The stage?

It seems that the first plays were given in the pre-classical agora used for all types of assembly, and the audience sat on the north-east slope of the Acropolis.[11] Around the time of the Persian invasion, an area on the south side of the Acropolis was dedicated to the performance of dithyrambs and plays in honour of Dionysos – a simple space for dancing between the sacrificial altar and the hillside. Amongst the surviving plays of Aeschylus, it is only *The Oresteia* at the end of his career which requires a stage building, but all subsequent Greek plays require a building with a door. It is a reasonable inference that the circle used for the dithyramb on the first day of the festival was transformed on subsequent days by the erection within the performance space of the wooden building called the *skênê*, literally a 'tent'. Aeschylus would most likely have set his wooden building with its central door *within* the dancing circle. Epidaurus offers a misleading model when it defines a small acting circle at a tangent to the stage building. If we look at earlier stone theatres like the one at Megalopolis, a new model city erected in the 360s BC, we see that the stage building was sited within the circle. Megalopolis is a particularly interesting example because we can see the foundations of a scene dock from which the original wooden building was slid into place.[12]

Whether or not there was a stage is one of the most controversial questions surrounding the performance of plays in the classical period.[13] The surviving theatres of the Greek world have stages on which the 'actors' performed, whilst the chorus danced in the orchestra below, but they are all of later date. The important exception is the 'theatre' surviving from classical times at Thorikos, where there is no stage or room to erect one, and the space must have been built for assemblies as much as for performances. Other surviving theatres were built after actors had become international stars touring the festival circuit. It was not feasible for a team of fifteen dancers to tour the world, and if the local community was able to provide choral dancers, those dancers would not have a chance to rehearse with the actors, so the physical separation of actors and chorus became an inevitability. The simplest way to understand the process of evolution is to assume that the acting area on the roof of the stage building, formerly used for gods or figures like Antigone in *Phoenician Women* (see above, p. 21), came to be used

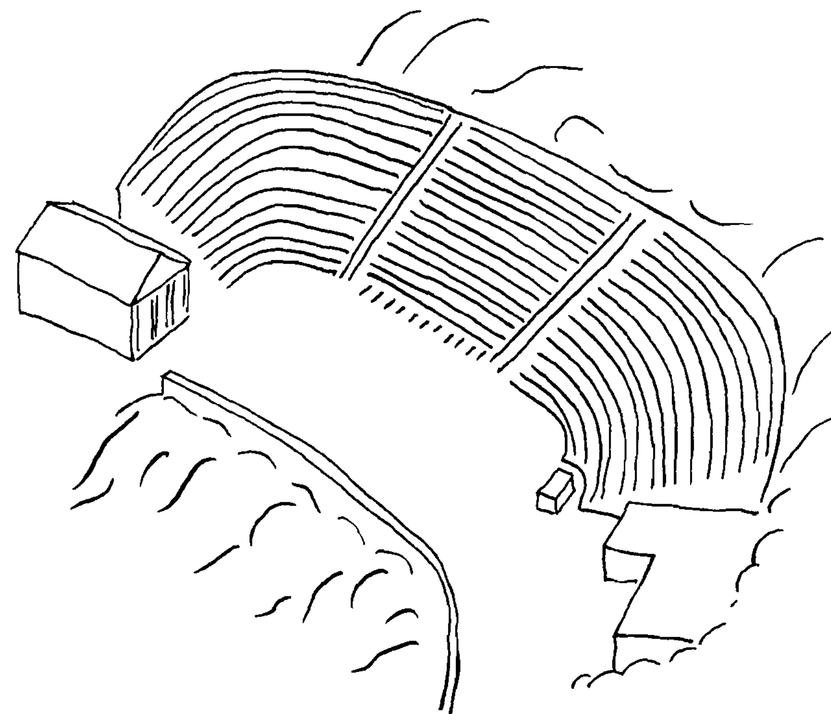

Figure 11 The multipurpose performance space at Thorikos in the classical period.

by all the 'actors'. The roof was found to offer acoustical advantages, since the voice was reflected off the floor of the orchestra.

