

Introduction to Ancient Greek Theater

By Alfred J. Drake

Good Books I've Come Across:

Easterling, P.E. *The Cambridge Companion to Greek Tragedy*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997.

Kaufmann, Walter. *Tragedy and Philosophy*.

Ley, Graham. *A Short Introduction to the Ancient Greek Theater*. Chicago: U of Chicago Press, 1991.

McLeish, Kenneth. *A Guide to Greek Theatre and Drama*. London: Methuen, 2003.

Pomeroy, Sarah. Et al. *Ancient Greece: A Political, Social, and Cultural History*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1999.

Religious Roots of Tragedy: The Festivals of Dionysus at Athens were called the City or Great Dionysia, which was held in March or April, and the Lenaea, which was held in January. Though classical theater flourished mainly from 475-400 BCE, it developed earlier from choral religious ceremonies dedicated to Dionysus.

The God of Honor: Dionysus was an Olympian god, and the Greeks celebrated his rites in the dithyramb. In mythology, his followers were satyrs and mainades, or ecstatic females. We sometimes call him the god of ecstasy, and as Kenneth McLeish says, he “supervis[ed] the moment when human beings surrender to unstoppable, irrational feeling or impulse” (1-2). His agents are wine, song, and dance. Song and dance were important to Dionysian rites, and the participants apparently wore masks.

At the festivals, three tragic writers would compete and so would three or five comedic playwrights. The idea was that each tragedian would present three plays and a satyr play; sometimes the three plays were linked in a trilogy, like *The Oresteia*. So the audience had a great deal of play going to do during the festival seasons; the activities may have gone on for three or four days, with perhaps four or five plays per day. The Oregon Shakespeare Festival provides something like this pace.

Organization: How were the festivals organized? Well, the magistrate was chosen every year by lot – the archon. Then, dramatists would apply to the magistrate for a chorus, and if they obtained a chorus, that meant that they had been chosen as one of the three tragic playwrights. After that affair was settled, wealthy private citizens known as choregoi served as producers for each playwright. The state paid for the actors, and the choregos paid chorus’ training and costumes. So there was both state and private involvement in the production of a tragedy or comedy.

The Playwrights: Aeschylus 525-456 B.C. / Sophocles 496-406 B.C. / Euripides 485-406 B.C. Aeschylus composed about 80 dramas, Sophocles about 120, Euripides perhaps about 90. Aristophanes probably wrote about 40 comedies. Dramatists who wrote tragedies did not compose comedies, and vice versa.

The playwright was called a didaskalos, a teacher or trainer because he trained the chorus who were to sing and dance. As drama developed, the playwright also took care of the scripts and the music. He was something like a modern director, and may at times have acted in his own plays, especially in the early stages of his career. A successful dramatist could win prizes, but generally, playwrights were able to support themselves independently by land-holdings. Sophocles, for example, was a prominent citizen – he served as a general and treasurer. Aeschylus was an esteemed soldier against the Persian Empire, and his tombstone is said to have recorded his military service, not his prowess as a playwright.

The Theater: The theater for the Great Dionysia was located on the south slope of the citadel of Athens, the Acropolis. Try www.ancientathens3d.com and in particular [this video](#) on “the ancient Greek theater” from the same site.

The Theater’s Three Sections:

Theatron: this was for seating around 14,000 spectators; it was probably at first of wood, but later it was of stone.

Orchestra: this was for the chorus to sing and dance in and for the actors, when their function was developed.

Skēnē: this was at first a tent-like structure that served as a scene-building, and it had a door for entrances and exits. The Oresteia requires one, though perhaps the earliest plays didn’t.

Costume was important, too, because it could be used to determine factors like status, gender, and age.

The chorus remained important in drama, especially in Aeschylus. At some point, a choregos (legend says it was “Thespis,” hence actors are “thespians”) stepped forth and became the first actor, or answerer (hypocrites). So the composer was the first participant to turn choral celebration into what we call drama, with a plot and interaction between characters. Apparently Aeschylus or Sophocles added a third actor. The former’s early plays required only two actors, but even that was enough to make for interesting exchanges between the chorus and the actors and, to some extent, between the actors and each other. With three actors, of course, the possibilities for true dramatic dialogue and action are impressive.

Audience: Would have consisted mostly of male citizens -- the ones who ran Athenian democracy by participating in the Assembly. There would probably have been very few, if any, slaves or women present, and perhaps some resident aliens or “metics” and visiting dignitaries. Drama was surely a male-centered affair, as was the political life of Athens. Public speaking was vital in democratic Athens -- anyone who was someone in the legal/political system needed to know how

to move and convince fairly large numbers of men. Theater and political life, as we shall see from Aeschylus, were in fact closely connected: the same skills were required, and the same class of people participated (male *kyrioi*, or heads of households who also performed military service). So while the stuff of tragedy seems almost always to have been the ancient myth cycles, the audience watching the plays would have felt themselves drawn in by the dramatists' updating of their significance for the major concerns of the 5th-century B.C. present. And that present was, of course, the age of the great statesman Pericles (495-429 B.C.), who drove home the movement towards full Athenian democracy from 461 B.C. onwards and who at the same time furthered a disastrous course of imperial protection and aggression that had ensued from victory in the Persian Wars around 500 B.C. Greek tragedy grew to maturity in the period extending from the battles of Marathon on land in 490 B.C. and the naval engagement at Salamis in 480 B.C., on through the Second Peloponnesian War from 431-404 B.C., in which the Athenians lost to Sparta the empire they had gained during half a century of glory following the victories over Persia. Athens' supremacy didn't last long as such things go, but it burned brightly while it lasted, and festival drama, along with architecture, sculpture, and philosophy, was among its greatest accomplishments. So the dramas took place in one of the most exciting times in Western history – both heady and unsettling at the same time, shot through with violence, democratic and artistic flowering, victory, and great loss.

Tragic Masks: The masks tell us something about tragedy: with linen or clay masks, a single actor might play several roles, or wear several faces of the same character. Wilde said, “give a man a mask, and he'll tell you the truth.” His quip should remind us that masks don't discourage expression -- as Kenneth McLeish says, they had religious significance in the theater: participants in Dionysian rites offered up their personal identity to the god, and further, he continues:

Wearing a mask does not inhibit or restrict the portrayal of character but enhances it, allowing more, not less, fluidity and suppleness of movement; and the character created by or embodied in the mask and the actor who wears it can feel as if it has an independent identity which is liberated at the moment of performance – an unsettlingly Dionysian experience (9).

That emphasis on what we might call expression is important especially because – Aristotle's claims about plot being the soul of tragedy notwithstanding – not much happens in many Greek tragedies. Instead, chorus members and characters “take up an attitude” towards the few well-packaged, exciting events that take place on or off the stage. The action is important, but the characters' words and attitudes help us, in turn, gain perspective on the action. Perhaps when Aristotle emphasizes plot so much, he's taking for granted the great power of the Dionysian mask to support the plot in driving the audience towards catharsis. Character, he says, will reveal itself in relation to the play's action.

Aristotle's theory of drama: In Aristotle's view, a well constructed plot that follows probability and necessity will induce the proper tragic emotions (pity and fear or terror), with the result being “catharsis,” a medical term that may be interpreted as “purgation” (of emotion) and/or as “intellectual clarification.” It makes sense to suggest that the tragic emotions, once aroused, become the object of introspection; thereafter, the audience attains clarification about an issue of great importance – for instance, our relation to the gods, the nature of divine justice, etc.