

Uncomplicated Theatre?

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Have you ever attended a site meeting, called by the Architect when the building is at a very advanced state? Chances are that the room is makeshift with not enough chairs for the score or so of consultants and representatives and that half of those present have suddenly found that they cannot live with some part of the structure in its present form. It all adds up to new drawings, new variations and directives issued to all departments and it all spells money. Furthermore you know that when the theatre is completed the problems are only beginning for another bunch of technicians.

Why do we have to be so complicated in our pleasures? A normal building complex can usually be accomplished on a fairly straight forward basis, to the satisfaction of most; but include into this complex some place of entertainment and this section immediately becomes a problem area; finally completed far behind schedule, to the dissatisfaction of most. Under the aegis of handsome subsidies, do we engage upon an exercise of technology for its own sake and treat the audience to a brilliant display of technical virtuosity which has little to do with the main theme of the action on stage? How many playwrights have you met lately who have written a full score of lighting and scenic fireworks to accompany their written word? They wouldn't even understand it enough to get past Cue one and this would include Shakespeare, Marlow and Sophocles, although one must be fair and state that they would possibly enjoy seeing it. In this respect the playwright is in the hands of the experts much the same as most architects are in the hands of their consultants.

What happens if you remove the electrics, the revolve, the carpets, air-conditioning and acoustic treatment? Even remove the whole roof, as it always is a problem area. We are left with something similar to an ancient Greek theatre in which almost any production, ancient or modern, can still be performed without altering a line or stage direction issued by the original playwright. People are attracted to the ruins of ancient theatres; go anywhere around the Mediterranean and you'll find them swarming in groups, listening to the fairy tales dispersed by local guides, or in ones and twos with guide books poised, or just sitting around enjoying the atmosphere of the place. Are people fundamentally romantic at heart and seek out places where living was supposedly uncomplicated and all problems simple ones? My own reasons for being there were not so simple, for I could not believe that a multitude of theatres could be built and maintained over hundreds of years and produce epics, the faint echos of which are still regarded with some awe, without the same sort of problems which would be of interest to a theatre technician in any age.

Books are not very helpful in this aspect,

they range from the excavator's report on the chronology of the stones to learned discussion on the play-character's lines, his personal props and perhaps how he effected entrances and exits. There are interesting references to hoists, cranes, scenery, front curtains (!), trucks and thunder and lightning machines; all originating from contemporary writers of that period who were not theatre men—but not much discussion, learned or otherwise on stage machinery and effects. Books on Greek Theatre are written mainly by academics and one should not expect detailed technical information here. No doubt they are following an ancient tradition, for the Greek and Roman "academics" usually disdained to follow any mathematical problem to its mechanical conclusion. Such things were left to slaves and stage-hands and it is interesting to look at the project from this level.

A good place to start is Crete, for here it is claimed, is the oldest theatre in Europe, certainly predating 1500 B.C. It stands at the head of a processional way and consists of a small flat area, half surrounded by a few steps at right angles to each other. It certainly has the virtue of being uncomplicated, but as these steps also form the entrance of the "Palace of Minos" I cannot accept this place as a theatre, any more than the steps fronting a medieval cathedral, which is valid enough as far as it goes. At the nearby Heraklion Museum, there is a reconstruction model of the Palace and the stepped area is plainly labelled "Theatre", so it received official sanction. This is certainly not the arena where bull leaping was performed to an audience of bare bosomed lovelies as indicated by surviving frescoes, for nobody has located that place. However, if the late Professor Wunderlich's theories are acceptable, the so called "Palace" was a reception house for the dead rather than the living and baring the breasts publicly was only indulged in at times of mourning, it would mean that we'd have to change our notions of these "light hearted" performances.

We have to move forward to the fifth century B.C. for our first stone theatre, that of Dionysus, and its remains can still be seen at the foot of the Acropolis at Athens. There is evidence that it replaced a former wooden building through necessity and certainly underwent some subsequent major reconstructions, by choice—which indicates some discontent with the original. What appears to be a site blunder is the fact that the audience faces a southerly direction and receives the sun in their eyes all day long. In those days other sites around the Acropolis must have been available. Perhaps it was chosen for religious reasons, or the architect had bad consultants; certainly we would hesitate to place our sole source of light somewhere above and behind the backdrop.

At the adjoining Roman Theatre of Herod

Atticus modern technology has triumphed in an array of follow spots dispersed around the upper tier of seating, together with a conglomeration of lesser spots fixed to the side stone work, all fed via temporary leads snaking in all directions. It looks rather horrible in daylight, but here one must take his dose of Sophocles or Euripedes only at night time. I can find no evidence of ancient Greek theatre performances at night even though the "luminaires" at their disposal were scarcely less than those available to the Restoration theatre in England. A poor comparison perhaps, for one is a 16,000 seater in the open and the other is covered and holding a couple of hundred, but there are the remains of a number of small covered Odeums sprinkled around the Mediterranean which were supposedly used only for musical recitals and poetry readings. In all other respects the ancient Greek producer seems to have availed himself of every mechanical aid such as winches and cranes, scenery, props, masks and costumes and although evidence for this is mainly in surviving writings and paintings, it is enough to strike a sympathetic feeling in us. That man was facing problems similar to ours and was probably solving them theatrically and technically with due regard to the means at his disposal.

All the Greek and Hellenistic theatres which I saw in Italy, Greece and Turkey were sited so that the audience faced a southerly direction, that is with the sun in their eyes and differences in alignment could be explained by differences in natural slopes which formed a convenient foundation for the tiers. As most of these theatres seem to have undergone some drastic remodelling, particularly in the main stage and stone backgrounds, it is reasonable to assume that this made for a better production, despite the fact that the result of raising the background was to cast the acting area into shadow for at least part of the day. As any technician should know the best lighting is not attained by a direct frontal onslaught and it is interesting to speculate whether the producer of that period shared our tastes. The theatre at Pompeii is a good place to mount a production in one's imagination and see if certain preconceived notions fall into place. The theatre, although early Roman built, is Hellenistic in style and embodied all the improvements "to date", plus whatever the Romans cared to add. There is an intriguing slot between the main stage and the orchestra and I've read that this accommodated a front curtain in the "out", or parked position. I certainly would not be using that as I can see no way of raising a 60 ft. wooden head batten, with attached cloth, up into the sky with only a couple of long-arm jibs and man power.

The programme of the day-long festival starts with a heavy drama, followed by three comedies and ends with a bawdy satire, which shows that audiences haven't changed much over the years, although it is a very heavy programme by modern standards. No problem about arising before dawn, you'd probably be up all night worrying. Now, assuming it is spring time and you're sitting in the audience facing south-east, the sun would rise on your half-left which means that from the stage any scenery and actors