

DRAMA

TEACHER RESOURCES



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Faculty of Classics

Classical Shorts is a series of films created for schools by Lion TV with the Faculty of Classics, University of Cambridge.

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Drama: Teacher Resources

What is Drama in the Modern World?

Drama is a mode of fiction characterised by performance. It can be a play, an opera, or even a ballet and can be performed anywhere- the most common places being in the theatre or on TV/radio. Drama is generally considered to be a genre of poetry and Aristotle, an ancient Greek philosopher, distinguishes it from epic and lyric poetry in his famous work Poetics written in 335 BC.

The term "drama" comes from a Greek word meaning "deed" or "act" (Classical Greek: δράμα).

In the modern world there are lots of different examples of drama. From the more traditional plays, to films and TV. Drama is all around us and quite readily available to entertain us. Drama in the modern era is a term that can also be used in a narrower sense to mean a specific type of play or program. "Drama" in this sense is neither a comedy nor a tragedy but is a separate broad genre, which is serious in tone and often uses clever plots and suspense to engage the audience. Types of drama include:

- Soap operas,
- Police crime dramas
- Legal dramas
- Historical dramas

Drama also exists in our everyday lives. We tell stories to our friends and our actions and interactions with other people can create 'drama'- even if the students in our film would prefer to stay out of drama!

Do you think Drama is important? List all the reasons in the film that show the importance of drama.

Think of examples in your own life of where drama has taught you something and/or made you feel a powerful emotion.

What is your favourite piece of drama and why? (This includes TV shows and films)

Imagine a world without drama. Try to describe what it would be like.

Why do people like to watch drama but would prefer to stay out of drama in their own lives? Write a short story about some drama that you think would make a great drama to watch but you wouldn't like to happen to you in real life.

Ancient Drama around the World

The broad scope of drama makes it unsurprising that it has a long and interesting history around the world. Drama looks different in various cultures and some iterations of drama are less recognisable than others.

Some of the longest continuous theatre traditions are present in India and China, where the drama developed out of religious ritual and performance.

The roots of Indian drama are thought to go back to at least the *Rigveda*, one of the four sacred canonical Hindu texts and the oldest known Vedic Sanskrit text orally transmitted since the 2nd millennium BC. It contains dialogues, acts, and scenes suggesting its dramatic nature. Early Buddhist literature provides evidence for the existence of Indian theatre as early as the 5th century BC describing the existence of companies of actors, who performed dramas on a stage. These dramas incorporated dance, but were separate from other performances of just dancing, singing, or story recitations. Classical Sanskrit drama actually used both Sanskrit and Prakrit languages making it bilingual and it was characterised by its use of stock characters- such as the hero (nayaka), heroine (nayika), or clown (vidusaka)- and full head masks.



Figure 1. Kathakali one of the later classical theatre forms from Kerala, India.

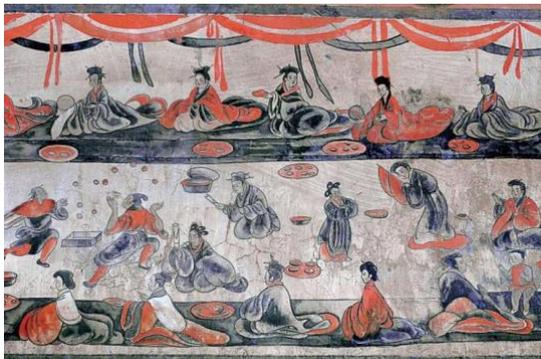


Figure 2. Part of a second-century tomb mural from Dahuting which depicts entertainers at an aristocratic banquet.

Theatre in China probably dates back to as early as the 16th Century BC and the Shang dynasty, when Shamans would perform song and dance, for ritualistic purposes. By the time of the Zhou dynasty, we have evidence that the royal court employed actors as well as dancers and musicians. It is likely that these early actors were close to clowns or jesters in nature and would perform comedy. Large-scale performances with masked actors, in which boys and girls dressed as gods and animals, were also popular in this period.

