

# Classical Greek Theater

**HISTORY:** Theater in the Western world can be traced back to ancient Greece, and especially to Athens. Classical Greek drama often focused on human characters' attempts to control their own destinies, often struggling against each other or against supernatural forces and all of those Greek gods and goddesses! Classical drama has its roots in religious celebrations; the Greeks performed songs and chants in celebration of Dionysus, god of wine and fertility.



**TYPES OF PLAYS:** In 534 BC, as part of one of the celebrations to Dionysus, the Greeks held a contest for the best **tragedy**—the first record of “theater”. The first winner (it became an annual event) was a guy by the name of Thespis, which is where we get the word *thesbian*, meaning actors and others involved with drama and the theater. For the competition, a playwright had to write/perform three **tragedies** and one **satyr**...

The Greeks also wrote comic plays, called **satyr** plays, but we know a lot less about them. Only one complete example—*The Cyclops* by Euripides—has survived. The plays were comic partly because of the antics of the satyrs who wore masks with shaggy hair and beards, pointed ears, snub noses, and usually a furry loincloth with a tail in the rear.

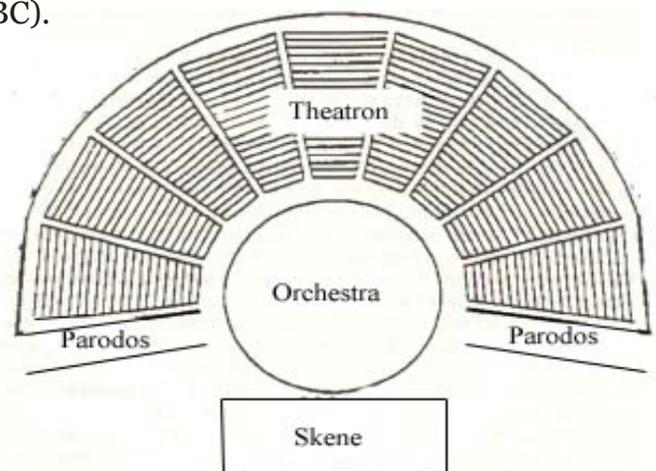
**Comedies** (a later development of the satyr plays) became an official part of the Dionysian festivals about fifty years later. Greek comedy was usually concerned with current issues in politics or art, with questions of war and peace; playwrights frequently ridiculed Athenian events very pointedly.



**Sophocles**

**FAMOUS PLAYWRITES:** Three dramatists stand out in Greek history: Aeschylus (523-456 BC), Sophocles (496-406 BC), and Euripides (480-406 BC). Of the surviving tragedies, *Oedipus the King* by Sophocles is often considered the finest example. Sophocles won twenty-four of the tragedy contests! Of Sophocles' dramas, only seven complete plays have survived: *Oedipus the King*, *Ajax*, *Antigone*, *Electra*, *Trachiniae*, *Philoctetes*, and *Oedipus at Colonus*. Only eleven comedies—of any Greek playwright—have survived, and they are all written by Aristophanes (448-380BC).

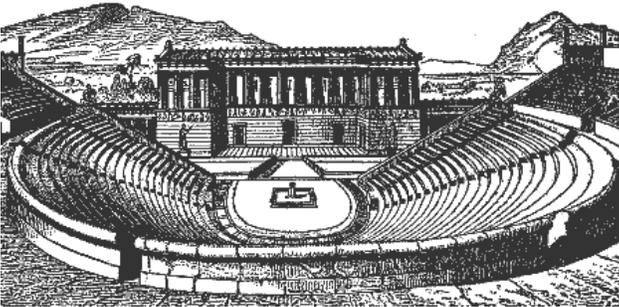
**THEATER(S):** Greek theaters, including the Theater of Dionysus, were built into the slope of a hill. The theater was located within a compound that included a temple and a large outdoor altar. Originally the slope served as the *theatron* (“seeing place” – the origin of our word *theater*). A flat terrace below the slope served as the *orchestra* (“dancing place”), in the middle of which was an altar. Gradually, the auditorium became a semicircular stone structure with seats extending



Parts of a Greek Theater



(above & below) Artists' renderings of what a Greek theater with the skene very possibly looked like.



(right) Photograph of the actual ruins of the Theater of Dionysus.

up on the hillside. The Theater of Dionysus was large enough to hold at least 14,000 and perhaps as many as 17,000 spectators. The structures today that most resemble Greek theaters are sports arenas.

