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# THEATRE

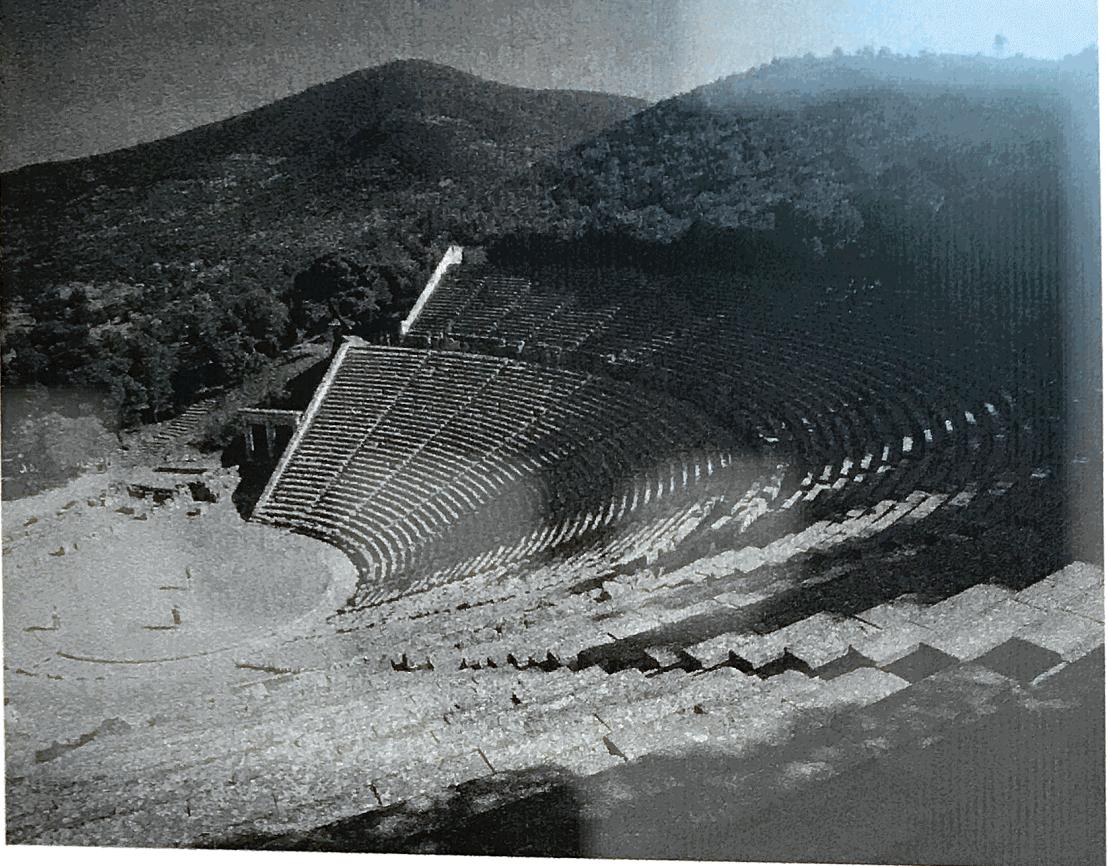
A Very Short Introduction

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# Classical Greece and Rome

Both Greek and Roman theatres were open-air municipal structures for very large audiences. Every Greek city of any size possessed a monumental space, often dug into a hillside, for theatre, and the ruins of these can still be found throughout Greece and its colonies. The excavated area was a semicircle of stone benches, providing seating for the audience. This sloped down to a flat circular area, the orchestra, where the chorus performed. Beyond the orchestra was the structure built for the actors, the skene, from which comes the modern word scene. The area in front of the skene house, at first level with the orchestra, but later raised to a higher level more suggestive of a modern stage, was the proskenion, from which comes the modern word proscenium, for the arch surrounding the modern stage (Figure 1).