It wasn't until the Han dynasty (206 BC–220 AD) that more narrative plays began to emerge, telling the stories of warriors. These were the precursors to military plays in later Chinese opera.

Drama in Ancient Athens

Theatre was very popular in ancient Greece, especially in ancient Athens, and many of the customs and conventions of these plays influenced later European theatre traditions. Like other dramatic traditions it was rooted in religion and ritual.

Dionysos

Dionysos is the god of theatre, wine, and partying. Also known as Bacchus or Eleutherios ("the liberator"), his wine, music, and dance freed his followers from self-consciousness and shame, and it subverted usual hierarchies.

Wine was a religious focus in the cult of Dionysus. Wine could ease suffering and bring joy, but it could also inspire divine madness. When you drink wine makes you different from what you usually are. And when you go to the theatre and act, he makes you different from what you usually are- he makes you other.

Dionysos does not have a clear origin story and in different myths he is described as having various origins. In some myths he is a son of Zeus and Persephone in others the twice-born son of Zeus and Semele, a mortal woman from Thebes. Most accounts say he was born in Thrace, travelled to the East, and arrived in Greece as a foreigner. This marks him out among the gods as one who is 'other' he comes in as a new outsider-god and many of his cults play on this aspect of his foreign newness, enacting rituals of entering and changing.

Although his mythology and cults are centred around his newness, Dionysos and his cults are actually some of the oldest in Greek religion. Another dichotomy that Dionysos speaks to is one of gender. In some artistic representations he is depicted as young and feminine with long hair and others he is an old bearded man. These contrasts are important in understanding Dionysos as an ambiguous figure who represented the 'other' in society.



Figure 3. (left) Amphora with cult mask of Dionysos, by the Antimenes Painter, around 520 BC, Altes Museum

Figure 4. (right) Dionysos riding a leopard, Macedonian mosaic from Pella, Greece (fourth century BC)

Look at the two representations of Dionysus. How are they different? How are they similar? What things suggest that these images present the same god? Why would different people choose to present him in such different ways?

The Festivals

There were several festivals to Dionysus in Athens. They would all have included singing, dancing and processions as well as sacrifices and theatrical competitions. These festivals were called the City Dionysia, the Rural Dionysia, and the Lenaia.

The festivals would start with a procession. At the City Dionysia citizens, metics (foreign people who lived in Athens), and representatives from the cities of Athens' empire processed to the Theatre of Dionysus on the southern slope of the Acropolis, carrying a wooden statue of Dionysus and phalloi (model penises), made of wood or bronze, as well as gifts and weapons were carried to showcase Athenian power and influence. After musical competitions, bulls were sacrificed, and a feast was held for all the citizens of Athens.

On the following days, playwrights would put on a series of plays as part of an intense competition. You could see 17 plays in total - 9 tragedies, 3 satyr plays and 5 comedies - and then judges picked the best ones and the best actors. Their prizes weren't cash - the glory of winning was enough.

The first ever performance of a tragedy at the Dionysia was said to be by the playwright and actor Thespis who was awarded a Goat. This isn't as random as it seems- a goat was a common symbol for Dionysos and the word Tragedy actually means 'goat-song'! You might also recognise the name Thespis as the origin for the English word 'Thespian' which is another term for an actor.

Does this change your view about how a play would have been written or performed? What sorts of things would you do differently if you were a playwright in a competition as opposed to simply writing a play for modern theatre audiences?



