

Throughout the year there were public performances of plays in all the Greek city-states. There were festivals that would last for several days and plays would be performed. Families would attend with children and servants. They would bring food. If the play met with disfavor the audience would shower the stage with food to drive the actors off the stage. Often prizes were awarded for the best play of the festival. Afterwards there would be a party for the winner. It was not too dissimilar to the parties after the Emmy Awards or the Oscars or Tony's.

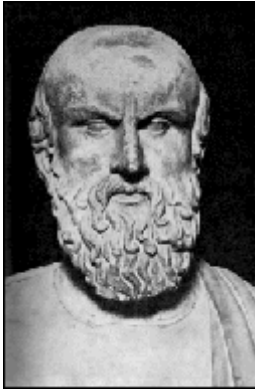
The large amphitheaters would hold from 10 to 20,000 people. Almost an entire town would fill the theater to watch and listen to the plays. The acoustics are still to this day, amid the ruins, simply amazing. All those in the theater could hear the actors on stage. Assisting in the seeing of the action and the emotion of those on stage were large masks held before the faces of the actors; one mask with a smile representing joy the other with a frown for sorrow. These masks were the persona (or personalities) of the actors made more visible for the audience to see.

The following playwrights will be discussed in brief to permit an understanding of the type of thought being promoted by these artistic works.

- Thespis 560BC
- Aeschylus 525-456BC
- Sophocles 496-405BC
- Euripides 485-406B
- Aristophanes 450-385BC

### **Thespis 560BC**

The father of the play. Thespians are actors. Thespis utilized a chorus and a single actor.



**Aeschylus** 525-456BC

Type of Play: Drama

Plays Mentioned: 90

Survive: 7 Prometheus, Orestes Trilogy: Agamemnon, Libation Bearers, Eumenides

Suppliants, Seven Against Thebes, The Persians

First Prizes 13:

Number of actors: 2      Chorus:12

His plays appear to focus upon justifying the way of the gods to humans according to human notions of justice. He attempts to promote harmony and cooperation. In his plays he demonstrates how violence begets violence begets more violence until reason enters to settle the discord. He demonstrates that the principles which govern the gods are above those of humans. He favored the civilized life in which reason prevails over violence. He encourages humans to avoid the sin of pride (hubris) and be mindful of the proper place for everyone. He indicates that the state is the champion of justice and it promotes reasoned reconciliation.



## Sophocles 496-405BC

Type of Play: Drama

Plays Mentioned: 120

Survive: 7: **Ajax, Electra, Oedipus the king, Antigone, Oedipus at Colonus,**

### **Trachinian Women, Philoctetes**

First Prizes: 24      Number of actors: 3      Chorus : 15      Used Painted scenery!

Sophocles tragedies are concerned with the fate of human heroes. He accepts the principles of the gods but focuses on the human response to the actions of the gods. The hero is a human who has an extraordinary career, which pushes back the horizons of what is possible for a human. The hero is not a flawless character but a virtuous character. Sophocles acknowledges the power of the gods but he does not assume that their standards are the same for humans. The human hero takes responsibility for the action of the human. Oedipus could easily claim that he did not know that the man that he killed was his father and neither did he know that the woman who was the mother of his children was also his mother. Oedipus could have claimed it was all a matter of fate, the work of the gods. He could have offered excuses and "copped a plea". Instead, Oedipus takes responsibility for what he has done and acknowledging the horror of it all, he plucks out his eyes and abandons the palace and his kingship.



## **Euripides** 485-406B

Type of Play: Drama, Tragedy

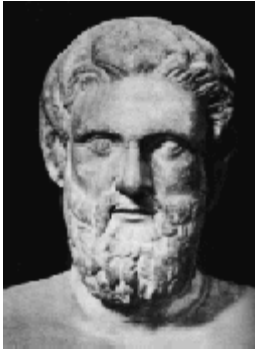
Plays Mentioned: 92

Survive: 19 including: **Alcestis, Medea, Hippolytus, Andramache, Ion, Trojan Women, Electra, Iphigenia among the Taurians, The Bacchants, Iphigenia at Aulis.**

First Prizes: 4 Number of actors: 4 Chorus: 15

While Euripides appears to have won fewer prizes in his lifetime than others, more of his plays survive to this day and are enacted in the principle cities of the Western world every year. His tragedies are very dark. They challenged the audience to radically reconsider some of their most cherished notions. He reduced the heroes to the level of the contemporary. He demonstrates that gods who do evil deeds are not to be considered as gods! Euripides encouraged his audience to criticize antiquated conventions and the restraints of the social order- a human made order.

Euripides' work promotes a psychological understanding or perception of events. The plays move from darkness to light. He promotes a questioning of the gods, often displaying their actions in a fashion so that they appear ludicrous or at least questionable. He illustrates how the gods whatever they may do are not responsible for human motivation. His human personages are seen struggling simply to survive in some tolerable manner. Euripides illustrates how human laws deny basic human rights to women, bastards, foreigners and slaves. His plays show the consequences of accepting those laws without question. He illustrates how the heroic deeds of the legends look when carried out by contemporary humans. Euripides discredits belief in the gods that promotes horrors. In his play Medea, he shows a horrible act of a mother killing her children in the light of unjust and inhumane conventions that drove her to such a horrible act. In the Trojan Women he shows the Athenians how their victory over the Trojans looked to the women and children of Troy who were raped and killed. The Greeks were made to think by Euripedes works, to think and to question.



