



How Did Athenian Theatrical Traditions Influence Performing Arts in the Modern Age?

Focus Questions

1. What are some of the fundamental themes of tragic stories, and why do these themes appeal to people in all times and places?
2. Do you think theater, television, and movies are an appropriate venue for expressing one's personal and political views? Why or why not?
3. What is the origin of *deus ex machina*, and can you provide two examples of that concept in modern movies or television series?

The intellectual and literary legacy that Western civilization has inherited from the ancient Greeks is extraordinary. First, the Greeks created the earliest and to this day some of the greatest examples of Western literature. Also, they established almost all the literary forms and disciplines that became standard in later Western societies right up to the present. This includes a wide variety of poetical forms; philosophic and scientific inquiry; formal speech writing; historical writing; prose fiction, including the novel; and literary criticism.

Along with these important literary forms, the Greeks invented one that over time diversified into a wide array of engaging and often entertaining versions—namely, drama. Simultaneously, they desired to express drama's literary forms in a more tangible manner—one that people could see and hear firsthand. So they created an entirely new art form: the theater. Drama and theater became widely popular

throughout the Greek cultural sphere in the last few centuries of the first millennium BCE.

More specifically, both were born and experienced their zenith in a single city-state—Athens. Moreover, that brilliant burst of theatrical creativity occurred during an astoundingly short period—from roughly 530 to 400 BCE, during Athens’s early classical period. In that mere sliver of historical time, a few supremely gifted Athenians constructed the model for great drama and theater for *all* times. As John Camp and Elizabeth Fisher put it, “Drama as we know it had its origins in Greece, and Athens in particular. The early comedies, tragedies and assorted choral performances can be seen as the ancestors of modern show business.”²⁴

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—Historians John Camp and Elizabeth Fisher

Indeed, nearly all of today’s popular theatrical concepts and customs—seen in stage plays, movies, and television shows—were invented in early classical Athens. Among others, they include comic and tragic plots, the arts of acting and directing, costumes and scenery, and even theater tickets and acting awards. Commenting on the prizes offered for best actor and best playwright in ancient Athens, Camp and Fisher call the recipients “the Academy Award winners of centuries long past.”²⁵

Earliest Origins of Drama and Acting

No one knows exactly how formal drama and theater first appeared in Athens, and modern experts still debate the details. However, a general consensus has emerged that the process that eventually produced these art forms started sometime in the 700s BCE. By that era, all Greeks had developed complex rituals connected with the worship of their deity of fertility, vineyards, and wine—Dionysus.

These ceremonies included the recitation of choral verses called dithyramb. The worshipers may have danced to as well as sung the verses. Evidence suggests that the words the priest and people recited told the then familiar tale of Dionysus’s life and exploits. Such stories were already an integral part of the large body of myths the Greeks had inherited from earlier centuries.



Greek worshipers of Dionysus, god of fertility, vineyards, and wine, cavort in a lively ceremony dedicated to that deity. Such rituals were among the key roots of drama and theater.

As the decades rolled by, the Dionysian dithyrambs steadily grew longer and more elaborate and brought in storylines of other gods, along with those of a few renowned mythical human heroes. The rituals also became more majestic and dramatic. Apparently, a priest—and later a handful of highly respected people from the congregation—stood in front of the rest of the worshipers. While musicians played flutes and other instruments, these key persons used singing and dancing to act out the story of Dionysus or another chosen god or hero. In this roundabout way, these leading worshipers became the first performers, and the rest of the faithful were their audience.

An especially important juncture in the evolution of this early formalized worship came when the priests started little by little to enhance the age-old storylines. By doing this, they were in a sense the first playwrights. The famous fourth-century-BCE Athenian thinker and scholar Aristotle later explained in his treatise the *Poetics* that drama “began in improvisations originating with the authors of the

dithyramb.”²⁶ He went on to say that these small-scale dramatic moments that occurred within religious rituals developed little by little over the years, becoming increasingly theatrical in character. Finally, he stated, the evolution of theatrical tragedies reached the form it took in his own day.