Figure 5. Attic black-figured column krater depicting a processional scene, Lydos, ca. 550 BC. New York MMA 31.11.11. Image ©Metropolitan Museum of Art

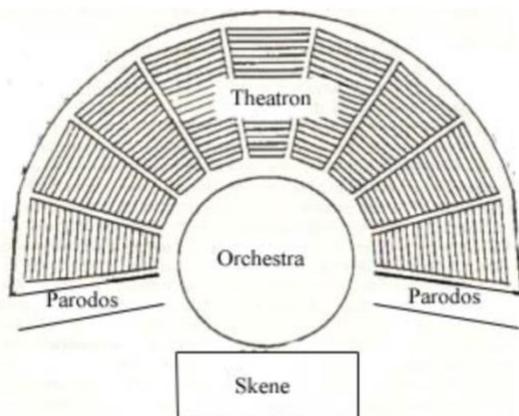
The ancient Greek Theatre

Ancient Greek theatres are semi-circular structures that are open to the elements and would have seated around 15,000 people in Athens- half the total number of citizens- on stone benched seating. Full citizens didn't include women or slaves, meaning that the audience was almost certainly made up entirely of men. And the actors were all men too.

Does this change your view about how a play would have been written or performed? What would you expect to find in a play written just for men?



Figure 6. Theatre of Dionysus, Athens



To the left there is a diagram showing the basic layout of Greek theatres. The Theatron where the audience would sit was made up of curved stone benches and, to make it easier to construct, was often built into the side of a hill.

The Orchestra is where the chorus would have performed, and the Greek term means 'dancing place'. They sometimes had an altar in the centre of this circular space for ritual purposes

The Skene is a building behind the performers that was designed to look like a palace or temple or whatever best suited the performance. It also provided a backstage area that actors could enter in and out of. There would also typically have been a roof area for actors playing gods to perform from. Actors playing human characters would have performed just in front of the skene, in later times on a stage raised above the level of the Orchestra.

The Parodos on either side were passages where the actors would make their entrances and exits. This was also where the audience would access the Theatre.

What challenges would there have been putting on a performance in a space like this? (For example, think about where the audience is in relation to the performers)

When you have looked at the sections about the chorus and masked theatre, go back over the activities remembering that the audience would have been to the sides and front, as well as some of them being far away. Repeat the activities to make your movements bigger and more visible from different seats in the theatre.

Types of Play

All the plays that survive from the ancient Greece were written and first performed in Athens in the fifth and fourth centuries. The most famous playwrights were Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides (for Tragedy) and Aristophanes (for Comedy). Their work has survived because it was so successful and the scripts were copied by hand, time and time again over many centuries.

Comedy

Ancient Greek Comedy is usually about ordinary people in the contemporary society, often with a bit of fantasy thrown in. It mocks politicians who were usually in the audience and even the gods are brought down a peg or two. It has rude jokes, silly costumes, and slapstick and typically ends happily.

Great examples of ancient Greek Comedies are the Plays of Aristophanes. Mary mentions the play about a sex strike- this is the plot of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*- and the story of the Giant beetle can be found in Aristophanes' *Peace*

Typically thought of as less serious than tragedy, comedy does have a more important role than you may initially think. It is used as a kind of social commentary. Playwrights were able to criticise powerful citizens and institutions in a very public forum and give ordinary citizens ways of looking at themselves and their power in a different way.

Attic comedy (that's comedy from Athens!) is split into three distinct periods. Typically, when people talk about ancient Greek comedy, they are referring to 'Old Comedy' this is the period in which Aristophanes was writing and what we have described above. The prevalence of this period is in part due to there being more surviving works from this time. The next period is 'Middle comedy' the plays from this period are mostly lost but they are thought to have differed from those of Old Comedy by being more general- mocking stock characters rather than real individuals- and reducing the role of the chorus. The final period is known as 'New Comedy' and was performed from around the time of the death of Alexander the Great. New Comedy built on both the previous periods but focused more on everyday life and realism, than on grotesque exaggeration and mythology. Key playwrights of New Comedy include Menander and Philemon, but though substantial fragments survive we don't have any full plays from this period.

Comedy has many different forms. How many can you think of? (Examples: Satire, Master/Servant, Farce, Slapstick/Physical, Musical Comedy.)

Think about your favourite comedy characters and shows. What makes them funny? What genre of comedy do they belong to? (Examples: Mr Bean – Physical comedy; Blackadder – Master/Servant; Simpsons – Slapstick and Satire). Can you see any societal commentary in your favourite comedies?

