

Greek drama began to deteriorate as Caesar's armies marched over the land. From the seeds of Greek drama, the victorious Romans established their theatre.

Roman Theatre

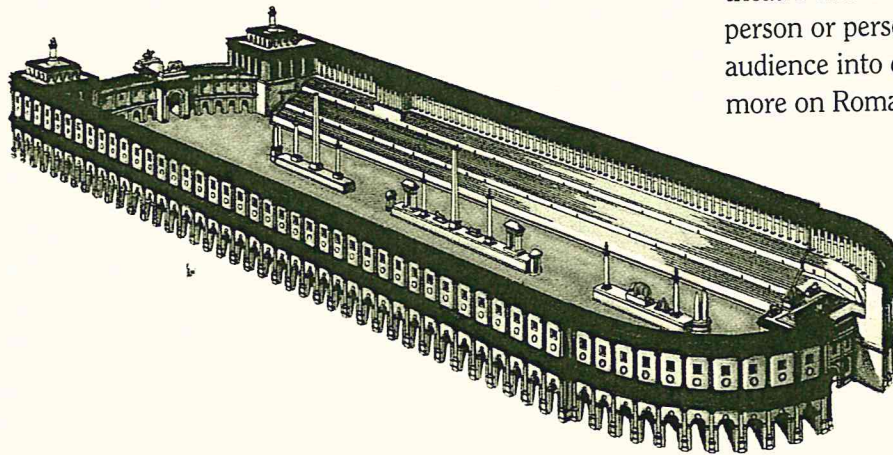
As the Romans invaded, they began to take special interest in Greek literature and art. Soon, Rome's crude native drama was replaced by translations and adaptations of Greek plays.

Theatre Terms

claque
closet drama

The Roman aristocracy frowned upon theatre, so audiences consisted mainly of the lower classes. They wanted entertainment. Scoffing at the art-loving and intellectual, they demanded spectacle and vulgarity. Thus, the imitated Greek theatre became decadent and hollow. Tragedies gradually degenerated and comedies slipped into common slapstick.

The Circus Maximus, where charioteers raced around the track.



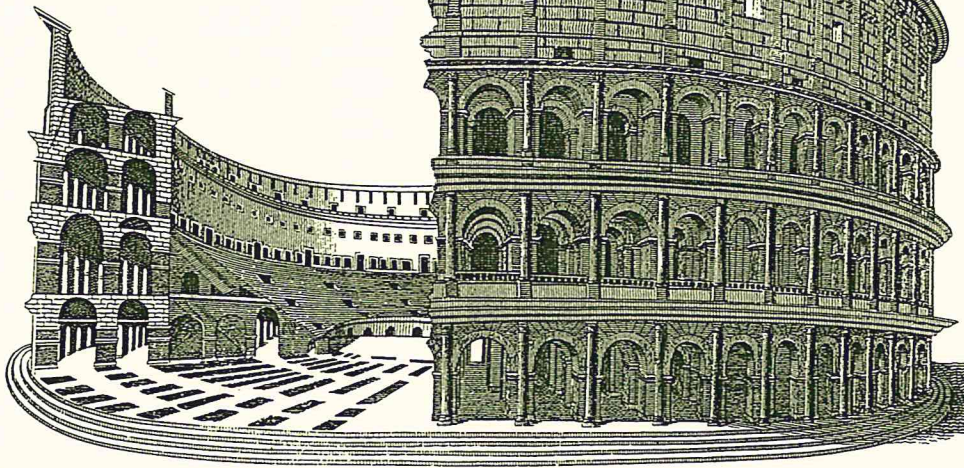
The Stage and the Playwrights

Because the Roman senate was hostile to theatre, the Roman playhouses were merely portable wooden platforms around which the audience stood. But in 61 B.C., the Roman leader Pompey had a huge outdoor auditorium built. In order to make it legal, he erected a small statue of Venus at the top and called it a temple of worship. The steps of this temple, of course, served as seats for the theatre.

Not to be outdone, the next Roman emperor, Caesar, ordered a playhouse built that was in the shape of two wooden theatres, back to back, each of which could be revolved to face the other. After a play presentation, the seats could be swung around into an amphitheatre for chariot races and gladiatorial contests.

The Romans were the first to use a front curtain. It rolled up and down from a trough in the downstage floor. Roman theatre also instigated the **claque**, a person or persons paid to arouse the audience into clapping and shouting. (For more on Roman theatres, see page 206.)

*Vespaasian's Amphitheatre, which
contained eighty-seven thousand spectators.*



This ancient amphitheatre seated 80,000 spectators.

Seneca (circa 4 B.C.—65 A.D.) was a major Roman dramatist. His plays are so bombastic and full of gory details, however, that they are more effective as **closet drama** (plays to be read rather than performed).

The comic writer **Plautus** (254–184 B.C.) is important mainly because his plays served as a pattern for later writers. His *Menaechmi* influenced Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*, and his *Pot of Gold* served as Molière's pattern for *The Miser*.

The Fall of Roman Theatre

Soon Roman theatrical activity gained impetus, with plays and other entertainment being presented for every holiday—and there were many Roman holidays—up to 175 at one point, which would have occupied about six months' time.

The production of plays was eventually overshadowed by sensational spectacles. In the coliseums, gladiatorial contests were interspersed with Christians being fed to lions. Special arenas called *nau-machiae* were filled with water, and slaves on ships fought until all hands were killed.

Finally, theatre entertainment became so base that when Rome fell in 475 A.D., the Christian church banned all theatrical activity. For hundreds of years afterward, theatre lay dormant throughout the continent. The East, however, did not suffer the darkness of Europe. Instead, theatrical forms that had been nurtured from years past, gained momentum throughout India and the Orient.

Theatre Then and Now

The Roman Audience in 200 A.D.

Imagine that you are attending a play at the imposing Roman theatre at Sabratha, around 200 A.D. You are one of thousands of people lucky enough to get a seat in the largest theatre in North Africa. By this time Roman theatres have been constructed all over Italy, Spain, and France, as well as North Africa.

Imagine the noise all these people are making. Then consider the fact that the performance is held outdoors and the performers onstage have no microphones or other artificial amplification.

In such a large performance space, subtlety won't be the first order of business. In fact, most of the actors wear masks painted with characteristic facial expressions that can be seen by audience members seated great distances away.

If you picture yourself sitting high in the stands at a football stadium watching a play going on down there on the 50-yard line, you'll have some idea of the dimensions. You should also consider that your seat is made of stone. There are no artificial lights of course, so the play is performed using that most natural of lighting systems—the sun.

For your theatre comfort, there are awnings, fruit vendors, and if it gets particularly hot, showers of perfumed water. More likely than not, you are watching a bawdy farce full of greed, horseplay, infidelities, and women in scanty costumes. Here you are, centuries in the past, watching a performance not unlike the TV situation comedies of today!



In the theatre at Sabratha, the audience sat on the tiered stone seats at the left while the actors performed on the dark street-like area to the right.