

comedy

Evolution of Comedy

Dramatic comedy grew out of the boisterous choruses and dialogue of the fertility rites of the feasts of the Greek god Dionysus. What became known to theater historians as Old Comedy in ancient Greece was a series of loosely connected scenes (using a chorus and individual characters) in which a particular situation was thoroughly exploited through farce, fantasy, satire, and parody, the series ending in a lyrical celebration of unity.

Reaching its height in the brilliantly scathing plays of Aristophanes, Old Comedy gradually declined and was replaced by a less vital and imaginative drama. In New Comedy, generally considered to have begun in the mid-4th cent. B.C., the plays were more consciously literary, often romantic in tone, and decidedly less satirical and critical. Menander was the most famous writer of New Comedy.

During the Middle Ages the Church strove to keep the joyous and critical aspects of the drama to a minimum, but comic drama survived in medieval folk plays and festivals, in the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, in mock liturgical dramas, and in the farcical elements of miracle and morality plays.

With the advent of the Renaissance, a new and vital drama emerged. In England in the 16th cent. the tradition of the interlude, developed by John Heywood and others, blended with that of Latin classic comedy, eventually producing the great Elizabethan comedy, which reached its highest expression in the plays of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson. Shakespeare, whose comedies ranged from the farcical to the tragicomic, was the master of the romantic comedy, while Jonson, whose drama was strongly influenced by classical tenets, wrote caustic, rich satire.

In 17th-century France, the classical influence was combined with that of the *commedia dell'arte* in the drama of Molière, one of the greatest comic and satiric writers in the history of the theater. This combination is also present in the plays of the Italian Carlo Goldoni. After a period of suppression during the Puritan Revolution, the English comic drama reemerged with the witty, frequently licentious, consciously artificial comedy of manners of Etherege, Wycherley, Congreve, and others. At the close of the 17th cent., however, such stern reaction had set in against the bawdiness and frivolity of the Restoration stage that English comedy descended into what has become known as sentimental comedy. This drama, which

sought more to evoke tears than laughter, had its counterpart in France in the *comédie larmoyante*.

In England during the later 18th cent. a resurgence of the satirical and witty character comedies was found in the plays of Sheridan. After an almost complete lapse in the early to mid-19th cent., good comedy was again brought to the stage in the comedies of manners by Oscar Wilde and in the comedies of ideas by George Bernard Shaw. In the late 1880s the great Russian dramatist Anton Chekhov began writing his subtle and delicate comedies of the dying Russian aristocracy.

The beginning of Greek comedy: 5th century BC

From 486 BC there is an annual competition for comedies at Athens - held as part of the Lenaea, a three-day festival in January. Only one comic author's work has survived from the 5th century. Like the first three tragedians, he launches the genre with great brilliance. He is Aristophanes, a frequent winner of the first prize in the Lenaea (on the first occasion, in 425 BC, with *the Acharnians*).

Eleven of his plays survive, out of a total of perhaps forty spanning approximately the period 425-390 BC. They rely mainly on a device which becomes central to the tradition of comedy. They satirize contemporary foibles by placing them in an unexpected context, whether by means of a fantastic plot or through the antics of ridiculous characters.

A good example is *The Frogs*, a literary satire at the expense of Euripides. After the death of the great man, Dionysus goes down to Hades to bring back his favourite tragedian. A competition held down there enables Aristophanes to parody the style of Euripides. As a result Dionysus comes back to earth with Aeschylus instead.

In *The Wasps* the Athenian love of litigation is ridiculed in the form of an old man who sets up a law court in his home, to try his dog for stealing cheese. In *Lysistrata* the horrors of war are discussed in a circumstance of extreme social crisis; the women of Greece refuse to make love until their men agree to make peace.

The Greek theatre: 4th century BC

An exclusively Greek contribution to architectural history is the raked auditorium for watching theatrical performances (appropriately, since the Greeks are also the inventors of theatre as a literary form).

The masterpieces of Greek drama date from the 5th century BC. At that time, in Athens, the audience sit on the bare hillside to watch performances on a temporary wooden stage. In the 4th century a stone auditorium is built on the site, and there is still a theatre there today - the theatre of Dionysus. However this is a Roman reconstruction from the time of Nero. By then the shape of the stage is a semi-circle.



In the first Greek theatres the stage is a full circle, in keeping with the circular dance - the *choros* - from which the theatrical performance has evolved. This stage is called the orchestra (*orchester*, a dancer), because it is the place where the chorus sing and dance.

Epidaurus, built in about 340 BC, provides the best example of a classical Greek theatre. In the centre of the orchestra is the stone base on which an altar stood, reflecting the religious aspect of theatre in Greece. The rising tiers of seats, separated by aisles, provide the pattern for the closest part of the auditorium to the stage in nearly all subsequent theatres - where these seats are still sometimes called the orchestra stalls.

Roman comedy: 3rd - 2nd century BC

In most cultural matters Rome is greatly influenced by Greece, and this is particularly true of theatre. Two Roman writers of comedy, Plautus and Terence, achieve lasting fame in the decades before and after 200 BC - Plautus for a robust form of entertainment close to farce, Terence for a more subtle comedy of manners. But neither writer invents a single plot. All are borrowed from

Greek drama, and every play of Terence's is set in Athens.

The misfortune of Plautus and Terence is that their audience is very much less attentive than in Athens. And the reason is that Roman plays are presented as part of a broader event, the Roman games.

The games, held every September, are originally a harvest festival. Taking place between the Palatine and Aventine hills in Rome, in an area known as the Circus Maximus, the main events are sporting contests - chariot races or boxing matches. Clowns soon become one of the side shows, to be joined from 240 BC by plays - enjoying much the same status. A play of Terence's, in 165, fails to attract much attention because it is going on at the same time as a rope dancer and a boxing match.

Since 264 BC gladiatorial contests have also been part of Rome's entertainments. In popular terms make-believe drama proves no match for the excitement of real death. The Roman circus is more famous than Roman theatre (see the Roman circus and gladiators).