**Greek Influences.** The period between the death of Alexander the Great of Macedon (323 B.C.E.) and the beginnings of the Roman Empire (31 B.C.E.) is known to scholars as the Hellenistic era. Even though Athens had undergone a major political downfall, its cultural production remained steady, and its influence on first the Etruscans, from the region of Etruria in northern Italy, and later the Romans is incalculable. The Greeks continued to be highly invested in theater and its performance. Around 300 B.C.E., an actor’s union, called the Artists of Dionysus, was established throughout Greece and other Hellenistic sovereignties, a sign of the continuing attraction of the presentation of Greek tragic and comic drama. This powerful guild functioned as a religious organization that was politically independent, with its own priests and sanctuaries (of the god Dionysus) as well as their own elected officials. This was the last era that actors would enjoy such privilege and protection, since performers of all kinds were eventually disenfranchised under Roman law. The Greeks had colonies in southern Italy and Sicily since Homer’s time, and they built many permanent performance spaces based on Greek prototypes. Syracuse on Sicily had a theater dating from the fifth century B.C.E., and many other archaeological remains have been excavated throughout the area of colonization. Acting troupes toured the region often, and revivals of ancient plays by authors like Euripides and Aristophanes were popular. In the western colonies, another tradition developed as well: the phlyax play, a farcical genre in which tales from myth and everyday life were performed on a special type of stage, with grotesque masks and obscenely padded costumes recalling those worn in Old Comedy, and perhaps involving extemporization and lewd action. A number of vases from this region and era survive depicting the performance of phlyakes, and it is from these that most of the modern knowledge about the genre comes. Beginning in the third century B.C.E., a poet named Rhinthon from Tarentum began to write phlyax plays as well. The stage consisted of a raised wooden platform covered by a roof and decorated with painted scenery, altars, porches, and other elements necessary for the depiction of the play. It is quite likely that the Romans were influenced far more by these bawdy farces than they were by the performances of “high” drama like tragedy and Old Comedy, but both kinds of theater were well established in Italy.

**Etruscan Influences.** The Etruscans, an indigenous people from the north of Italy who had power over Rome until the late sixth century B.C.E., seem to have been aware of Greek drama to a greater extent than the early Romans were. There is much artistic evidence for Etruscan shows, since various performers like musicians, dancers, actors wearing masks, and tumblers, as well as audiences, are found in wall paintings. Etruscan vases from the late sixth century B.C.E. depict performers dressed as satyrs, leading scholars to posit that satyr drama, which was developing in Athens during this period, was the form of theater that most affected the Etruscans, since the satyr play combined coarse farce with a religious element. The Roman historian Livy (59 B.C.E.–17 C.E.) reported that the Etruscans were the first to introduce enacted performance to the Romans in the mid-fourth century B.C.E. Livy, however, was obsessed with identifying “firsts” in Roman history, as evidenced even by the title of his work, *From the Foundation of the City*, and as a result may have exaggerated a bit. The satyr play would probably have appealed to the Romans more than other types of formal drama due to native rituals relating to the harvest that included satirical and vulgar jokes, songs and dances, and good-natured abuse and mockery. Whether the Etruscans were truly the first to introduce acted shows to the Romans or not, their influence was prevalent not only in the lively arts but also in the way the Romans structured their society and government.

