Ancient Theatre in Greece and Rome

Introduction
In this essay I will be exploring Ancient Greek and Ancient Roman theatre. I will mainly cover Greek Theatre because Roman Theatre originated in Greek Theatre. I will cover Tragedy, Comedy, Satyr, festivals to do with the theatre, the actual stage and costumes and finally I will compare Greek and Roman Theatre.

Greek Tragedy
In Greek theatre the first plays that were written were tragedy. Tragedy is a genre combining a mythical way of thinking (for example, regarding the Gods) with a more modern way of thinking (for example, regarding current affairs). This genre explored the relationships between man, death, other people, the Gods, and feelings. An example of this is any of the plays that Aeschylus, Sophocles or Euripides wrote. All these authors were writing around 500 to 400 BC. Tragedy was written to be performed, not read as Homer’s epic poems show. ‘The Persians’ by Aeschylus is the first surviving example we have of a tragic play, although tragedies were being performed before this. It is based on true historical events unlike many tragic plays. Tragedy traditionally had a single leading actor. However, in Aeschylus’ plays he changed it to two, then Sophocles changed it to three. The Chorus originally consisted of thirteen people, although Sophocles added two more to this number.

Greek Comedy
Comedy is the second of the genres. Comedy was largely topical — it was about real life, not the past or a mythical land. Another difference between comedy and tragedy is that, instead of the titles being named after the principal actor or the story, the majority of Comedic plays are named after what characters the chorus play. Some examples of this are ‘Clouds’ and ‘Birds’ by Aristophanes. There were three stages of comedy in Greece; Old Comedy (486 – 404 BC), Middle Comedy (404 – 321 BC) and New Comedy (321 BC onwards). One difference between the stages was costumes. All comedy plays had the same format. First, the chorus would perform the opening. Then, there would be a direct scene to the audience. Next, there would be a battle or quarrel between the principal actors. Finally, there would be a Grand Finale. This varied from a song or dance to a large scene or speech including the chorus.

Greek Satyr
Satyr was a genre that looked at myths or mythical themes in a comedic way. Satyr is so called because the chorus are Satyrs – half goat, half man. These Satyrs were, in some cases, like small children, as they were cheeky and mischievous but in other plays they were more ‘earthly and grotesque’ (Burgess, 2005) implying that they were more impish or bawdy and mythical. There are not many records of Satyr plays: we have one full surviving play, which is Euripides’ Cyclops, but fragments remain of other Satyr plays. Historians think that Satyr plays became less popular as audiences grew more sophisticated and preferred comedy.
Greek Theatre Festivals

In many cases theatre crossed with religion. Dionysos, the God of Theatre and merriment, had a whole festival named after him. City Dionysia was a festival that lasted six days. It took place at the end of March, when the winter storms had ceased and it was fine weather to travel to Athens. On Day One of the festival the statue of Dionysos was moved from his temple, to a shrine on the road into Athens and finally to Theatre Dionysos, where the performances took place. Day 2 was the Dithyramb competition. This was a competition where 50 men or 50 boys making a chorus would sing a song to the accompaniment of a flute. Day 3, 4 and 5 followed the same structure. Two tragic playwrights each entered a satyr play and three tragic plays. Five comic playwrights entered one play each. Day 6 was the final day. There would be a procession, prize giving and the closing ceremony. There was one more festival that was held in Athens. This festival was called Lenaia. It was smaller than City Dionysia as Lenaia occurred in December or January time when the seas were harsh so it was harder to travel to Athens. Lenaia lasted for around four days. On the first day there would probably have been speeches and a procession. On the second day it could have been comedy day – five comedies were performed, each from separate writers. On the third day it may have been tragedy day with two writers showing two tragedies each. The fourth, and final, day would have been prize giving and a closing ceremony.

To enter a festival competition, you would first have to submit your ideas to the certain state official who was running it. Next, if you were successful, you would be given a backer. This was a very wealthy person who would effectively sponsor you. They would pay money to get your costumes and everything you needed for the performance. After that, all you could do is cross your fingers and hope to win...

The Stage and Costumes

The theatre was also very important. The theatre where the City Dionysia plays and other plays in Athens were performed was called The Theatre of Dionysos and could seat around 14,000 people. These theatres were very carefully designed so every one of those 14,000 people could hear what the actors onstage were saying.

The Theatre of Dionysos

![The Theatre of Dionysos diagram]

- Audience
- Altar
- Orchestra
- Skene
- Parados
- Parados
- Stoa

Diagram showing the different parts of the theatre, including the audience, altar, orchestra, skene, and paradoses.
Parados – side passage leading into the orchestra
Skene – building at the back of the acting area. Would be painted as the background of the play
Stoa - walkway

As well as being able to hear the actors the audience must be able to see them. The actors wore large masks showing their character so the audience could see who they were and their mood. Not only was this a means of good visibility, it was also showing respect for Dionysos, who was also sometimes worshipped using masks. In tragedies the principal actors would wear colourful, long sleeved tunics with patterns and animal figures on them. In Old/ Middle comedies the lead roles would wear padded backsides, paunches and leather phalluses. As comedy advanced all the padding was taken away. The performers then looked more real and natural. It is hard to know exactly what costumes were like, though. In some plays like Aristophanes’ ‘Birds’ elaborate costumes would be worn, but in some plays more usual outfits would be worn. In both genres props varied massively. However, in tragedy minimum props were used – the actors would only have them if they needed them. In comedy many props were used to make it look as much like a normal town/ city as possible.

Comparing Greek and Roman Theatre
Roman theatre comes from Greece. The founder of Roman Drama was Livius Andronicus. Andronicus was a Greek speaking former slave. Most of the plays that were performed at the start of Roman Drama were simply adapted from the Greek. Latin did not have many literary rhyming words, so instead of the simple, under stated words Greeks used, Romans used much grander words. In Greece the main focus was on the acting and the story, so not much music was used. In Rome, however, music played a more important role in plays. The playwrights in Rome did not, until Pacvius, specialise in just one genre of theatre. Andronicus and Naevius wrote comedy as well as tragedy and Ennius wrote epic poetry and tragedy. In Greece it was not usual for a playwright to write two different genres. However, Roman theatre did not just copy from the Greeks. They created a new genre of play called ‘fabula praetexta’ or ‘drama in a purple bordered toga’. This type of play was written to celebrate victories in war or in politics. After a while theatre became less popular in Rome so plays were only written to show off literary skills. Caesar, Augustus and Ovid all tried their hand at writing plays.

Conclusion
In conclusion, theatre in Ancient Greece and Rome was quite similar in many ways. The Romans did not just copy the Greeks in theatre as they also developed their own styles. The theatre that we know today partly originates in Ancient Greece and Rome – they were some of the first people to start writing and performing plays. In summary, Ancient Greece and Rome were thriving civilisations and the theatre there was just as successful and thriving.
References

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