The Greek Theatre

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Tragedy and comedy are two of the most notable inventions of the ancient Greeks. Many people who study Greek civilization regard tragedy in particular as its greatest achievement (although picking amongst contenders like democracy, mathematics, and philosophy is a risky business). Yet tragedy and, to a lesser extent, comedy as the Greeks knew them are somewhat alien to our ideas of theatre, and it takes some guidance before one can enjoy and appreciate these great plays for oneself.

In the first place the theatre (theatron) was out of doors, and it was big. The earliest theatres had no formal structure at all, merely an open space well placed before an embankment which could provide both space for spectators (theatai) and natural acoustics. The Greeks were good at finding such spots, and it is well known how amazing the acoustics in some of their theatres really are. A common trick of tourists at the large theatre of Epidauros in the Peloponnese is to drop a coin on the stone pavement at ground level and see if it can be heard by a companion in the back row of seats. It can, as clearly as if you had dropped it yourself. At Epidauros too you are no small distance away: estimates of the number of spectators who could be accommodated range as high as 17,000.

At Athens the theatre of Dionysos (god of the theatre) is smaller, but still able to seat perhaps 14,000. What you see when you visit the site today on the southeast slope of the Acropolis is the remains of the fourth-century B.C. structure, made of stone and much more ambitious than the theatre that existed in the days of Aischylos, Sophokles, Euripides, and Aristophanes, the great dramatists of the fifth century B.C. In their time, the theatre consisted first of a low wooden stage, behind which rose the facade of a mock-building, representing a temple or a palace, as might be required by the play; in the centre of this facade was a large double door through which actors could exit into a small building known as the skene, suitable for changing costumes and storing props. "Skene" means "tent" in Greek, and originally that's all there was; but by the fifth century the facade of which I speak was in place, and could be painted to give an idea of the setting or "scene" of the play. By such unexpected means did a word meaning "tent" evolve into a word meaning "setting" in English.

In addition to the skene and the stage, there was a large, circular space in which the chorus sang and danced, known as the orchestra. The word in Greek refers to dancing, as this is what choruses did when they sang; they did not stand still to perform. The orchestra came between the stage and the spectators, and was in fact the focal point of the theatre. Tragedy and comedy alike evolved from earlier forms of entertainment which were purely choral, without individual actors. It was an innovation of the late sixth century ascribed to Thespis to introduce a character in a specific role who could engage in dialogue with the chorus; Aischylos in the fifth century is then supposed to have introduced the second character, so that the two could engage in dialogue with each other. These actors were later known as the protagonistes and the deuteragonistes, first and second "competitor", which gives an idea of what good drama consists of:

conflict and tension between interesting characters. For Greeks, it was natural that the subjects of these dramatizations should be drawn from mythology. The chorus of pre-tragedy days sang of the great Bronze Age heroes, recounting their exploits to the greater glory of the city and its gods; but as long as they remained a chorus, their account would be mostly narrative, with little real acting or dramatization. With an actor actually representing the main character in the story, who could answer the questions of the chorus about his activities, came the arrival of real theatre. With the addition of a second actor to play the hero's rival came even greater possibilities of truly re-creating the events before the spectator's eyes; and when Sophokles added a third actor, and sometimes even a fourth, the complexity begins to resemble what one finds on a modern stage. As actors became more and more important, however, the chorus' role diminished until it was eventually dispensed with altogether. The orchestra was then no longer used for dancers but for - an orchestra, a few musicians who played a short piece to mark breaks in the stage action (interludes). There's your second weird etymology for today: a word meaning "dancing space" comes to mean "group of musicians" in English.

Although the trend was in the direction of increased complexity, the number of main actors never grew to more than three. (Nothing like the proverbial "cast of thousands" of a Hollywood epic is ever found in the ancient theatre.) Part of the reason was financial. The plays were put on as part of an annual competition in the festival of Dionysos sponsored by the state, which had to bear the costs of training and outfitting actors (ordinary clothes were mostly made at home because of their prohibitive cost, so we can imagine what the fancy silk and linen outfits of the actors were worth). Thus, a limit was set at three. Another reason for the limit, however, was artistic. Greek playwrights preferred the relative simplicity of their art form. They wished to focus with relentless intensity on the emotions and motives of a few great people, in order to draw appropriate lessons from the confusing events of the past (myth was for them history). They did not want a lot of people getting in the way of this examination, merely cluttering things up. It is in keeping with this characteristic that action (murders, battles, etc.) is seldom ever represented on stage, but is rather reported to the characters by a witness in a "messenger speech". The dramatist is not interested in the action so much as the reaction of the principals.

The cost of outfitting and training the chorus was borne by a producer (choregos, literally "chorus-leader") designated for this duty by the state. In Athens there was an official census recording the wealth of all citizens, and in the fifth century it was regular practice to consult this list for people to bear special costs such as this (it's a form of taxation). The cost of a fourth actor would also be met by this person. Most citizens were happy to shoulder this burden, or at least could reconcile themselves to the expense by dwelling on the amount of goodwill their public-spirit would generate. Producers vied with one another in lavishness, for this was first and foremost a spectacle, and the greatest crowd-pleaser among the shows would win the prize.

What was the overall effect of this spectacle, then? Not quite what we think of now when we think of theatre. Seated with a very large crowd we look down towards a fairly sparsely equipped orchestra and stage. As the play opens one or two spectacularly dressed figures emerge to explain the action and setting, either directly to us or in conversation with one another. Then comes the stately entrance of the chorus, also impressively outfitted; they chant their opening words in a marching rhythm as they enter through one of the two side entrances (parodoi), and switch to more elaborate rhythms after reaching the centre of the orchestra where they begin to swirl and dance. Henceforth action on the stage will alternate with songs by the chorus (odai, "odes", or stasima, "standing pieces"). When the whole chorus is not singing they will retire to the edges, except for their leader who may speak to the actors. The whole thing is delivered in grand style, and the exalted, mannered effect is emphasized by the stiffness of the acting - stiff, because the masks all actors wore forced them to rely on exaggerated gesture and intonation to suggest emotional nuances. The amount of music would make the production seem more like an opera than a play to us, and the general effect seems rather unnatural at first. The chorus especially, with its general reflections and comments on the action at regular intervals throughout the play, proves awkward for modern audiences, who prefer the action to move forward without interruption and find a group speaking in unison quite offputting. But the ancient writers found this a natural medium, and once you get used to it you begin to see how powerful a medium it can be.

Productions of ancient dramas are mounted regularly in modern theatres, but the directors usually do not have the knowledge to recreate the original ambience, and would not want to if they did. They must make the thing work for modern audiences, as a historically accurate reproduction does not. Human actors find masks difficult to work with, and the role of the chorus is usually cut back severely. One expert, however, Peter Arnott of Tufts University, makes the novel case that the original conditions can best be realized and made to work for today's theatre-goers through the use of puppets in a marionette theatre. His theory has been put to the test many times by Arnott himself - quite recently at the University of Waterloo, where a good crowd of nearly 200 was enthralled by his one-man (plus puppets) performance of Euripides' Bacchai. Everyone who hears about this is

skeptical at first, but everyone comes away from his performances raving about them. We are hopeful that we can bring him back in the not-too-distant future, and if we do we shall give Labyrinth readers advance notice so they can come and re-create the ancient theatre for themselves.