Elements of Greek Theater

- **Greek Drama:**
  - Has roots in the Athenian festivals honoring Dionysus (god of wine; god of fertility); festivals usually filled with drunkenness and sexuality
    - These festivals were performed during the first week of seasonal changes
    - The core element of these festivals was revelry—drunken men dressed in rough goatskins and sang in choruses to imitate the capering of goats, as well as to honor Dionysus; the word *tragedy* literally means “goat song” from the Greek *tragos* and *ode*.
    - Along with revelry was a serious and sacred side of the festivals; the men also sang about the sorrow that comes with winter, the pruning of the grapevine, and death; they also sang of spring, new growth, and rebirth—the cycles of seasons and life.
  - The songs of the festivals were choral hymns:
    - Chants, songs, paeans, poems
    - Referred to as **DITHYRAMBS**
    - Began informally, but became traditional
    - A choral leader evolved—he recited lines alone and waited for an answer from the chorus—this was first theatrical dialogue. An actor who was separate from the chorus and leader of the chorus was later added.

- **The first tragedies:**
  - c. 534 B.C.- Thespis, an Athenian from the borough of Icaria, traveled from village to village and organized local celebrations throughout Attica. He is usually credited with the introduction of the first actor, but some scholars believe Phrynichus, his successor, deserves the credit.
  - The actor conversed with the chorus leader and the chorus itself; he could take on several roles at different times during the intervals of the chorus singing.
  - These early tragedies focused on human matters, not just on hymns to Dionysus.
  - The “Golden Age” of Greece included tragedies written by Aeschylus, Euripides, and Sophocles, that reached a great height of literary artistry.

- **The evolved tragedies:**
  - 5th century B.C.- the technique of the tragedy was improved with the addition of more actors and a greater complexity of plot and theme.
  - People congregated in amphitheaters to see dramas, which were specifically written to be performed; the drunken spontaneity of before was relegated to **SATYR** plays—comic relief from larger tragedies.
  - The audience could expect the tragedies to focus on vengeance, severe punishment, exile, death, and early Greek myths.

- **City Dionysia:**
  - Most prestigious of the drama festivals held in Athens
  - Held over a six-day period
Throngs of visitors, dignitaries, and rural citizens came to see the spectacle, which represented a major aspect of religious worship.

There were two processions from Dionysus’ temple and back again, and public sacrifices were performed at his altar.

A few days before the performance in a spot near the theater, the playwright offered a PROAGON, a preview of coming attractions to build enthusiasm.

On three successive mornings, dramatists who had been chosen by the archon (mayor), each presented a TETRALOGY, consisting of three tragedies and a satyr play.

The play began at sunrise and ended at noon; audiences were serious about viewing the performance and often ran in fear from the more intense characters, as well as weighed the judgments and decisions of others.

The state paid each actor from public funds. The CHOREGOS, or patron, usually a wealthy Athenian, considered it an honor to help pay for production costs.

The actors provided their own costumes and masks, which had been passed down for generations in their family, and were repainted for each performance.

At the end of the performance, ten judges determined the winners and awarded prizes.

