

## THE HISTORY AND ORIGIN OF WESTERN DRAMA...

The history of drama is closely related to the history of **humanity**: when the first hunters recounted their adventures using **pantomime** (acting without words), when the first storytellers told their tales in rhythmic chants, and when the first organized groups of people found expression in the re-enactment of war and fertility dances the dramatic impulse demonstrated itself.

As civilization developed in different cultures, drama took definite forms. People worshipped gods and glorified earthly rules with elaborate pageantry. These tales led to dramatic presentations, ultimately to be written and acted out again and again as societal ritual.

The earliest record of a theatrical performance comes from **Egypt**; Carved on a stone tablet about four thousand years ago. It details a three day pageant made up for actual battles, boat processions, and intricate ceremonies that told the story of the murder, dismemberment, and resurrection of the god **Osiris**.

Western drama started to develop in **Greece in the sixth century B.C.** as part of the worship of the god **Dionysus**. To commemorate the god's death, a group of chanters, called the **chorus**, danced around an altar on which a goat was sacrificed. Therefore these chanters were called **goat-singers, or tragos**: the word from which we derive tragedy. These ceremonies evolved into dramatic contests, and according to Greek folklore, **Thespis** won the first competition. Legend has it that when Thespis stepped away from the group and engaged in dialogue with other members of the performance, he became known as the first actor. The term **thespian** has been given to actors ever since.

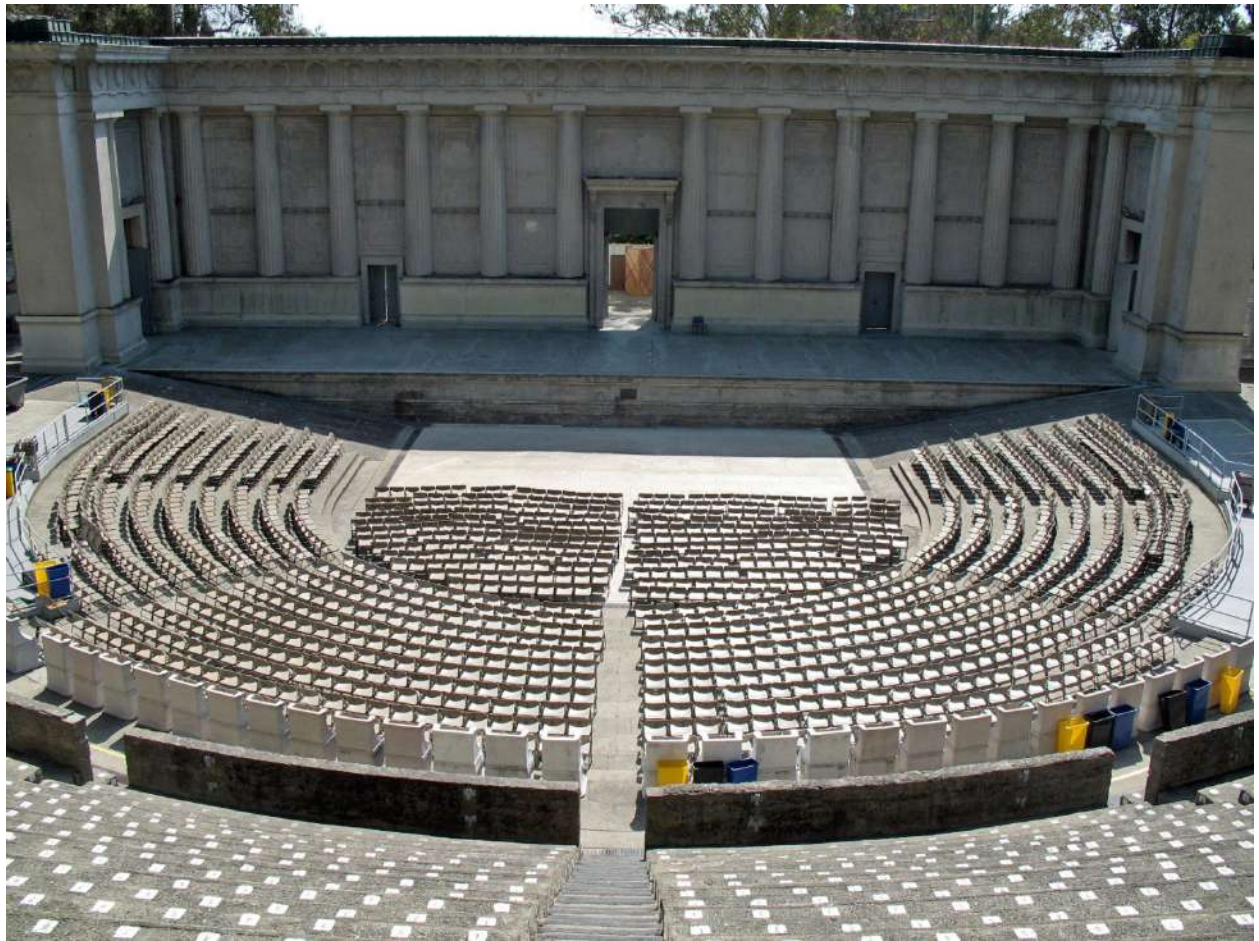
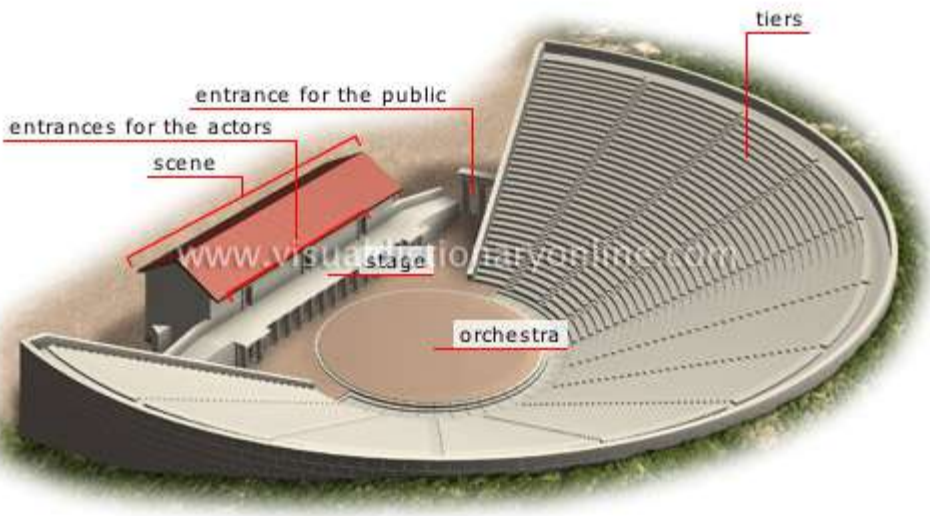
The dramatic contests became part of a festival that lasted five or six days. On each of the last three days, a different playwright would present four plays. The first three plays were tragedies, often forming a **trilogy: three plays related by theme, myth, or characters**. The fourth play was customarily an irreverent, bawdy, burlesque called a **satyr play**. Playwrights competed fiercely to win the laurel wreath at these dramatic contests.

