

Greek Theater

Greek theater began over 2,500 years ago. It began in the religious festivals that honored Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and the harvest. The festivals grew in popularity and importance until, at its peak, the great theater festival in Athens lasted six days. Over 15,000 people attended the festival each year.

The earliest plays were stories told by a chorus of men and boys. According to legend, one day a man named Thespis stepped out of the chorus and spoke alone. The chorus then responded to his speeches. Thespis was the first actor. Today we call actors *Thespians* in his honor. Later, the number of actors increased to three, in addition to the chorus.

Each actor in the Greek theater played more than one role. To portray different roles, the actor wore different masks. The masks of comedy and tragedy have become symbols of the theater.

Greek authors entered their plays in contests for the festival. The winning playwright won a prize of money and an ivy wreath to wear as a symbol of victory. Greek theater had many important playwrights. Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides wrote *tragedies* (dramas in which the main character suffers a disastrous end). Aristophanes and Menander wrote *comedies* (light, humorous dramas with a happy ending). A special type of play called the *satyrplay* made fun of the Greek legends. We get our word *satire* from this. Some of the most famous Greek plays were *Oedipus*, *Antigone*, *Electra*, *Medea*, *The Birds*, and *The Frogs*.

The great Greek philosopher and teacher, Aristotle, wrote *The Poetics*. In this book he discussed the theater of his time. Aristotle discussed important topics of the theater including *plot* (what happens), *theme* (the idea or message), *character*, *music*, *diction* (speech), and *spectacle* (what was seen). Aristotle became the first literary critic.

The Greeks built their theaters on hillsides. They used the natural slope of the hill for seating the audience. A large circular area called the *orchestra* was located at the foot of the hill. It was here that the members of the chorus moved as they chanted their lines. Behind the orchestra was a raised platform on which the actors performed. A small building named the *skene* was built in back of the acting platform. The skene was where the actors changed masks. The Greeks used the front wall of the skene to represent the location of the play. Our word *scene* comes from skene.

The Greek theater also had special machinery including platforms on wheels and a device to lower an actor from the top of the skene house onto the stage. They used this device to show a god coming down to earth. The Greeks also used scenery to help give locations for the action of the play.

Most historians agree that the Greek era is one of the most important times in theater history.



Greek theater consisted of one to three actors and a chorus.

Name _____ Date _____

Questions for Consideration

1. What did Greek theater originally celebrate?

2. How many people attended the yearly festivals honoring Dionysus?

3. Who is known as the first actor?

4. How did Greek actors change roles?

5. Who wrote Greek tragedies?

6. Who wrote Greek comedies?

7. What type of play made fun of Greek legends?

8. Who was the first known literary critic? What book did he write about the theater of his time?

9. Where did the Greeks build their theaters?

10. In Greek drama, what was the function of the orchestra?

11. What was the skene?

Name _____ Date _____

Looks Like Greek To Me

Many words we use today come from the ancient Greek language. The following words used in theater came to us from the Greeks:

Greek Root	Meaning	English Word
Theatron	seeing place	Theater
Drama	to do, act	Drama
Tragos	goat song (it is believed goats were sacrificed before the presentations of the tragedies)	Tragedy
Komos	to revel, celebrate	Comedy
Skene	building (used for scenery)	Scene

The Greek language gave us many other words. Below are listed Greek roots and their meanings. Can you list one English word that came from each Greek root?

	Greek Root	Meaning	English Word
1.	Angelos	a messenger	_____
2.	Arithmos	number	_____
3.	Bios	life	_____
4.	Geo	earth	_____
5.	Grapho	write	_____
6.	Kosmos*	order	_____
7.	Tele	far	_____
8.	Okto*	eight	_____
9.	Pod	foot (<i>ped</i> in Latin)	_____
10.	Polis	city	_____

* Hint: The Greek alphabet uses a "k" in place of a "c"

Name _____ Date _____

Word Search Puzzle

Find the words listed below and circle them in the puzzle. The words may be printed forward or backward, horizontally, vertically, or diagonally.

D C D P A R I S T O P H A N E S O I O H
 D I W B R P P Q L U W Q R E D A J I N O
 N E B D V V P E M E H T T A O S P D C C
 S D L P O E T I C S B J I R K U P R O V
 E O S U P I D E O C S W C U M S V J M H
 L W P T J L Z F B O K H O V Z Y E Y E F
 C U M H R U A R H W E S G K Z N Y A D F
 A T D T O F N M O S N G I R R O K Y Y L
 T H F K M C A O T A E I I P J I I R B Y
 C G E C W S L R I N E E Y L S D X S D R
 E D S N K J A E T P P X V X B E P A A X
 P Y T S J O V Y S Y R E P L O T H V S D
 S P I B E A R I S T O T L E P Q O T I C
 O N V L W H D N A D D B I X H D G C M U
 V S A M E N A N D E R C O P D G T B T H
 A I L P D V S M X A S A T Y R I R I Y M
 M U T O F Y I T R A G E D Y O F E Z M E
 L K K X V K Y D J J D V Z N F T O V T U
 U I G J N W W E O Y E H F M N F Y Y H W
 F Z C L K J S U D I B E U R I P I D E S

WORD LIST

Aristophanes
 diction
 festival
 Oedipus
 Poetics
 Sophocles
 Thespis

Aristotle
 Dionysus
 masks
 orchestra
 satyr
 spectacle
 tragedy

comedy
 Euripides
 Menander
 plot
 skene
 theme