Tracing the evolution of Greek theatre is a hazardous business. The only hard information we have about theatre before Aeschylus is Aristotle's statement that the leader of the chorus entered into dialogue with his fellow-dancers, and there was thus in the beginning only a single actor.[14] If the story is one of actors progressively separating themselves from the chorus, then the task of the theatre historian is to determine the exact extent of that separation in the classical period. Actors were funded by the state, at least from 449 BC when a competition was introduced for best tragic actor, whilst the chorus were recruited and paid by the choregos, but this institutional division was probably intended to prevent the buying up of talent, and does not imply separate rehearsal (see above, p. 35). There was

no international circuit and the actors were available to work with the chorus under the supervision of the playwright. The internal evidence of the plays makes any kind of spatial separation seem most unlikely. In the *Suppliants* and *Eumenides* of Aeschylus or *The Suppliants* of Euripides, the chorus functions as if it was one of the central characters. In *The Libation Bearers*, Orestes and Electra dance with the chorus around the tomb over which the libations have been poured. In a comedy like *Lysistrata* it would be a nonsense to separate the half-chorus of women from their leader Lysistrata who leads them into the Acropolis. Physical interaction is constant in Greek drama. It does not take much experimentation to realize that in a space like the Theatre of Dionysos the actor who comes too far forward within the orchestral circle will have less power to command the back of the auditorium; he will be too close to the spectators, there will be less empty space around him to frame his form, and the line of his voice will travel less clearly across the heads of the front spectators as it approaches what acousticians call 'grazing incidence'.[15] It is reasonable, therefore, to think of the 'up-stage' space as a privileged or stronger area. There is not, however, any obvious advantage in defining a stage – though a few steps to the door may be a different matter. It is crucial to remember that the audience faced south. The later stage building put a high wall behind the high stage so the actors would be in permanent shadow and the spectators' eyes could adjust accordingly, picking out more easily details of mask and costume. So long as the stage building was a low wooden hut, there was a danger that the actor could be placed unsatisfactorily half in shadow half in sun if he stood too close to the building. A stage required a monumental building behind it if it was to serve a useful function in terms of focus.

Back in the nineteenth century, when the idea of performing any play without a stage seemed unthinkable, no one questioned the assumption that the actors and chorus performed on different levels; this accorded with an operatic view of Greek tragedy, the chorus being regarded primarily as singers. In the course of the twentieth century, following the excavations of Dörpfeld, the dominant assumption has been that a low stage (for which we have no archaeological evidence) stood in front of the stage building and was the favoured location of the actors, though free movement between stage and orchestra remained possible. Hall and Stein, in their versions of *The Oresteia* which aimed at a high degree of spatial

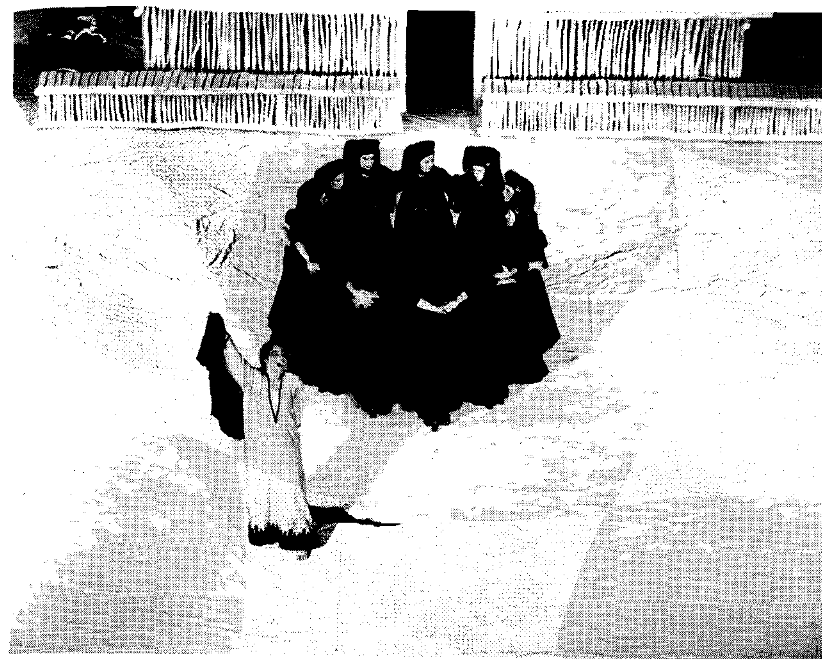

Plate 7 The relationship of actor and chorus: exclusion. Euripides, *Electra* directed by Costas Tsianos for the Thessaliko Theatro, with L. Korniordou as Electra. 1989.

authenticity, adopted this solution and used two levels. The majority of recent professional directors with no such aspirations seem to have considered that a single level allows maximum flexibility when exploring the relationship of actors and chorus.

