Greek and Roman Theatre
What has survived?

• 33 Greek plays
• 36 Roman plays
• Over 400 Greco-Roman Theatres in Europe, Middle East, North Africa and Central Asia
Theatre and Religion

- **Greek Theatre** had its beginnings in the *worship* of **Dionysus**, the Greek God of wine, fertility and revelry.
- There were **four major celebrations** in honor of Dionysus.
- **Three** – the City Dionsyia, the Lenaia and Rural Dionysia – involved drama
- **City Dionysia** was the major festival
City Dionysia

- Held in Athens
- During the Spring (late March, early April)
- Lasted a week
- Three days are set aside for the performance of three Tragic Trilogies
- Is considered the birthplace of Tragedy
Dithyramb

- A **choral ode** sung in honor of **Dionysus** by a chorus of **fifty men**
- Was a regular part of the **City Dionysia**
- **Greek Tragedy** grew out of the **Dithyramb**
- Legend says that **Thespis**, a choral leader, left the chorus jumped on the alter, and assumed the role of "the god"
Thespis

- Considered the first Actor
- Also the first Playwright
- Wrote for one actor plus chorus
- Won the first Tragic Contest in 534 BCE
Three Tragic Greek Playwrights

1. Aeschylus
2. Sophocles
3. Euripides
Aeschylus
525-456 BCE

- Won thirteen contests
- Have seven of his plays
- The only complete trilogy: Oresteia -- Agamemnon, Libation Bearers, and Eumenides
- Most studied play: Prometheus Bound
- Added the second actor
Sophocles
496-406 BCE

- Won eighteen contests
- Have seven of his plays
- Most important work: *Oedipus Rex*
- Added the third actor
Eudipides
480-407 BCE

- Won five contests
- Have eighteen of his plays
- Most often produced: Medea
- Often forced to use a contrived ending: Deus ex machina, god out of the machine
Trilogy

• Three short plays built around a common plot, character or idea
• Each play runs between 40 minutes and an hour
• Only one complete trilogy has survived: *Oresteia* by Aeschylus
• In addition to the trilogy, each playwright also presented a Satyr Play
Satyr Play

- Short comic treatment of the material covered in the three tragedies
- Presented after the tragedies
- Only one has survived: “Cyclops” by Euripides
Lenaia

- Held in **Athens**
- During the **winter** (January)
- Five comedies were performed
- First comedy competition: **486 BCE**
- Is considered the **home of Greek Comedy**
New Comedy – Old Comedy

Old Comedy
• Written before 400 BCE
• Mostly political satire
• Work of only one playwright has survived

New Comedy
• Written after 400 BCE
• Dealt with domestic affairs
• Fragments of only one New Comedy has survived
Aristophanes
с 448 – с 380 BCE

• Wrote *Old Comedy*
• Probably won *four contests*
• *Eleven* plays have survived
• Remembered for *The Wasps, The Birds, The Frogs, and The Clouds*
• Probably most produced: *Lysistrata*
Menander

c 342 – 292 BCE

• Wrote New Comedy
• Fragments of only one play has survived: The Grouch
• Works were adapted by Roman playwrights
A Play by Menander
Layout of a Greek Theatre

Seating Capacity: 15 to 16 thousand
One third the population of Athens
Greek Theatre

Orchestra: Where the chorus performed
• Meaning: Dancing place

Theatron: Where the audience sat.
• Meaning: Seeing place

Skene: The “palace” at the back of the orchestra.
• Source of our word scene.

Parados: The entrance to the Orchestra
Theatre of Dionysus
Athens
Deus Ex Machina

“God Out of the Machine”
The Actor

- Limited to 2 in the plays of Aeschylus
- 3 in the plays of Sophocles and Euripides
- No limit in comedy
- Male only, no women on stage
The Greek Chorus

Ancient

Modern
Function of the Chorus

1. **Character** in the Play
2. Presents the playwright’s **point-of-view**
3. The **ideal spectator**
4. Divided the play into **dramatic units**
Dramatic Units

- Prologue by Chorus
- **Scene 1**
- Choral Interlude
- **Scene 2**
- Choral Interlude
- **Scene 3**
- Epilogue by Chorus
Roman Theatre

A Wall Painting in Pompeii
Titus Marcus Plautus
254 – 184 BCE

- We have 21 plays
- All based on New Greek Comedy
- Plots and characters borrowed by Shakespeare and Moliere
- Most often revived: Menaechmi
Stock Characters used by Plautus

- The young man
- The old man
- A pair of slaves
- The parasite
- The courtesan
- The slave dealer
- The braggart soldier
Set for a Roman Comedy
On a street in front of 3 houses
Lucius Seneca
c 6 BCE – 65 CE

- Tragic playwright
- Tutor and advisor to Nero
- 9 plays have survived
- All adaption of Greek tragedies
- Mostly Euripides
- Probably not performed
Seneca’s Importance to Dramatic Literature

His plays were used as models by Renaissance playwrights:

• William Shakespeare
• Jean Racine
• Pierre Corneille
Characteristics of Senecan Tragedy

1. He divided his plays into **five acts**
2. He used **elaborate rhetorical speeches**
3. He was a **moral philosopher**
4. His tragedies involved much **violent action**
5. His tragedies respected the **unity of time and place**
6. Each of his characters was **dominated by one passion**
Soliloquy, Aside, & Confidant

- **Soliloquy**: A character, on an empty stage, speaks directly to the audience
- **Aside**: A character speaks to the audience, but the other characters on stage do not hear
- **Confidant**: A character who listens to and often gives advice to another character
Roman Theatre
Merida, Spain
Greek to Roman Theatre

1. Cut the orchestra in half, from a circle (in Greek times) to a semi-circle.
2. Reduced the seating area (cavea) to a semi-circle
3. Orchestra was used as a seating area
4. Added a narrow stage backed by an ornate facade (scena frons)
5. There were five entrances onto the stage
6. Seating capacity: About 14,000
Greek and Roman Theatre

Diagrams showing the architecture and components of Greek and Roman theatres, including the cavea, orchestra, and scena.
Teatro Marcello
Roma
Teatro Marcello, Rome
Today

Largest Theatre in the Roman Empire
Teatro Marcello
Rear view
Teatro Marcello
Satellite View
Anfiteatro di Flavio
Rome, Today
Roman Amphitheatre

• An amphitheatre has the audience completely surrounding the "stage space."
• They were huge arenas used primarily for gladitorial combat, mock sea battles and wild animal hunts.
• The largest (Seating capacity: 87,000) in the Empire was Rome's *Anfiteatro di Flavio*, the *Colosseum*
Gladitorial Combat
Colosseum
Satellite View
The *hypogeum* (underground)
Amphitheatre in Verona
Grand Opera at Verona
Amphitheatre in Capua
Inside the Amphitheatre
Downfall of the Roman Theatre

1. The **decay** and **fall** of the Roman empire
2. The **barbarians** who came down from the north and plundered the cities of the empire
3. The **hostility** of the church
Last Roman Performance

533 CE, 1066 years after Thespis won the first Greek Tragic Contest.