

The Presentation of Greek Tragedy

Greek tragedy of the classical period had recently evolved from religious ritual and, as *The Eumenides* shows, it featured gods, mythological personages, and a chorus that was both a character participating in the dramatic action and a continuing commentator on the unfolding tragedy.

The Architecture of the Theater

The ancient Greek theater had three main elements:

Orchestra: A large central area, usually circular, where the play was performed.

Skene: A large rectangular building situated behind the orchestra, used as a backstage where actors could change their costumes and masks. Originally no more than a tent or hut, the skene evolved into a more elaborate structure of wood and eventually stone. In addition to being used as a dressing room, the skene served as a backdrop for the action of the play and could be decorated to depict an appropriate local: palace, temple, etc.

Audience: Rising in semi-circles from the circle of the orchestra was seating sufficient to accommodate audiences of 14,000 to 15,000.

Almost 50% of all ancient Greek theaters (including that of Dionysus Eleuthereus in Athens) faced south, presumably to maximize natural illumination.

The Actors

Originally, the only performer in Greek tragedy was the chorus, eventually joined in the 6th Century B.C. by the first actor, the eponymous Thespis. A major innovation of Aeschylus was to add a second actor and, shortly afterwards, Sophocles added a third. The actors and chorus in ancient Greek tragedy all were men and all were amateurs - - both Aeschylus and Sophocles acted in their own plays. In order to play women's roles, the actors wore false breasts under their costumes.

Masks

Both the chorus and the actors wore stylized masks (*persona* in Greek), which fit over the actor's head like a hood. As noted, Greek theaters were very large, so the masks served to telegraph to the audience the physical or emotional condition of the character being portrayed. (E.g., after the eye gouging, the actor playing Oedipus donned a mask with blood-red streaks below the eye sockets.) Masks also allowed actors to play several roles.

Choral Dance and Song

The chorus chanted and danced in a series of set forms:

Parodos: the initial entrance of the chorus into the orchestra.

Stasimon: A song composed of strophes and antistrophes performed by the chorus.

Strophe: The first part of the song, chanted by the chorus as it moves rhythmically from right to left in front of the skene.

Antistrophe: The second portion of the song sung by the chorus in its return movement from left to right in front of the skene.

Epode: The third part of the song, following the strophe and antistrophe and completing the movement. It was chanted while the chorus stood motionless in the center of the orchestra.

Antiphon: A song chanted by one segment of the chorus and responded to by the second during those occasions when the chorus had divided in two.

Exodos: The final scene or departure following the last stasimon.

Aside from the basic layout of the theater, these distinctive features of Greek tragedy are largely foreign to us and stands in vivid contrast to the tradition of realistic drama that Americans are most familiar with.