Tragedy

Tragedies are mostly set in the distant past with characters such as kings and queens and gods, and they tell the dramatic stories of mythology. They're full of death, revenge and punishment and are about love, sex, murder. These serious topics, confronting fundamental moral dilemmas, are why Tragedy has always been important, where comedy is sometimes considered more frivolous.



Figure 7. Albert Greiner plays blind Oedipus in Sophocles Oedipus Rex (1896)

Though the bloodiest bits don't actually happen on stage, many people in the ancient world thought that Tragedies were extreme and could be difficult to watch. Aristotle in his poetics described the action of Tragedy as 'mimesis' or imitation of noble actions which produced fear and compassion in the audience. Seeing such extreme emotions represented on stage, and thereby experiencing them in a controlled environment was thought to lead to 'Catharsis' or a cleaning/purging of your emotions in a way that was beneficial.

The myth of Oedipus mentioned by Mary is developed in Tragedies by all three of the great tragedians. We can still read Aeschylus' Seven Against Thebes, Sophocles' Oedipus Rex, Oedipus at Colonus and Antigone (sometimes called The Theban Plays), and Euripides' Phoenician Women.

Satyr Plays

You will likely have heard of the usual genres of plays: tragedy and comedy. However, the third genre of play is less well known- a satyr play. This is a third genre of ancient Greek drama that straddles the two genres.

The relationship between satyr plays and tragedy is strong; satyr plays were written by tragedians, and satyr plays were performed as the conclusion following the performance of a group of three tragedies. The satyr play's mythological-heroic stories and the style of language are also elevated in the same way as in tragedies. However, the connection with comedy is also significant – and with its happy endings, over the top characters, and toilet humour it is probably closer to a

Figure 8. Teracotta Kylix (drinking cup), ~490-480 BC
Attributed to Makron depicting Satyrs and Maenads



comedy in feel. A good way to think of a satyr play is as comedic supplement of tragic performances.



Figure 9. Satyr on an Attic red-figure plate, 520–500 BCE. From Vulci.

Satyr plays take their name from their chorus which is made up of satyrs. In Greek mythology, a satyr is part man, part animal (with a man's body, but an animal's tail and ears). They are typically exaggeratedly ugly and have mane-like hair and snub noses and are always shown naked, with their phalluses on full display. Satyrs were characterised as lovers of wine, music, dancing, and sex. They were companions of Dionysus and they often attempted to attack nymphs and mortal women alike. Over the course of Greek history, satyrs gradually became portrayed as more human and less bestial.

The introduction of a chorus of satyrs into a mythological scene is a key element of the satyr play genre. This adds comedic effect as they are driven by their own base instincts causing chaos for the other characters.

The only surviving satyr play is Euripides' *Cyclops*.

Starting with a popular myth or story, think about how you would insert a chorus of satyrs. What humour would this bring? For example, how could a troupe of satyrs help/hinder Little Red Riding Hood?

Chorus

One aspect of Greek theatre that is fundamental- and possibly alien to us- is the Chorus. The chorus serves many roles in Greek Theatre. They are 'on stage' throughout the play and function as observers, emotional interpreters, commentators on the main action, as well as companions, and story-tellers. They sing and dance together in the area of the theatre called the orchestra.

In order to better understand the role of the chorus, think about what choruses that exist in modern life. Try to be as creative as possible! For example:

- A group of sports fans
- A class of students
- A group of old women playing bingo

Movement and the Chorus

An effective way to begin thinking about how the chorus will move on stage is to look for examples of groups of animals moving as one in nature. This could include images of shoals of fish, flocks of birds, or sheep being rounded up by a sheepdog. In all these examples, the individual animal disappears as it becomes part of a homogenous group with its companions.