Although the religious-based dithyramb was a significant source for Greek drama and theater, other cultural aspects contributed as well. Particularly important were public readings from the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the magnificent epic poems of the legendary Greek poet Homer. During the early years of the Archaic Age, roving storytellers such as Homer recited these tales to local gatherings of townspeople. Over time, such performances became more formal and theatrical in style. A major turning point came in 566 BCE. That year the Athenians initiated contests called *rhapsodia*, in which the best of the roving Homeric storytellers competed. These individuals tried to outdo one another vocally, as well as in the use of gestures, which made them actors of a sort.

The First True Actor

Around 534 BCE a seminal event occurred in Athens that transformed storytellers into true actors. In that year the city introduced a new annual religious festival honoring Dionysus. Appropriately, it was known as the City Dionysia. A larger and more complex edition of the traditional Dionysian dithyrambic rituals, it featured public contests among performers similar to the *rhapsodia*.

The very first winner of the competition was an individual named Thespis, who was both highly creative and forward thinking. Evidence suggests that he converted his performance into the earliest-known version of what later became a stage play. His presentation contained most of the traditional aspects of the dithyramb and *rhapsodia*. Thespis went further, however, first by having a group of people accompany him while he was performing. Collectively called a chorus, its members recited some of the lines in unison, as well as commented on the events of the story. This increased the performance’s overall dramatic effect.

Even more crucial was Thespis’s brilliant idea to actually take on the role of, rather than simply tell about, the story’s main character.

By impersonating that character, in a very real sense he became the world's first true actor. This fresh approach to storytelling instantly became popular in Athens, which motivated Thespis to come up with still more innovations. One of these was not to limit himself to playing the single main character of a story. He realized that he could deliver one character's lines, leave the stage, and come back as a second character, and later even as a third one.

To ensure that the audience was able to clearly differentiate between multiple characters played by the same actor, Thespis employed various disguises. Today that approach would be accomplished through the use of makeup and costumes. Thespis chose instead to don a series of masks, one for each character, and after that masks became standard devices in Greek stage plays. The exact materials used in making those masks are somewhat uncertain. But the late, noted expert on historical costumes Iris Brooke surmised they were "made from carved wood, cork, or leather, or perhaps it was stiffened linen, molded on a marble face in much the same manner as a paper mache one can be today."²⁷

A Much Beloved Institution

Thespis's many contributions to the dramatic arts earned him a kind of theatrical immortality. Indeed, to this day actors are frequently called "thespians" in his honor. Beyond his principal innovations, little is known about him, so it remains a mystery how long he dominated the annual City Dionysia contests.

More certain is that other gifted and popular Athenian writer-actor-directors either competed with or followed Thespis. Evidence suggests that one, named Choerilus, penned about 160 plays and won the festival's dramatic contest thirteen times. He and his fellow early playwrights derived most of their plots and themes from Greek mythology, along with Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and other popular epic poems about the gods and ancient human heroes.

Now and then, however, a dramatist chose to depict a recent historical event widely viewed as a landmark. For example, in 492 BCE an early playwright named Phrynichus wrote *The Capture of Miletus*,



These sculpted representations of ancient Greek theater masks show some of the range of characters these objects portrayed. An actor could first appear wearing the standard mask for a certain kind of character, and later he could change masks, thereby becoming a different character.

about the fall of that important Greek city-state to the Persians two years before. Because Athens had strong cultural ties to Miletus, Athenian audiences found the play very upsetting. The fifth-century-BCE Greek historian Herodotus reported that the spectators “in the theater burst into tears,” and “the author was fined a thousand drachmas for reminding them of a disaster which touched them so closely, and they forbade anybody ever to put the play on the stage again.”²⁸

By the time Phrynichus received his fine, the City Dionysia’s dramatic festival had become a much beloved institution in Athens. It took place over the course of several days at the end of March each year, and Athenians of both genders and all walks of life attended. Also, the festival became so famous that a number of people from

other Greek city-states journeyed to Athens each March to see the plays. According to scholar Robert Flaceliere:

The actual performances [began] in the morning, shortly after daybreak. This was indeed essential if some four or five plays were to be crammed in before sundown, [and] a brief breathing space left between each. The play itself, whether tragedy or comedy, was performed without any breaks or intermissions. [Over the course of] four days audiences saw fifteen, perhaps seventeen plays, [so they] were subjected to something like twenty thousand lines of verse, either spoken or sung.²⁹

Tragedy, Comedy, and Play Production

Modern scholars and others interested in ancient drama find it regrettable that all the plays of Thespis, Choerilus, Phrynichus, and other early Athenian dramatists are lost. The only surviving full-length plays from Athens's golden age of theater—the fifth century BCE—are by the four great playwriting masters of that period. Three of them—Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides—primarily composed tragedies.

In these serious and at times even grim tales, the authors explored the universal human struggle to “deal with the most intractable aspects of human existence,” states noted scholar Mary Lefkowitz. These include “uncertainty about the future, deprivation, suffering, and death.” Such dramatic stories “speak to the causes of human despair.”³⁰ Moreover, these aspects of the human condition have not changed over the many centuries since the Athenians invented the theater, and neither have people's fascination with examining them. Greek drama is therefore the direct ancestor of modern stage, film, and television dramas that explore those same themes.

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—Scholar Robert Flaceliere

The fourth great dramatist of the age was Aristophanes, who wrote comedies. He and his fellow comic playwrights typically presented

Judges of the Dramatic Contests



During Athens's City Dionysia, after all the plays had been presented, a group of official judges rated those productions and chose the winners, who then received their awards. The late French scholar Robert Flaceliere explained how the judges were selected and how they went about deciding the victors.

Before the festival a list of eligible judges was drawn up, and this was reduced by lot, when the proceedings opened, to a panel of ten. These ten judges had special reserved seats in the theater. At the close of the presentations they voted. But yet another selection by lot was employed to reduce these ten personal votes to the final, decisive five. The procedure was as follows. In one urn were placed the ten tablets on which the judges had recorded their votes, and in another, five little black cubes and five white. A voting tablet and a cube were drawn out simultaneously, and only the vote which matched with a white cube was valid. These precautions were, clearly, taken to prevent the possibility of dishonest pressurizing on the part of the poets and *choregoi* [financial backers]. Even so, the crowd did sometimes attempt [by shouting] to put pressure on the judges, and this was liable [to] produce uproarious scenes which the festival officials had some difficulty in controlling.

Robert Flaceliere, *Daily Life in Greece at the Time of Pericles*, trans. Peter Green. London: Phoenix, 1996, p. 208.

topical humor that made fun of all sorts of people, but especially politicians, military leaders, wealthy folk, and other powerful citizens. Often the subjects of the ridicule the actors hurled were sitting right there in the audience.

Such open displays of public criticism were then unheard-of everywhere else in the world outside of Greece. The reason they developed in Athens was the existence of complete freedom of speech guaranteed by

that polis's recently established democracy. This extraordinary literary and theatrical liberty also allowed Aristophanes and his colleagues to employ levels of dirty language, sexual innuendo, and outright crudity seen today only in the frankest uncensored movies and cable TV shows.

These four theatrical giants and their fellow playwrights presented their works in the Theater of Dionysus. Shaped overall like a large semicircle, its circular stage and stone seats were built into one side of the rocky base of Athens's central hill, the Acropolis. The government maintained the theater, as well as paid the actors and supplied the awards for the City Dionysia's winning competitors.