Behind the *orchestra* (the stage area) was the *skene* (where we get our word *scene*). The *skene* was a hut or tent where actors could go between scenes. We don't know exactly what the *skene* looked like because it has long since disappeared, but it was 75 to 100 feet long and probably two stories high. It had a large central door, and smaller doors at each side that served as entrances and exits for the actors. It most likely also served as a backdrop for the action of the play, even though very little, if any, scenery was used.



## PERFORMERS:

**Actors:** The early tragedy contests limited plays to three actors. However, each actor could play multiple roles. Elaborate **masks** became significant in Greek theater and helped distinguish between the many roles one actor might play in a single play. All the performers wore **masks** of lightweight wood, cork or linen. This facilitated actors playing multiple roles and made it easier for men to be more convincing in female roles (early Greek actors were all men) or to assume roles of varied ages and character types.

**Supernumeraries** ('extras') could be used in the early competition in addition to the three principal actors, but they were not allowed to have any speaking lines.



**Chorus:** Singers and dancers—usually about 15 men in **tragedies**, 24 in **comedies**—performed between scenes, usually in unison, but at times in smaller groups or solos. Not only was the chorus colorful and entertaining, it served multiple roles. The chorus served as a 'group character' that expressed opinions, gave advice and sometimes participated in the action of a scene. Often the chorus expressed the playwright's views, and most often represented the 'ideal spectator' reacting to the action of the play as the playwright would want and expect the audience to respond.

**Musicians:** The principal musical accompaniment in Greek tragedy was a flute player who appeared with the chorus. The flute player wore sandals, one with a metal clapper on its sole for beating time.

## Japanese Theater: Noh

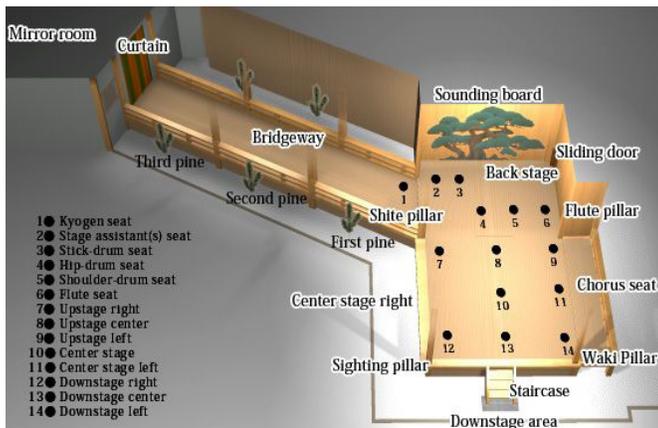
**HISTORY:** **Noh** theater originated during the period in history when shogun (military dictators) ruled Japan. Society operated within a strict social hierarchy. The highest ranking class was the samurai (warriors), followed by merchants, then artists and craftsmen, and finally farmers and peasants. Likewise, theater conventions were formalized and strictly codified.

In 1375 Kiyotsugu Kan'ami (1333-1384) and his son Zeami Motokiyo (1363-1444) were granted samurai status and perfected **Noh** conventions. All **Noh** plays were written more than 400 years ago and are still performed today much as they were at that time. **Noh** theater does not encourage innovations, but seeks to perfect and preserve an art form.

**Noh** theater was never intended to appeal to a mass audience (like theater in Greece, Rome and medieval Europe), it was reserved for the samurai class and only performed on special occasions.

**TYPES OF PLAYS:** **Noh** dramas, which are very short, are classified into five types: god plays, warrior plays, women plays, madness plays, and demon plays; in a traditional program, one play of each type is performed in the order above. Most **Noh** protagonists are ghosts, demons, or obsessed human beings whose souls cannot find rest because they are devoted to earthly goals that draw them back to the physical world with its imperfections. Story telling (plot) is not a focus of **Noh** dramas which rely on dialogue to outline the circumstances that lead up to the musical dance-drama that is the central focus of **Noh** theater. The lines, written partly in verse, are sung or intoned, and the entire drama's purpose is to evoke an emotional mood.

**FAMOUS PLAYWRITES:** Kiyotsugu Kan'ami (1333-1384) and his son Zeami Motokiyo (1363-1444). Zeami wrote more than 100 of the 240 plays that make up the **Noh** repertory.



