ANCIENT THEATRE
EGYPT

• EARLIEST RECORD OF PERFORMANCES – 4,000 YEARS AGO
• WERE THREE DAY PAGEANTS
• RELIGIOUS IN CHARACTER
• RITUALISTIC
• LARGELY DEVOID OF DRAMA
GREECE

• 600 B.C.
  – Part of worship of Dionysus, god of wine & fertility
  – Based on a sacrifice done with a chorus of chanters
    • Chanters were called goat-singers
    • Their chant was a “tragos,” origin of word *tragedy*

• 534 B.C.
  – Thespis stepped out from chorus and engaged chorus in dialogue, becoming first ACTOR
  – Origin of term *Thespian*
  – Use of masks also began with Thespis; helped with female characters played by males
• Most famous of festivals was City Dionysia
  – Lasted 5-6 days
  – Last 3 days of festival a playwright would present 4 plays each day
    • A trilogy of tragedies
    • One satyr play or tragicomedy
  – Playwrights were competing for prizes
  – Patrons, called choregoi, bore the expenses
  – Staging gradually evolved

• Some theaters could hold 17,000 persons
Staging of Greek Theatre

- Open hillsides surrounded an orchestra where the chorus would dance, with an altar (thymele) to Dionysus centered in the orchestra.
- Priests would sit down in the front of the theatron.
- A skene would come to be located at the rear of the acting area.
Other Stage Components

• Side wings added to skene were called paraskenia

• Entrances to orchestra from under the seating would be vomitoria

• A wheeled platform (the eccyclema) would be used to bring in corpses “killed” off-stage

• Periaktoi were three flats put together to form a triangle, then center mounted on a pivot and used for scene/background changes

• A machina could be used to ‘fly’ a god into the orchestra, thus having a deus ex machina.
MASKS/COSTUMING

• Tragic actors wore
  – Enlarged masks heightened with a crown or *onkus*
  – Somewhat padded costumes with *chiton* (tunic)
  – *Cothurni* (high-topped boots w/ thick, padded soles and laced up, with open toes) later known as buskins
• Comic actors wore
  – Grotesque masks
  – *Chiton* padded in a humorously deformed way and/or cut too short
  – Socks (sandals)
  – *Phallus* (male characters only) and on occasion a tail
USUAL THEME OF GREEK TRAGEDY CENTERED ON THE CLASH BETWEEN THE WILL OF THE GODS AND THE AMBITIONS/DESIRE OF MEN, AND SHOWED HOW HUMAN EFFORTS WERE FUTILE IN CIRCUMVENTING THE DECREES OF FATE AND/OR WILL OF THE GODS.
DEVELOPMENT OF CHORUS

• Initially 50 or more members, gradually decreasing to 12-15 as actors took over parts

• Roles
  – Explain situations
  – Update audience on events
  – Comment on action from viewpoint of established ideas or group it represented
  – Engage actors in dialogue
ACTORS

• Initially one (Thespis stepped out of chorus and recited monologue
• Aeschylus added a 2\textsuperscript{nd} actor, allowing face-to-face conflict
• Sophocles added a 3\textsuperscript{rd} and final actor
• Three actors had to play ALL characters
• No women permitted to act until 4 century B.C. (300+ B.C.)
GREEK PLAYWRIGHTS

• TRAGEDIANS
  – Aeschylus
  – Sophocles
  – Euripides

• COMEDIANS
  – Aristophanes
  – Menander
Aeschylus (525-456 B.C.)

- Won 13 of the contests
- Father of Greek tragedy
- Seven extant works: *The Persians Seven against Thebes*; [Trilogy Oresteia] *Agamemnon, Choephoroe, & Eumenides; The Suppliants; and Prometheus Bound*
- Introduced the 2\(^{nd}\) actor
- Reduced chorus to 12
- Noted for elevation & majesty of language
SOPHOCLES (496-406 B.C.)

-Introduced 3rd actor
-Called the Greatest of the Greek dramatists
-Credited with >100 plays, only 7 still existing
-Won 18 First Prizes, beating Aeschylus in 468
-Most known for *The Theban Plays: Oedipus Rex (Tyrannus), Oedipus at Colonus, & Antigone*
-Balanced power of the gods with the importance of man. Characters could ask WHY?
-Introduced dramatic action leading to a definite plot structure of unity and beauty
EURIPIDES (485-406 B.C.)