"I won first prize as *choregus* with a men's chorus at the Dionysia!"³¹

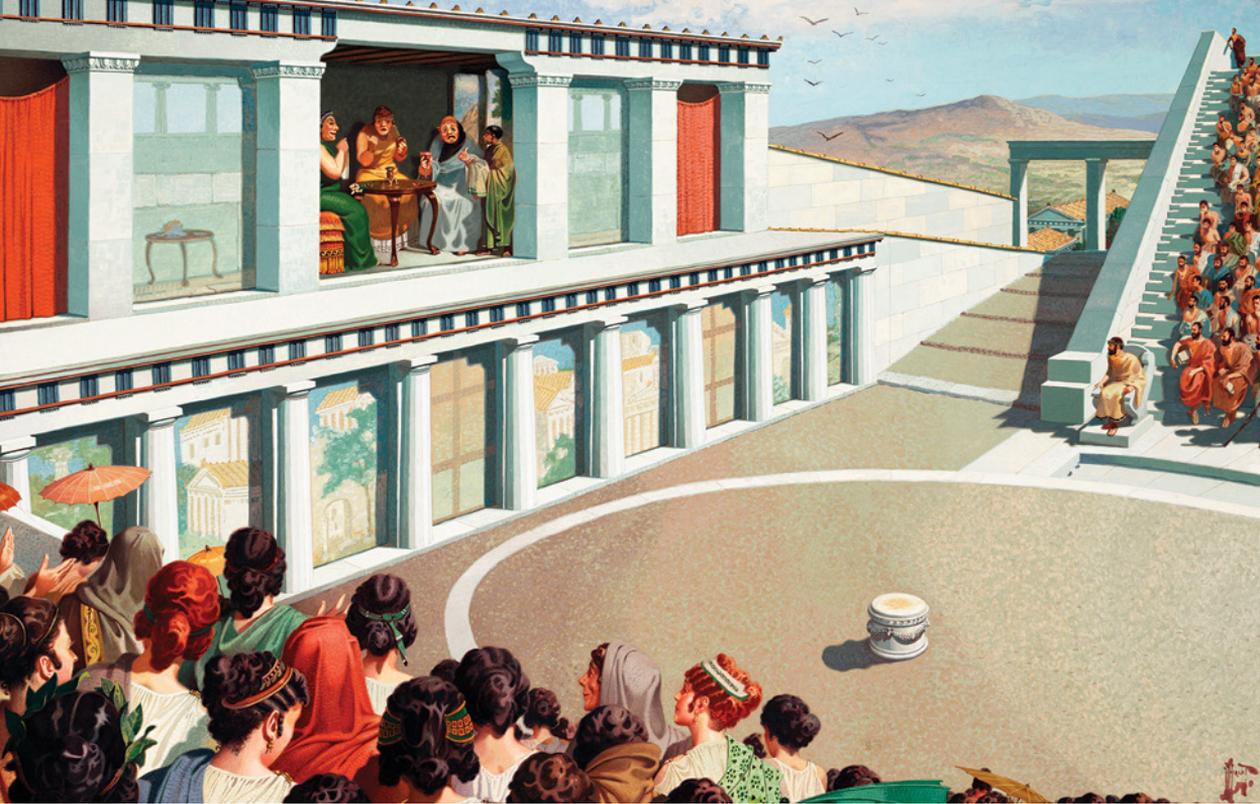
—A proud ancient Athenian

Play production itself, a fairly expensive venture, was sponsored by a few well-to-do citizens who participated on a rotation basis, so that each took part once every few years. Such a backer of dramatic entertainment, who would today be called a *patron*, or an *angel*, was known in Athens as a *choregus*. Most such individuals took great pride in fulfilling what was seen as a vital duty to the community. In a surviving speech, a defendant in an Athenian court case, who was also a former theatrical backer, boasted to the jury, "I won first prize as *choregus* with a men's chorus at the Dionysia, spending 5,000 drachmas!"³¹

The God from the Machine

Among the more expensive items the *choregus* paid for were various kinds of special effects designed to surprise and amaze playgoers. These were the direct forerunners of the complex backstage rigging, lighting, and sound effects that have become standard in modern Broadway theaters. (Such effects, intended in a symbolic rather than literal manner in stage plays, became more realistic in film and television versions of those plays.)

