

GREEK THEATRE

Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Overview It is convenient to date the institution of the ancient Greek theater to around 700 B.C.E., which would mean that the first tragedians were figuring out the essentials of their craft at the time when writing was achieving popular usage in Athens, the Homeric epics were being enshrined in polis-wide performances, and the Athenian sense of self-awareness, as a distinctive community, was making itself articulate through such early civic geniuses as Solon (638-558 B.C.E.) (Convenient it is, yes, to sketch out this kind of context for the origins of Greek theater, yet furtive references, throughout Greek literature, hint at archaic rustic festivals which would long have predated 700 B.C.E., and reverted into a period in the second millennium B.C.E., when rural sacrifice and propitiation of the gods formed a basis for the first 'tragedy,' or 'goat-song,' as the word *tragedy* has it.) Given this context, the earliest Greek theater and tragedies, in the seventh century B.C.E., were the initial expressions of a world culture on its threshold.

The developmental stages of the Greek theater *Theatron* means the 'place from which you see,' and we must envisage, at the physical origin of Greek tragedy itself, a doubtless archaic familiarity with environmental factors that supported the idea of stage, audience location, and stage, on which action could be watched from a distance; in short, for *theater* one needed the appropriately canted hill slope, a perspicuous view from it down onto a stage, and facilities of some kind—say carved out stone benches; the first in 499 B.C.E.—where the audience could sit and ideally relax. The Greek landscape, hilly and rocky, has always been generous with such visual layouts, as nothing could better illustrate than the position of the Theater of Dionysus, itself, on the slopes of the Acropolis, where in 518 B.C.E. the Festival of Dionysus was instituted. There the first recorded actor appears for us—Thespis, in 532 B.C.E.; noted as the 18th in sequence among the first actors of the Greek stage-- and there, in 534 B.C.E., occurred the first public staged readings of the Homeric epics. Such a dense digest of the events occurring around the Festival of the Theater of Dionysus, in Athens, can only start to suggest what must have been the thrilling discovery of the larger social-expressive achievement being brought to birth there. One might say that the discovery of how to manage nature for art's sake was the first and stunning stage of this achievement.

How to make a theater out of a theatron In step with the physical/structural developments, which were to create a *theatron*, went not only the landmark new actor/action stages above mentioned, but the physical paraphernalia of the actor himself. By the tradition of early Greek culture, the events to be enacted, on the Greek stage, were 'historical fictions,' traditional tales taken from parts of Homer's work, from the epic cycle of Homer's era, now mostly vanished, or from inherited Dorian culture tales, that survived from the mix of mythology which the Hellenes brought with them from the north, in the second millennium B.C.E. For the performance of such materials to become a reality, before the large crowds of Athenians who flocked to the dramatic festivals—audiences of 14,000 have been surmised for the Theater of Dionysos in Athens—many fine-tunings of the actor condition had been necessary.

Who acted in the Greek theater? Those who enacted Greek tragedy, comedy, and satyr play—the interlude type play that accompanied every dramatic trilogy—were all male, all clothed in quite stylized robes, themselves works of master art in the Athenian polis, and all more or less closely symbolized the character portrayed—the old farmer of comedy, the returned warrior of tragedy, on down the line; or, in the instance of the chorus, the 'puzzled citizens of Thebes,' or 'the frightened maidens in flight.' (In other words the actors played stock roles, although they had abundant room, thanks to the brilliance of the language leading them, to tweak the expected.) Great actors there were, in the modern sense, but the dominant tone of enacted Greek tragedy was stylization.

The chorus. Arguably, the most brilliant innovation of the Greek tragedy was the use of the chorus, and its interactions with the two or three major characters of the drama. Of course the chorus, we think, was the earliest growth point of tragedy, the rural 'nub' out of which the whole performance action of the theater took place; but at the same time the chorus was the sensitive organ through which the dramatist was able to fine tune his presentation. Aeschylus counterpoints the return of Agamemnon from war with the awed and fearful citizens of Argos, a collective voice against which the dreadful central action of the

play unrolls. Sophocles counterpoints the unfolding horror, of the house of Thebes, against the sequence of revelatory events playing out in the consciousness of Oedipus. Euripides works through his chorus to elaborate on the very terror-fraught wonders of his patron god, Dionysus, while the audience has to tremble at such dangerous praise. The chorus, in other words, is a subtle tool for modulating and interpreting the intense action at the center of the play.

How the Hellenic synthesis of historical development and artistic genius occurred The right actors, the right dramatists, the right cultural milieu, the right totally sharpened narrative sense, deployed throughout a homogeneous but argumentative social community: as our temporal distance from the ancient Greeks increases, our fascination with their achievement increases. We hunt in vain for artistic syntheses of the ancient Hellenic variety, but nowhere else do we find a comparable blend of historical-cultural readiedness with writers so deeply communal, in their thinking, that they are able to find their unique voices.

Reading

Freund, Philip, *The Birth of Theater*, London, 2003

Ley, Graham, *Acting Greek Tragedy*, Essex, 2015.

Discussion questions

In Roman theater actors were considered socially unacceptable, even disreputable. Were the greatest actors of ancient Greek drama viewed disparagingly?

Who were the sugar daddies who supported the preparations of actors and choruses for the Festivals of Dionysus? Have we any detailed information about these individuals?

How were male actors costumed and polished in order to appear as convincing female actors?