

The variety of cloaks
over the tunic;



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The history of European theater begins with the Greeks, whose annual festivals in honor of the god Dionysus included competitions in tragic and comical plays. According to tradition, the first of these dramatic forms evolved from choral songs concerning the death and resurrection of Dionysus. This occurred about the middle of the 6th century BC, when Thespis of Icaria, in a drama of his own composition, impersonated a character and engaged the chorus in dialogue, thereby becoming both the first playwright and the first actor. Thespis won first prize in the initial tragedy competition held at Athens in 534 BC and is also credited with the introduction of masks, which were thereafter a conventional feature of Greek and Roman theater. The tragic writers, Aeschylus and Sophocles later added a second and a third actor to tragedy, and about the beginning of the 5th century BC comedy was given written form by Epicharmus of Syracuse and was also admitted to the festivals. The ancient chorus was retained as an integral part of Greek drama and eventually consisted of a standard number of members: 15 in tragedy and 24 in comedy. In a satire play, a short burlesque that dramatists were expected to submit along with their tragedies, the chorus comprised either 12 or 15 members.

Men played all of the roles; women were not allowed to perform in the Greek theater. The early Greek playwrights not only wrote and frequently acted in their plays but also served as directors and choreographers; some may also have composed their own music (Greek tragedy was intensely musical). Sophocles is said to have been a scene designer and Aeschylus to invent the tragic costume. Tragic actors wore a tight-sleeved, belted, patterned tunic; a variety of cloaks over the tunic; boot, which in later periods became

exaggeratedly elevated by the addition of a wooden platform to the sole; and the helmet-like mask with attached wig, in which the forehead elevation was proportional to the social status of the character represented. The original Greek theater at Athens was simply a large circle known as the orchestra (“dancing place”). Here the chorus and early plays of Thespis and Aeschylus were staged, while spectators sat on seats set into the southern slope of the Acropolis. The only scenery consisted of a few set pieces such as tombs and rocks, and it was not until about 460 BC that a stage building, originally of wood, was added at the rear of the orchestra.

The actors then made their entrances and exits through this structure, although the chorus continued to enter from the sides and the acting was still confined to the flat orchestra. A limited amount of scenery, painted on panels attached to the stage building, may have been used at this time, and several special effects and machines were available. The playwright Euripides was fond of both these devices, and his contemporary Aristophanes ridiculed his use of them in several of his comedies.

By the 4th century BC the playwright no longer controlled all aspects of production. The Greek theater had become a professional institution with specialists responsible for the various aspects of theatrical art. In the next two centuries, during the Hellenistic Age, the physical structure of the theater continued to evolve, the most notable innovation being the addition of a raised stage to the building, where most of the acting took place.