**Italian Influences.** Existing primary sources for early forms of Italian performance are the historian Livy and the Augustan poet Horace (65–8 B.C.E.). Horace traced the development of “Fescennine” poetry to early harvest or wedding celebrations involving sacrifices, libations, and an exchange of playful insults, which Horace says degenerated into cruelty and abusive slander (it was a common lament in Latin letters that society had deteriorated since the innocent days of the early Republic). The term “Fescennine” may derive from the Etruscan town of Fescenna, apparently a place known for these verses, or from the Latin word *fascinum*, having to do with the phallus. This agricultural ritual recalls the legendary origins of Greek drama from lascivious songs and dances, and parades of phallic representations, in honor of Dionysus. Fescennine verses may have developed into an early kind of dramatic performance involving improvisation, rude humor, and rustic music. There was another type of farcical performance already developing in the region of Atella, Campania, called the *Atellanae* or “Atellan farces.” The peoples of this region spoke Oscan, an Italic language, and so Latin speakers were unable to understand any of the dialogue in these lampoons, although the mimetic gestures of the actors would have been clear enough. In fact, most Atellan farce lacked extensive dialogue anyway, and relied more on crude physical comedy and charade. The character types
depended on a dominant emotion or quality like anger or stupidity or appetite for food or sex, and stock types carried the same names in every farce: Pappus the old man; Bucco the boaster; Maccus the buffoon. Scholars have suggested the famous Roman comedian Titus Maccus or Maccius Plautus took his familial (middle) name from this last character. The Romans also had a performance tradition of the *satura*, a mixture of genres and content, the precise nature of which remained a mystery even to ancient scholars. One ancient commentator derived the name *satura* from “satyr,” and described the genre as a musical medley written for the pipes and involving the same kind of shameless dialogue and stage action as Greek satyr plays. The Romans derived their own genre of “satire” from this term, and perhaps from the performative tradition as well. Hence, there were a multitude of dramatic influences for the development of the Roman theater, and these influences shed light on why the Romans may have preferred comedy and “light” musical drama such as mime and pantomime to “heavier” dramatic genres, like tragedy and politically driven satire.

**SOURCES**


**Roman Theaters, Playwrights, and Actors**

**Structure of the Roman Theater.** The Romans did not construct a permanent theater until Pompey sponsored one in 55 B.C.E. Instead, as the Roman architect, engineer, and writer Vitruvius (last half of first century B.C.E.) described, the Romans built temporary wooden structures as performance spaces, and continued to do so even after the advent of permanent theaters. There may have been several political reasons for this. Conservatives argued that theater promoted immoral behavior and fought to prevent the building of permanent structures. As class divisions and personal sponsorship of occasions for performance arose, such as the annual *Ludi Romani* ("Roman Games"), circuses and other spectacles, and funeral celebrations for the wealthy and notable, the building of provisional theater spaces allowed for luxury seating and elaborate decorative elements. There was also a fear of seditious behavior, again due to the growing divide between the aristocracy and the *plebs* or common people, and permanent theaters provided a made-to-order space for public assemblies and mass communication. As needed for festivals and other celebrations, theaters could be erected in public spaces like the Forum, the Campus Martius, or the Circus. These wooden edifices affected the development of the Roman theater as much as the theatrical influences of the Greeks, Etruscans, and early Roman displays and rituals. The ephemeral nature of these wooden theaters allowed the Romans to modify the buildings as needed rather than blindly follow the Greek and Hellenistic models, resulting in a performance space that diverged in distinct ways from its Greek predecessors. Theaters in *Magna Graecia* and on Sicily seem to have followed models from Greece, as might be expected: built into a hillside for ready-made tiered seating, for the most part with a raised stage, an orchestra dividing the acting platform from the spectators, and side entrances. There were also the *phlyax* stages depicted on painted vases—elevated and covered platforms with scenery and accouterments added as needed for individual plays. No remains of the temporary wooden theaters survive, but based on the stage directions implicit in the comedies of Plautus and Terence as well as Pompeian wall paintings and references to the stage in other works, modern scholars can postulate what these Roman performance spaces might have looked like. There was a raised stage with a roofed structure at the rear and usually a public byway running in the front of the stage building. No space for a chorus was necessary. This building could be adapted to suit specific plays, with an altar in front to serve as a temple, or rocks in front of a cave, or a separation between two citizens’ homes. The stage building probably had at least three doors and an off-stage back alley to allow for unseen action and to accommodate the frenetic entrances and exits required in a chaotic comedy. Roman audiences included all strata of society, from aristocrats in special and secluded seats to common folk and slaves. Some playwrights lamented the short attention spans of their spectators, who could easily lose interest in a performance if sidetracked by a high-energy display of physical skill or combat.

**Acting Troupes.** Even though Roman theaters were not permanent until 55 B.C.E., actors were amassed into solid unions and groups by the late third century, something that did not occur until late in the history of Greek theater. In 207 B.C.E., Livius Andronicus—who produced the first plays adapted from Greek originals at the *Ludi Romani* in 240 B.C.E.—oversaw the