

## *Greek Theatre as the Foundation for Opera*

The Western concept of theater has its roots in Classical Greek culture and literature. Theater sprang from religious festivals and the tradition of choral poetry honoring the gods. By the fifth century BCE more elaborate productions competed for prizes at three and four-day events while the names of play writes such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes established high standards and dramatic formulas that continue into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The most prestigious of the ancient festivals honored the god, Dionysus, and attracted daily crowds of more than 15,000 Athenians to view performances in the outdoor Theater Dionysus at the base of the Acropolis. Today, only ruins remain of this spectacular theater (pictured at right).

Approximately sixty-seven Greek city-states had theaters. Plays fell into one of three categories:

**Tragedies:** *Serious plays focusing on gods and heroes brought down by a character flaw, misfortune, or fate. Watching these tragedies unfold on the stage, mankind saw own vulnerabilities and the cruel realities of life.*

**Comedies:** *Like the comedies and television sitcoms of today, ancient comedies*



### ***Did you know?***

***Many of our theatrical terms are Greek in origin. Below are some examples:***

The Greek word “**drama**” means word or act.

Ancient performances were presented outdoors with the audience seated in a semicircle set into a hillside (**theatron**)

The backdrop was called a **skene**.

The circular area where the chorus sang and danced was the **orchestra**.

*Photo of the Theater Dionysos, royalty-free, courtesy of Greek Picture Gallery (Historylink101.com)*

*laughed at life's predicaments, daily happenings, and familiar characters such as politicians.*

***Satyr Play:*** *Named for the mythical half-man, half-goat companions of Dionysus, the dialogue of the satyr play was colloquial, action was rambunctious, and the tone of the play was mocking.*

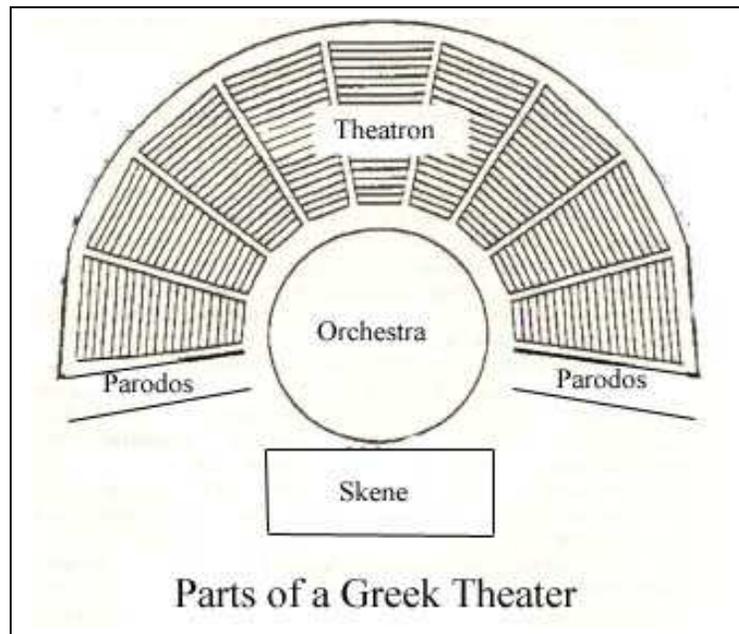


**Can you give an example (from theater, movies, or television) of a tragedy, a comedy, or a satyr play?**

**Each year three tragic poets competed, with each receiving a full day to present three tragedies and a satyr play. On the fourth day, three comic writers competed for a separate prize with each presenting only one comedy. Like much of today's comedic writing,**

**authors satirized political personalities and issues. Audiences could be especially aggressive when disappointed or annoyed and it was here that the tradition of throwing fruits and vegetables at the offending performers was born. In order to compete in either competition, authors submitted an "application for chorus" to the *archon* or magistrate. Those selected to compete chose a wealthy citizen to fund the production, while the state took responsibility for paying the actors. Rehearsals began six months before the competition. The play write Thespis (sixth century, BCE), was the first to step out of the chorus as the principal actor. By the fifth century BCE, productions had two-three actors in addition to the chorus of 12-15 members.**

