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> "[It] is the business of [the dramatist] to pick out the significant incidents from the chaos of daily happenings and arrange them so that their relation to one another becomes significant, thus changing us from bewildered spectators of a monstrous confusion to [people] intelligently conscious of the world and its destinies."
>
> —George Bernard Shaw, "How to Write a Popular Play"

The playscript is both the typical starting point for a theatrical production and the most common residue of production, because it usually remains intact after its performance ends. Because the same script may serve as a basis for many different productions, it has greater permanence than its theatrical representations and may come to be considered a literary work. Drama is consequently often taught apart from theatre; many people who read plays have never seen a live dramatic performance, and most students get their first glimpse of theatre through reading plays in literature classes. But a script may seem unsatisfactory or puzzling, because it is essentially a blueprint demanding from both reader and performer the imaginative creation of much that is only implied on the printed page. Learning to read, understand, and fill out the script (either in the mind or on the stage) is essential if the power of a play is to be fully realized.

On Reading a Play

There are no rules about how one should read a play. Nevertheless, some observations may be helpful to those for whom play reading is a new experience. First, one must accept that the ability to read imaginatively and perceptively is a basic skill needed by everyone, because without this skill much of human experience is lost, and intellectually we suffer from historical and cultural amnesia.

Because all writers do not express themselves in the same form, all written works cannot be read in the same way. Each form has its own characteristics, and each makes distinctive demands on the reader. We cannot read a play in the same way we read a historical treatise, an essay, a biography, a novel, or a poem. To read a play adequately, we must adjust our minds to the dramatic form. A play is distinctive in part because it is made up primarily of dialogue constructed with great care to convey its intentions and to create the sense of spontaneous speech by characters involved in a developing action. A play is both a highly controlled structure and a simulated reflection of human experience.

Drama requires readers to contribute more than most other forms of fiction do. Not only must readers see and understand what is explicitly said and done, but also they must be aware of all that is implied. The dramatist may use stage directions to clarify setting, situation, or tone but usually conveys intentions through dialogue. In reading a play, we should assume that what is written is what the writer wished to say. But because the dramatist must convey intentions through a likeness of conversation, we must be sensitive—as in life—to what is left unspoken. The reader must be alert to the nuances of interactions among characters. Although inwardly and imaginatively seeing and hearing a script are not a simple undertaking, we can become adept at them with practice. Perhaps the best place to begin is with a look at how plays are constructed and

how structure is related to dramatic effectiveness and meaning. (How playwrights function in today's theatre is discussed in Chapter 11.)

Dramatic Action

Broadly speaking, a play is (as the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle wrote in his *Poetics*) a representation of human beings "in action." By "action" he did not mean mere physical movement. Rather, he was concerned not only with *what* characters do but also with *why* they do it. In turn, the actions of the individual characters relate to some question, problem, or theme that forms the central focus, or *dramatic action*, of the play as a whole.

Francis Fergusson, a twentieth-century American critic, has argued that a dramatic action builds through three steps: purpose, passion, and perception. By *purpose* he means awareness of some desire or goal; by *passion* he means the strength of desire or suffering that makes characters act to fulfill their goals, along with the emotional turmoil they undergo while doing so; and by *perception* he means the understanding that eventually comes from the struggle. In Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (a discussion of which can be found in chapter 6), we see Nora attempt desperately to conceal that she has borrowed money without her husband's knowledge, the increasing anguish into which this attempt leads her, and her eventual discovery that her marriage has been a lie based on a misunderstanding of her husband's character.

The range of human motivation and behavior is so great that no single play can depict more than a small part of the totality. Because each playwright's view of the human condition differs, each drama is in some respects unique. Still, all plays share certain qualities that allow us to draw some conclusions about the characteristics of effective dramatic action. Aristotle stated that a dramatic action should have a beginning, middle, and end. On the surface, this statement seems obvious, but it summarizes a fundamental principle: A dramatic action should be *complete and self-contained* (that is, everything essential for understanding it should be in or implied in the play). If this principle is not observed, the action will probably seem incomplete or unsatisfying. Effective dramatic action is *deliberately shaped* or organized to reveal its purpose and goal and to evoke from the audience specific responses (pity, fear, laughter, ridicule, and so on). Effective dramatic action, in addition to having purpose, must also have *variety* (in story, characterization, idea, mood, spectacle) to avoid monotony. Effective dramatic action *engages and maintains interest*. The situation must be sufficiently compelling to arouse curiosity, the characters interesting enough to awaken sympathy or antipathy, the issues vital enough to provoke concern, or the spectacle and sound novel enough to attract attention. Effective dramatic action is *internally consistent*. Even if the events might be impossible in real life, they should be consistent with the "rules of the game" established in the opening section of the play. For example, when during the opening speech of Eugene Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* the clock strikes seventeen times and a character announces that it is nine o'clock, we are warned that in this play we should be prepared for things to deviate from normal modes of perception—and they do. It is consistency within the framework of the particular play, not whether the events would have happened this way in real life, that leads us to accept events in drama as believable.

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Aristotle's Poetics

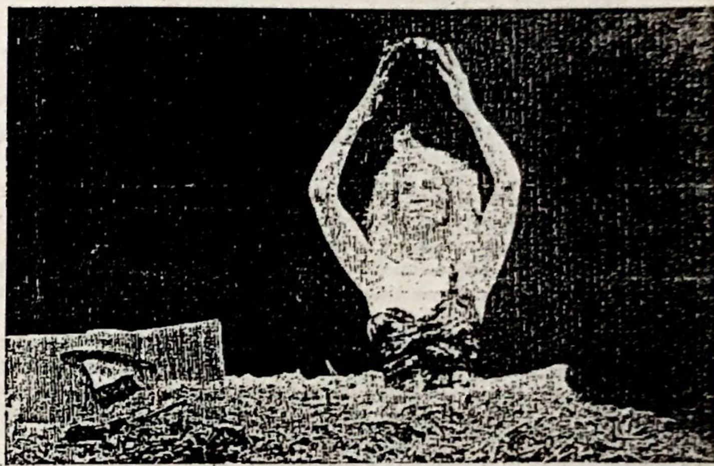
Probably no one has exerted greater influence on ideas about the nature of drama, dramatic structure, and dramatic form than the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 B.C.). The son of a physician, he was sent to Athens at the age of eighteen to study at the Academy, the school headed by Plato, another of the great Greek philosophers. Aristotle remained for twenty years, becoming a teacher there. Beginning in 343, he was for the next seven years tutor to the future Alexander the Great. When Alexander succeeded to the throne in 336, Aristotle returned to Athens, where he founded his own school, the Lyceum. When Alexander died in 323, a reaction against those who had been associated with the ruler made it prudent for Aristotle to flee Athens. Aristotle died the next year at the age of sixty-two or sixty-three.

Aristotle was a biologist by training, but he studied and wrote in a number of other fields. His study of drama led to the *Poetics* (c. 335–323), the oldest surviving treatise on drama. After it was rediscovered in the fifteenth century A.D., it came to be considered authoritative on drama, especially tragedy. Although its influence began to decline in the nineteenth century, it continues to be one of the works most frequently referred to in discussions of the nature and structure of drama. It seems likely that only a part of the *Poetics* has survived, because, although it divides drama into two basic types—tragedy and comedy—and promises to treat both, it discusses only tragedy at length. While describing tragedy, it outlines several principles of dramatic writing. It recommends the cause-to-effect arrangement of incidents, progressing through complications and resolution, as the most effective means of unifying action. It also considers internal consistency to be the basis of believability. The *Poetics* is too complex to summarize briefly, especially because the meaning of almost every line has been heatedly debated. Because it has been so influential, it is a work with which serious students of drama should be familiar.

Methods of Organizing Dramatic Action

A play is composed of incidents organized to accomplish a purpose. This organization directs attention to relationships that create a meaningful pattern. In analyzing a play, it is helpful to pinpoint the source of unity; otherwise, the play may seem a collection of unrelated happenings rather than a whole. The most common sources of unity are: cause-to-effect arrangement of events, character, and thought. (To understand the following discussion most fully, the reader should be familiar with Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, and Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days*. A discussion of *Oedipus* can be found on pages 71–77, of *A Doll's House* on pages 166–169, and of *Happy Days* on pages 218–220.)

The majority of plays from the past are organized through *cause-to-effect arrangement* of events. This is the organizational principle used in *A Doll's House*. Using this



Samuel Beckett's *Happy Days* at Stage West (Springfield, Mass.). Ellen Laurie as Winnie. Directed by Gregory Boyd. (photo by Peter Gould; courtesy of Stage West)

method, in the opening scenes the playwright sets up the necessary conditions—the situation, the desires and motivations of the characters—out of which later events develop. The goals of one character come into conflict with those of another, or two conflicting desires within the same character lead to a crisis. Attempts to surmount the obstacles make up the substance of the play, each scene growing logically out of those that precede it. Any organizational pattern other than cause-to-effect is likely to seem loose, often giving the effect of randomness.

Less often, a dramatist uses a *character* as the source of unity. Such a play is held together primarily because all of the events focus on one person. Few plays are unified predominantly through character, however, because, to create a sense of purpose, more is required than that all the incidents involve one person. They must also either tell a connected story or embody a theme. Beckett's *Happy Days* is unified in part because Winnie creates the action, but ultimately the play's unity comes from its theme. Similarly, *A Doll's House* gains much of its sense of purpose from Nora Helmer, but the play is organized mainly through the structure of its incidents. Plays with primary emphasis on character are usually biographical, as, for instance, a play about Abraham Lincoln or Richard Nixon.

Many twentieth-century dramatists organize plays around *thought*, with scenes linked through a central theme or set of ideas. Beckett's *Happy Days* shows its central character, buried up to the waist in the first act and up to the chin in the second act, trying cheerfully to fill her days as if her situation were perfectly normal. It is organized somewhat like a musical composition, in which a theme or motif is introduced and then elaborated upon in a series of variations; ultimately, these variations fuse to create a vision of human existence as an attempt to make the best of the senseless circumstances

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in which we are trapped. Beckett does not tell a story so much as embroider upon a central idea. Like much contemporary drama, Beckett's is nonlinear, composed more of fragments than of causally related incidents.