Production in Greek theatre was a highly complex art form that used many clever mechanical devices. **At first, performances were held in the open on hillsides surrounding a circular area called the orchestra, where the chorus danced**. Wooden (and later stone) seats were added to

form the theatre. It is believed that some theatres seated more than seventeen thousand patrons.

At the rear of the acting area was a small hut called the **skene**, where the actors changed masks and costumes. Later, the skene was enlarged into a stone building, a second story and wings were added, and scenery was painted on the front. On the roof of the skene, was the **god-walk**, from which the actors portraying gods delivered their monologues.

Yet another device used in Greek theatre was the **machina**, a cranelike hoist that permitted actors to appear above the stage area as if flying. The machina could also lower actors from the roof of the skene to the orchestra floor. The machine was sturdy enough to carry a chariot and horses or several people. Usually the characters lowered by the machine represented a god from Mount Olympus who came to Earth to settle the affairs of human beings, including the dilemma of the playwright who could not resolve the conflict satisfactorily without the intervention of the gods. From this use came the term **deus ex machina or "god from the machine."** This term is still used today to indicate an artificial plot device an author introduces late in a play to resolve difficulties. An unknown relative who leaves a legacy, a long-lost letter, and the discovery of a relative presumed dead are all typical of deus ex machina. Usually such a plot resolution weakens the play and works out acceptable only in farce, melodrama, or fantasy, however.





### The Chorus:

The chorus was an integral part of early Greek plays. The chorus served to explain the situation, to bring the audience up to date, to make a commentary on the action from the point of view of established ideas, and to engage in dialogue with the actors. Over time, the responsibilities of the chorus diminished as the scope of the actors' roles expanded. Still, remnants of the Greek chorus are found in theatre today.