### ***The Greek Theater: Setting the Stage***

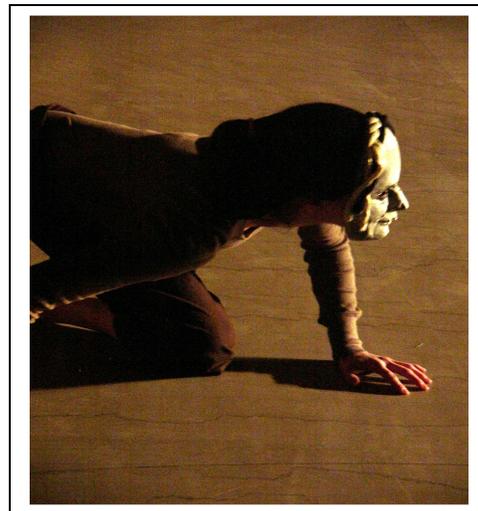


Theaters in ancient Greece were enormous open-air structures set into a hillside in order to take advantage of the natural slope for seating. Here audiences of up to 15,000 people viewed performances from wooden or stone benches upon row after row of terraced seating that formed a semi-circle in the hillside (*theatron*).

Principal actors and members of the chorus performed below in a circular area known as the *orchestra* (or dancing place). To each side of the orchestra extended the *paradoi* – long entrance/exit ramps from which the members of the chorus entered singing the *parados*, or entrance song. Behind the orchestra and facing the audience was a *skene*, a tent or building storing actors' props, costumes and masks and the place where actors changed during the performance. Over the years the skene became more elaborate and was adjusted to meet the needs of a specific play. For example, Aeschylus altered the skene to include central doors and an upper level for a watchman required in the performance. The later addition of painted boards or pictures (*pinakes*) for scenery, trap doors, cranes (*dues ex machine*) allowing gods to fly, and the *ekuklema* (a rolling platform usually used for bringing bodies onto the stage).

**“Who is that masked man?”**

Each production had a minimum number of actors – 1-3 (aside from the members of the chorus), and all were male. In order to play multiple roles, including those of female characters, masks were used. With the mask hiding any facial expression, the actor used only his voice, body, and gestures to present the character. Specific masks were used to signify a ruler, a deity, a soldier, a comic figure, etc. In addition to aiding audiences with the identity of the character, masks also assisted with the amplification of the voice in the open space of the theater.



***Draw your mask design for the following theater characters: a king, one of the goddesses, Zeus, a slave, Odysseus, or Tiresius (the blind oracle).***

**“Can anybody hear me?”**

Any outdoor event can be an acoustical nightmare. Today we overcome the problem with the aid of microphones and huge electrical speakers that bounce the sound out toward the audience and back toward the performers enabling performers to hear themselves. But how did the ancient Greeks overcome outdoor acoustical problems and successfully present plays to 15,000 people?

The basic questions for architects in dealing with acoustics are 1) how much reverberation do we need in order to produce good sound; and 2) how do we make the acoustics work for both performer and audience?

As mentioned above, the use of masks helped to amplify the voices of the actors, but this form of amplification was minimal. It was the curved positioning of the theater seating carved into the hillside that provided the greatest help in the amplification of voices – similar to shouting toward a rock wall or bluff.

***Oh! The Math of It All!!!***

Acoustics is an area in which math plays a critical role. Using a formula created by Harvard mathematics professor Wallace Clement Sabine, architects today can quantify the level of reverberation by measuring the amount of time it takes after a sound has stopped for the reverberation of the sound to vanish.

The ancient Greeks apparently understood acoustics well enough to devise outdoor theaters with acoustical qualities so finely tuned that 15,000 people packed into a theater could hear and understand the words of the performers.

The philosophers and mathematicians of ancient Greece experimented with, and analyzed music, placing it within the curriculum of the academies along side astronomy and mathematics in educational importance. Today’s student is aware of the Pythagoras Theorem and the Pythagorean obsession with numbers. Most, however, may be unaware of important work of Pythagoreans in regard to the relationship of number ratios and musical tones. Experiments by Pythagoras around 540 BCE provided an “a-ha” moment when he discovered that the length of a string produced certain notes and that integral ratios related to all notes on the scale. He and his followers went even further, linking music and astronomy (the orbit of the planets) in the creation of what was called *The Music of the Spheres*.