**THEATERS:** The **Noh** stage, made of wood and bamboo and raised about three feet, consists of two principal areas--the stage (*butai*) and bridge (*hashigakari*)--which are both roofed like shrines. The *butai* roof is supported by four columns, which serve as locations for specific actions by the primary and secondary actors. The bridge serves as the only entrance for actors; the chorus and stage assistants use the "slit," a second entrance (only about three feet high). **Noh** theater uses no scenery. However, three live pine trees in front of the bridge symbolize heaven, earth, and humanity.





**PERFORMERS:** **Noh** performers, all of whom are male, can be divided into three groups: **actors, chorus, and musicians.** **Actors** are trained from childhood, devoting twenty or more years to perfecting their craft. There are two principal actors: the main character or *shite*, and the secondary character or *waki*. Other supporting actors are *kyogen*, or *kokata* (child actors). All actors wear **masks** of painted wood, many of them handed down for generations. Embroidered silk costumes are rich in color and design, based on the official dress of the 14th and 15th centuries but adapted to give the actor grandeur. Props are

minimal, the most important being a fan. Swords and spears are also common.

The **Noh chorus** includes six to ten members, who sit at the side of the stage and sing or recite the *shite's* lines while he dances. Two or three drummers and one flute player make up the **musicians** for each **Noh** drama. The chorus and musicians wear the traditional dress of the samurai.

## Japanese Theater: Kabuki



Geisha playing *shamisen*.

**HISTORY:** **Kabuki** theater, begun in the 17th century, is the most popular of traditional theater forms. It borrows conventions from **Noh** theater, but is more open to change and innovations.

**TYPES OF PLAYS:** Song and narration are important in **Kabuki** dramas. Many Kabuki plays include accompaniment by an orchestra often including flutes, drums, bells, gongs, cymbals, and strings; however, the most essential instrument is the *samisen*.

**THEATERS:** The **Kabuki** stage is framed by a proscenium (see Modern/Western handout for a diagram) that is very wide -- about 90 feet -- but only about 20 feet high and relatively shallow.

The auditorium is also very wide and shallow, with all seats facing the stage. A raised gangway, the *hanamichi*, connects the stage and the back of the auditorium and serves as the entrance and exit pathway for most of the actors. Some major scenes are also played on the *hanamichi* so that dramatic action occurs in the midst of the audience.

Unlike **Noh**, **Kabuki** uses a lot of scenery. However, many elements are symbolic rather than realistic (white floor mats represent snow, blue floor mats represent water, etc.). Without a curtain that opens and closes, changes of scenes and props are made in full view of the audience.



**PERFORMERS:** Most **Kabuki** plays are divided into several acts that emphasize emotional incidents--similar to **Noh**. At the climactic moment in many scenes, the principal character strikes and holds a highly expressive pose called a *mie* (example photo at left). Principal actors' parts offer numerous opportunities to demonstrate their skill with these *mie*, which are greatly admired by Japanese audiences. Actors train extensively for this.

**Kabuki** actors do not wear masks, but many roles do use bold, patterned makeup to typify the character. Traditional **Kabuki** costumes can weigh up to 50 pounds, so heavy that stage assistants (whom audience members ignore as if they are invisible) must help actors in keeping costumes properly arranged. Roles are often stereotypical (evil villains, loyal and courageous heroes, comic roles, beautiful women, innocent children, etc.). All **Kabuki** actors are male.

# Elizabethan (Shakespearean) Theater

**HISTORY:** Greek and Roman theatrical traditions influenced European theater, especially during the Renaissance. Like classical Greek theater, plays were often part of religious celebrations. However, unlike Greek dramas, European theatrical performances--including theater in Elizabethan England--were often sponsored (financed) by governmental or religious authorities or wealthy citizens. Therefore, theater was often utilized by these individuals and organizations as an effective propaganda medium.

Shortly after Elizabeth I took the throne (1558) she decreed that no plays dealing with religious or political subjects were to be performed. Without the sponsorship of the state, the church, and the wealthy nobility, theater was forced to become a commercial enterprise. This is a significant part of why the church held decidedly negative views toward theaters and actors.

To survive, professional theater groups had to perform continuously (not just at religious celebrations), be sufficiently entertaining to keep a playing public coming back regularly, and they needed a theater where they could control audience access and collect entrance fees. As a new profession (actors had no active guilds, or “unions”) these tasks were extremely difficult. To overcome this, acting companies sought out noblemen to be their patrons. For example, William Shakespeare was part of the Lord Chamberlain’s Men and later the King’s Men. Although there was little money gained through these associations, the titles were helpful in lending them credibility and status.

