

# ORIGINS OF WESTERN THEATER

by Elaine Langlois

Western theater began in Greece some 2,500 years ago. Much of what we enjoy in plays and movies today—the sidesplitting comedy, the hero facing a crisis—began then and there. Greek drama dealt with important issues like bad government policies and competing values—what is moral or just versus what is good for the state, for example. Most of all, Greek drama dealt with people—what they do in the face of challenges and the choices they make.

## A Golden Age

Ancient Greece was made up of *city-states*: cities and their surrounding regions. By the fifth century B.C. Athens had emerged from the Persian Wars as the richest and most powerful of them all. It also became the world's first democracy, though women were not considered citizens, and slaves comprised much of the population.

This was a time of extraordinary growth and discovery. To give just a few examples, Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle developed their philosophies. Physics, biology, psychology, and ethics were born. Magnificent buildings were erected, and sculptors produced figures

of gods, people, and animals that were graceful and natural in appearance.

## Beginnings

Greek theater began in ceremonies honoring the god Dionysus. A chorus of 50 men would dress in goatskins and pretend to be *satyrs*—mythical, half-human creatures. They would dance, chant, and play instruments. By 600 B.C., these ceremonies were held each spring in many parts of Greece, including Athens. Over time, the performances came to include stories and dialogues and grew closer to what we think of as drama.

Pisistratus, the leader of Athens, reorganized and expanded the city's Dionysian festival and began awarding prizes for the best plays. In 534, an actor named Thespis took the prize for a new type of drama called tragedy.

## Tragedy

Tragedy drew from both its religious origins and questions that people, especially philosophers, were thinking about and discussing in this free society. What is the right way to live? What is the place of humankind in the universe? What are the consequences of people's actions, and how do they cope with them?

The citizens of Athens were educated people who were well acquainted with their history. They were proud of their past and their own

accomplishments. Their playwrights gave them plays that dramatized this past, represented human experience as they saw it, and helped them to understand it in new ways.

Tragedies were peopled with gods, heroes, and ordinary women and men. They dealt with themes like courage, commitment, murder, vengeance, injustice, suffering, and the uses of power. They showed Oedipus, striving to find his father's murderer and cleanse his city of a plague—only to find that he is guilty. Or Antigone, defying a death sentence to bury her brother's body.

Historians of drama disagree about what tragedy means. It is not, as many people think, simply something bad that happens. Drama critic Walter Kerr sees it this way: "Tragedy seems to me to be an investigation of the possibilities of human *freedom*. . . It begins by asking: What is possible? It asks: What may man do, and what may come of what he does? Then it moves forward to find out."

### **The Tragic Playwrights**

Hundreds of tragedies were written and performed during this time, but only a few remain. The first great playwright was Aeschylus, and his masterpiece was the *Oresteia*. Like most of the first tragedies, it is a trilogy, or a set of three related plays.

These trilogies followed a pattern. The first play contained an *agon*, a struggle or conflict, which gave birth to a second *agon*, the focus of the second play. This in turn produced a third *agon*, the subject of the third play, which apparently closed with an end of suffering and some sort of change or understanding.

The *Oresteia* deals with characters from the Trojan War. In the first play, King Agamemnon is murdered by his wife, Clytemnestra. He has sacrificed their daughter, earning Clytemnestra's hatred, but she also has selfish reasons for her action. In the second play, their son, Orestes, with the gods' encouragement, murders his mother to avenge his father's death. The third play deals with his torment by the Furies, goddesses of vengeance, for this crime. At the end of the play, Orestes is forgiven and healed by the goddess Athena.

The second great tragic playwright was Sophocles. Like Aeschylus, Sophocles drew his characters from Greek history and legend. He was skilled at constructing plots and characters and using irony. The third was Euripides. Many of his plays dealt with ordinary men and women and the problems of his time. His plays are produced most often today.