Mathematics, as Pythagoras discovered to his delight, is central to an understanding of music. Fractions identify musical notes and designate the time signature, or the numbers appearing at the beginning of a piece of music. Likewise, the notes of a scale are related to ratios. As any music teacher can tell you, the mathematics of music is fun to explore. As any musician can tell you, the mathematics of music is fun to work with. And as any jazz musician can tell you, the mathematics of music is fun to play with.

***Did you know that Nashville has two sites with near-perfect acoustics?***

- 1) The Ryman Auditorium***
- 2) The Schermerhorn Symphony Hall***



***Accepting Gifts from Greeks:  
The foundations of theater and opera***



As we have seen, among the greatest gifts bestowed upon the world by the ancient Greeks, the design and elements of theater are a wonderful and lasting contribution.

Generations of audiences around the world continue to marvel at the brilliance of play writers such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, Aristophanes, and Euripides in structure, universal theme, and dramatic impact.

The structure of ancient tragedy included the *prologue* (introductory speech), the *parados* (entry of the chorus), *episodes* (in modern drama division into acts), *choral interlude* (songs or odes separating episodes), and *exodus* (the finale). Over the centuries, this structure evolved into *exposition* (the introduction), *conflict* (establishing the situation), *climax* (the escalation of problems for the protagonist or central figure), and *denouement* (resolution of tragic consequences).

Over two thousand years after being written, Greek tragedies continue to be performed or adapted, bringing timeless messages to audiences around the world. What makes these characters and themes so popular? An excellent article, *Tantalus from the Perspective of Modern Adaptation and Remaking of Greek Tragedy* by Helene Foley of Barnard College, Columbia University addresses this important question. Foley points out that in many cases, Greek tragedy can address controversial subjects such as war, nationalism, pollution, or religion in a less political way and without the language problems associated with other great play writers such as Shakespeare. Her 5-page paper explores how, throughout history, writers or directors used the ancient plays to make bold, modern statements. Bertolt Brecht and Jean Anouilh used *Antigone* to make powerful statements during World War II. The popularity of Jean Paul Sartre's *The Flies*, or Archibald McLeish's *Heracles* demonstrates the continued appeal of Greek drama as a vehicle for pressing personal or political agendas. The tragedies can be updated as in Steven Beckoff's *Greek* with a modern working class Eddy replacing Oedipus. Japanese directors Suzuki Tadashi and Yukio Ninagawa use adaptations of Greek drama to address a wide range of modern issues. With movies, as with the stage, universal themes found throughout Greek myths, epic poems, and plays are rediscovered by new generations of audiences. An example from recent years is the popular appeal of the film *Oh, Brother, Where Art Thou?*

We see how stagecraft, vocabulary and various elements of the Greek theater were easily adapted for opera. As with plays throughout history, many operas are based on Greek plays, myths, and heroic poems. The opera, *Daphne*, by Jacopo Peri (libretto by Ottavio Rinuccini) was performed in 1597, and three years later what is considered the first modern opera, *Euridice*, was performed. Composed by Peri and

**Rinuccini** he opera was based on the myth of Orpheus and his wife.

Throughout the seventeenth century composers including **Claudio Monteverdi** (“*Galatea*,” “*The Return of Ulysses*”), **Francesco Cavalli** (“*The Wedding of Thetis and Peleus*” “*Il Giasone*,” “*Ercole Amante*,”) **Marc Antonio Cesti** (*Il Pomo d’Oro*), **Marc Antoine Charpentier** (“*Calypso*,” and “*Medea*) and **Jean Baptiste Lully** (“*Phaeton*”) created popular operatic productions that dramatically addressed issues from love to war. Twentieth century opera composers such as **Richard Strauss**, **Igor Stravinsky**, and **Mikis Theodorakis** continued to tap these ancient sources to bring timeless messages and beautiful stories and music to audiences around the world.



*For more information about opera, log onto the Nashville Opera’s website at [www.nashvilleopera.org](http://www.nashvilleopera.org)*

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Sources:

Helene Foley, *Tantalus from the Perspective of Modern Adaptation & Remaking of Greek Tragedies* ([www.dcpa.org/Tantalus/play/symposium.html](http://www.dcpa.org/Tantalus/play/symposium.html))

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