Despite difficulties, by 1600 English acting companies were creating what many consider the greatest theatrical era the world has known.

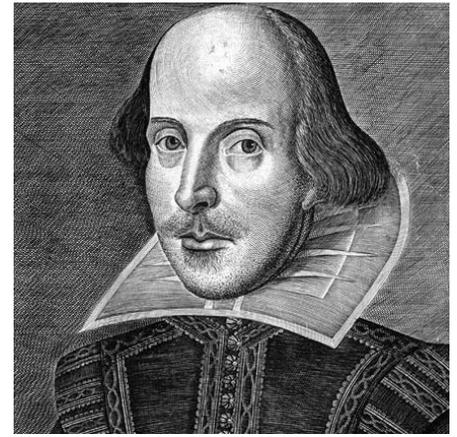


**TYPES OF PLAYS:** At the time, Shakespeare and his contemporaries did not consider their plays “literature” and generally did not seek to become published. Plays were considered part of pop culture, something similar to today’s TV shows. Traditionally, Shakespeare’s plays--and others of his day--were divided into three categories: **tragedies**, **comedies**, and **histories**.

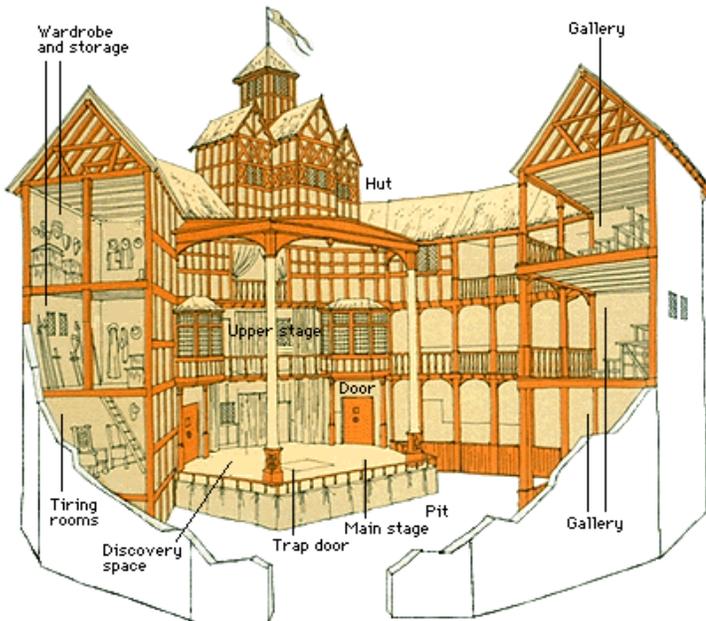
**Tragedies** involve a protagonist who is brought to ruin or suffers extreme sorrow, especially as a result of a tragic character flaw; tragedies often end with a funeral. **Comedies** may or may not be focused on humor, but they are meant to entertain; comedies often end with a wedding. **Histories** tell the story--though it may be fictionalized--of historic characters; often histories focused on a political leader as the protagonist.

Much later, the category of **romances** was added as a classification of some plays.

**FAMOUS PLAYWRITES:** William Shakespeare (1564-1616) is by far the best known playwright of the Elizabethan era. He composed 37 plays that have survived. (He also wrote more than 150 sonnets.) Other noteworthy dramatists of the time include Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593), Ben Jonson (1572-1637), Thomas Kyd (1558-1594), John Fletcher (1579-1625) and John Webster (1580-1634).



**THEATERS:** In Elizabethan England, the first theater constructed was **The Red Lion** (built in 1567), but the best known of the early playhouses was simply known as **The Theater** (built in 1576). Others soon followed, including Shakespeare's company's theater, **The Globe**.