Although a play usually has one major source of unity, it also uses secondary sources, because every script involves a sequence of incidents, uses characters, and implies a theme or set of ideas. Other sources of unity are a dominant mood, visual style, or distinctive use of language.

The organization of dramatic action may also be approached through the parts of drama, which, according to Aristotle, are plot, character, thought, diction, music, and spectacle.

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Plot is often considered merely the summary of a play's incidents, but it also refers to the organization of all the elements into a meaningful pattern. Thus plot is the overall structure of a play.

The Beginning

The beginning of a play establishes some or all of these: the place, the occasion, the characters, the mood, the theme, and the internal logic (the rules of the game) that will be followed. Viewing a play is like coming upon previously unknown places and persons. Initially, the novelty may excite interest, but as information about the place and people is revealed, interest either wanes or increases. The playwright is faced with a double problem: to give essential information and at the same time to make the audience want to stay and see more.

The beginning of a play involves *exposition*, or the setting forth of information—about earlier events, the identity and relationship of the characters, and the present situation. Although exposition is a necessary part of the opening scenes, it is not confined to those scenes, because information is gradually revealed throughout most plays.

The amount of exposition required about past events is partly determined by the *point of attack:* the moment at which the story is taken up. Shakespeare typically uses an early point of attack (that is, he begins the play near the beginning of the story and tells it chronologically). Thus he needs relatively little exposition. In *King Lear*, one needs to know nothing about events that have occurred prior to the opening scene. Greek tragic dramatists, on the other hand, use late points, which require that many previous events be summarized for the audience's benefit. Thus Greek tragedies actually show only the final parts of their stories. In *Oedipus the King*, all of the action seems to take place in one day, but to uncover the truth on which the action turns, we must be told about events that begin before Oedipus' birth. Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* is unusual in having a late point of attack (beginning only one day before Willy's death) but still showing, in flashbacks, events that range through many years. The point of attack in *Happy Days* can be called middle because Winnie's situation in Act I has long existed but in Act II is far more advanced; the implication is that her situation would be similar no matter the moment in time.

Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* as performed at the Missouri Repertory Theatre. The figure at center is Tiresias, the blind seer. (courtesy of the Missouri Repertory Theatre; photo by Frank Siraguso)

Playwrights motivate the giving of exposition in many ways. Ibsen, as in *A Doll's House*, frequently introduces a character who has returned after a long absence; questions about happenings while the character was away motivate the giving of background information needed by the audience to understand the situation. On the other hand, some plays offer exposition without attempting to make it seem natural. Many of Euripides' Greek tragedies open with a monologue-prologue that summarizes events up to this time. In a musical play, exposition may be given in song and dance.

In most plays, attention is focused early on a question, potential conflict, or theme. The beginning of such plays includes what may be called an *inciting incident*, an occurrence that sets the main action in motion. In Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, a plague is destroying the city of Thebes; the oracle at Delphi declares that the murderer of the former king, Laius must be found and punished before the plague can end. This is the event (introduced in the prologue) that sets the action in motion.

The inciting incident usually leads directly to a *major dramatic question* around which the play is organized, although this question may change as the play progresses. For example, the question first raised in *Oedipus the King* is: Will the murderer of Laius be found and the city saved? Later, this question changes as interest shifts to Oedipus' involvement in the crime. *A Doll's House* asks: Can Nora conceal her criminal act from Torvald, and, if not, what will he do?

Not all plays include inciting incidents or clearly identifiable major dramatic questions. All have focal points, nevertheless, frequently a theme or controlling idea around which the action is centered. *Happy Days* is a good example of this alternative pattern as Winnie seeks to cope with the meaninglessness of her daily existence.

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The Middle

The middle of a play is normally composed of a series of complications. A *complication* is any new element that changes the direction of the action—the discovery of new information, for example, or the arrival of a character. The substance of most complications is *discovery* (any new information of sufficient importance to alter the direction of action). Discoveries may involve objects (a wife discovers in her husband's pocket a weapon of the kind used in a murder), persons (a young man discovers that his rival in love is his father), facts (a young man about to leave home discovers that his mother has cancer), values (a woman discovers that self-esteem is more important than marriage), or self (a man discovers that he has been acting from purely selfish motives when he thought he was acting out of love for his children). Each complication normally has a beginning, middle, and end—its own development, climax, and resolution—just as the play as a whole does.

Other means than discoveries can be used to precipitate complications. Natural or mechanical disasters (earthquakes, storms, airplane crashes, automobile accidents) are sometimes used, but these are likely to seem contrived if they resolve the problem (for example, if the villain is killed in an automobile accident and as a result the struggle automatically ends).

The series of complications culminates in the *climax*, the highest point of interest or suspense. It is often accompanied by the *crisis*, that discovery or event that determines the outcome of the action. For example, the title character in *Oedipus the King* sets out to discover the murderer of Laius; the interest steadily grows as events increasingly focus attention on Oedipus, and the turning point comes when Oedipus realizes that he himself is the guilty person and becomes the pursued rather than the pursuer. Not all plays have a clear-cut series of complications leading to climax and crisis. *Happy Days*, for example, is less concerned with a progressing action than with a static condition. Nevertheless, interest is maintained by the frequent introduction of new elements and an ongoing pattern of tension and relaxation. One way of analyzing such plays (and all others as well) is to divide them into beats, or *units*, the beginnings and endings of which are indicated by shifts in motivation, topic, or the introduction of some new element. One can then examine the function of each of these units both at that point in the action and in the overall development of the play.

The End

The final portion of a play, the *resolution* or *denouement* (unraveling or untying), extends from the crisis to the final curtain. It ties up the various strands of action, answers the questions raised earlier, or solidifies the theme. It returns the situation to a state of balance and satisfies audience expectations.

Plays may also have *subplots*, in which events or actions of secondary interest are developed, often providing contrast to or commentary on the main plot. In *A Doll's House*, the relationship of Krogstad and Mrs. Linde contrasts sharply with that of Nora and Torvald. Often a subplot becomes a major factor in resolving the main plot, as in *Hamlet*, when Laertes, a morally upright character, is provoked by the death of his father Polonius and the madness of his sister Ophelia to agree to help Claudius in his plan to kill Hamlet.

Character and Characterization

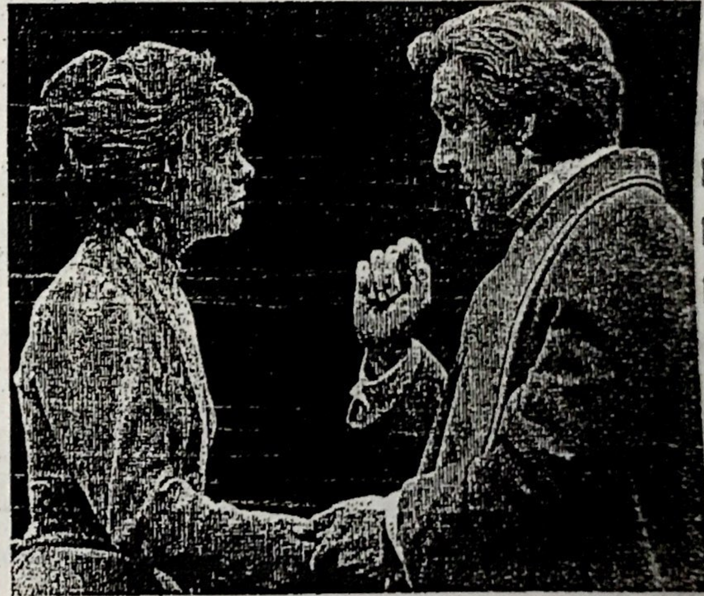
Character is the primary material from which plots are created, because incidents are developed through the speech and behavior of dramatic personages. *Characterization* is anything that delineates a person or differentiates that person from others. It operates on four levels.

The first level of characterization is *physical* or *biological*, defining gender, age, size, coloration, and general appearance. Sometimes a dramatist does not supply all of this information, but when the play is produced, actors necessarily give physical presence to the characters.

The second level is *societal*. It includes a character's economic status, profession or trade, religion, family relationships—all of the factors that place a character in a particular social environment.

The third level is *psychological*. It reveals a character's habitual responses, desires, motivation, likes, and dislikes—the inner workings of the mind. Because drama most often arises from conflicting desires, the psychological is the most essential level of characterization.

The fourth level is *moral*. It reveals what characters are willing to do to get what they want. It also shows what characters actually do when faced with making a difficult



Henrik Ibsen's ***A Doll's House*** as produced by the Guthrie Theater (Minneapolis). Megan Follows as Nora; Stephen Pelinski as Torvald. Directed by Michael Langham. (photo by Michal Daniel)

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choice (as opposed to what they have said they or others should do in such situations). Moral decisions differentiate characters more fully than any other type, because deliberating about such decisions causes characters to examine their values and motives, in the process of which their true natures are revealed both to themselves and to the audience. The moral level is developed most fully in serious plays. (Analyzing Nora in *A Doll's House* and Winnie in *Happy Days* in terms of the four levels will reveal much about these characters and the plays in which they appear.)

A playwright may emphasize one or more of these levels and may develop many or few traits, depending on *how the character functions in the play*. For example, the audience needs to know very little about a maid who appears only to announce dinner, whereas the principal characters need to be drawn in considerable depth.

A character is revealed in several ways: through *descriptions in stage directions, prefaces, or other explanatory material* not part of the dialogue; *through what the character says*; through *what others in the play say about the character*; and, most important, through *what the character does*.

Dramatic characters are usually both *typified* and *individualized*. On the one hand, spectators would be unable to relate to a character who was totally unlike any person they had ever known. Therefore, characters can usually be placed in one of several large categories of people. On the other hand, audiences may be dissatisfied unless the playwright goes beyond this typification to give characters individualizing traits that set them apart from other characters of the same type. The most satisfactory dramatic characters are usually easily recognizable types with some unusual or complex qualities.

A playwright may be concerned with making characters *sympathetic* or *unsympathetic*. Normally, sympathetic characters are given major virtues and lesser foibles, whereas the reverse is true of unsympathetic characters. A character who is either completely good or bad is likely to seem unconvincing as a reflection of human behavior. Acceptability varies, however, with the type of play. Melodrama, for example, oversimplifies human psychology and clearly divides characters into good or evil. Tragedy, on the other hand, normally depicts more complex forces at work both within and without characters and requires greater depth and range of characterization.

