

Greeks first began
performing tragedy



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Imagine, you were living in Greece a couple thousand years ago. The sights, smells, and the culture would be vibrant! But what if you were looking for some sort of entertainment, where would you go and what would you do? Seems like a no-brainer, right? You would go to Greek theatre of course! Although the Roman culture is often famously referred to when discussing ancient theatre, we may often forget the Greeks and their many contributions to modern theatre. This Greek theatre is especially different from what you might imagine.

It was an event that you would not want to miss for a lot of reasons: the stage, costumes, and especially the acting methods used in ancient Greek theatre were further incorporated and developed as time went on. Ancient Greece was critically influential in the evolution of theatre and impacted today's modern theatre in many ways.

In the sixth century B. C., the Greeks first began performing tragedy plays in the city of Athens. The origin of Greek tragedy plays is uncertain among scholars, but it has been linked to the worship of Greek god Dionysus where they would wear masks during rituals (Cartwright). Because of this, Dionysus is referred to as the Greek god of theatre among others things such as wine, grape harvest, and more. Greek tragedy became a very important element in drama in the region and later extended to theatre worldwide.

Some of the first tragedy plays featured just one male actor that would dress in costume and use masks to portray characters such as Greek gods. At that time in history, it was not seen right for women to be involved in theatre let alone hold a noticeable role. As a result, only men were considered

professionals. In addition, Men would wear masks that would help show emotion, depict exaggerated facial expressions, and project their voices. These masks were made out of fabric and then firmed with plaster. Masks and costumes were also used in celebration and worship towards Dionysus. It is likely that masks and costumes were used in celebration and worship towards Dionysus before the creation of drama.

As time went on, Greek theatre continued to evolve and adapt to the new ideas and approaches. Tragedy was performed by an all-male cast which, in its final form, consisted of fifteen chorus-members and three character actors who, between the three of them, played all of the speaking parts, male and female alike (Dugdale 4). Due to the restricted number of actors, each performer had to learn how to use masks, costumes, voice, and gesture for the performance to be successful. These difficult and intricate skills were the beginning of common acting performance methods that would be a foundation for adapting to new concepts in the years to come.

Most of the storylines for tragedy plays were heavily influenced by that of Greek mythology. This mythology centered most of Greek culture and society. As time went on, the playwrights got more creative with their themes and plots. The dialogue, language, and visuals as a whole became more detailed. The complexity of characters and the amount of feelings and emotions displayed on stage progressed as well.

Some of the most famous playwrights of tragedy plays included the likes of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Aeschylus was the first tragedian author that so famously added the second actor to the stage and was known

for writing his plays in themes to the point of creating sequels. A few of his most popular works included Persians, Seven Against Thebes, and the Oresteia trilogy. Sophocles was the playwright that decided to make the advancement to three actors as well as creating a more vibrant scenery. Some of his more famous works are Antigone, Oedipus the King, and The Women of Trachis. Euripides was known for incorporating strong women roles and showcasing the darker side of reality. Some of his most well-known works have been Medea, Hebeuca, and Alcestis. Some even referred to him as the father of melodrama (Trumbill)

In Greek tragedy, by contrast, the main dramatic actions are people talking or people listening (McLeish 19). In today's society, when we think of drama we typically think of emotions running high, arguments full of tension, relationships between people, etc. Ironically, it seems that in Greek tragedy just the calm, everyday conversations would be seen as drama. What we view today as normal conversations, the Greeks would view as dramatic. It is often said that nothing happens in Greek tragedy (McLeish 19). I wonder what the playwrights, actors, and audience of the ancient Greek tragedies would think if they were able to experience the drama of the twenty-first century.

The overall structure of Greek comedy plays was vastly different than tragedy plays. The costumes, dialogue, environment, and performance were all much more extravagant. Aristophanes was easily the most well-known playwright of comedy from ancient Greece. Aristophanes developed a very prominent reputation for his works like *The Wasps*, *Lysistrata*, and *The*

Frogs. Comedy, in the hands of Aristophanes, was usually a contemporary fantasy, and was intended to be directly funny, as well as crude (Ley 5).

Both tragedy and comedy plays would be performed at outdoor theatres. The outdoor theatres were typically built next to an open hillside or wide area in the city where the audience could sit or stand while enjoying the performance on stage. The basic layout of an ancient Greek theatre was composed of four areas: skene, orchestra, theatron, and parodos. The skene was a tent like structure behind the stage where the actors entered and exited during the play. The orchestra was a circular area where the actors were onstage and where the choir could sing and dance alongside the actors in given scenes. The theatron was the area where the audience was to sit and observe the play as it wrapped around the orchestra in a half circular shape. Lastly, the parodos was the area where the spectators could enter and exit the theatron as well as a place for actors to get closer to the crowd.

The Greek theatre, although not always considered, was hugely impactful on today's theatre. Where would the current state of theatre be without ancient Greek theatre? The character complexity, dialogue, language, costumes, theater stage, and more elements of Greek theatre have been influenced what we know today to be modern theatre and drama. While tragedy and comedy are two very different styles of theatre play, they would not have been able to impact the dramatic emotions and feelings of both joy and sorrow without the Greeks. Modern theatre today is better because of the many advancements made by the Greeks and the effect it has had.