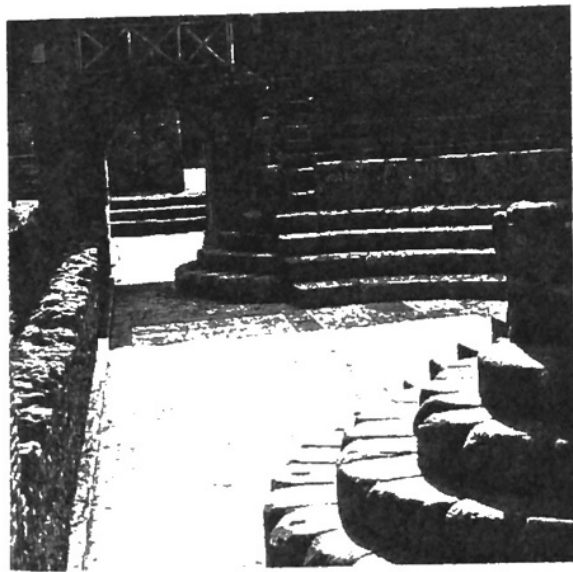


The Theater at Pompeii

Plays were not performed in Pompeii every day but only at festivals, which were held several times a year. There was, therefore, all the more excitement in the town when the notices appeared announcing a performance. On the day itself, the stores were closed, and no business was done in the forum. Men and women with their slaves set off for the theater early in the morning. Some carried cushions because the seats were made of stone, and many took food and drink for the day. The only people who did not need to hurry were the members of the town council and other important citizens, for whom the best seats at the front of the auditorium were reserved. These important people carried tokens which indicated the entrance they should use and where they were to sit. Latecomers among the ordinary citizens had to be content with a seat right at the top of the large semicircular auditorium. The large open-air theater at Pompeii could hold 5,000 people. Adjoining it was the **Odeon**, a smaller, more elegant, roofed theater.

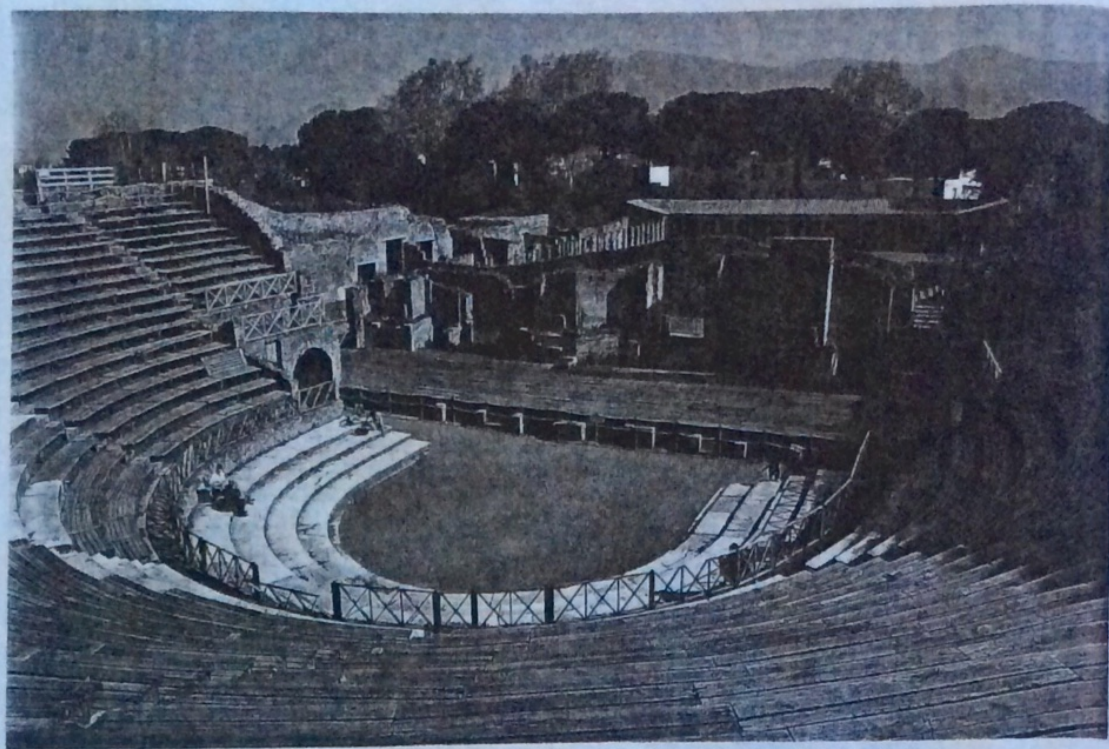
The large Pompeian theater was modelled on the Greek and had essentially the same parts. The *cavea*, or seating area, was a semicircular sloping auditorium in which seats rose in tiers. The *orchēstra* in Pompeii was horseshoe-shaped and provided seating space for important officials. Behind the *scaena*, or stage, was a building (*scaenae frōns*) as high as the auditorium. The *scaenae frōns* had three or five doorways, and the entire front was decorated with columns and niches.