Thought

The third basic element of a play is *thought*. It includes the themes, arguments, and overall meaning of the action. It is present in all plays, even the most lighthearted farce, because a playwright cannot avoid expressing some attitudes, because events and characterization always imply some view of human behavior. As we have already seen, thought may also be used to unify a play's dramatic action.

Meaning in drama is usually implied rather than stated directly. It is suggested by the relationships among characters; the ideas associated with unsympathetic and sympathetic characters; the conflicts and their resolution; and such devices as spectacle, music, and song. Sometimes the author's intention is clearly stated in the script, as when characters advocate a certain line of action, point of view, or specific social reform.

Dramatists in different periods have used various devices to project ideas. Greek playwrights made extensive use of the *chorus*, just as those of later periods employed such devices as *soliloquies*, *asides*, and other forms of statement made directly to the

audience. Other tools for projecting meaning are *allegory* and *symbol*. In allegory, characters are personifications of abstract qualities (mercy, greed, and so on), as in the medieval play *Everyman*. A symbol is an object, event, or image that, although meaningful in itself, also suggests a concept or set of relationships. In *Happy Days*, the mound in which Winnie is trapped and that progressively rises around her serves as a symbol of the human condition and visually sums up the play's thought.

Just because plays imply or state meaning, we should not conclude that there is a single correct interpretation for each play. Most plays permit multiple interpretations, as different productions of, and critical essays about, the same play clearly indicate. Nevertheless, each interpretation should be supported by evidence found in the script.

Diction

Plot, character, and thought are the basic subjects of drama. To convey these to an audience, playwrights have at their disposal two means: sound and spectacle. Sound includes language, music, and other aural effects; spectacle includes the visual elements of a production (the physical appearance and movement of performers, the costumes, scenery, properties, and lighting).

Language is the playwright's primary means of expression. When a play is performed, other expressive means (music, sound effects, and spectacle) may be added; but to convey intentions to others, the dramatist depends almost entirely on dialogue and stage directions. Thus language (diction) is the playwright's primary tool.

Diction serves many purposes. It is used to *impart information*, to *characterize*, to *direct attention* to important plot elements, to *reveal the themes and ideas* of a play, to *establish tone or mood and internal logic*, and to *establish tempo and rhythm*.

The diction of every play, no matter how realistic, is more abstract and formal than that of normal conversation. A dramatist always selects, arranges, and heightens language. In a realistic play, although the dialogue is modeled after and *may* retain the rhythms and basic vocabulary of everyday usage, the characters are usually more articulate and state their ideas and feelings more precisely than their real-life counterparts would.

The dialogue of nonrealistic plays (such as Greek and Shakespearean tragedies) deviates markedly from everyday speech. It employs a larger vocabulary, abandons the rhythms of conversation, and makes extensive use of imagery and meter. Other types of nonrealistic plays may emphasize the clichés and repetitiveness of conversation as a means of commenting on the mechanical quality and meaninglessness of exchanges that pass for communication.

The basic criterion for judging diction is its *appropriateness* to characters, situation, internal logic, and type of play.

Music

Music, as we ordinarily understand the term, does not occur in every play. But if the term is extended to include all patterned sound, it is an important ingredient in every production, except those wholly silent.

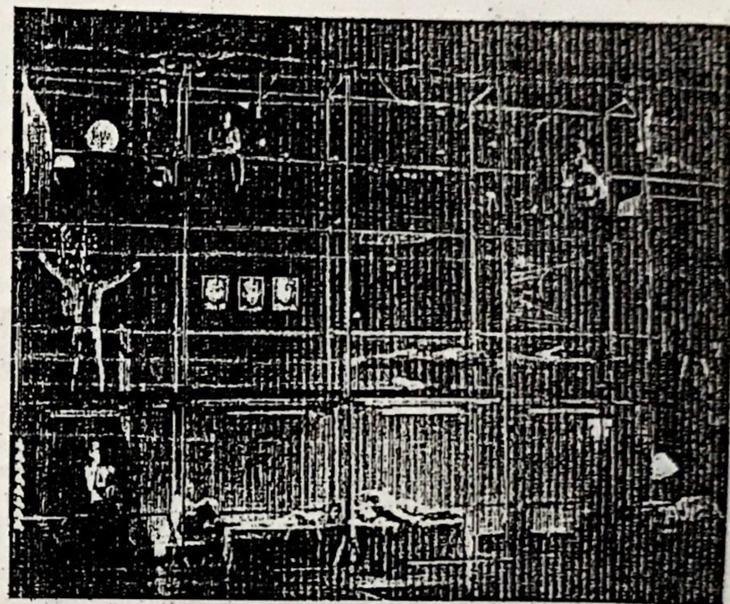
Language has been described as the playwright's principal means of expression. But a written script, like a musical score, is not fully realized until the performers—

Striking music and spectacle are major features of Lee Breuer and Bob Telson's *The Gospel at Colonus*, a retelling of Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus* through American gospel music and preaching. Here in a production at the Goodman Theatre (Chicago), Martin Jacob (a member of the gospel group the Soul Stirrers) separates the Balladeer (Sam Butler, Jr.) and Polyneices (Terrence A. Carson). (courtesy of the Goodman Theatre)

through the elements of pitch, stress, volume, tempo, duration, and quality—transform print into sound. It is through these elements that meaning is conveyed. For example, though the words of a sentence may remain constant, its meaning can be varied by manipulating emphasis or tone ("You say *he* told her?" as contrasted with "You say he told *her*?" or the differences that result if the tone in the same speech is shifted from joy to sarcasm). Because written language is imprecise in emphasis or tone, actors and directors may interpret a passage in ways the playwright did not intend.

The spoken aspect of language varies in its formal qualities. In some plays, among them *A Doll's House*, it simulates the loose rhythms of everyday speech; in others, such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, it is shaped into formalized metrical patterns.

In addition to the sound of the actors' voices, a play may also use music in the form of incidental songs and background music or—as in musical comedy and opera—it may utilize song and instrumental accompaniment as integral structural means. Music (especially in combination with lyrics) may serve many functions. It may *establish mood*, it may *characterize*, it may *suggest ideas*, it may *compress* characterization or exposition (by presenting information, feelings, or motivations in a song), it may *lend variety*, and it may be *pleasurable* in itself.



In this production of Bertolt Brecht's *In the Jungle of Cities* at the American Repertory Theatre, numerous compartments are used to enact the harsh realities of the American Dream and the attempts of two men to destroy each other. Directed by Robert Woodruff, setting by Robert Pyzocha, costumes by Catherine Zuber; lighting by Michael Chybowski. (photo by Richard Feldman)

Spectacle

Spectacle encompasses all the visual elements of a production: the movement and spatial relations of characters, the lighting, settings, costumes, and properties. Because others normally supply these elements, the playwright does not have full control over them; and because the script seldom describes the spectacle precisely, the other theatre artists must discover the play's intentions through careful study of the text. Similarly, the reader of a script must try to envision the spectacle in order to grasp a play's full power. The visual picture of Winnie embedded in the mound is essential to *Happy Days*.

Some scripts give the reader more help than others. Many older plays (including Greek and Shakespearean tragedies) contain almost no stage directions, and most clues to spectacle must be sought in the dialogue. When place or action is important, such plays usually have a character describe them. Beginning in the nineteenth century, when visual elements were given added prominence, stage directions became usual. Since that time, the printed texts of plays have typically included many aids designed to help the reader visualize the action. In evaluating spectacle, the characteristics we should be most concerned with are *appropriateness* and *distinctiveness*. (The process of transferring the written script to the stage is treated more fully in the chapters that make up Part Three.)

Analyzing Scripts

The structure of drama can best be understood by analyzing specific plays. Here is a list of questions useful in that process.

1. How is the dramatic action unified? Through cause-to-effect relationship of incidents? Character? Theme/motif/idea?
2. What are the given circumstances? (Geographical location? Period? Time of day? Socioeconomic environment? Attitudes and relationships of characters at the beginning of the play? Previous action?) How is this information conveyed?
3. At what point in the total story does the play begin (that is, where is the point of attack)? What sets the dramatic action in motion (the inciting incident)?
4. What is the major conflict, dramatic question, or unifying theme? What is the climactic scene? How is the action resolved? Are there subplots? If so, how is each related to the main plot?
5. What is the dominant tone of the play? Serious? Comic? Ironic? Is the tone consistent throughout, or does it change often? How is tone established?
6. For each character, list the biological, social, psychological, and moral traits indicated in the script. Which traits of each character are most important to the dramatic action? What is each character willing to do to achieve his/her desires?
7. What are the major ideas/themes/implications of the dramatic action? Is there a clear-cut message? If not, how is significance conveyed? Are there a number of possible interpretations of the play? If so, which seems most defensible based on the play's action, characterizations, and other elements in the script?
8. To what extent do the vocabulary, rhythm, and tempo of speeches follow or deviate from everyday, colloquial usage? What information is given or implied about sound? Music? Is this information significant to the dramatic action? If so, how?
9. What information is given or implied in the script about settings? Costumes and makeup? Lighting? Is this information significant to the dramatic action? If so, how?
10. For what kind of theatrical space was the play written? What characteristics of the script are explained by the theatrical or dramatic conventions in use at the time the play was written?

Not all of these questions need be answered for each script. Additional questions may be needed for some scripts or for specialized interests (to meet the needs of actors, designers, and others) or for atypical scripts.

Form in Drama

Scripts are frequently classified according to form: tragedy, comedy, tragicomedy, melodrama, farce, and so on. Considerable emphasis is sometimes placed on understanding the essential qualities of each dramatic form and the proper classification of each script. Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, for example, provoked a lengthy controversy over whether it was a true tragedy. Since the 1960s concern over dramatic form has lessened, in part because much recent drama defies formal classification. Nevertheless, one cannot read plays without encountering formal labels. Consequently, some understanding of dramatic form is helpful.

Basically, *form* means the shape given to something for a particular purpose. A sentence is a form created by words arranged in a particular order to convey a thought. Similarly, a play is a form created by arranging incidents in a particular order to create a dramatic action. Most plays have in common certain formal elements that permit us to recognize them as *plays* rather than as novels, epic poems, or essays. Still, those works we recognize as plays are not all alike. Critics have divided them into a number of dramatic forms on the basis of certain characteristics, the most important of which are type of action, overall tone, and basic emotional appeals. Throughout much of history, *tragedy* and *comedy* have been considered the two basic forms.