Elizabethan theaters were generally three-tiered, octagonal structures built of wood. **The Globe** was about 100 feet in diameter, with each of the three roofed galleries being about 15 feet deep. The galleries surrounded an unroofed open space (the yard) about 70 feet in diameter. The stage extended into the yard, was just over 40 feet wide, close to 30 feet deep, and raised 5 or 6 feet above the level of the yard. The audience standing in the yard surrounded the stage on three sides. The stage was sheltered by a roof and supported by two posts near the front of the platform. Center and side doorways facilitated actors' entrances and exits, and the upper levels above the stage included balconies used in performances as well as costume and prop rooms accessed from back stage. The

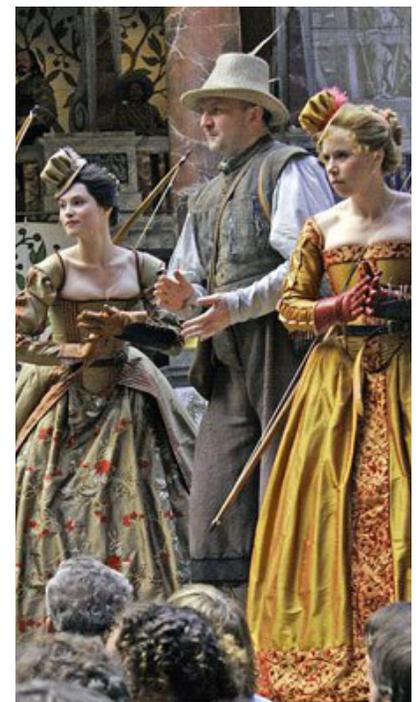
backdrop of the stage was permanent, and scenery was very minimal. The audience relied on the dialogue of the actors to indicate changes in location and setting.

**PERFORMERS:** An **acting company** typically consisted of about twenty-five people (men), of whom about half were **shareholders**. The shareholders made all the important decisions and played the principal roles. Other **hired men** were paid weekly wages as actors, musicians or stagehands. Any company might also maintain a few **apprentices**, boys who played female roles. There were no English actresses until 1661.

Actors did not wear masks (except as disguises or at costume parties, etc. within the plot of the play), and the speech and actions were stylistically closer to everyday behaviors than earlier forms of theater such as classical Greek dramas and Noh performances. However, Elizabethan theater often had its characters speaking in verse.

**Musical elements** were incorporated--flourishes of trumpets often marked the entrance of royalty; social events often included dancing--but, unlike Greek theater, the musicians were rarely part of the action of the play.

Though the backdrop of the stage was static, and scenery may have been minimal, Elizabethan theater incorporated elaborate **costuming**. Maintaining an adequate wardrobe was one of an acting company's greatest expenses.

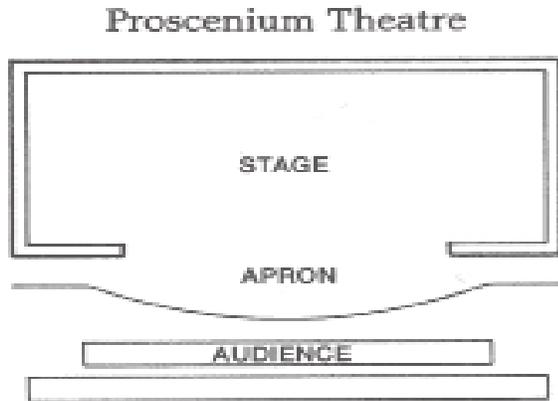


# Modern/Western Theater & Stages

**INFLUENCES of THEATRICAL SPACE:** Three characteristics specifically influence modern theater. First, the **degree of the formality** acts as an influence. An elaborate theater building with carpeted lobbies, ornate décor, cushioned seats, and complex sound and lighting equipment sets a significantly different tone than an outdoor theater, or an improvised theater space with a temporary plywood stage and folding chairs set up in an old warehouse.

Second, the **size** of the theater (or theater space, if outdoor) exerts an influence. Very large spaces make it difficult for all audience members to see small props and the actor's facial expressions. In a large space, props, costuming and actors' gestures need to be exaggerated for all audience members to benefit from them. Actors' voices may need to be amplified. A smaller, more intimate theater allows more subtle use of voice, facial expressions, and costuming details.