Academics and practitioners have become increasingly interested in the actor–chorus relationship, and it seems today rather perverse to postulate a structure which limits that flexibility. Today, in a more or less democratic age, what seems unique and particularly fascinating in the Greek dramatic form is its ability to explore the shifting relationship between an individual and a group. In *Medea* the chorus initially show solidarity with Medea, and they distance themselves emotionally when she announces her plan to kill her children, but decline to betray her. By using a single wide acting space, Ninagawa was able to depict a series of different relationships between the protagonist and the sixteen women of his chorus:[16] sometimes

Plate 7 The relationship of actor and chorus: exclusion. Euripides, *Electra* directed by Costas Tsianos for the Thessaliko Theatro, with L. Korniordou as Electra. 1989.

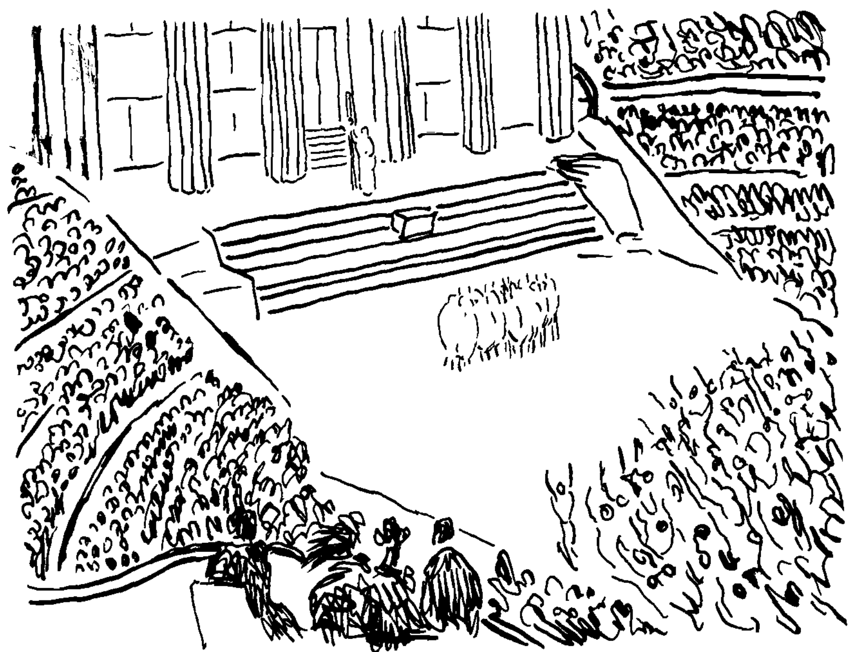

Figure 12 The crowd of suppliants approaches Oedipus in Max Reinhardt's production in the Zircus Schumann, Berlin.

Medea stood with them, sometimes apart, sometimes in confrontation. No such effects were possible in the proscenium theatre production starring Diana Rigg in 1993/4, for here the narrow space prevented the chorus of three from being more than an emotional and musical backing to the central performance. The relationship between the individual and her society was lost. One of the strengths of Brecht's *Antigone*, which set all the characters within a primitive place of sacrifice, was the way it explored Creon's dependence on the chorus of Theban elders, and the moral turpitude of those men who would never voice their opposition to a proto-fascist leader (see above, p. 63). This sociopolitical dimension is lost when the play becomes a vehicle for the two star performers.

Reinhardt back in 1910–12 used three levels in his production of *Oedipus the King*: Oedipus stood before his palace on the highest rostrum; below and around him were a chorus of Theban elders, and below them was a proletariat of 500 or more Thebans (only 300 in the London production).[17] Reinhardt made an important political statement when Oedipus abandoned his status as a heroic figure at the end of the play and walked down to the level of the pit to join the mass of humanity. The chorus on their intermediate level provided vocal orchestration, voicing the thoughts of the dramatist or feelings appropriate to an audience, but they could not offer serious political advice. Reinhardt was interested in primitive impulses within crowds and powerful men rather than the workings of Greek democracy. Peter Hall's production of *Oedipus the King* at the Olivier Theatre in 1996, which aspired to a kind of classical formalism, demonstrates the perils of vertical separation today (see above, p. 61). Reinhardt's Nietzschean vision of superhuman individuals subject to primal drives was by 1996 the stuff of history. In large measure the failure of Hall's design concept, which isolated the characters on a high red ramp, can be attributed to assumptions about space rooted in nineteenth century scholarship. At the end of the twentieth century the human being can no longer be regarded as an entity isolated from its social environment. Greek tragedy cannot any longer be conceived as the tale of a hero. It was and is the spatial correlative of democracy that all individuals should be placed on the same level.