Tragedy

The oldest known form of drama, tragedy, presents a genuinely serious action and maintains a serious tone throughout, although there may be moments of comic relief. It raises significant issues about the nature of human existence, morality, or human relationships. The protagonist, or leading character, of tragedy is usually someone who arouses our sympathy and admiration but who encounters disaster through the pursuit of some goal, worthy in itself, that conflicts with another goal or principle. The emotional effect of tragedy is the arousal of a strong empathy for those who strive for integrity and dignity.

Tragedy is a form associated especially with ancient Greece and Elizabethan England. (In later chapters, two of the world's greatest tragedies, Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* and Shakespeare's *Hamlet* will be discussed in detail.) Few plays in the twentieth century have been called tragedies, perhaps because, as some critics have argued, we no longer consider human beings capable of the kind of heroic action associated with the great tragic heroes.

Comedy

A dramatic form that had its origins in ancient Greece, comedy is based on some deviation from normality in action, character, or thought. It must not pose a serious threat, and an "in-fun" tone is usually maintained. Comedy demands that an audience view the situation objectively. Henri Bergson argues that comedy requires "an anesthesia of the heart," because it is difficult to laugh at anything about which we feel deeply. We may find it funny to see a person slip on a banana peel, but if we discover that the person is

The Possibility of Writing Tragedy Today

Is it still possible to write tragedy? This question has been debated frequently during the past century. Few dramatists since the mid-nineteenth century have called their serious plays tragedies, and today, though we still study tragedy and talk about tragic form, when we do so we usually look back to the Greeks or to Shakespeare for our examples. Joseph Wood Krutch, a university professor and critic, argued in his essay "The Tragic Fallacy" that it is impossible to write tragedy in modern times because we consider human beings too petty to be capable of tragic action: "the idea of nobility is inseparable from the idea of tragedy, which cannot exist without it. . . . [A] tragedy . . . must . . . have a hero and, from the universe as we see it both the Glory of God and the Glory of Man have departed. Our cosmos may be farcical or it may be pathetic but it has not the dignity of tragedy. . . . The death of tragedy is, like the death of love, one of those emotional fatalities as the result of which the human as distinguished from the natural world grows more and more a desert."

Not everyone agrees with Krutch's conclusions. Arthur Miller was driven to offer a different point of view when *Death of a Salesman*, following its original production, became the subject of a lengthy debate over whether it could be considered a "true tragedy." Miller responded in an essay entitled "Tragedy and the Common Man":

> For one reason or another, we are often held to be below tragedy—or tragedy above us. . . . I believe that the common man is as apt a subject for tragedy in its highest sense as kings were. . . . [T]he tragic feeling is evoked in us when we are in the presence of a character who is ready to lay down his life, if need be, to secure one thing—his sense of personal dignity. . . .

a close relative who is just recovering from a serious operation, our concern will destroy the laughter. Similarly, we may dislike some things so intensely that we cannot see their ridiculous qualities. Nevertheless, any subject, however trivial or important, can become the subject of comedy if we place it in the right framework and distance ourselves sufficiently from its serious implications. Comedy arouses emotions ranging between joy and scorn, with laughter as their common response.

Other Forms

Not all plays are wholly serious or comic. The two are often intermingled to create mixed effects, as in tragicomedy, a serious play that ends happily. Perhaps the best known of the mixed types is *melodrama*, the favorite form of the nineteenth century and still the dominant form among television dramas dealing with crime and danger. A melodrama develops a temporarily serious action that is initiated and kept in motion by the malicious designs of a villain; a happy resolution is made possible by destroying the villain's power. Melodrama depicts a world in which good and evil are sharply differentiated;

there is seldom any question where the audience's sympathies should lie. The appeals are strong and basic, creating a desire to see the "good guys" triumph and the "bad guys" punished. This desire is usually met in a double ending, one outcome for the good, another for the bad. Melodrama is related to tragedy through its serious action and to comedy through its happy ending. It is a popular form, perhaps because it assures audiences that good triumphs over evil.

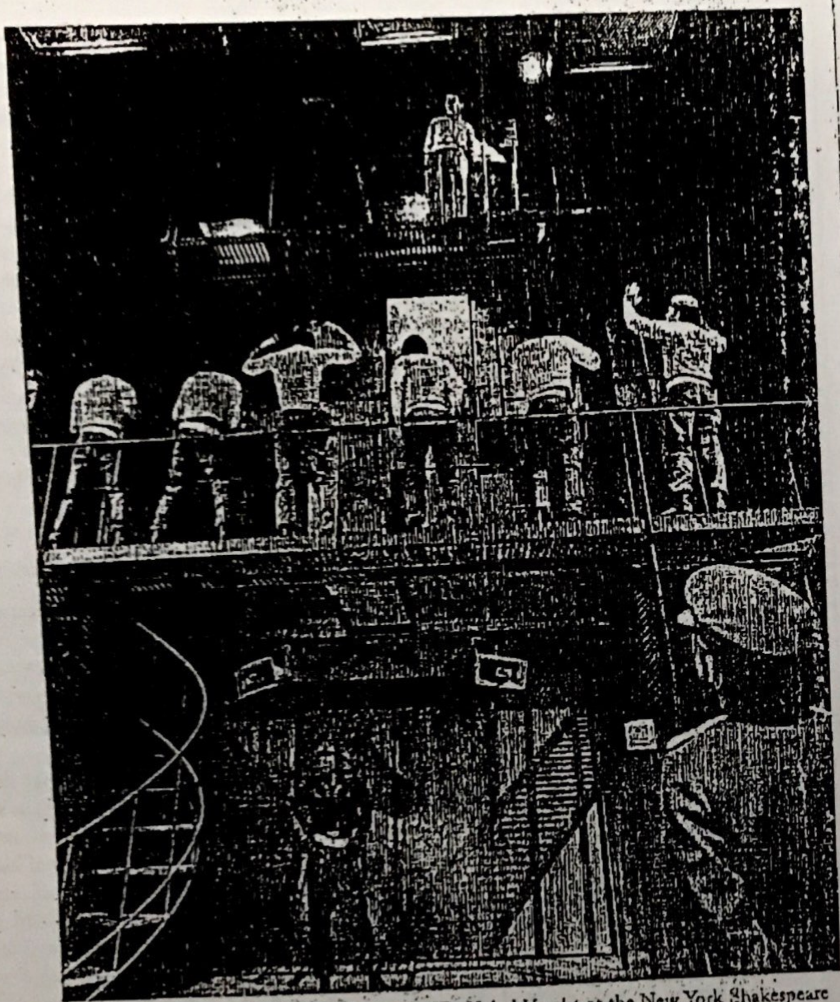
During the past century, concern for giving formal labels to plays has greatly diminished, probably because people no longer consider it possible to categorize situations and people precisely. Boundaries have come to seem so fluid that a single event might be viewed almost simultaneously as serious, comic, threatening, or grotesque. Thus tone might shift rapidly; elements that in the past were associated with tragedy or comedy might be intermingled or be transformed into their opposites. As a result, the old formal categories have lost much of their significance. Since World War II, plays have been labeled "tragic farce," "anti-play," "tragedy for the music hall," and a variety of other terms that suggest how elements from earlier categories and from popular culture have been intermingled.

Despite all of the changes, we need to recognize that each play has a form; otherwise, we would not be able to read or comprehend it. It is perhaps best to remember that the form of each play is in some respects unique—no two plays are exactly alike—but that there are sufficient similarities among certain plays to group them into a common category. Whether or not we have precise notions about tragedy, comedy, or other forms, we are aware of distinctions between the serious and the funny, and most of us freely use "tragic," "comic," and "melodramatic" to describe events in the world around us. Basic awareness of dramatic form will be helpful in many of the subsequent discussions in this book.

Style in Drama

Even plays of the same form vary considerably. One reason for this variety is *style*. Like *form*, the word *style* is difficult to define because it has been used to designate many things. Basically, however, style results from a distinctive mode of expression or method of presentation. For example, style may stem from traits attributable to a period, a nation, a movement, or an author. In most periods, the drama of all Western nations has certain common qualities caused by prevailing cultural concepts (religious, philosophical, psychological, economic) and by then-current theatrical conventions. Thus we may speak of an eighteenth-century style. Within a period, national differences permit us to distinguish a French from an English style. Furthermore, the dramas written by neoclassicists have qualities that distinguish them from those written by romantics, expressionists, or absurdists. Finally, the plays of individual authors have distinctive qualities that set them off from the work of all other writers. Thus we may speak of Shakespeare's or Sophocles' style.

Style in theatre results from three basic influences. First, it is grounded in assumptions about what is truthful and valuable. Dramatists of all movements or periods have sought to convey truthful pictures of humanity, but they have differed widely in their answers to the following questions: What is ultimate truth? Where is it to be



Hamlet in Joseph Papp's modernized version, *The Naked Hamlet*, at the New York Shakespeare Festival in costumes and sets that suggest a contemporary prison-like world. Directed by Joseph Papp; setting by David Mitchell. (photo by George E. Joseph)

found? How can we perceive reality? Some have argued that surface appearances only disguise truth, which is to be found in some inner or spiritual realm. Others have maintained that truth can be discovered only by objective study of things that can be felt, tasted, seen, heard, or smelled. To advocates of the latter view, observable details hold the key to truth; to advocates of the former view, the same details only hide the truth. Although all writers attempt to depict the truth as they see it, the individual playwright's

conception of truth is determined by basic temperament and talent and by the culture in which he or she lives.

Second, style results from the manner in which a playwright manipulates the means of expression. All dramatists have at their disposal the same means—sound and spectacle. Nevertheless, the work of each playwright is distinctive, because each perceives the human condition from a different point of view, and these perceptions are reflected in situations, characters, and ideas; in manipulation of language; and in suggestions for the use of spectacle. In the process of writing, playwrights set their distinctive stamp (or style) on their plays.