- The Greek Theater:
  - THEATRON - “seeing place” - area in which the audience sat.
    - Shaped like a horseshoe and had rows of stone bleachers rising upward and backward in tiers; first row were seats in honor of city officials, the choragus, and the priest of Dionysus; behind them sat male citizens and a special section of EPHEBI, eighteen-year-old boys enrolled in military training; women were seated behind them and then slaves.
  - ORCHESTRA - the circular area at ground level where the chorus danced; originally dirt, but later paved with stone
  - THYMELE - in the center of the orchestra; an altar to Dionysus on which sacrifices were made and which served as a stage prop
  - PARADOS - entrance passage for the chorus on the left or right of the orchestra; the flute player and occasional harpist generally sat in the corner of the orchestra
  - SKENE - a wooden structure, or scene building, located on the side of the orchestra, which formed the open end of the theatron; usually resembled a palace or temple, but served as a dressing room for the actors
  - PROSCENIUM - level area in front of the skene on which most of the play’s action took place, although at times the actors might move to the orchestra or even the roof of the skene; may have been raised one step higher than the orchestra
  - Technical equipment:
    - Devices for imitating lightning and the sound of thunder
    - Brass noisemakers
    - PINAKES, painted scenery
    - PERIAKTOI, three-sided prisms set in holes on the stage floor
• **ECCYCLEMA**, a wheeled platform which was rolled out of the skene to reveal a tableau of action that had taken place indoors
• **MECHANE**, “the machine”- consisting of pulleys and ropes that could be mounted on the roof of the skene and used to bring about the miraculous appearance of gods; the term, *deus ex machina*, or “god from the machine,” refers to the intervention of a supernatural being to resolve a dramatic dilemma.

**Costumes:**

- In early dramas, costumes were long, flowing robes and hightopped leggings
- The use of masks, wigs and makeup (earlier, they had smeared their faces with wine dregs)
- Eventually, tragic actors wore ornate costumes with long sleeves and an eye-catching belt worn above the waist to increase the illusion of height or stature
- Color symbolization:
  - Green- mourning
  - Red- procurers
  - White boarded with purple- royalty
- Travelers indicated their role by wearing hats
- Excessive ornamentation- mantles, tunics, sashes, heavy jewelry
- The tragic hero was set apart from the rest of the actors by gloves, body padding, **COPTHURNUS** boots (high-heeled buskins), which added height and significance to the figure.
- Masks served two purposes: their exaggerated expressions amplified the emotions which the character portrayed and on the inside of the mask, the small megaphone amplified the actor’s words
- Masks were made of cork or wood, fit over the actor’s whole head, and were painted with linen or leather; the hero’s mask was extended by a dome on top, or **ONKOS**; only three actors appeared on stage at a time, so multiple masks made the doubling of roles possible.

**Actors:**

- All members of the cast were male
- Actors were called **HYPOCRITES**; the chorus members were called **CHOREUTI**
- Actors, like athletes, had to be able to endure long performances in cumbersome masks and costuming, as well as be able to sing
- The role of the **PROTAGANIST** was assigned to a tenor; the **DEUTERAGONIST**, or second in importance, to a baritone; the **TRITAGONIST**, or least important, to a bass.
- Participants took on a god-like status because they often acted as deities.
- Actors joined an actor’s guild, called the artists of Dionysus, and were exempt from military service on the basis of the importance in the worship of Dionysus.
- Stars of the Greek stage were idolized and often demanded outrageous salaries.
Chorus:
- The key to understanding the meaning and purpose of the theater; the nucleus from which the tragedy evolved; acted as “ideal spectator,” the conservative spokesperson of the community wherein it clarifies the experiences and feelings of the characters in everyday terms and expresses the conventional attitude toward development of the story
- Can also serve as a central figure in the tragedy
- Tragedians used the chorus to create a psychological and emotional background to the action through its odes
- It introduced and questioned new characters, chastised and admonished wayward characters, sympathized with victims, explained events as they occurred, established facts and affirmed the outlook of society, covered the passage of time and events, and separated EPISODES.

Structure of the Tragedy:
- Prologue: opening scene; here, the background of the story is established, usually by a single actor or in a dialogue between two actors
- Parados: the entrance of the chorus, usually barefoot and chanting a lyric which bears some relation to the main theme of the play
- Episode: the counterpart of the modern act or scene, in which the plot is developed through action and dialogue between the actors, which the chorus sometimes playing a minor role.
- Stasimon: the choral ode. A stasimon comes at the end of each episode so that the tragedy is a measured alternation between these two elements.
- Exodos: the final action after the last stasimon, ended by the ceremonial exit of all the players.
Parts of a Greek Theater