Thespis, Athens, and The Origins of Greek Drama: Crash Course Theater #2

Crash Course: Theater
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Hey there. I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Theater and today we're traveling to ancient Greece to uncover the origins of Western drama.

Right, Dionysus? He, he's still hung over. My dude, this is your episode you got to get up.

[Opening Music]

If we believe the ritualism theory from last episode, then eons of religious or quasi-religious rituals eventually birthed drama. But how? Well it has to do a bunch with our grape loving friend over here.

By the 6th century BCE, Dionysus had become a very popular God in Greece, especially among the ladies. According to some maybe true, maybe not reports, women participated in a ritual where they'd run through the countryside, tear apart some animals, and then come home. It's fun, right? And if you want to know more about it, you can check out the *Bacchae* by Euripides. It is great.

Whether or not that happened, we do have good evidence that in the 6th century BCE some less wild rituals celebrating Dionysus spread through Greece. One of the most popular involved a procession from Eleuthera to Athens, where worshipers lofted a giant phallus and sang songs called dithyrambs in praise of...you know who.

And one theory about those dithyrambs actually is that eventually they evolved into theater. When singers started acting out the action instead of
just singing it. Aristotle and his followers think that sooner or later a singer stepped out of the dithyramb chorus and started acting out individual characters.

This actor was called Thespis. Like actually that was his name and that's where we get the noun thespian. According to stories, Thespis learned to switch between characters and to enhance the effect, he
got the bright idea to use masks. This was Greek tragedy in its earliest form. One actor paired with a chorus.

It still sounded a lot like a dithyrambs or like a bard reciting a portions of epics as banquet entertainment, but the direct impersonation of a song's characters made it different. And it continued to develop, adding actors and architectural elements for about a hundred and fifty years.

Tragedy, by the way, derives from the Greek words for goat and song, which may have had to do with animal sacrifices that were made during the festivals or it may just be another reference to satyr.

Theater eventually gets institutionalized in Athens. Late in the sixth century BCE, pre-democracy Athens was ruled by a tyrant named Peisistratus. Peisistratus came to power through violence but once he was in charge he wanted to unite and strengthen the city.

He decided that festivals, particularly those in praise of Dionysus would be a good way to get everyone on board. Because wine. So in the 530s BCE, he expanded one of the god's pre-existing spring festivals and turned Athens into city Dionysia with a theater competition at its center.

Now, this festival wasn't only about theater. It was also about reaffirming Athens as a source of pride and power. It lasted five or six days and included a lot of events. Military and political leaders poured out libations, tribute from cities of the Athenian Empire was displayed on stage. Names of men who greatly benefited Athens were read out, children of soldiers who had died in war and had now reached maturity were brought on stage.

There were also dithyramb contests. The theater competition took place in an outdoor amphitheater in front of a crowd of about fourteen thousand spectators. That likely included the whole range of Athenian society, even women and slaves. But, of course, only male citizens could perform in the chorus or vote for Best Play.

The contest was between three different playwrights. Each had to submit a tetralogy, a four-part work. The first three parts were linked tragedies and the fourth part was a satyr play, which was lewd and usually involved a lot of prop penises. In 486 BCE, a comedy competition was added.

Once competing playwrights were chosen, they were matched with a prominent Athenian citizen who would bankroll the production. Our big spender was called the choregos, and it was his job to assemble the chorus, hire the flute player, and buy the masks or any other set furniture, like a bed or a throne.

The playwright usually did the jobs that we now associate with director, composer, and set designer. Sometimes, they even acted in their own work alongside other performers. There may have been up to three actors on stage, and then the chorus.

Unfortunately none of the music from these shows remains, but there are some painted vases that suggest what productions may have looked like. Fun fact, the chorus would sometimes dance. I wonder how hard it is to high kick in a toga.

For a look at the theater structure itself, let's go to the Thought Bubble.

The theater of Dionysus was an outdoor amphitheater built into the Athenian hillside. You can still visit the ruins today. Its first incarnation might not have had seats but eventually they were added, wood first and then stone. The seated section was known as the theatron, or seeing place.

The chorus performed on a flat part called the orchestra. And in the center of the orchestra was the thymele, or altar. At some point a dressing hut called a skene was also built so that actors could change masks. With only two or three actors playing every role, you gotta change masks pretty often.

There were several ways on and offstage known as paradoi, including two side entrances so big choruses could march on and off when needed. There was also a place on top of the skene where an actor playing a god could appear and descend in a cart, which was called the god-in-the-machine or the deus ex machina.

Maybe you're wondering, why might a playwright need a god to descend from the heavens? Well, sometimes you write your way into a situation and you can't write yourself out, so it's pretty helpful to have Zeus or Apollo come on down and make everything right.

All of the actors wore masks made of linen with hair attached, so they probably looked pretty frightening, especially the one of Oedipus with blood all around the eyes. Tragic actors also wore robes and platform shoes called cothurni. So just imagine a lot of big sweeping gestures and trying not to trip.

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

Ugh, this thing is no less terrifying from the inside either.

So during the dithyramb contest after each playwright presented his tetralogy, a group of 10 randomly chosen citizens would select the

winner, who was honored with an ivy wreath, sacrificial animals, and a big banquet. The Athenians took this contest very seriously, and if any funny business was suspected, there were lawsuits.

Tragedy hits golden age in fifth century Athens. First, with the works of Aeschylus then Sophocles and Euripides. Because papyrus disintegrates and invading hordes kept burning libraries, we don't have the plays that they wrote.

Aeschylus wrote as many as 90 plays but we have only seven. Sophocles wrote 120, but we have only seven. Of the 92 Euripides wrote, more than seven at least this time. We have 19.

Those thirty odd plays have had a huge impact, though. They're still very widely read. They matter to us now because they provide a template for most contemporary drama.

But let's look for a second at how they mattered then. It's a huge deal to have 14,000 of your most prominent citizens hang out on a hillside watching plays when they could be doing their civic duty. But as it turns out, they were doing their civic duty.

The leading citizens of Athens decided that it was important to get together and see plays that actively questioned the values and structures of the state. These plays are exploring what it means to be a part of a family and a nation, and what to do when divided loyalties creates conflict.

They can teach you to be a better person and a better citizen by encouraging you to ask, through the dramatic action, what a good person is and what a good citizen does.

Tragedy does something else, too. At least, according to Aristotle. He wrote the *Poetics,* one of the world's first works of literary criticism and he had a theory about what made tragedy so important. And his theory was about catharsis, which literally means purgation.

Aristotle writes that tragedy, through pity and fear, affects the proper purgation of these emotions. Now, a lot of scholars have spilled a lot of ink trying to explain what this means so it's unlikely we are gonna get to the bottom of it right here and now. But let me quickly offer one interpretation of catharsis.

Let's try out the idea that tragedy, by exciting the emotions of pity and fear, becomes an outlet for those emotions. If we believe that pity and fear maybe aren't that helpful in a democracy, then can argue that it's better to feel these things at a play, have an emotional catharsis, and then just get that stuff out of our systems, and go back to being productive members of society.

Like, imagine how productive all those people who've seen *Les Mis* hundreds of times must be or people who've seen thousands of episodes of *General Hospital* for that matter.

Next time, we're gonna look more closely at Aristotle's theories and use them to discuss Aeschylus's *Oresteia* - the only complete tragic trilogy we have. And then, finally on to the satyrs and their phallus.

Thanks for watching and...curtain.

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