Third, style results from the manner in which the play is presented in the theatre. The directing, acting, scenery, costumes, and lighting used to translate the play from the written script to the stage may each be manipulated in many ways; the distinctive manner in which these elements are handled in a production characterizes its style. Because so many people are involved in producing a play, it is not unusual to find conflicting or inconsistent styles in a single production. Typically, unity is a primary artistic goal. Each theatre artist usually seeks to create qualities analogous to those found in the written text, and the director then coordinates all of the parts into a unified whole. In recent times, postmodernism has intermingled different styles, although this intermingling may itself be considered a style. Ultimately, style results from the way in which means are adapted to ends.

Prologue

Part One has introduced and discussed several basic issues related to the nature of theatre, to the role of audiences, to varied criteria for judging theatrical performances, and to dramatic structure, form, and style. Such discussions remain somewhat abstract, however, until they are made concrete through specific examples. Consequently, the chapters that follow explore how these issues have been manifested in the theatrical practices of diverse times and places, both past and present.

"The second phase [in the development of theatre brings it] to as elaborate a scale of great festival performance as one can reach, but still acted under the . . . open sky. . . . [The offerings] are performed only on special, ritual occasions in the year. There is still a dominating . . . religious element. There is no, or very little, professionalism. . . ."

—Richard Southern, *The Seven Ages of the Theatre*

During the first two thousand years of its existence, Western theatre was markedly different from the professional and commercial theatre that we know today and that has flourished only during the past four hundred years. Until the sixteenth century A.D., theatre in the Western world was performed primarily as part of festivals. Financed by the community and performed for the community, it was available only for brief periods each year when theatrical performances were presented as offerings to a god and for the enjoyment of the general populace. This type of theatre flourished in ancient Greece, Rome, and medieval Europe, although in each the differences were as important as the similarities.

The Theatre of Ancient Greece

Theatre in the Western world can be traced back to ancient Greece, and especially to Athens, usually considered the cradle of Western civilization. The Athenians, inventors of democracy, were the first to have sufficient faith in humanity to let citizens be responsible for making the laws that governed their lives. Nevertheless, the Greeks did not consider everyone equal: Their economy depended on slave labor, and women were permitted no public role.

The belief in the ability of human beings to make significant decisions contrasted sharply with the beliefs of earlier societies that people are pawns of supernatural forces or all-powerful tyrants. This new attitude may have been a major factor in the development of Greek drama, which usually emphasized the attempts of human characters to control their own destinies. The Greeks nevertheless considered happiness to depend on harmony between human and supernatural forces and believed that this harmony could easily be broken. Greek tragedy often shows the results of human attempts to escape fate or the will of the gods. From the beginning, Greek drama was presented exclusively at festivals honoring Dionysus, one of the many gods worshiped by the Greeks, who conceived of their gods essentially as immortal human beings. Each god had power over a limited sphere of activity. Like human beings, these gods had many failings: They were jealous of each other, bickered among themselves, were vindictive when slighted, took sides in both human and divine quarrels, indulged frequently in adulterous affairs, and in general made human existence unpredictable. The Greeks did not observe a holy day comparable to the Sabbath but had a series of religious festivals throughout the year, one or more dedicated to each of the gods.

Dionysus, the god in whose honor plays were presented, was the god of wine (one of the principal products of Greece) and fertility. His blessing was sought in order to ensure fertility of both human beings and the land. Supposedly the son of Zeus (the greatest of Greek gods) and Semele (a mortal), Dionysus was killed (allegedly at the

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behest of Zeus' jealous wife Hera), dismembered, resurrected, and deified. The myths associated with him were closely related to the life cycle and seasonal changes: birth, growth, decay, death, and rebirth; summer, fall, winter, and especially spring, the season of rebirth and the return of fertility. As the god of wine and revelry, he was also associated with a number of irrational forces.

By the fifth century B.C. Athens held four festivals in honor of Dionysus each year, at three of which theatrical performances were offered. Plays were not presented at the festivals of other gods. The major Dionysian festival in Athens was the City Dionysia. Extending over several days near the end of March, it was one of the most important occasions of the year and a major showcase for Athenian wealth and power. The festival was both a religious and civic celebration under the supervision of the principal state official. Theatrical performances were viewed in a radically different light than they are today. They were offerings of the city to a god. At the same time, they were expressions of civic pride—indications of the cultural superiority of Athens over the other Greek states, which only later developed their own theatres. (Eventually there were theatres throughout the eastern Mediterranean in areas now parts of Turkey, Lebanon, Syria, Israel, southern Italy, and elsewhere.)

Our first record of a theatrical event in Athens is the establishment in 534 B.C. of a contest for the best tragedy, a form that also originated in Athens. The first winner was Thespis, the earliest playwright and actor whose name has come down to us. From his name we derive the term *thespian*, still used in reference to actors. During the fifth century, three tragic dramatists competed at each City Dionysia, each writer presenting a group of four plays: three tragedies and one satyr play.

A satyr play was short, comic or satiric in tone, poked fun at some Greek myth using a chorus of satyrs, and was presented following the tragedies. Thus, nine tragedies were produced at each City Dionysia, a total of nine hundred during the fifth century. Of these, only thirty-two have survived, all written by three dramatists—Aeschylus (523–456 B.C.), Sophocles (496–406 B.C.), and Euripides (480–406 B.C.)—who are ranked among the world's greatest playwrights.

Actors of a satyr play as depicted on a Greek vase of the late fifth century B.C. The embroidered robes resemble those thought to have been worn by some tragic actors. Notice at bottom center the flute player, who provided the musical accompaniment for dramatic performances. (from Baumeister, *Denkmaler des Klassischens Altertums*, 1888)

Greck Satyr Plays

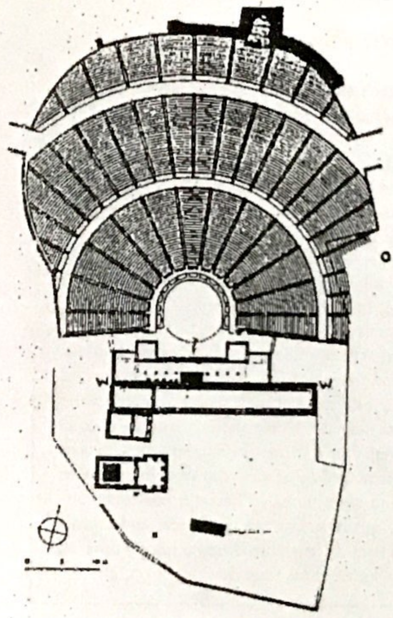
Although in the fifth century B.C. each dramatist competing in the contests at the City Dionysia had to present a satyr play in addition to three tragedies, we know little about this comic form, largely because only one complete example—*The Cyclops* by Euripides—has survived. It is an adaptation of an incident in Homer's *Odyssey*, in which Odysseus and his crew, on their way home from the Trojan War, are captured by a cyclops (a giant with one eye in the middle of his forehead).

When the play opens, Silenus and his satyr sons have been enslaved by the cyclops Polyphemus. Odysseus arrives looking for water and provisions, which Silenus (in Polyphemus' absence) is eager to give him in exchange for wine. Returning unexpectedly, Polyphemus captures the Greeks and eats two of them. Odysseus then gets Polyphemus drunk, sharpens a tree trunk with which to blind the cyclops, and escapes with his crew and the satyrs. Although the events sound grim, they are given a humorous turn by Silenus' attempts to get as much wine for himself as possible, by various tricks played on Polyphemus, and by a considerable number of jokes. Satyr plays were comic in part because of the antics of the satyrs (half-man/half-goat characters played by actors who wore masks with shaggy hair and beards, pointed ears, and snub noses). The satyr costume consisted only of a loincloth made of fur, with a horselike tail in the rear and prominent phallus in front. The satyr play apparently was considered a happy note on which to end a performance that had included three tragedies.

Of the surviving tragedies, *Oedipus the King* by Sophocles is often considered the finest. Performed about 430 B.C.—approximately a hundred years after the establishment of the contest for tragedy—it continues to be produced frequently. Before we look more closely at this play and its performance, let us examine some features of the Greek theatre building and other conventions that affected staging.

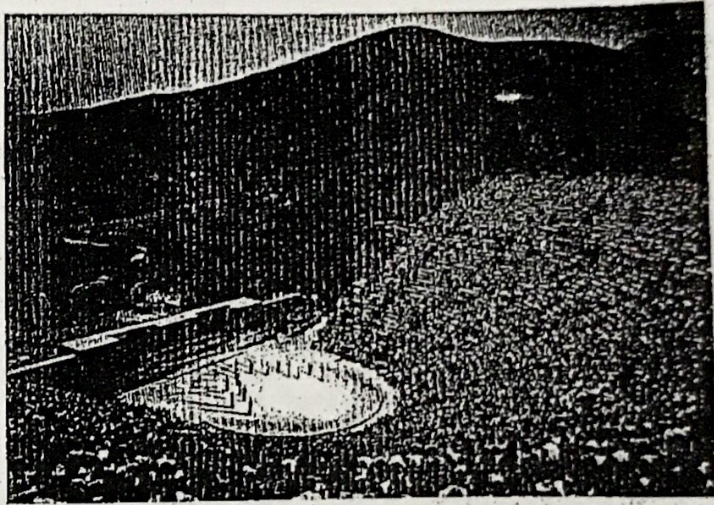
The Theatre of Dionysus

Plays were performed in the Theatre of Dionysus, on the slope of the hill just beneath the Athenian Acropolis (a fortified area including the Parthenon, the city treasury, and other buildings considered essential to the city's survival). The theatre was located within a compound that included a temple and a large outdoor altar dedicated to the worship of Dionysus. Originally, the slope (without any seating) served as the *theatron* ("seeing place," the origin of our word *theatre*). A flat terrace below the slope served as the *orchestra* (dancing place), in the middle of which was placed an altar (*thymele*) dedicated to Dionysus.