PERFORMING IN THE THEATRE OF DIONYSOS

The effects of scale

The scale of Athenian theatre, played to an audience of 15,000 or more, makes it more akin to pop concerts or sporting events than any modern form of theatre. From the central door in the stage wall to the furthest spectator the distance was over 100 metres in Athens, as opposed to 70 metres in the fuller semicircle at Epidaurus and some 25 metres in Shakespeare's Globe. To speak or sing audibly required formidable training if the voice was to carry over such a distance. Men probably had better hearing than today, and there was less ambient noise, but wind was always a danger. There were no side walls to reflect the sound, and a frontal delivery was therefore essential. The presence of the chorus underpinned the convention, essential if the text was to reach its audience, that every speech was a mode of public address. The long speeches of Greek tragedy fit the requirements of the space. Quick-fire has the formality of a cross-examination in court (see above, p. 57). Antigone and Creon, for

example, do not talk to each other, but talk to the chorus and by extension the audience in a bid for moral approval. Tragedy could not permit interpersonal dialogue because intimacy simply is not interesting to a spectator 100 metres distant. One can of course create intimacy when performing Greek plays today in intimate spaces, but the risk of such transposition is that the speeches will seem unnaturally long, and the chorus irrelevant.

Considerations of distance are fundamental if we want to analyze the visual image and use of the body. All movements had to be simple, clear and bold. The costumes of tragedy were long and bright to create strong tableaux; the costumes of men in comedy were exceptionally short to allow energetic movement and a sense of the whole anatomy. Masks covered the whole head, requiring the spectator to project emotion on to the face and imagine movement in the few simple features that the mask rendered visible. The actor brought the mask to life through configurations of the whole body. Later Greek theatre was able to use subtle densely coded masks because the actors stood in shadow, but in the classical period the actors in Athens stood in the circle of the orchestra with the sun behind them. To see the face in these silhouetted figures was almost impossible, and Greek theatre relied rather upon the patterns which bodies made on the ground. It would be wrong to commiserate with such a theatre for its limitations. We should think of the passions and depth of meaning which fifteen distant bodies on a cricket pitch or twenty-three bodies on a football pitch can offer a packed crowd, and recall that Greek theatre was, amongst other things, a hard-fought contest in physical skills.

In lieu of the single body which the eye fixes upon in proscenium or studio theatre, it was the collective body that held the attention in Greek theatre. Inspired by his work in the large Greek theatre at Syracuse, Jacques Lecoq writes:

> The chorus is the essential element which uniquely allows the release of a true tragic space. A chorus is not geometric, it is organic. As a collective body, it possesses a centre of gravity, extensions, breath. It is a sort of organism that can take different shapes according to the situation in which it finds itself.

In a vivid metaphor, Silviu Purcarete describes the chorus as 'a single organism made up of dozens of heads and arms, like a sort of giant squid'.[18] The blocking of the chorus is a subtle instrument for

Plate 8 The relationship of mask and body. Classical masks designed and made by Thanos Vovolis, used in a production of *The Dibbuk*. Stockholm, 1994.

Plate 8 The relationship of mask and body. Classical masks designed and made by Thanos Vovolis, used in a production of *The Dibbuk*. Stockholm, 1994.

directing attention to different sections of an empty space, and has a similar function to modern stage lighting. Lecoq continues:

> A chorus arrives on stage, to the sound of percussion which through rhythm creates collectivity. It occupies the whole space, then withdraws to one part of the arena. In so doing it frees a new space and offers a kind of invitation to the hero. But who will come and fill this space? What equilibrium can be found today between a chorus and a hero?[19]

As Lecoq discerns, the Greek use of performance space differed from today in its constant positioning of the individual in relation to the group. In a small performance space, the shifting relationship of an individual body to a collective body cannot be reproduced. The ability of the play to engage with political issues is reduced. Modern performance space reflects a reluctance to understand individual identity as a function of social identity.