• Seriously questioned life
• More concerned with human interest than with religious views of the day
• Emphasized man-to-man relationships
• Master of pathos. Best known for *The Trojan Women* (an indictment of war), and *Medea* (wife seeks revenge against husband for infidelity, ultimately sacrificing two sons.)
ARISTOPHANES (450-380 B.C.)

- Known as chief writer of “Old Comedy.”
- Satirist; observer of mankind; nothing was sacred to him
- Best known for
  - *The Frogs* (a writers’ contest in Hell between Aeschylus and Euripides, judged by Dionysus)
  - *The Clouds* (a commentary on Socrates & Greek education)
  - *Lysistrata* (a scathing attack on war)
Old Comedy

• Could use more than 3 actors (often 5)
• Used a 24 member chorus
• Concerned with contemporary matters of politics or art, questions of peace or war, or with persons/practices disliked by the author
• Structured into: prologue (happy idea is conceived), parados (chorus entry), agon (debate over merits of idea), parabasis (chorus addresses audience w/advice), series of episodes (shows happy idea in practice), & komos (exit to feasting and revelry)
MENANDER (342-291 B.C.)

• Only known complete script is *The Curmudgeon* [or *The Grouch*]

• Most associated with “New Comedy”
  – Satire was replaced by sentimental comedy based upon a love story, drawn from everyday life of middle-class Athenians
  – Divided into 5 parts with 4 choral interludes
  – Used costumes of everyday garments and masks depicting basic character types of period
Greek theater had almost disappeared by 2\textsuperscript{nd} century B.C., as Rome absorbed the Hellenistic world, adapting theatre to its own needs.
ROMAN THEATRE

• First regular dramas were performed in 240 B.C., being the plays of Livius Andronicus
• Only works of two comedy writers (Plautus & Terence) and one tragedian (Seneca) survive
• No permanent theater was built in Rome until 55 B.C.
• All actors wore masks. Costumes were similar to those of daily life
• Comedies were patterned after Greek New Comedy
TITUS MARCUS PLAUTUS (254-184 B.C.

- 21 PLAYS OF 130+ SURVIVE, NOTABLE: *The Twin Menaechmi, Amphitryon*, and *The Pot of Gold*. Plots often based on mistaken identity or father/son rivalry
- About 2/3rds of the lines were accompanied by music, and usually 3 songs were included.
- He typically explored a single plot with a complicated intrigue
- Used character types (stock characters): slave, master, the courtesan, cowardly soldier, etc.
PUBLIUS TERENTIUS AFER (TERENCE)  
(195?185? B.C. – 159 B.C.)

• Native of North Africa, brought to Rome as a young slave by a Roman senator who educated Terence and set him free.

• Scipio Africanus Minor became his patron, encouraging Terence to adapt New Comedy, particularly Menander’s, to the Roman stage.

• Character portrayal, gentle humor, warmth of feeling, & elegance of dialogue reflected good manners and high-culture of upper class society.

• Excelled at suspenseful plots
LUCIUS ANNEUS SENECA (4 B.C.-65 A.D.)

- Wrote “closet dramas,” meant to be read rather than performed
- An influential writer/philosopher of Stoicism
- Adapted five plays of Euripides, authored 4 others
- Used a 5 act construction
- Showed violent action; used elaborately constructed speeches similar to what would appear in Elizabethan drama
- Wrote 12 moral essays and 124 moral letters
- Tutored & advised Nero, fell out of favor, condemned to die but chose suicide
Other Roman dramatic forms

• Farce (fabula Atellana): used stock characters with improvised dialogue; plots involved trickery, cheating, & general buffoonery
• Mime: female roles played by women, no masks were worn, and subject matter was primarily urban. Subjects were often adultery or unnatural vices. Used indecent language Because the rising Christian religion opposed these, the Mime companies retaliated by ridiculing practicies & belief of Christians
• Pantomime: silent interpretive dance, performed by a single actor, and narrated by a chorus.
Theater at Ostia

The Roman Theatre at Ostia Antica
