 1st theatre of Dionysus in Athens (Aeschylus theatre)

- consisted only of orchestra or dancing space about 66 ft. in diameter with an altar (thymele) placed in the centre. Audience probably stood or sat on the hillside; they have had clay or wooden steps. Seated 14,000.

- possible that a skene (scene building) developed out of a temporary structure meant to serve as a dressing room, but got incorporated into the action by an imaginative playwright.

2) 443 - 2nd theatre of Dionysus in Athens (Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes)

- first extensive changes made by Pericles. Circle pushed forward and a skene building constructed with wings (per/5A-enlJL Two openings at wings (paradoi) for chorus or messengers. Anything from 1 to 3 large doors built into the skene for entrances. Some felt there was only the large, central door equipped with an ekkyklama - a movable platform devised to reveal tableaux, most often the bodies of characters killed offstage — that could be rolled out of the central doorway. Machine or crane showed characters in flight or suspended above earth.

Scenery

Aristotle claims Sophocles created scene painting about 468—456. However, uncertain if this involved actual use of conventional sets as was done later or if it was a matter of the scene house being painted or adorned in a formalized sense with the script and the actor setting the scene.

150 B.C. Hellenistic Theatre— (Menander and revivals of the classics)

High raised stage with a long shallow forestage and backstage added (8—13 ft. high, 140 ft. long, 6 1/2—14 ft. deep) Sometimes ramps from the paradoi and orchestra, sometimes not. 1—3 doors in skene facade converted into series of 1-7 openings about 10—12 ft. in length and as high as the roof would allow (thvrop2at,~. Uncertain whether orchestra only used for revivals and the stage for New Comedy, or if the upper stage was only used for the gods and special scenes, with it becoming the usual acting place only later.

Scenery

Vitruvius suggests there were three kinds of background. Tragedy — palace; Comedy - city street, Satyr play - pastoral. May have been set in the thyromata either as periaktoi (revolving triangles) or pinakes (painted panels slipped into slots).