

Theatre festivals

Plays at festivals

The very first plays were performed at festivals for Dionysos. They began as religious performances by a group of performers known as a chorus. The chorus sang and danced stories of gods and heroes from Greek myths. Later an actor was added. He took on the part of each character in the story by wearing a different mask and costume. Even when more actors were added, the chorus always remained very important.

A festival of Dionysos

The largest festival in honour of Dionysos was called the Great Dionysia. It lasted six days. On the day before the festival, the worshippers carried a statue of the god into the theatre. The first and second days were taken up with sacrifices to Dionysos and a poetry contest. On the third day, five comedies were put on.

On the next three days, three playwrights put on four plays each. Three of these plays were tragedies, which usually had an unhappy ending; the fourth play was a satyr play in which the chorus were dressed to look like satyrs. The satyr plays were light-hearted to provide relief from the sad stories in the tragedies.

Watching the plays

There were no theatre lights, so performances took place in daylight, beginning at sunrise. The theatre of Dionysos in Athens could hold about 15,000 people. Tickets cost the same as a week's food for one person, but the performance of plays was such an important part of Athenian life that the city paid for tickets for the poor people.



An early theatre performance with a chorus of satyrs. One actor plays different characters using a separate mask for each. As far as we know, all performers were men, even for women characters.

If women were allowed to attend the theatre, they probably only sat in the back rows of the theatre. Priests of Dionysos and other important people in the city had special seats in the front rows. Spectators sometimes made their feelings known by stamping, clapping and whistling during a performance.

Awarding the prizes

Ten judges decided which were the best plays. Prizes were given for the best tragedy and for the best comedy. The prizes were wreaths of ivy. They were given to the playwright, the leading actor and the Athenian citizen who had paid for the training of the chorus.