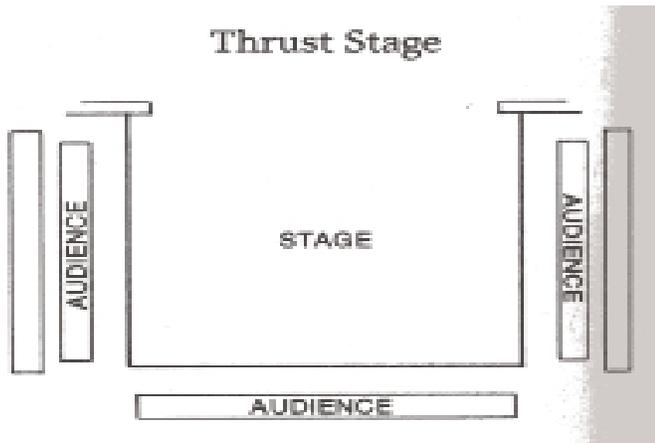
Third, the **arrangement or configuration of theatrical space** is an important influence. Not only does it define the physical relationship and potential interaction between the actors and audience, it also determines how production elements (props, scenery, lighting, curtain) can -- or can *not* -- be used. While more and more theaters are being built with movable seating to allow for increasingly flexible arrangements of stage and seating areas, three configurations are still quite common: the **proscenium arch**, the **thrust stage**, and **arena theater**.



**PROSCENIUM ARCH STAGE:** Though other arrangements have become increasingly common, the proscenium arch style theater with a raised stage is still the most familiar. The division between the stage and the auditorium is clearly marked by the proscenium arch (which may be simple or elaborately decorated); the acting platform may extend beyond the arch - called an apron. The seating floor may be raked (slanted) upward toward the rear and there may be one or more balconies, but all seating faces the stage from the front. There may be an orchestra pit between the first rows of the audience and the apron or front of the acting platform.

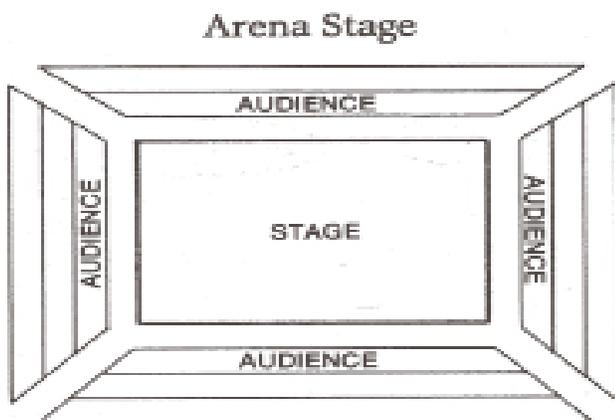
The other three sides of the stage may be used for scenery and may accommodate the entrances and exits of actors. The placement of scenery and props, lighting, and the blocking (positioning of actors throughout the drama) is all arranged to be viewed from the front. Some proscenium stages may include portions of the stage that raise or lower on hydraulic lifts, or an area that can be rotated.

The proscenium stage is usually equipped with a curtain that may be raised or lowered and used to conceal or reveal the stage area before and after the drama or between scenes.



**THRUST STAGE:** With a thrust stage, seating is usually arranged around three sides of a raised platform, bringing more of the audience closer to the action than is possible in a proscenium theater of the same size. Thus, prop and costume details as well as facial expressions, not just large gestures, are more important than in most proscenium theaters. The director, actors, and set designers all must present the scene in three directions simultaneously. Flat painted backdrops don't work like they may with a proscenium stage. Likewise, tall props or scenery can only be used on the rear stage; otherwise they would block the view of a portion of the audience.

Without a curtain, changes of scenery and props are done in full view of the audience. Lighting equipment is typically mounted above the stage area and is often used--in lieu of a curtain--to indicate scene changes. Though less common than with a proscenium stage, some thrust stages also have trap doors or portions of the acting platform that raise and lower by use of hydraulic lifts.



**ARENA STAGE:** A typical arena theater -- so named because of its similarity to a sports arena, with seating on all sides -- has no raised stage. Instead, an open space in the middle of the auditorium serves as the acting platform. Seating is usually in stepped arrangements on all sides, and may be movable to accommodate varied configurations. Directors, actors and set designers must therefore be concerned with how the dramatic action will be seen and heard from every angle. Scenery is somewhat limited, as it could block audience viewing; costumes, lighting, furniture and props are more important than scenery.

Portions of the stage area may be slightly raised, but all areas must be visible from all seating. As with a thrust stage, there is no curtain and changes of scenery and props take place in view of the audience. Actors may enter from any side of the stage, between seating sections. Many arena theaters have passageways running under the seating areas and opening onto the stage area.

Though they can be of any size (as sporting arenas are), most arena theaters are relatively small and bring the audience close to the action on stage. Props and costumes details will be noticeable, as will slight gestures and facial expressions of the actors.