Theater Terms from Greek Words	
<b>antagonist</b>	Second actor added by Aeschylus to interact with the protagonist
<b>deus ex machina</b>	God suddenly brought in at the end of a play to wrap things up, probably added by Euripides
<b>orchestra</b>	Platform where the chorus stood
<b>prologue</b>	Explanation that sets the scene for a play, probably added by Euripides
<b>protagonist</b>	Actor added by Thespis to interact with the chorus
<b>satire</b>	From satyr plays
<b>theatre</b>	From <i>theatron</i> , the wooden stands that spectators sat on
<b>thespian</b>	From Thespis, the first actor-dramatist
<b>tragedy</b>	From <i>tragos</i> (goat) and <i>ode</i> (song)

## Comedy

Comedies were first included in Athens's festival in 486 B.C. Yet these were not the first comic performances on the Greek stage. As previously stated, tragedies were initially performed as trilogies of three related plays. The last play was usually followed by a *satyr play*, written by the same author, in which the same material that had been just been treated so seriously was performed again in a riotously comic way.

The purpose of these satyr plays, and of comedy itself, may have been to satisfy the Athenians' desire to see all of human experience, both tragic and comic. For example, a hero scales a ladder to assault a city. Halfway up, he slips and falls, hitting rungs, like a cartoon character, all the way down. While this scene doesn't belong in a tragedy, it is part of the truth about humankind. People fall. They belch, or

slip on banana peels, or scratch in public. "Comedy," Kerr proposes, "scratches freely in order to add the last necessary ounce of truth."

The greatest Greek comic playwright was Aristophanes. There was scarcely anything in Athenian life that he did not ridicule. Religion, excessive lawsuits, public figures, war, and taxes were just a few of his themes. In *The Birds*, he satirizes the character of the Athenian people. Athenians knew themselves to be energetic, curious, original, and daring. These qualities, they believed, had much to do with their great success. Yet the other side of this nature was instability, quarreling, and restless discontent.

The main character, Pisthetairos, flees Athens, seeking a quiet life in the clouds. Yet, once he arrives, Pisthetairos changes. He becomes a restless, aggressive Athenian. He manipulates the birds into creating a new kingdom,

Cloudcuckooland, and waging a campaign to rule both humans and the gods. Pisthetairos demands a goddess for a bride and proclaims himself the birds' leader. At the end of the play, he sits down with the gods to a feast of cooked bird.

Greek comedy bristled with bad jokes, crudeness, and ridiculous situations. It made fun of specific individuals and events by name. Toward the end of Aristophanes' career, when the Athenians were losing the Peloponnesian War, society became less tolerant, and he had to soften his criticisms.

### **Seeing a Play**

Early Greek theaters consisted of a raised stage with an adjacent platform for the chorus. Spectators sat in wooden tiers built in an arc on a hillside rising above. The Theater of Dionysus, where the Athenian competitions were held, was at the foot of the Acropolis and could seat 17,000. These theaters had wonderful acoustics. In the theater at Epidaurus, a match struck in the orchestra can be heard from the farthest seat.

Attending the festival was both a celebration of national pride and a religious duty. Several plays were performed each day, over a period of several days. At the height of their popularity, as many as 30,000 people attended these performances.

At first, there was one actor, who interacted with the chorus. Aeschylus added a second; Sophocles, a third. Aeschylus introduced scenery and props and cut the chorus to 12 members. The action shifted from the orchestra, where the chorus stood, to the stage. The chorus usually took the role of ordinary people. They commented on the action, sympathized with different characters, and spoke to the audience:

*O suffering mankind,  
lives of twilight,  
race feeble and fleeting,  
like the leaves scattered!  
Pale generations,  
creatures of clay,  
the wingless, the fading!  
Unhappy mortals,  
shadows in time,  
flickering dreams!*<sup>1</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The golden age of Greece lasted roughly 150 years. In the Peloponnesian War (431–404 B.C.), Sparta and its allies waged war on the Athenian empire. Under the poor leadership of Alcibiades, the Athenians were defeated. Yet many of the ideas, discoveries, and developments of that time, including its theater, are a fundamental part of our world today.

<sup>1</sup> *from Aristophane's The Birds, translated by William Arrowsmith.*

# Time Line of Greek Theater

