

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF GREEK THEATRE

By Unknown

Historical Background of Greek Theatre

Greek theatre evolved from ritual and dance with a strong choral focus, to greater emphasis upon dramatic action. The choric dithyrambs (choral songs) were originally about the death and resurrection of Dionysus (god of wine and fertility).

- 1 - The first function of the chorus was as narrator (telling stories, providing information).
2. When the first actor stepped out of the chorus and assumed a role, the chorus was then able to assume a role as well (i.e. If the actor was playing a god, the chorus could become his worshippers).
3. The chorus could work within the limits of the action as characters, or from outside the action as impartial commentators.
4. The chorus was the ideal spectator. It provided commentary and questions, gave opinions and warnings, and clarified experiences and feelings of characters in everyday terms. The chorus sympathized with victims, reinforced facts, separated episodes, and often served as spokespeople for the conservative members of the community.
5. As the number of actors increased from one to three, the size of the chorus, which originally numbered 50, was reduced.
6. In the fifth century BC the tragic chorus numbered 12-15 members, while the comedic chorus numbered 24.
7. Members of the chorus were chosen from the general population.
8. Chorus members were unpaid volunteers doing their civic duty.
9. The rehearsal period for a chorus was likely four months or more.
10. Choruses probably did not rehearse in the theatres in which they later performed. Not wanting spectators to see the play before the festivals, they probably rehearsed in a closed rehearsal room.
- 11 - The chorus was trained and costumed at state expense through a choregos (a wealthy citizen) who chose this job as his way of paying taxes and getting his name on a monument.
12. Early dramatists (Aeschylus and probably Sophocles and Euripides) taught their own choruses.
13. The parades (chorus entrance) marks the beginning of the play, and the exodus (its exit) the ending.
14. The purpose of the chorus was to bridge the gap between the audience and the players and to intensify the emotion.
15. The functions of the chorus were to-
 - Maintain a sense of ceremony and ritual
 - Establish a lyric mood through rhythmic chanting and dance
 - Reinforce the passions of the dramatic action
 - Connect the audience and the actors by making responses and asking questions
 - unite music, dance, and speech and connect dramatic episodes
16. The chorus could punctuate the action of a play with bursts of song and dance, which enlarged the dramatic action and relieved tension.
17. Instruments used to accompany choric songs and dances included flutes, lyres, horns, drums, and bells.