Many modern performers feel that performance in a huge space is a constraint upon subtle delivery and the development of an actor–audience relationship. Peter Brook, for example, regards 1,000 as a sensible threshold.[20] This is to miss what lent Greek theatre its power. The spectator 100 metres away was part of a single crowd, bonded by a space that created no vertical or horizontal boundaries, and concealed no group from all the rest. If all 15,000-plus tightly packed people were listening to the same words at the same time, and shared the same broad response, the power of emotion generated would have been quite unlike that created today in a studio theatre. Communication was effected not simply via light and sound waves but via an osmosis passing through the bodies of the spectators.

Patsy Rodenburg, voice coach at the National Theatre in London, laments the dead acoustics of the Olivier auditorium, used for the Greek productions of Peter Hall. The actor gets no sense of feedback from the auditorium and has to reconstruct the audience's perception. Another major drawback is the division of circle from stalls, leaving the actors tempted always to play to the stalls below. 'In the original Greek theatre ... the space's perspective pulls the actor up to make full contact with the whole house ... The design of the Greek theatre centres the actor's body rather than suppressing it.'[21] In the pseudo-Greek Olivier, inspired by Epidaurus, the commercial logic which divides cheaper seats from dearer ones undermines the power of the performance. The audience are not bonded because comfortable seats divide shoulders from shoulders and knees from backs, creating an individualized mode of viewing. Stage lighting

and an acoustic destroyed by the roof prevent the actor sensing the audience and therefore interacting with it in the moment of performance.

The natural world

Roland Barthes, in an essay on Greek theatre, attempts to develop an aesthetic of open air performance: 'In the open air, the spectacle cannot be a habit, it is vulnerable, perhaps irreplaceable: the spectator's immersion in the complex polyphony of the open air (shifting sun, rising wind, flying birds, noises of the city) restores to the drama the singularity of the event.' The spectator has an acute sense of being in the present, the passing day of the festival. He shares the same sense of space as the characters of the play, placed on the threshold of tombs and palaces. The theatre is open to the sky in order 'to amplify the news (i.e., fate) and not to smother the plot'.[22] Viewed in the open, the play will thus be seen as a treatment not of interpersonal relationships but of the relationship between human beings and their environment, an environment which for the Greeks necessarily included the gods. An event at Delphi, where *Prometheus* was performed in 1927 (see below, pp. 183–9), illustrates these principles. As Prometheus referred to his liver being pecked by eagles, two eagles flew down from the mountain, creating a sense in the audience that Zeus was at work. Three years later, when Aeschylus' *Suppliants* was performed in Delphi, rain coincided with the crisis of the plot, and sunshine accompanied the triumphant conclusion, again creating the sense that the performance was part of a larger cosmic process.[23] Performances at Epidaurus in high summer under stage lighting do not provide the same opportunities for divine intervention.

Greek theatres were modifications of the landscape rather than impositions, and Greek architects always built their theatres with attention to the view, unlike the Romans who enclosed the audience within high walls. The audience on the slopes of the Athenian Acropolis had a fine view of the hills to the south-east, and a few at the top could also see the sea. Greek plays dealt with the limits of the human ability to control the world. Spectators sat inside the city they had created and looked at the wilderness beyond. From the security of their seats, they contemplated a world where nothing was secure. In tragedy the city was viewed in its relation to the wilderness

Figure 13 The theatre of Athens in relation to its environment: from a coin of the Roman period.

beyond. Violent women like Phaedra, Medea or Electra seek to escape from the confinement of the city. Men like Oedipus, Creon and Pentheus are destroyed by events that take place in the mountains, where they cannot impose rationality and the gods seem to be in control. The topography of the theatre shaped the meaning of the plays. In the modern theatre, because Zen is attuned to the idea that energies link humans to their environment, Suzuki has been the major practitioner to experiment with this aspect of Greek theatre. He built his open-air theatre at Toga facing a lake and mountains, which are selectively illuminated in accordance with the needs of the play.

Sacred space

Western practitioners like Grotowski and Brook have pursued the ideal of a 'holy' theatre which rejects the façades of orthodox commercial theatre and adopts the condition of a 'poor' theatre.[24] Many have been impressed by the practices of the east. The *Natya Sastra*, for example, describes a complex of rituals performed when laying out a temporary theatre in ancient India, and in the Noh theatre elaborate rules govern the preparation of the polished cypress-wood floor. The theatre of the classical period meets the physical conditions of a Grotowskian poor theatre, with its wooden seating arranged around a hillside, an earth floor, and a painted wooden hut for its set. Actors working in 1992 on a trilogy in the Greek-style theatre of Minneapolis found it helpful to conceive that they were working in a circle which was somehow 'sacred',[25] and this is a common experience in productions that attend to the ritual dimension. It is important, therefore, to clarify how far the 'poor' space was also a 'sacred' space.

