

# Ancient greeks: theatre as competition and ritual

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Ancient Greeks: Theatre as Competition and Ritual The ancient Greeks were the inventors of what is today known as “ theater. ” Beginning with religious ritual celebrations and competitions, they created an art form which has been parent to the modern theater, as well as television and film. Although the origins of Greek theater are unknown, it is believed that it grew out of the dithyramb, songs and dances honoring Dionysus held at a festival called the Dionysia (Theater of Ancient Greece).

Although these uninhibited songs and dances probably grew out of ritual celebrations, they eventually became more formalized and symbolic, eventually evolving into the Greek theater (The Ancient Greek Theatre Page). Theater started as ritual fertility celebrations by the “ Cult of Dionysus” in Athens. These rituals altered over time and became Spring ritual with theater at the center of the celebrations (Drama 30), although it is impossible to know how the rituals separated into comedy and tragedy (Greek Theatre).

A lesser festival in honour of Dionysus, The Lenea, became another theater festival/competition halfway through the fifth century BC. The rules of the Lenea were different from those of the Dionysia. In the Lenea, there were only four tragedies, two from each of two playwrights, and five comedies from five playwrights (Greek and British Theatre). According to Aristotle's Poetics, Greek tragedy came before satyr plays and comedies. Tragedy came out of the dithyrambs sung in praise of Dionysus at the Dionysia every year.

By the 600's BC, the dithyramb was changed into a formalized narrative sung by a chorus (Greek Theatre). Tragedy lost its Dionysiac associations

very early, and only one of the preserved plays, *Bacchae* by Euripides, has any Dionysiac content, namely the myth of resistance to the introduction of Dionysus's cult to Thebes, and the god's revenge upon the city (Greek Tragedy). In the 500s BC, the poet, Thespis of Attica, is credited with creating a new style in which an actor, called the protagonist, performed the characters' speeches in the narrative, using masks to distinguish between the different characters.

The actor spoke and acted as if he were the character, and he interacted with the chorus, who acted as narrators and commentators. Because of this, Thespis is considered the first Greek "actor," and his style of drama became known as "tragedy," which means 'goat song,' possibly referring to goats sacrificed to Dionysus before performances, or to goat-skins worn by the performers (Ancient Greek Theater) Aeschylus introduced the antagonist, and Sophocles introduced a third actor. Plays with more realism and dialogue were written by Euripides and Aristophanes (Drama 30).

Theatrical presentations had a religious element and attendance was practically compulsory. Because of this, the builders of Greek theaters had to provide enough space for large audiences. It is believed that the theatrical representations could have arisen from the substitution of an animal for a human sacrifice and, eventually, the formula of the sacrifice was enacted ritualistically without the actual sacrifice of the animal (The Greek Theatre). Plays were produced which could be seen as a formalistic representation of human sacrifice. An example of one of these representational plays is *Oedipus the King* by Sophocles.

In the play, Oedipus becomes the embodiment of suffering and guilt, serving as a way of cleansing the spectators (The Greek Theatre). By the fifth century BC, the theater had become a major part of the culture of Athens. The most important element of the annual Dionysia celebration was the play competition between three playwrights at the Theater of Dionysus. These playwrights each submitted a trilogy of connected tragedies, along with a satyr play which dealt with the same subject matter as the trio of tragedies (Greek Theatre). The competitors were chosen by a government authority called the archon.

Wealthy patrons, called choregos, financed the productions. The funding of the arts was a way of tax avoidance, so they were willing to do so. In return for funding a production, the choregos would pay no taxes that year (The Ancient Greek Theatre Page). These men paid for the production of each dramatist's series, the chorus, and other production costs. The actors were paid by the state. The directors of the plays were usually the actual playwrights (Greek and British Theatre). Once many playwrights began writing plays for multiple actors and submitting plays for the Dionysia, competitions began to be held all over Greece.

Prizes were given for the best of these and they were written down and saved (Greek and British Theatre). In the competitions, there were ten judges. These judges were taken from each of the Athenian "tribes," divisions of the people made for administrative convenience, not actual tribes. Choosing the "best new tragedy," which was the purpose for the competition, was taken very seriously. In 449 BC an award for the best

leading actor in a tragedy was introduced (Greek and British Theatre).

Revivals of popular plays was not allowed in Greek theater. This was to encourage new plays to be written.

In fact, a special state decree was issued to allow the Aeschylus's plays to be performed after he died. Until this, revivals had never happened. Revivals did begin to occur in the fourth century when touring companies began to perform in Attica, a rural area, and beyond (Greek Theatre). The ancient Greeks took their theater seriously. Beginning with religious ritual celebrations, the Greek theater evolved into the modern theater that we know today. Plays from those ancient competitions are known and performed all over the world. The Greeks' contribution to the cultural and artistic development of the modern theater is incalculable. Works Cited " Ancient Greek Theater. " Greek Theater. 6 Oct 2008. . " Greek and British Theatre" The British Theatre Guide. 6 Oct 2008. " Greek Theatre. " Greek Theatre. 6 Oct 2008. . " Greek Tragedy. " Greek Tragedy. 6 Oct 2008.. " The Ancient Greek Theatre Page. " The Ancient Greek Drama and Theatre History Page. 30 Sep 2008. . " Theatre of Ancient Greece. " Ancient Greece. 30 Sep 2008. . " The Greek Theatre. " The Greek Theatre. 6 Oct 2008. " The Theatre in Ancient Greece. " Ancient Greece. 6 Oct 2008. " When Did Theatre Begin? " Drama 30. 6 Oct 2008..