Pompeii's elegant, smaller, roofed theater.



A bronze head of Sorex, a famous actor of Pompeii. Originally the eyes would have been inserted in lifelike colors.



Pompeii's main, open-air theater.

A dramatic performance was a public occasion, and admission to the theater was free. All the expenses were paid by a wealthy citizen, who provided the actors, the producer, the scenery, and the costumes. He volunteered to do this not only to benefit his fellow citizens but also to gain political popularity which would be useful in local elections.

The performance consisted of a series of plays and lasted all day, even during the heat of the afternoon. To keep the spectators cool, a large canvas awning was suspended by ropes and pulleys across most of the large theater. The awning was managed by sailors, who were used to handling ropes and canvas. Even so, on a windy day, the awning could not be unfurled, and the audience had to make use of hats or sunshades to protect themselves from the sun. Between plays, scented water was sprinkled by attendants.

One of the most popular kinds of production was the pantomime, a mixture of opera and ballet. The plot, which was usually serious, was taken from the Greek myths. The parts of the different characters were mimed and danced by one masked performer, while a chorus sang the lyrics. An orchestra containing such instruments as the lyre, double pipes, trumpet, and castanets accompanied the performance, providing a rhythmical beat. Pantomime actors were usually Greek slaves or freedmen. They were much admired for their skill and stamina and attracted a large following of fans.

Equally popular were the comic actors. The bronze statue of one of these, Sorex, was discovered at Pompeii, together with graffiti on walls naming other popular actors. One of these reads:

Actius, our favorite, come back quickly.

Comic actors appeared in vulgar farces and in short one-act plays which were often put on at the end of longer performances. These short plays were about Italian country life and were packed with rude jokes and slapstick. They used just a few familiar characters, such as Pappus, an old fool, and Manducus, a greedy clown. These characters were instantly recognizable from the strange masks worn by the actors. The Roman poet Juvenal describes a performance of a play of this kind in a country theater, where the children sitting on their mothers' laps shrank back in horror when they saw the gaping, white masks. These masks, like those used in other plays, were probably made of linen which was covered with plaster and painted.

Sometimes, at a festival, the comedies of Plautus and Terence, playwrights of the second century B.C., were put on. These plays also used a number of familiar characters, but the plots were complicated and the dialogue more witty than that of the farces.



A clay model of a mask, perhaps for the character Manducus.



A mosaic of a theater musician.

The Comedies of Plautus

There is usually a young man from a respectable family who is leading a wild life; he is often in debt and in love with a pretty, but unsuitable, slave-girl. His father, who is old-fashioned and disapproving, has to be kept in the dark by deception. The son is usually helped in this by a cunning slave, who gets himself and his young master in and out of trouble at great speed. Eventually, it is discovered that the girl is free-born and from a good family. The young man is, therefore, able to marry his true love, and all ends happily.



1 *Father has to be restrained from violence when he finds his son coming home drunk from a party. The cunning slave props the lad up. A musician is playing the double pipes.*



2 *The boy has been with his beloved slave-girl (here's her mask).*



3 *The slave sits on an altar for sanctuary, hoping to escape terrible punishment.*



4 *The slave uncovers a basket in the girl's possession and finds her baby clothes – they are recognized! She must be the long-lost daughter of father's best friend and wrongly enslaved by pirates! All live happily ever after.*