Plan of the precinct devoted to the worship of Dionysus in Athens: at bottom, the temple and altar; at top, the theatre. Notice the scene house below the circular orchestra and the *parodoi* (passages) between the ends of the scene house and the auditorium. (from Dorpfeld-Reisch, *Das Griechische Theater,* 1896)

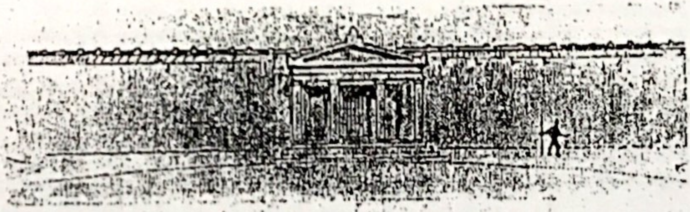
This arrangement was gradually converted into a permanent structure. The auditorium eventually became a semicircle of stadium-like stone seats extending up the hill to the retaining walls of the Acropolis (the structure was not fully completed until the late fourth century B.C.). It held at least fourteen thousand and perhaps as many as seventeen thousand spectators. This seating curved about halfway around a circular orchestra, measuring about sixty-five feet in diameter, that was used as performance space, especially for the chorus. On the side of the orchestra opposite the audience was the *skene* ("hut" or "tent," the origin of our word *scene*). The term suggests that the original structure was used as a place to which the actors could retire or where they could change costumes. Once its possibilities as a background for the action were recognized, the *skene* was elaborated into a structure seventy-five to a hundred feet long and probably two stories high. It is thought that this scene house had three doors—a large central doorway flanked on either side by smaller doors—all opening onto the acting area. The roof of this structure could be used as an acting area to represent high places or for the appearance of gods. The scene house was not architecturally joined to the auditorium; the spaces (called *paradoi)* at either side between the *skene* and the auditorium were used as entrances and exits for performers (especially the chorus) and perhaps by spectators before and after performances. Because the original scene house has long disappeared, no one knows exactly how it looked. (Some possibilities are shown in the illustrations on page 66.)

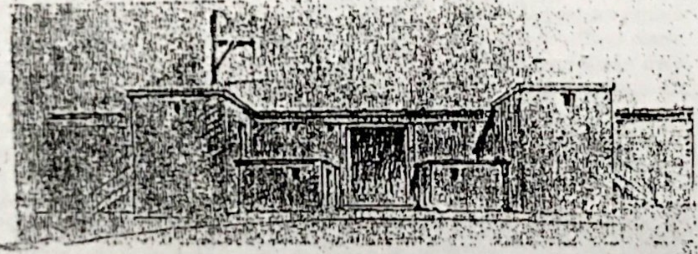


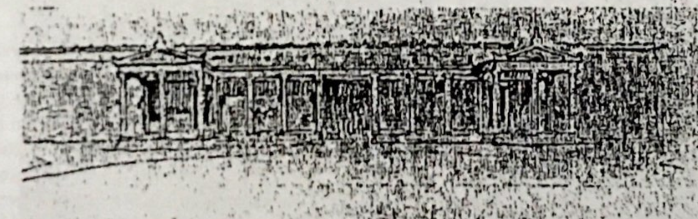
The theatre at Epidaurus, the best preserved of all ancient Greek theatres, is still used for festival performances. The scene house, at left, is a temporary structure erected on the ruins of the original. A tragic chorus of fifteen is performing in the orchestra. Notice the large size of the theatre and the audience-performer relationship. For another photo of this theatre, see color plate 1. (courtesy of the Embassy of Greece)

The scene house (as, later, in Shakespeare's theatre) probably served as a formalized architectural background for all plays, even those set in woods, on seashores, or outside caves. This convention meant that locale was probably established by the dialogue, not by representational scenery. The action in Greek plays usually took place outdoors, but occasionally the outcome of events that occurred indoors was shown. Most of the latter scenes involved the corpses (effigies) of characters slain offstage that were then shown onstage. To show the corpses, the large central doorway was probably opened and a wheeled platform (the *eccyclema*) pushed out. Another common occurrence in Greek plays was the appearance of a god. Sometimes the roof was used, but in many plays the god had to descend to ground level or to be lifted from the orchestra to roof level. For this purpose, a cranelike device (the *machina*) was used. (The overuse of gods to resolve difficult dramatic situations led to any contrived ending being labeled a *deus ex machina*—god from the machine—ending.) Probably nothing better illustrates the nonrepresentational conventions of the Greek theatre than the machine, because its fulcrum arm, ropes, and pulleys were visible to the audience. It was not intended to fool anyone; rather, it was used to suggest the *idea* of flying, a power possessed by the gods and denied to human beings (except for a few who had been granted special powers by the gods).

From our standpoint, one of the most remarkable things about the Theatre of Dionysus is its size. Today, a theatre with an audience capacity of even three thousand







The scene house of the Theatre of Dionysus in the fifth century B.C. No one knows precisely the appearance of the scene house; these drawings show four possibilities. (from Ernst Fiechter, *Antike Griechische Theaterbauten*, 1936; courtesy of Dr. Charlotte Fiechter)

is considered almost unusable for drama because of the difficulty of seeing and hearing. We expect realistic visual effects and acting, and we feel cheated if we cannot see every detail as we do on the movie or television screen. Obviously, the Greeks had expectations that differed from ours, as is clear from the conventions they developed and accepted. The structures today that most resemble Greek theatres are sports arenas. (Keeping in mind the scale of such structures will help us understand many other conventions of the Greek theatre.)

The Performers

Performers in the Greek theatre may be divided into four categories: actors, chorus, supernumeraries, and musicians. All were male.

By the time *Oedipus the King* was produced, around 430 B.C., the rules of the contests restricted the number of speaking actors to three for each author. This rule did not restrict the number of roles to three; rather, all speaking parts had to be assumed by three actors, which meant that the same actor might have to play several roles and that the same three actors appeared in all three of the tragedies presented by a competing dramatist. Supernumeraries (extras) could be used, but they were not permitted to speak lines. This convention probably developed to ensure fairness in the competition. A principal actor was assigned by lot to playwrights, who usually staged their own plays. The playwright and the leading actor then probably chose the other two. A prize was offered for the best tragic actor at each festival, but only the leading actors were eligible to win.

The tragic chorus was composed of fifteen men. A playwright wishing to present his plays at the City Dionysia had to apply to the principal government official for a chorus. We do not know how this official decided which playwrights would be granted choruses, but it is clear that being granted a chorus was the mark that a playwright had been accepted as a competitor. This official also paired the dramatist with a *choregus*, a wealthy citizen who bore the expense of training and costuming that dramatist's choruses and of the musicians who accompanied the choruses during their training and during performances. The well-to-do citizens of Athens were required to take turns serving as *choregoi*, and most seem to have done so willingly. Thus, the financing of productions was undertaken by the state and a few wealthy citizens. The prize awarded for the best group of plays was shared by the playwright and his *choregus*. We are not sure what the prizes consisted of; they may have included money, but the honor of winning seems to have mattered most, just as winning an Oscar or an Olympic medal does today.

Choruses were assigned approximately eleven months prior to the next festival. How much time was spent in training is unknown, but apparently the routine was not unlike that today in training athletes. Exercises and diets were controlled, and the chorus worked under the strict and strenuous supervision of a trainer. A great deal of emphasis was placed on singing and dancing, because the fifteen members both sang and danced the choral passages. Thus much of their training resembled that of opera singers and dancers. Usually they performed in unison, but at times they were divided into semichoruses of seven members. The chorus leader sometimes had solo lines, but the rest of the chorus usually responded as a group or as two subgroups that performed and responded to each other alternately.

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The chorus was one of the distinctive conventions of the Greek theatre. It usually made its entrance following the prologue and was present thereafter until the end of the play. The choral odes, performed between episodes, divided the action into segments something like the acts of a modern play. The chorus served several functions in Greek drama. First, it was treated as a group character who expressed opinions, gave advice, and occasionally threatened to interfere in the action. Second, it often seemed to express the author's point of view and to establish a standard against which the actions of the characters could be judged. Third, it frequently served as the ideal spectator, reacting to events and characters as the author would like the audience to react. Fourth, it helped to establish mood and heighten dramatic effects. Fifth, it added color, movement, and spectacle as it sang and danced the choral interludes.

The principal musical accompaniment in Greek tragedy was provided by a flute player, who preceded the chorus as it made its entrance and then (like the chorus) remained onstage throughout. The source of the musical accompaniment was thus visible to the audience and not kept offstage, as in most modern productions. The flute player wore sandals, one with a clapper on its sole for beating time. Both percussionist and flutist, he also seems to have composed the music he played.

Although much music was used in Greek theatrical performances, almost none of it has survived; the texts of Greek plays do little to make us aware that we should

Statuette of a tragic actor showing mask, headdress, and long robe. This figure is from a period later than the fifth century B.C. and is more exaggerated in appearance than would have been typical in Sophocles' time. The projections below the statuette are pegs used to anchor it in a base. (from *Monumenti Inediti*, 2, 1879)

Greek Tragic Dramatists

Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides are the only tragic authors whose plays have survived. Aeschylus (523–456 B.C.), a member of the Athenian nobility who distinguished himself in the wars against Persia, wrote approximately eighty plays, of which seven survived: *The Persians, Seven against Thebes, The Suppliants, Prometheus Bound,* and *Oresteia* (a trilogy of plays: *Agamemnon, The Libation Bearers,* and *The Furies*). Some scholars believe that all of Aeschylus' surviving plays were parts of trilogies (three plays based on a single story or theme) treating philosophical issues. The *Oresteia,* for example, shows the evolution of the concept of justice as personal revenge is replaced by the impersonal judgment of the state. Aeschylus' plays, the oldest that have survived, are somewhat crude in comparison with Sophocles', but they show heroic figures wrestling with significant philosophical issues.

Sophocles (495–406 B.C.) was from a wealthy family, well educated, handsome, and popular. For a time, he served as one of ten generals, the highest elective office of the Athenian state. Sophocles wrote more than 120 plays and won 24 contests, more than any other Greek dramatist. Of his plays, only seven have survived: *Ajax, Antigone, Oedipus the King, Electra, Trachiniae, Philoctetes,* and *Oedipus at Colonnus.* Sophocles' final play, *Oedipus at Colonnus,* written when he was almost ninety years old, was produced the year after his death. His reputation as one of the world's great dramatists has remained constant since his own lifetime, probably because of his masterful dramatic structure, moving stories, complex characters, beautiful poetry, and universal themes.

