

The tragic dramas written and performed at Athens during the 5th century B.C. represent some of the most enduring of all Classical masterpieces. Each author competing in the festival – competition always played an important role in the Greek attitude to life composed four plays, to be performed on a single day. The last work in each author's offering was a more light-hearted "satyr" play. The plots of the tragedies were generally based on myths, with which the spectators would already be familiar. Writers could thus employ "dramatic irony," whereby the audience was in possession of information still hidden from the characters. For the Greeks the theatre retained its connection with worship, and audiences at the performances of the Classical era regarded them as religious rituals.

The Dramatic Festivals of Dionysus

The origins of drama go back to the 6th century B.C., in the form of choral hymns in praise of the god Dionysus. The first three dramas were tragedies, sometimes forming a trilogy – three episodes in a single story and sometimes three different stories with a common theme. The first works in the history of the Western theatre, many of them still retain the power to grip and move audiences today; some two and a half thousand years after their creation. All the surviving plays were written for one of the two annual festivals of drama dedicated to Dionysus, the god of the theatre and of wine.