

Origins of Theatre

Little information about the origin of theatre has survived. The information we do have comes from wall paintings, decorations, artifacts, and hieroglyphics that show the importance of successful hunts, seasonal changes, life cycles, and stories of the gods. From these we see the necessity of passing along the experiences of the old to the young through art, storytelling, and dramatizing events. This practice gave the youth of a culture a guide and a plan for their own lives.

Theatre emerged from myth, ritual, and ceremony. Early societies perceived connections between certain actions performed by the group or leaders in the group and the desired results of the whole society. These actions moved from habit, to tradition, and then on to ceremony and ritual. The formulation of these actions, and the consequent repetition and rehearsal, broke the ground for theatre.

According to the mythologist Joseph Campbell, rituals are related to three basic concerns: pleasure, power, and duty. Power- influencing and controlling events- was often the intention of rituals such as ceremonies to guarantee a successful crop or to please the gods. Usually societies had rituals that glorified supernatural powers, victories, and heroes. Often supernatural forms would be represented using costumes and masks. Rituals that were practiced as duty to the gods, also brought entertainment and pleasure.

These rituals are accompanied by myths. The myths enter the storytelling tradition, gaining a life beyond the original rites. This new life allows the myths to move towards entertainment and the esthetic. These stories now are performed for their own sake and move towards theatre.

Through these rituals, leaders, or actors of sorts, emerged. These acting/leadership roles were often filled by elders and priests. In addition, the beginnings of acting spaces or auditoriums developed as a result of more elaborate rituals.

The earliest example of ceremony and ritual evolving towards theatre comes from ancient Egypt. "Pyramid texts" dating from 2800 to 2400 B.C., contain dramas sending the dead pharaoh off to the underworld. These dramas also the continuity of life and the pharaoh's power. There is also the Memphite Drama, recounting the story of the death and resurrection of the god Osiris, and the coronation of his son Horus. The most important Egyptian drama, though, was the Abydos passion play. Like the Memphite drama, the Abydos passion play concerns the story of Osiris. The paramount Egyptian myth, this drama was enacted at the most sacred place in Egypt, Abydos- the burial site of Osiris. .Performed annually from 2500 to 550 B.C. and full of spectacle, this passion play is the first of its kind ever recorded and is the first example of theatre.

II. Theatre and Drama in Ancient Greece

The Greeks' history began around 700 B.C. with festivals honoring their many gods. One god, Dionysus, was honored with an unusual festival called the *City Dionysia*. The revelry-filled festival was led by drunken men dressed up in rough goat skins (because goats were thought sexually potent) who would sing and play in choruses to welcome Dionysus. Tribes competed against one another in performances, and the best show would have the honor of winning the contest. Of the four festivals in Athens (each reflecting seasonal changes), plays were only presented at one festival--*City Dionysia*. Historians believe that the Greeks patterned their celebrations after the traditional Egyptian pageants honoring Osiris.

At the early Greek festivals, the actors, directors, and dramatists were all the same person. Later, only three actors could be used in each play. After some time, non-speaking roles were allowed to perform on-stage. Because of the limited number of actors allowed on-stage, the chorus evolved into a very active part of Greek theatre. Though the number of people in the chorus is not clear, the chorus was given as many as one-half the total lines of the play. Music was often played during the chorus' delivery of its lines.

Although few tragedies written from this time actually remain, the themes and accomplishments of Greek tragedy still resonate to contemporary audiences. The term tragedy (tragos and ode) literally means "goat song," after the festival participants' goat-like dancing around sacrificial goats for prizes. Most Greek tragedies are based on mythology or history and deal with characters' search for the meaning of life and the nature of the gods. Most tragedies that have survived from this period begin with a prologue that gives the audience exposition to the following action. The chorus then introduces a period called the paradox. During this time introductions to characters are made, exposition is given, and a mood is established. The final scene is called the exodus when all the characters as well as the chorus depart.

Three well-known Greek tragedy playwrights of the fifth century are Sophocles, and Euripedes. Aeschylus , who was a competitor at the *City Dionysia* around 499 B.C., wrote some of the oldest tragedies in the world. Only a few of Aeschylus' plays have survived but they include *The Persians* and the *Oresteia trilogy*. Aeschylus is attributed with the introducing the second actor to the stage. Another Greek playwright was Sophocles, and only seven of his tragedies--including the still-popular *Antigone*, *Electra*, and *Oedipus Rex*--have survived. Sophocles won twenty-four contests for his plays, never placing lower than second place. His contributions to theatre history are many: He introduced the third actor to the stage, fixed the number of chorus members to fifteen, and was the first to use scene painting. Euripedes was another prolific playwright who is believed to have written 90 plays, 18 of which have survived, including *Medea*, *Hercules* and *The Trojan Women*. He was often criticized for the way he questioned traditional values on stage. Euripedes also explored the psychological motivations of his characters actions which had not been explored by other authors. His plays were used as pattern for other authors for many years after his death.

Comedy was also an important part of ancient Greek theatre. No one is quite sure of the origins of comedy, but it is said that they derived from imitation. All comedies of note during this time are by Aristophanes . Aristophanes, who competed in the major Athenian festivals, wrote 40 plays, 11 of which survived--including the most controversial piece of literature to come from ancient Greece, *Lysistrata*, a humorous tale about a strong woman who leads a female coalition to end war in Greece. Although only 33 tragedies and 11 comedies remain from such a creative period, the Greeks were responsible for the birth of drama in the Western world.