The whole of Athens was experienced as a sacred place, and more particularly the rock of the Acropolis since the origins of the Athenian people were traced to that spot. The procession led the audience on a journey to the ritual centre of their community, and the actors performed on the earth of a city protected by Athene. The performance circle lay inside the sanctuary of the god Dionysos, while the audience sat on the slope outside the precinct, and this helped to define the nature of the actor–audience divide. Performers would dress as gods, engage in obscene behaviour and slander fellow-citizens in a way that was only acceptable in a time and space dedicated to a god. Behind the wooden stage building, the stone temple was a visible reminder of the divine reality behind the illusion of the play. The sacredness of the performance space was emphasized by rituals in the same way as other public events: the blood of a young pig was sprinkled around the orchestra to ward off evil, and libations were poured into the earth.[26] The performance space was not contaminated by the blood and smell of slaughtered oxen, whose place of sacrifice was lower down the slope. Religious taboos may explain why in plays the act of killing is never accomplished in front of the audience, though non-violent death may occur. After the classical period, the new stoa, followed by the move of the actors on to a high stage, effectively separated the temple from the playing

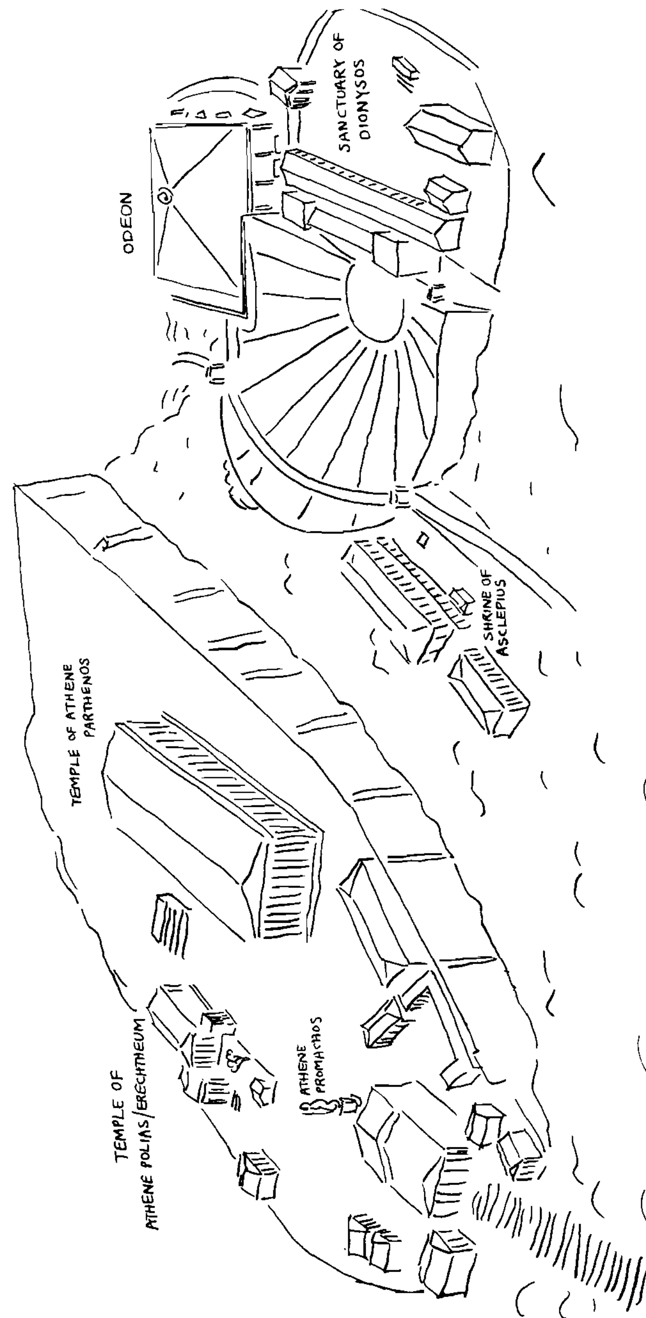

Figure 14 The Theatre of Dionysos after the rebuilding by Lycurgus in about 330 BC.

area, and this must have weakened the sense that the playing space was a sacred space.