Mirroring

Find a friend and face them in a neutral position. Then, with you as the leader, start moving slowly and your partner should try to mirror you, to experiment with speed and detail of movement, as well as to explore how effectively they can maintain synchronicity when using their peripheral vision.

Shadowing

With a friend, stand one behind the other. The person at the front of the pair will move and the person behind follows and copies their movements exactly. When the person at the front rotates, the person at the back then becomes the leader. You can then extend this task by doing it with more people.

Shoaling

Get together a group of three people. Stand together in a tight clump. Whoever is at the front of the clump should then begin to move slowly and the rest of the group should join in with their movements. Whenever the clump turns, the new person at the front should take on the job of leading the movement, however, if conducted effectively it should look like there is no leader at all. Once you have successfully synchronised into each other's movements, the chorus can begin to play with speed and different ways of travelling.

Shoaling extension

Once you have learned to move in unison move on to not copying each other exactly, and instead maintain a similar quality of movement. For example, if someone begins to run, the rest of the chorus may run too, but not in exactly the same manner. This will serve to naturalise, or humanise, the chorus.

Chorus and vocals

Think about all the different ways a group can make sounds together. For example, a chorus can speak in unison, individuals can speak certain lines, a line can be spoken by an individual whilst the rest of the chorus hum.

Then look at this passage spoken by the chorus of Aristophanes *Frogs* and put your ideas into practice:

Brekekekex koax koax,
Brekekekex koax koax,
Marshy children of the waters,
the harmonious cry of hymns,
Let us sing, my sweet
song, Koaxkoax,
which for Nysian
Dionysos, son of Zeus,
we sang at Limnae
when in drunken revelry
at the Feast of the Jars
the crowd of people marches to my sanctuary.
Brekekekex koax koax

Aristophanes' *Frogs* 209-220, trans. Dillon

What works? What doesn't? What aural effects can you create?
Then go on to combine both vocals and movement- can you make the Frogs
come to life?

Masked Theatre

You may have seen the symbol for theatre is typically a pair of masks one smiling the other frowning (like this emoji- 🎭) This comes from Greek theatre and the masks they would have used for comedy and tragedy. Masks were typically made from linen which was stiffened and stretched into place. This means that none survive to this day and we only know what they look like from artistic depictions in other mediums, for example paintings of actors on pottery and decorative terracotta masks.

The use of masks had practical functions for ancient theatre which was performed outside in large theatres. The masks allowed easy recognition of characters at a distance, enabled the same actors to play multiple characters (including ones of different genders and even species), and they may even have played a role in amplifying the actors' voices.

The tradition of mask use in theatre and public ceremonies endured in Europe long after the ancient use of them. The Renaissance, in particular, saw the resurgence of masks, with them becoming popular at society 'masquerade balls' and shows such as ballets and comedic theatre known as *Commedia dell'arte*.

Though mask would have been fundamental to ancient Greek theatre, the staging of modern versions of ancient plays tends to move away from them in favour of more modern conventions of drama. The chorus however is one area where modern productions tend to use aspects of masked theatre- such as unified design and emphasis on gesture- to evoke the concept of unity and perhaps allude to the strangeness of Greek Theatre.

Design a mask for a Greek Chorus member (Some examples of chorus characters are- Frogs, Wasps, Birds, women, old men etc. but you can make up your own chorus too) How would you design it differently for a Tragedy and for a Comedy? Try making a 3D mask of your design that you can wear.

Wearing your mask, think about how you would have to use gesture to convey your character- remember you can't move your face now!



These images are from past Cambridge Greek Plays and they show a range of ways of presenting a Chorus. What are the differences? How has the traditional masked form been conveyed? How is the concept of unity presented?

Read More

Ancient Texts

For some additional plays try the following ones which have Dionysos as their protagonist:

Aristophanes' *Frogs* for Comedy

Euripides' *Bacchae* for Tragedy

Read the last remaining Satyr Play:

Euripides' *Cyclops*

For an important text about ancient drama (that a lot of people still read in relation to drama today) try:

Aristotle's *Poetics*