Greek Drama & Theater
Origins of Drama

Greek drama reflected the flaws and values of Greek society. In turn, members of society internalized both the positive and negative messages, and incorporated them into their daily lives. This concept of exposing society’s flaws and allowing the audience to learn from them is evident in contemporary theater.
Origins of Drama

- The earliest origins of drama are ancient hymns, called dithyrambs. These were sung in honor of the god Dionysus. These hymns were later adapted for choral processions in which participants would dress up in costumes and masks.
Why Dionysus?

- In Greek mythology, Dionysus was the son of Zeus & Semele. He is the only god born of one god and one mortal parent.
- One of the 12 Olympians
- He was the god of wine, fertility, and revelry.
Dionysus

- Responsible for human impulses
- Divine mission: eradicate all care and worry
- Described as feminine; “man-womanish”
- It was believed that Dionysus could liberate and inspire man. It was also believed that he could endow man with divine creativity. Dionysus, thus, came to be considered a patron of the arts.
- Honored him through theater festivals
The modern word “theater” comes from the Greek word *theatron* meaning "seeing place."
Greek Theater

- First resemblance of a Greek theater was in the Palace at Knossos in northern Crete
- First formal Greek theater built in Athens between 550 and 534 BC
- Front rows reserved for distinguished visitors
- Open-air theater
  - Simple surrounding allowed audience to devote full attention to characters
Theatre of Dionysus

- Built in the shadow of the Acropolis in Athens at the beginning of the 5th century
- These theatres proved to be so popular they soon spread all over Greece.
Parts of the Theater

- **Orchestra**: (literally, "dancing space") A circular and level space where the chorus would dance, sing, and interact with the actors who were on the stage near the skene.

- **Theatron**: (literally, "viewing-place") This is where the spectators sat. The theatron was usually part of hillside overlooking the orchestra.
Parts of the Theater

- **Skene**: (literally, "tent") The skene was directly in back of the stage, and was usually decorated as a palace, temple, or other building, depending on the needs of the play. It had at least one set of doors, and actors could make entrances and exits through them.

- **Parodos**: (literally, "passageways") The paths by which the chorus and some actors made their entrances and exits. The audience also used them to enter and exit the theater before and after the performance.
Amphitheatres

- The side of a mountain was scooped out into a bowl shape, and tiers of stone seats were built into the hillside.
- Often seated as many as 20,000 people
In the sixth century BC, the Athenian ruler Pisistratus established the “City Dionysia,” a festival of entertainment held in honor of the god Dionysus.

This festival, held in March, featured competitions in music, singing, dance and poetry.

Statue of Dionysus was carried into theater so he could observe the performance.

Performance was preceded by a sacrifice to Dionysus.
Community Involvement in Festival

- The entire city would be in attendance.
- All other businesses not directly involved with the 6-day festival would shut down so that everyone could attend.
- The government even offered financial assistance to those who could not afford to attend.
Thespis

- The most remarkable winning actor/playwright was said to be a wandering bard named Thespis.
- Does the name Thespis remind you of anything? Can you guess which modern word goes back to this early actor’s name?

Thespian:
Of or relating to drama; dramatic: *thespian talents*
Essentials of Greek Drama

1. The play
2. The actors
3. The chorus
The Play: The Tragedy

- *Tragodia* in Greek
- Derived from the words *Tragos*, meaning goat, and *oide*, meaning song. Reason for this obscure origin has two possibilities:
  1. Choruses were dressed in loin-skins of goats
  2. Prize for best song was a goat
The Play: The Tragedy

- Centered around the rise and downfall of the “hero”
- The conclusion of a tragedy was usually a messenger coming out to tell the audience of the tragic consequences of the characters’ actions
- Stories based on myth or history, but varied interpretations of events
- Focus was on psychological and ethical attributes of characters, rather than physical and sociological.
The Structure of Greek Tragedy

- **Prologue**, which described the situation and set the scene
- **Parados**, an ode sung by the chorus as it made its entrance
- **Five dramatic scenes**, each followed by a **Komos**, an exchange of laments by the chorus and the protagonist
- **Exodus**, the climax and conclusion

**Tragedies were often presented in trilogies. Interspersed between the three plays in the trilogy were *satyr plays*.**
Satyr (say-ter) Plays

- These were short plays performed between the acts of tragedies. They made fun of the plight of the tragedy's characters.
- The satyrs were mythical half-human, half-goat servants of Dionysus.
Word Origin

- Does the term Satyr remind you of any modern-day term?
- The Satyr and the Satyr plays spawned the word *satire*.
The Play: The Comedy

- Not admitted to Dionysus festival till 487-486 B.C. – late
- The first comedies were mainly satirical and mocked men in power for their vanity and foolishness.
- Slapstick and crude humor
- Comedies usually concluded with a “happy ending” and the characters find a resolution to the original conflict
The Actors

- Actors were chosen from a pool of professionals.
- Speaking parts were allotted to three men.
- Women were not allowed to participate.
- Gestures and body movements were controlled and stately.
The Actors- Costuming

- Wore long, trailing robes with elaborate designs
- At the bottom of each of the actors’ shoes was a 6-inch wooden sole to make him appear taller and more intimidating.
The Actors- Masks

- Made out of linen, cork, or wood
- Allowed the actors to portray multiple characters
- Portrayed different emotions
- Amplified voices
The Chorus

- The word “chorus” literally means “dance”
- Most Greek choruses blended music, dance and song
- The chorus began in numbers as large as 50 but dwindled to 12-15.
- The traditional Greek chorus moved and spoke in unison.
Functions of the Chorus:

1) To establish the ethical framework— the standard by which action will be judged
2) To set mood and heighten dramatic effect
3) To add movement, spectacle, song, and dance
4) To provide rhythm— pauses / paces the action so that the audience can reflect.
5) To provide time for scene changes and introduce background or summary information.
6) To represent the “ideal” spectator— they take part in play, ask questions, react as playwright intends audience to react
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<tr>
<th>Greek</th>
<th>Both</th>
<th>Modern</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Maximum of 3 male actors, in addition to chorus</td>
<td>• Have a moral that actors/director/playwright is trying to convey to audience</td>
<td>• As many characters and of any gender as playwright deems necessary</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Plays divided into prologue, parados, episodes, stasimons and exodus</td>
<td>• Integrate music, dance and story</td>
<td>• Plays divided into scenes and acts</td>
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<td>• Few and very simple special effects and props</td>
<td>• The Tragedy and The Comedy, including slapstick and satyr</td>
<td>• Many complex special effects and props</td>
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<td>• Some religious significance</td>
<td>• Reaction of audience is very important to life of a play</td>
<td>• Purely entertainment</td>
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<td>• Playwright was responsible to write, direct, choreograph, design and sometimes act in a play</td>
<td>• Similar set-up of theater</td>
<td>• Specific jobs are given to specialists. i.e. playwright writes script, director directs actors, etc.</td>
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