Euripides (480–406 B.C.), the last of the great Greek tragic dramatists, wrote about ninety plays, of which eighteen have survived. The best known are *Alcestis, Medea, Hippolytus, The Trojan Women, Electra, The Bacchae,* and *Iphigenia in Aulis.* He is also author of *Cyclops,* the only surviving satyr play. Because he questioned many Athenian beliefs and customs, he was rarely honored during his lifetime but later became the most popular of tragic writers. Often denounced for writing about subjects considered unfit for the stage (such as Medea killing her children and Phaedra falling in love with her stepson), he was also disliked for suggesting that the gods of Greek myth are morally corrupt. Writing at the end of the fifth century, Euripides raised doubts about many of the values that Aeschylus had championed at the beginning of that century.

be hearing certain passages sung or recited to musical accompaniment. (Attempts to unite music and text as they had been in Greek tragedy gave rise to opera in Italy during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries.) Greek music had a great variety of musical modes, each with a particular tonal quality that was thought appropriate to certain kinds of subjects or emotions. It probably more nearly approximated the sounds of present-day music of the Near East than that of western Europe or America. In Greek theatre, music may have had much in common with film music, enhancing the mood and emotion of the action it accompanied.

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All of the performers, except the musician, wore masks of lightweight wood, cork, or linen. The use of masks, another of the Greek theatre's distinctive conventions, served several purposes: It facilitated the rapid change of roles when three actors had to play all of the parts; it made it easier for male performers to embody female roles; it helped the actor in assuming roles that differed widely in age or character type; and it assisted communication in the large theatres by capturing and emphasizing the essential qualities of each character. Because each mask covered the entire head and included the appropriate hair and headdress, the actor's appearance could be changed instantaneously with a change of mask.

A variety of clothing was used for stage purposes. A long-sleeved, heavily embroidered tunic was worn by some characters, but because there are references in the plays to characters in rags, in mourning, and in Greek or in foreign dress, it seems unlikely that all characters were dressed alike. The selection of costume was probably determined by its appropriateness to the role. The sleeved, embroidered tunic, which was not a garment worn in Greek daily life, may have been reserved for supernatural or non-Greek characters, whereas native dress was used for Greeks. The usual dress in Greece was an ankle-length or knee-length garment called a *chiton.* On his feet the tragic actor wore soft, flexible, high-topped boots in common use at that time.

These conventions suggest that performance in the Greek theatre was highly formalized. When we remember that the same actor often played several roles in the same

Aeschylus' *Agamemnon* (the first play in the *Oresteia* trilogy) as performed at the American Repertory Theatre. Directed by Francois Rochaix; set by Robert Dahlstrom; costumes by Catherine Zuber. Seen here is Electra (Kerry O'Malley) and the chorus. (photo by Richard Feldman)

play, that men played both male and female roles, that the performers wore masks, that much of the text was sung and danced, and that the scale of the theatre prevented small details from being seen, we are faced with a performance mode quite different from that of the present day. That this mode was pleasing to the Greeks emphasizes a simple truth: What any group accepts as effective theatrical performance depends to a great extent upon the group's familiarity with, and acceptance of, a particular set of conventions and upon the skill with which those conventions are handled.

Oedipus the King and Its Performance

Among the many events at the City Dionysia was the reenactment of Dionysus' arrival in Athens in a procession whose participants included the major officials of Athens, the actors and others associated with the performances, and many citizens who carried gifts for the god. This procession wound through much of Athens, stopped for dances and ceremonies at various altars, and ended at the precinct dedicated to Dionysus, where a bull was sacrificed on the main altar. Five days of performances followed. In addition to the tragedies, there were comedies and dithyrambs (hymns to Dionysus sung and danced by groups of fifty men or boys). At the end of the festival, prizes were awarded. The performance of *Oedipus the King* was thus embedded within a much larger festival framework.

The performances were open to everyone—even prisoners, who were released during the festival. Seats at the front of the auditorium were reserved for public officials and special guests, and the center seat in the front row was reserved for the head priest of the Dionysian cult. The audience was composed primarily of men and boys, although some accounts suggest that women, children, and even slaves attended. Officials were responsible for keeping order, and violence in the theatre was punishable by death. Performances probably lasted all day, because several plays were presented. There must have been considerable coming and going and much eating and drinking in the theatre. The audience at times expressed itself noisily and occasionally hissed actors off the stage. The atmosphere probably resembled a mixture of religious festival and athletic event.

Performances seem to have begun at dawn. There was no artificial lighting in the theatre, no proscenium arch or curtain. The auditorium rose sharply up the hill, so that most of the spectators looked down on the acting areas and could see over the stage house across a plain to the sea. The total visual context was immense.

The beginning of *Oedipus the King* was signaled by the entrance through one of the *paradoi* of a group of people of all ages carrying branches, the symbol of the suppliant. Oedipus, masked and in full-length *chiton*, appeared through the central doorway of the stage house (which in this play represented a palace) to hear their petition that something be done to end the plague that had been ravishing Thebes for some time. Then Creon, returning from Delphi—where he had been sent to consult the oracle about how to end the plague—arrived through the other *parodos*. After the suppliants left, the chorus of fifteen elderly Thebans, all as nearly identical in appearance as possible and preceded by the flute player, marched into the orchestra and performed the first choral song while moving in stately patterns. As this description of the performance's opening suggests, spectacle played an important role throughout.

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Let us look more closely at the script. The skill with which *Oedipus the King* is constructed can be appreciated if we compare the complex story (which actually begins with a prophecy prior to the birth of Oedipus) to Sophocles' ordering of the events. In the play, there is a simultaneous movement backward and forward in time during which the revelation of the past moves Oedipus ever nearer to his doom in the present.

The division of the play into a prologue and five episodes separated by choral passages is typical of Greek tragedy. The prologue is devoted principally to exposition: A plague is destroying the city of Thebes; Creon returns from Delphi with a command from the oracle to find and punish the murderer of Laius, the former king; Oedipus promises to obey the command. All of the necessary information is given in this very brief scene, and the first important question—Who is the murderer of Laius?—is raised. The prologue is followed by the *parodos*, or entry of the chorus, and the first choral song, which offers prayers to the gods for deliverance from the plague.

The first episode begins with Oedipus' proclamation demanding that anyone with knowledge of the crime come forward and placing a curse on the murderer. This proclamation has great dramatic power because Oedipus is unknowingly pronouncing a curse on himself. Then Tiresias, the blind seer, enters. His refusal to answer questions about the past provokes Oedipus' anger, the first display of a response that is developed forcefully throughout the first four episodes. Oedipus' quick temper, we later discover, has caused him to kill Laius. When Tiresias, having been forced to answer, suggests that the truth is too painful to reveal, Oedipus suspects some trickery. The scene ends in a stalemate of accusations.

It is interesting to note that while the first four episodes move forward in the present, they go successively further back in time. This first episode reveals only that part of the past immediately preceding Oedipus' arrival at Thebes. The choral passage that follows the first episode reflects upon the previous scene, stating the confusion that Sophocles probably wished the audience to feel.

The second episode builds logically upon the first. Creon comes to defend himself against Oedipus' accusation that he is involved in a conspiracy with Tiresias. Queen Jocasta is drawn to the scene by the quarrel, and she and the chorus persuade Oedipus to let his anger cool. This quarrel illustrates Oedipus' complete faith in his own righteousness. In spite of Tiresias' hints, no suspicion of his own guilt has entered Oedipus' mind. Ironically, Jocasta's attempt to placate Oedipus leads to his first suspicion about himself. She tells him that oracles are not to be believed and as evidence points to Laius' death, which did not come in the manner prophesied. But her description of how Laius was killed recalls to Oedipus the circumstances under which he killed a man. He insists that Jocasta send for the one survivor of Laius' party. This scene continues the backward exploration of the past, because in it Oedipus tells of his life in Corinth, his visit to the oracle of Delphi, and his killing of a man who is later discovered to have been Laius. The choral song that follows is concerned with the questions Jocasta has raised about oracles. The chorus concludes that if oracles are proven untrue, then the gods themselves are to be doubted.

Though Jocasta has called oracles into question, she obviously does not disbelieve in the gods, for at the beginning of the third episode she makes offerings to them. She is interrupted by the entrance of the Messenger from Corinth, who brings news of the death of Oedipus' supposed father, Polybus. But this news, rather than arousing grief,

as one would expect, is greeted with rejoicing, for it seems to disprove the oracle's prediction that Oedipus would kill his father. This seeming reversal only serves to heighten the effect of the following events. Oedipus still fears returning to Corinth because the oracle also has prophesied that he will marry his own mother. Thinking that he will set Oedipus' mind at ease, the Messenger reveals that he himself brought Oedipus as an infant to Polybus. The circumstances under which the Messenger acquired the child bring home the truth to Jocasta. This discovery leads to a complete reversal for Jocasta, for the oracles she has cast doubt upon in the preceding scene have suddenly been vindicated. She strives to stop Oedipus from making further inquiries, but he interprets her entreaties as fear that he may be of humble birth. Jocasta goes into the palace; it is the last we see of her.

The scene not only reveals the truth to Jocasta, but also it diverts attention from the murder of Laius to the birth of Oedipus. The scene goes backward in time to the infancy of Oedipus. The choral song that follows is filled with romantic hopes, as the chorus speculates on Oedipus' parentage and suggests such possibilities as the god Apollo and the nymphs. The truth is deliberately kept at a distance here in order to make the following scene more powerful.

This choral song is followed by the entry of the Herdsman (the sole survivor of Laius' party at the time of the killing and the person from whom the Corinthian Messenger had acquired the infant). The Herdsman does not wish to speak, but he is tortured by Oedipus' servants into doing so. In this very rapid scene, everything that has gone before is brought to a climax. We are taken back to the beginning of the story (Oedipus' birth), we learn that he is the son of Laius and Jocasta, that Oedipus killed Laius, and that Oedipus is married to his mother. The climax is reached in Oedipus' cry of despair and disgust as he rushes into the palace. The brief choral song that follows comments upon the fickleness of fate and points to Oedipus' life as an example.

The final episode is divided into two parts. A Messenger enters and describes what has happened offstage. The "messenger scene" is a standard part of Greek drama, because Greek sensibilities dictated that scenes of extreme violence take place offstage, although the results of the violence (the bodies of the dead, or in this case Oedipus' self-inflicted blindness) might be shown. Following the messenger scene, Oedipus returns to the stage and seeks to prepare himself for the future.