**Aristophanes** 450-385BC

Type of Play: Comedy

Plays Mentioned: 40

Survive: 11 including: **Archonians**, the **Birds**, the **Frogs**, the **Clouds**, **Lysistrata**

Number of Actors: 3 Chorus: 15

Aristophanes was a comic playwright. He was a conservative minded artist. He liked to poke fun at man and his foibles. He delivered hilarious indictments concerning the politics, morality, law, economic theories and educational practices of his time.

His plays are an example of old comedy: burlesque, farce, comic opera, pantomime. It was fun with a serious intent to it.

In one play the Lysistrata, the men of a Greek city-state are off at war. The women are lamenting their fate as they await news of the war and learning whether their husbands and sons are still alive or not. The women do not like their station in life, the folly of war and the devaluation in the eyes of men. They are aware that the men appear to have only one interest in them. They use this as part of a scheme. The women send word to the front lines that no woman of the polis will have sex with the men while there is still a war going on. When word of this strike reaches the men at war not much time goes by before they have settled the matter and are at peace again. This play was greeted with much laughter by the audience for several reasons. It was Aristophanes way to condemn both the impatience to go to war and the narrow interest that men appear to have had in women.

In another of his plays, the Clouds, Aristophanes is poking fun at the Sophists. These public speakers, debaters, lawyers and educators were respected, feared and despised by many. The Sophists were destroying respect for the traditions, including the family. They taught a form of skepticism, atheism, cynicism and relativism that was undermining the foundations of the moral and social order. They did have tremendous skills as orators. It is connection with Socrates that this play becomes very important. Aristophanes play The Clouds was first produced in the drama festival in Athens—the City Dionysia—in 423 BC, where it placed third. In this play, the author, a friend of Socrates, uses his name in a comedy that criticizes the Sophists. Many who see the play do not realize that the character named “Socrates” in the play did not depict the actual thinking of Socrates. It was burlesque and farce; an exaggerated comic depiction.

*On Satire in Aristophanes's The Clouds a lecture by Ian Johnston.*

The text and some information about the play *The Clouds*

Aristophanes and Socrates were well known to one another. They were friends of a sort. They dined together as reported in the Symposium of Plato and Xenophanes. It was in the manner of a Friar's Club Roast where the host of honor is lampooned and kidded by his friends that Aristophanes thought that he would poke a little fun at Socrates. Aristophanes used the name of Socrates for one of the characters in his play. He made him the head of a school. It was a school of sophistry, something that in real life Socrates not only would have no part of but also would criticize. In the play the character Socrates spends his time suspended in air above the stage looking heavenward in contemplation of the clouds and the heavens and divine nature of things. Because of this association with the Sophistry, many who saw the play but who had never met Socrates or who had not learned of his actual works, his questioning and questing after virtue and wisdom, these people would mistakenly associate Socrates with being a Sophist and thus the animus born toward the Sophists was directed to Socrates. Some of the jurors at the trial of Socrates were probably in that group who knew of Socrates only indirectly and through the play. People today born after the events depicted in an Oliver Stone film might take the film to be an actual depiction of the

events as they did occur. Those who were alive and experienced those events now that this is not the case.

In the *Clouds*, Aristophanes satirizes the intelligentsia of his day and decries the new educational programs of the Sophists. The play opens with a father confronted by his son who is begging for more money to pay off gambling debts. The father is a well-to-do businessman who wanted his son to assist him in business instead of going off entertaining himself and gambling. The father agrees to pay off the debt one last time if the son will agree to make something of his life, go off to school and learn how to assist his father in the business. The son must agree as the debtors are threatening. The father takes his son into town where he knocks on a door and enters a "school" where his son will be taught how to speak well so that he can conduct business, take up legal matters in a court and become educated. In the school the actor named Socrates appears above the stage engaged in reflections upon heavenly matters. The son is given a course in oratory, rhetoric and sophistry. The son returns home to meet his father. The father greets his son and expects him now to assist the father. The son, using his new speaking skills, attempts to convince the father that the father should turn over his business to his son in payment for what the father owes the son. The father is most distressed by this and expresses his concern about how his wife will receive this news of their son's attitude. Upon hearing this, the son proceeds to say insulting things about his mother which the father becomes enraged upon hearing. So enraged in fact, that the father drives the son away and then proceeds into town where he burns the school down. The audiences who feared the Sophists enjoyed seeing them made fun of and receive their just deserts at the hands of the father. Unfortunately, while entertaining to the general public Aristophanes, unwittingly contributed to the negative assessment some had of Socrates.

In the Greek theatre there was a considerable amount of thinking going on. The dramatists and comedians were encouraging their audiences to consider and reconsider their accepted truths, their traditions and their laws, customs and values. It was not only on the stages that encouragement was given for thought. The Sophists were at work with their questioning process as well. More on this will be in the next section.