



Acting 1 & 2 (Introductory Acting)
Sophocles & Ancient Greek Theatre
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Learning Objective:

The student will be introduced to Sophocles and Ancient Greek Theatre.

Bell Ringer:

What do you know about early theatre? Theatre history?

Lesson Steps:

Read the article below and take notes. You will take a quiz after you have read it.

Sophocles, one of the three greatest writers of Greek tragedy, lived from about 496 to 406 B.C. The son of a wealthy manufacturer, he lived his entire life in Athens, at the height of that city's political and cultural success. The young Sophocles studied what we would now call theatre arts. He entered the annual theatrical competitions sacred to the god Dionysus, both as actor and playwright. In 468 his play won first prize; but soon, because of his relatively weak voice, he gave up performing. During his long career Sophocles wrote 123 plays; 24 of them won first prize, and the rest second.

Sophocles was a conscious innovator in the theatre. He was the first playwright to have three actors onstage at the same time, which allowed for the development of more dramatically complex scenes. He increased the number of singers in the chorus, a group of performers in Greek theatre who functioned as a commentary on and as an accompaniment to the action of a play. Breaking with the past, he turned from the tradition of writing three interconnected plays featuring a diversity of characters to writing single dramas of concentrated action that focus upon a dominant individual. Sophocles wrote about a partly mythical heroic era of Greek history; yet he did not evade contemporary problems, but used the ancient tales to comment on the Greece of his own time. Today only seven of Sophocles' tragedies survive. They include Oedipus The King, Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone, and Electra. Oedipus The King has been called the most perfect example of Greek tragedy that we have today.

Greek drama was not simply entertainment; it had links with sacred ritual and with the Athenian social and political system. All plays were written for the annual spring festival of Dionysus, held in a large open-air theatre built into the natural slope of a hill. The theatre held 14,000 to 15,000 spectators originally seated on wooden bleachers. Performances took place during daylight hours on the orchestra, a circular area with an altar in the center. This area was backed by a building called the skene, which served as a setting for all plays. In front of the skene was a framework called the proskenion that supported a wide, shallow stage. In the 4th Century B. C., a permanent stone structure was completed.

Because the Greek outdoor theatre was so large, actors could not depend on facial expressions or vocal inflections to convey their characters. Presumably, they had to rely on large, simple physical gestures and on their ability to declaim the poetry of the script. They were helped by donning stylized character masks. Such masks could easily be seen from the top rows of the audience; some researchers believe that these masks also acted as megaphones to help project the voice. These masks also helped just three actors to play all the roles in a play, including the female characters – there were no actresses. In addition to the leading actors, there was a chorus of perhaps 15 actors who represented townspeople or other groups. The chorus undoubtedly remained in the orchestra where they sang, danced in ritualistic, formal patterns, and commented on the action. Because the original texts of Greek dramas rarely have stage directions, we don't know whether the main characters moved among the chorus at times or confined themselves to the raised stage.

Theatrical costumes were essentially the same as the Greeks' daily wear, with perhaps some exaggeration for effect. Both men and women draped themselves in robes of finely woven wool or linen. Although much variety was possible through draping, pleating, tucking, and layering, there was little tailoring – the basic drama remained the simple rectangular shape in which cloth had been woven on the loom. A variety of colors available through dyeing, however, and elaborate patterns were embroidered or woven into the cloth. These robes were held in place with pins, laces, or belts. Both men and women wore sandals, but men – especially soldiers – sometimes wore calf-high boots. With

the addition of a top robe and the switch of a mask, an actor could complete a costume change within minutes and be ready to portray a different character. Chorus members probably dressed alike, or in variations on a basic pattern, and wore similar masks.

Practice:

Take the quiz below to check your understanding of the article. Then, check your answers with the key.

Quiz:

For each of the following, write "True" if the statement is true and "False" if the statement is false.

_____ 1. One of the innovations Sophocles introduced in Greek theatre was the emphasis on one dominant character in a drama.

_____ 2. In Sophocles' time, the orchestra was a square area in front of the stage where musicians performed.

_____ 3. In ancient Greece, theatre was often seen as a threat to Greek religious practices.

_____ 4. In Sophocles' time, plays were usually performed in small indoor theatres.

_____ 5. Over the centuries, many of Sophocles' plays have been lost.

_____ 6. Antigone is one of Sophocles' most important comedies.

Answer each of the following in 1 – 3 complete sentences.

7. Explain why masks were useful tools for actors in ancient Greece. Give at least two reasons.

8. Describe the role of the chorus in Greek dramas.

Answers

1. True

2. False

3. False

4. False

5. True

6. False

7. Masks could be seen at a distance, could allow the same actor to play several roles, and might have amplified actors' voices.

8. The chorus represented townspeople or other groups of characters, sang, danced, and commented on the events of the play.