Oedipus the King is structurally unusual, for the resolution scene is the longest in the play. Sophocles was not solely concerned with discovering the murderer of Laius, for in this lengthy final scene interest shifts to the question: What will Oedipus do now that he knows the truth? Up to this scene, the play has concentrated upon Oedipus as the ruler of Thebes, but in the resolution, Oedipus as a man and a father becomes the center of interest. At this point, he has ceased to be the ruler of Thebes and has become the lowest of its citizens, and much of the intense pathos results from this change in status. An audience may feel for Oedipus the outcast as it never could feel for the self-righteous ruler shown in the prologue.

Oedipus' act of blinding himself grows believably out of his character, for his very uprightness and deep sense of moral outrage cause him to punish himself by thrusting pins into his eyes. Although he is innocent of intentional sin, he considers the deeds themselves (killing a blood relative and incest) to be so horrible that ignorance cannot wipe away the moral stigma. Part of the play's power resides in the revulsion with which

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Oedipus the King at the St. Louis Black Repertory Company. Directed by Ben Halley, Jr. (courtesy of the St. Louis Black Repertory Company)

people in all ages have viewed patricide and incest. That they are committed by an essentially good man only makes them more terrible.

In drawing his characters, Sophocles pays little attention to the physical level. The principal characters—Oedipus, Creon, and Jocasta—are mature persons, but Sophocles says almost nothing about their age or appearance. One factor that is likely to distract modern readers—the *relative* ages of Jocasta and Oedipus—is not even mentioned by

Sophocles. When Oedipus answered the riddle of the Sphinx, his reward, being made king, carried the stipulation that he marry the queen, Jocasta. Sophocles never questions the suitability of the marriage on the grounds of disparity in age.

Sophocles does give brief indications of age for other roles. The Priest of the prologue is spoken of as being old; the chorus is made up of Theban elders; Tiresias is old and blind; the Herdsman is an old man. In almost every case, age is associated with wisdom, experience, or knowledge of the past. On the other hand, there are a number of young characters, none of whom speaks: The band of suppliants in the prologue includes children, and Oedipus' daughters, Antigone and Ismene, are young. Here the innocence of childhood is used to arouse pity.

On the sociological level of characterization, Sophocles again indicates little. Oedipus, Creon, and Jocasta hold joint authority in Thebes, although the power has been delegated to Oedipus. Vocational designations—priest, seer, herdsman, servants—are used for some of the characters.

Sophocles is principally concerned with psychological and ethical characteristics. He emphasizes Oedipus' moral uprightness, his reputation for wisdom, his quick temper, his insistence on discovering truth, his suspicion, his love for his children, and his strength in the face of disaster. These qualities make us understand Oedipus, although a limited number of traits are used.

Creon is given even fewer characteristics. He has been Oedipus' trusted friend and brother-in-law. He is quick to defend his honor and is a man of common sense and uprightness who acts as honorably and compassionately as he can when the truth is discovered. Jocasta is similarly restricted. She strives to make life run smoothly for Oedipus: She tries to comfort him, to mediate between him and Creon, to stop Oedipus in his quest. She commits suicide when the truth becomes clear. We know nothing of her as a mother, and the existence of the children is not mentioned until after her death.

Unlike a modern play, then, in which characterization is usually built from numerous realistic details, here the characterization is drawn with a few bold strokes; the most important traits are psychological and moral. Everything is pared to its essentials and then enlarged and formalized, in part because of the scale of the theatre, but also to emphasize the seemingly inevitable fate that overwhelms the characters.

All of the speaking roles had to be played by three actors. Discovering which actor played which roles is revealing. The first actor played Oedipus throughout, because he is present in every scene. The second actor probably played Creon and the Messenger from Corinth; the third actor probably played the Priest, Tiresias, Jocasta, the Herdsman, and the second Messenger. The greatest range is required of the third actor, whereas the greatest individual power is required of the first.

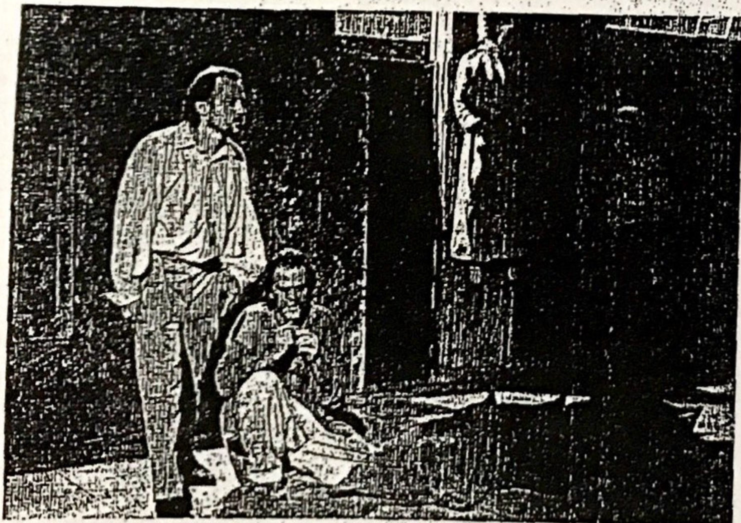
In addition to the three speaking actors, a great many supernumeraries are required, many of whom no doubt appeared in more than one scene. For example, the band of suppliants in the prologue includes children, two of whom could later appear as Antigone and Ismene. Some who portrayed suppliants probably also later appeared as servants and attendants. To the actors must be added the chorus of fifteen members. The total number in the cast of *Oedipus the King* was probably no fewer than thirty-five.

In reading the play, it is sometimes difficult to perceive that there were so many participants and that the visual and aural appeals were so numerous and continuous. The power of the play and of the production was so great that *Oedipus the King* became

one of the most admired plays in ancient Greece. Aristotle (384–322 B.C.), author of the *Poetics*, the oldest surviving treatise on drama, thought it the finest of all Greek tragedies, and his opinion has been echoed to the present. It is still among the most frequently performed Greek plays. Today, productions of *Oedipus the King* inevitably deviate markedly from the original because the occasion, theatre structure, conventions, and audiences are unlike those of classical Greece. A director now must search the text for those features that remain vital despite the passage of twenty-four centuries. As some of the illustrations included in this chapter indicate, Greek conventions (especially masks and treatments of the chorus) may be used today, but they are almost always adapted to make them acceptable to modern sensibilities.

Why has *Oedipus the King* continued to attract audiences? We have already looked at its skillful construction and its concern with the moral taboos of incest and patricide. In addition, it develops themes of universal relevance. The fall of Oedipus from the place of highest honor to that of an outcast demonstrates the uncertainty of human destiny. This is related to another theme: the limited ability of human beings to control their fate. Oedipus has done every thing he can to avoid the oracle's prediction that he will kill his father and marry his mother but, in doing so, he unknowingly fulfills the oracle. The contrast between human beings seeking to control their destiny and external forces shaping destiny is clearly depicted.

It is significant that no attempt is made in the play to explain why destruction comes to Oedipus. It is implied that human beings must submit to fate and that in



The Oedipus Cycle, adapted by Timberlake Wertenbaker from *Oedipus the King*, *Oedipus at Colonus*, and *Antigone*, as produced by Perseverance Theatre (Douglas, Alaska). Directed by Molly D. Smith; designed by Pavel Dobrusky. The actors in the foreground are Ed Christian (Creon) and Patrick Moore (Oedipus). (photo by Mark Daughhetee)

→ killing your parents.

struggling to avoid it, they only become more entangled. An irrational, or at least an unknowable, force apparently is at work. No one in the play asks who or what has determined Oedipus' fate. The truth of the oracle is established, but the purpose is unclear. The Greek concept of the gods did not assume that all the gods were benevolent—all supernatural forces were deified, whether good or evil. It is possible to interpret this play as suggesting that the gods, rather than having decreed the characters' fates, have merely foreseen and foretold what will happen. Such an interpretation shifts the emphasis, but it does not contradict the picture of humanity as a victim of forces beyond its control.

Another motif—blindness versus sight—is emphasized in poetic images and in various comparisons. A contrast is repeatedly drawn between physical sight and the inner sight of understanding. For example, Tiresias, though blind, can see the truth that escapes Oedipus, while Oedipus, who has penetrated the riddle of the Sphinx, cannot solve the puzzle of his own life. When it is revealed to him, he blinds himself in an act of retribution. → cezalandırmak

Another theme, of which Sophocles may not have been conscious, is that of Oedipus as scapegoat. The city of Thebes will be saved if the one guilty man can be found and punished. In a sense, then, Oedipus takes the troubles of the city upon himself, and in his punishment lies the salvation of others.

Greek Comedy

In addition to tragedy and satyr plays, Athens developed a distinctive comic drama. Comedy became an official part of the Dionysian festivals about fifty years later than tragedy. Although comedy was performed at the City Dionysia with the tragedies, it eventually found its most sympathetic home at another Dionysian festival, the Lenaia, which was held during the winter, when few outsiders were present and at which the playwrights were allowed to ridicule Athenian events more pointedly.

Five comic dramatists competed each year at the Lenaia, but each presented only one play. The conventions of comedy differed significantly from those of tragedy. Greek comedy was usually concerned with current issues in politics or art, with questions of war and peace, or with persons or practices disliked by the author. Occasionally playwrights used mythological material as a framework for satire, but usually they invented their own stories. Comedy used a chorus of twenty-four members, not always identical in appearance or all of the same sex. Sometimes the choruses were depicted as everyday citizens but often as nonhuman (birds, wasps, frogs, clouds). Many of the male characters wore a very tight, too-short *chiton* over flesh-colored tights, creating a ludicrous effect of partial nakedness. This effect was emphasized by an enormous *phallus* attached to the costumes of most male characters. This not only was a source of humor but also was a constant reminder of the purpose of the Dionysian festival: the celebration of fertility. Masks contributed to the ridiculous appearance of the characters.

Numerous authors wrote Old Comedy, as the plays written prior to 400 B.C. are called, but only eleven comedies have survived and all of these are by Aristophanes (448–380 B.C.). His plays mingle slapstick, fantasy, lyrical poetry, personal abuse, literary and musical parody, and serious commentary on contemporary affairs. The plot

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