

# Chapter 21

## Task in action: Ancient Greek theatre

By the end of the chapter you should be able to:

- identify the features of a specific drama/theatre form.

### Historical background

*Drama* comes from a Greek word, *dran*, meaning 'to do' or 'to act'. The word *theatre* is derived from the Greek word *theatron*, which comes from the Greek word *theasthai* which means 'to view as spectators'. Ancient Greece can be considered as the birthplace of drama in the Western world. By the 5th century BC dramas were presented at religious festivals twice a year. The performances of plays became a very important part of the religious festivals and playwrights could enter four plays – three tragedies and one comedy – at each religious festival. There were prizes for best play, best actor and best playwright. It was a great honour to receive the first prize and actors and playwrights were treated like celebrities, a little like film stars today.

### Tragedy and comedy



'Tragedy is an imitation, not of men, but of action.'

Aristotle

The words *tragedy* and *comedy* are derived from Greek words *tragos* and *kômôdoi* or *comus*.

Tragedy, which can be translated from the Greek literally as 'goat song' was the focus of the City Dionysia each spring. The City Dionysia was the celebration in April in honour of Dionysus, the god of wine and fertility. A chorus of men were dressed in goatskin to represent satyrs. Satyrs were beings from Greek mythology who were half-man and half-goat.

The origin of comedy is not as clear-cut as that of tragedy. Comedy seems to have originated from bands of young men who roamed the streets celebrating the good harvest or who had just attended a banquet in the town square. A banquet is a large public meal. These men used to carry torches through the streets, singing songs and shouting abuse at passers-by. The singer was called the *comoedus* and the song the *comoedia*.

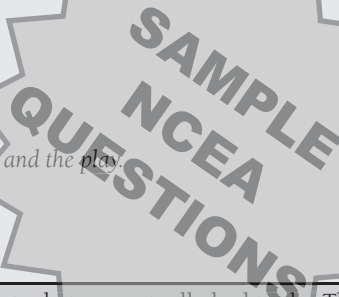
There is a distinct difference between tragedy and comedy. Tragedy usually focuses on a great and noble character who fails to achieve his/her desired goals, or is overcome by opposing enemies. This brings them to a downfall. A tragedy always ends tragically. A comedy usually deals with ordinary people and the author pokes fun at the characters.

**Activity 31A**

Choose one of the activities listed above and write down the process that was involved in it. Use the example below to help you.

**Participating in a technical/production role****Set designer:**

- Read the play.
- Discussed ideas with the director.
- Researched the era.
- Drew a set design appropriate for the stage space and the play.
- Sourced the items.
- Worked with the crew to build the set.
- Decorated the set with stage furniture.



**SAMPLE  
NCEA  
QUESTIONS**

For each step in the process, add some details about what you actually had to do. Think about why you did this. Re-read the interviews with Anton Bentley and Carleena Walsh, and note that they frequently spoke about **justifying** their ideas. Make sure you can justify what you did and why you did it.

You need to analyse why the things that you did were effective or ineffective. It can be difficult to be objective when asked this question. You may feel that what you did was either 'brilliant' or 'rubbish'. However, these are unhelpful comments in an exam. By looking back at your portfolio notes you should have some specific comments about what worked and what did not work in a production.

For example, Anton Bentley's costume for the character portrayed by Carleena Walsh was **effective**:

- It made the actress walk and move like a character from the 1950s.
- It helped the actress find her role.
- The textiles used were appropriate for a wealthy woman.
- The use of black in the detective scene showed she was in mourning after her husband's death.
- It made the audience think they were back in the 1950s.
- The costume supported the production concept of the play.

However, Anton Bentley might say that the costume was **ineffective**:

- when Elsie had to kneel down on the floor when her son was ill, it was too constricting, and therefore he had to make some changes so that the actress could do this.

Anton could say that his role as costume and set designer was effective, since the actor and audience were helped by his research and design. He could also say that experimenting with the costume was effective as he discovered something that could not work and made sure it was changed.

**TIP**

Make sure that you write down several specific facts. Avoid waffle and vague comments. Your writing may seem like lots of brief notes linked together but that is acceptable. Be precise. Show what you know, what you did and, most important of all, why you did it.

## Glossary/Index

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**action** (94): series of events that form the plot of a drama

**aerial view** (176): view from above

**Alexander technique** (21): method of vocal training for singers and actors

**annotate** (190): write notes and comments on a piece of text or script

**audible** (11): able to be heard

**audience** (87): group of spectators or listeners

**audition** (163): trial seeing of applicant for role as actor in a drama

**body** (35, 53): use of the actor's body as a drama technique to express meaning and emotion

**breath control** (12): control exercised by actor, which determines carrying power and loudness of the voice

**character trait** (55): distinguishing feature of a character

**characterisation** (55): method the playwright uses to give a character life

**choral song** (130): songs (odes) sung by the chorus in ancient Greek plays

**chorus** (130, 136): group of people in ancient Greek plays who sang and danced as part of the performance

**climax** (91): turning point of a play; determines what the outcome of the conflict will be

**comedy** (127): dramatic form that deals with ordinary people and in which fun is poked at the characters

**components of drama** (201): any factors which contribute to a performance event

**conflict** (91, 110): struggle or clash between characters or ideas; a vital element of drama

**contrast** (92, 111): difference between elements or characters that emphasises aspects of the drama or heightens dramatic tension

**conventions of ancient Greek drama** (131): conventions specific to ancient Greek drama: late point of attack; violence occurs only offstage; triple-unity rule applies; mythological nature of plays

**conventions of drama** (81, 87, 95): established ways of working in drama; accepted form of the dramatic activity

**costume** (33, 135, 165, 209): style of dress; clothing worn by actor in a specific role

**crisis** (91): turning point of a play; determines what the outcome of the conflict will be

**dialogue** (6): conversation; exchange between characters in a conversational form

**drama practitioner** (47): person who influences or shapes a particular theatre or acting style

**dramatic meaning** (109): meaning or significance of a play conveyed to the audience through using conventions and elements of drama

SAMPLE  
GLOSSARY