One of those special effects in ancient Greek theaters was produced by the *eccyclema*, or "tableau machine." Murders and other violent acts almost always took place offstage, and the spectators discovered what had happened thanks to verbal descriptions by messengers or other characters. The *eccyclema* gave a sort of visual punch that added



The spectators in the seating area (*theatron*) watch an ancient Greek play unfold. Most often the actors stood within the circular stage area, or orchestra. The two-story structure directly behind the orchestra is the scene building (*skene*), which stored props and provided actors with doors for entering and exiting.

pure shock value to that secondhand news. That device, which several stagehands pushed onto the stage, consisted of a platform mounted on wheels. Atop the platform stood the murderer and his or her victim (or victims), all unmoving, posed at the very moment of the death blow. Usually, the sight of this unnerving frozen tableau sent shudders through the audience.

Another common special effect designed to add a semirealistic touch was the sound of distant rolling thunder (*bronton* in Greek). Stagehands produced this sound behind the scenes. Some evidence suggests that they placed handfuls of metal shards in a large, empty pottery jug and vigorously shook that container.

Probably the most spectacular special effects device used in ancient Greek theaters was the *machina* (from which the English word *machine* derives). Essentially, it was a large crane with a sturdy mechanical arm attached. Behind the scenes, stagehands tied an actor playing a

Echoes of Euripides in *Game of Thrones*



The influence of ancient Greek theater on modern plays, films, and television shows is often considerably greater than many fans of these productions realize. The hugely popular HBO series *Game of Thrones* offers one example of a production that borrows from ancient Greece some of its storylines and characters. As researcher Amanda Marcotte points out:

In a traditional [Greek] tragedy, there should be a growing sense of dread as events converge. The hero is generally invested with some specific “tragic flaw” that leads to his downfall. He should make some terrible decision that the audience can see, in retrospect, was the point of no return that leads to ruin. The most obvious example from *Game of Thrones* is the story of Shireen and Stannis. Shireen’s murder has raised complaints from critics who protest that it was out-of-character for Stannis. But the plot [is] based on the ancient Greek tragedy *Iphigenia in Aulis*, by Euripides. Every beat of the Greek myth is the same in Stannis’s story: The troops are stuck and starving and the general [Stannis here; Agamemnon in the original] must sacrifice his own daughter to turn the fates to their favor. The mother begging for mercy, the disapproving second-in-command who can do nothing to stop it, the daughter who says she will do whatever it takes to help—it’s all a clear echo. In fact, many of the “shocking” deaths on the show, if you look back at the events that precipitated them, fit the model of Classical Greek tragedy.

Amanda Marcotte, “Don’t Be So Shocked by the Deaths on *Game of Thrones*: The Show Is a Classical Tragedy,” *Browbeat* (blog), *Slate*, June 9, 2015. www.slate.com.

god to the arm, and at the appropriate moment the crane “flew” the actor through the air high above the stage. The divine character then gave a climactic speech designed to tie up the story’s loose ends. He delivered the lines either while still dangling in the “heavens” or after the machine had deposited him on the stage.

The *machina* proved so popular that both during and after Athens's cultural golden age, playwrights employed it often. In fact, ancient theater critics came to feel that it was much overused and too often resolved a play's plot twists too simply. As a result, thereafter in Western culture the term *deus ex machina*, "the god from the machine," was (and remains) the standard reference to a writer's attempt to resolve a storyline too easily and neatly.

The Foundation of Western Drama

Thus, the ancient Greeks, starting with the Athenians, introduced almost all of the theatrical conventions that became part of the mainstay of Western dramatic and entertainment arts. These included the most basic notions of plays with plots and spoken lines; theaters with stages and seats for the audience; actors and their costumes and props; comic and tragic plots; writing, acting, and directing awards; financial backers of entertainment; and special effects to enhance the presentation.

Hence, modern theater, film, and the performing arts in general "cannot escape [their] roots in ancient Greece," Charles Freeman asserts. "It is there that the chromosomes of the Western dramatic tradition lie and it is impossible to know what forms of performance might exist today without the Greek initiative."³²