Although the great age of Greek playwriting was confined to the 5th century BCE, the theatre continued to be an important part of Greek life, and indeed with the conquest of Alexander the Great in the next century, this tradition was carried further around the Mediterranean and as far east as Syria and Iraq. The theatres of the Hellenistic period did not radically change in form, although by that time a raised proscenium was universal and some stages had become more elaborate, containing two or even three storeys. Plays of the classical period continued to be performed, although the fanciful comedies of Aristophanes lost their popularity to a



## 1. Greek theatre at Epidaurus

new style of comedy, diminishing the role of the chorus, and moving away from satires of particular living targets to depictions of more general or stock characters. Hellenistic scholars divided comedy into old, middle, and new styles, the old represented by Aristophanes and his contemporaries, the middle by the changes just noted, and the new by a group of dramatists of the late 4th and 3rd centuries BCE, the best known of whom was Menander.

No examples of middle comedy survive, but one complete play by Menander, *Dyskolos*, was discovered in the mid 20th century. New comedy was primarily characterized by its focus on contemporary bourgeois life. Its basic plot structures and stock characters were picked up and utilized by the major Roman comic dramatists, Plautus and Terence, and through them were disseminated by Renaissance dramatists throughout Europe. As a result, these stock characters and plot arrangements have remained an important element of the European comic tradition.

into modern times. The most common plots concerned a pair of thwarted young lovers, struggling against recalcitrant members of the older generation and grotesque would-be rivals and aided by an array of servants, some clever and some not, in attaining an eventual happy union.

As the works of Plautus and Terence, the pre-eminent Roman dramatists, suggest, Roman drama drew heavily upon the Greek, and followed the Greek style of dividing drama into comedies and tragedies (the satyr play completely disappeared). Although tragedy was popular in Rome, only ten tragedies have survived, all from the time of the Empire. Nine are by the stoic philosopher Seneca and the author of the other, *Octavia*, is unknown. The ornate rhetorical style and occasional gruesome scenes have led many historians to suggest that these plays were meant only for reading and never staged, but they have in fact had a respectable modern stage history and were highly influential among Renaissance tragedians. During the later years of the Roman Empire, literary drama declined, in favour of circuses, gladiatorial combats, and spectacular shows like the mock naval battles, the Naumachiae, staged in massive public spaces like the Roman Colosseum. Somewhat closer to a theatre tradition were the pantomimes, often with chorus and dancers, and the mimes, farcical comedians, who carried on something of the characters and situations of new comedy, and, some historians have argued, formed a bridge to the improvised comedy, the commedia dell'arte of the Renaissance.

Although the original stages used by Plautus and Terence appear to have been rather simple platforms with a back wall containing the doors to the houses of the various characters, much larger permanent theatres were later built throughout the Roman Empire, from Spain to the Middle East. The first of these, the largest, and the model for those that followed, was the Theatre of Pompey, built in Rome in 55 BCE, almost a century after Plautus and Terence. Although based on Greek models, the Roman theatre

had distinctive features. It was free-standing, not built into a natural slope, the Greek orchestra was reduced to a semicircle, while the Hellenistic skene house was made larger and more elaborate and its projecting side wings joined to the auditorium seating so as to create a single architectural structure. These monumental buildings were found in every Roman city of any size and still today are the most distinctive features of Roman archeological sites around the Mediterranean and as far north as England.

As Christianity arose, the theatre in general, and the irreverent and salacious popular mimes in particular, were often the object of attack, but the conquests of northern invaders during the 5th century essentially put an end to theatre in the Western Empire, although wandering players are thought by many to have carried on some of its traditions through the following centuries. In the year 330 CE, however, the Emperor Constantine rebuilt the Eastern city of Byzantium and made it his capital. When Rome was captured, the eastern part of the Empire survived for another thousand years, as the Byzantine Empire. Popular classical forms like the mimes, pantomimes, and street entertainers continued into this Empire, as did great popular spectacles, such as gladiatorial combats and chariot races, but despite sustained efforts, historians have found no solid evidence of a continuing theatrical tradition, in the classical sense, in the Byzantine Empire.