

Student Name:

Greek Theater

Vocabulary

obligation - n - duty

solemn - adj - serious

playwright - n - a person who writes plays

choreographer - n - a person who plans dance movements

precinct - n - a defined space

integral - adj - essential for completion

Reading

Theater began in Athens in the early 6th century BCE. It had its roots in religion and was sponsored by the city-state, so everyone felt a powerful connection to it. Drama festivals were celebrations held twice a year in honor of the god Dionysus. It was both an obligation and a privilege for all citizens to attend performances.

Unlike today, seats were available to everyone. Shops were closed to encourage people to attend, people in jail were let out on bail, and slaves were sent days in advance to save the best seats for their owners. The city-state provided free tickets and spending money to the poor. Theater was one of the few public events in which women could participate.

In Athens there were two drama festivals each year. One, held in the winter, presented comedies, amusing plays that often made fun of well-known Athenians. A more important festival was the Great Dionysia, a solemn event held every spring. The plays written for the Dionysia were tragedies, stories of famous men and women who were forced to deal with life-changing events that were often beyond their control. Familiarity with the stories meant that people knew in advance how the plays would end. That did not matter to the audience; at each festival Athenians looked forward to seeing and hearing what new twists the participating playwrights would give to the well-known tales.

A prize was given to the playwright who, working with actors, costumers, mask makers, choreographers, and musicians, could produce the best plays. A playwright wrote not one, but four plays for each festival. Sometimes a writer created a trilogy, three plays related by story or theme, which would be performed on the same day. It was not a requirement that plays be related, only that each deal with a well-known story that had been passed down for hundreds of years.

There were many playwrights in 6th century Athens, but the works of only a few have survived. Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes wrote plays that are still performed today, all over the world. Their plays were first performed in the precinct of Dionysus, a flat area on the south side of the Athenian Acropolis. Many were so successful that they were later presented in other cities. As drama became popular, theaters appeared all over Greece.

The original meaning of the word theater was "watching place." Theaters did not have a stage; all that was needed was an orchestra, a flat, circular space for the actors to perform, and a place for the audience. The audience sat on a hillside overlooking the orchestra. The orchestra was originally a place for dancing. Its edge was marked by a border of stones. At its center was an altar to Dionysus.

The dancers also sang and spoke. They were the Chorus, an integral part of 6th century drama. Tragedies had a Chorus of 15 men, while comedies had 24. Because Greek plays had no more than three actors, the Chorus helped to tell the story by remarking on what was happening in the play. The Chorus might represent the elder citizens of a city, women from a palace, or a group of sailors. By commenting on what was going on they guided, but also reflected, the audience's thinking.