Entering the space

From the side

Greek plays were written for specific spatial requirements, and I shall focus on one example. Euripides' *Hippolytus* tells how Hippolytus learns that his stepmother Phaedra has fallen in love with him. He rejects Phaedra and all women, whilst Phaedra commits suicide, leaving a message to incriminate Hippolytus. Theseus, Phaedra's husband and Hippolytus' father, returns and calls a curse upon his son.

As Oliver Taplin recognized in a book which transformed the study of ancient theatre, the most important dramatic effects in a huge theatre were achieved through control of entries and exits.[27] There were three main points of entry: through the single central door of the skênê, or through the side approaches known as *eisodoi.* To enter through an eisodos took a large amount of stage time and the actor could be seen by some spectators long before others (see plate 6). It is a rather exceptional moment when Theseus arrives unannounced because the chorus are focussed on the suicide within the skênê. Normally text is required to cover entries. This is a typical example, which I translate rather literally:

> Well now, a servant of Hippolytus here I see
> Urgently dark-faced to the house hastening. (1151–2)

Only two lines are allocated because the messenger is moving quickly. The angle of the eisodos directs the actor towards the 'house' rather than the centre of the orchestra. The chorus halt their dance ('well now') and point in order to change the focus ('here'); they identify for the audience who the new character is, and help them to interpret his gait and project an emotion upon the distant mask. The first entry of the chorus was always a special moment of spectacle, created in *Hippolytus* through the mime of washing long robes. Hippolytus makes two imposing processional entries through an eisodos: first of all with a group of hunters chanting and bearing a garland to crown the statue of Artemis, and at the end, again to music, when his wrecked body is carried on and he cries out in agony.

Because there were two more or less symmetrical eisodoi, Greek

theatre commonly set up a contrast, both geographical and symbolic, between the two sides. Like many Greek cities, Troizen where the play is set was built on the coast, protected by an impenetrable hinterland. Accordingly one exit in *Hippolytus* leads to the sea and one to the mountains. The mountains symbolize the wilderness and state of virginity which Hippolytus loves, whilst the sea symbolizes both access to the civilized world of Athens and the passions of sexual desire. This contrast was fixed by visual icons in the post-classical period, but in the time of Euripides the audience simply used its imagination, attaching different connotations to the two eisodoi as the play developed. The massive presence of the exotic Odeon on the audience's left (built after the time of Aeschylus) and the more modest presence of the temple on the audience's right must in practice have given a very different feel to the two sides.

From the house

Tragedy used only a single doorway in the stage wall, apparently in the form of a double door opening inwards.[28] This doorway created a powerful point of focus, and is used for a long section of the play to keep attention fixed on Phaedra's non-verbal reactions, as she listens to the servant within telling Hippolytus of her love whilst the chorus sing of love. She hears Hippolytus' violent response, and is still beside the door when Hippolytus bursts out and delivers a long anti-feminist diatribe. The audience watch the silent mounting agony that will culminate in suicide.

Phaedra's first entrance from the house is slow and imposing: she is carried on a couch, the picture of an invalid, her body and head covered. When Phaedra appears for the second time, it is as a corpse on the '*eccyclema*', a wheeled platform rolled forward through the doorway. A dummy dressed as Phaedra lay upon it, with an incriminating letter displayed in the hand, and the costume doubtless disposed to suggest the victim of a rape. The house in Greek tragedy is regularly associated with death, and the eccyclema was often required to display a scene of horror. It should be understood as a formal convention rather than a primitive attempt to depict an inner room. As the corpse lies before the audience, Theseus speaks of his wife as the best beneath the sun and stars, and delivers a public address to the city. Only an imagination conditioned by naturalism bothers to ask whether the corpse is supposed to be indoors or outdoors.

Plate 9 The power of the doorway. Euripides, *Electra*, directed by Costas Tsianos. 1989.

On a symbolic level, the themes of the play are bound up with a tension between two spaces: the unseen world behind the skênê, and the public world of the orchestra. The world indoors is, sociologically speaking, the world of women, and Phaedra, daughter of an Amazon, rejects her forced seclusion. The statue of Aphrodite, goddess of sex, is placed by the doors, whilst the statue of Artemis, goddess of chastity, stands in the orchestra, for the first goddess is associated with the bedroom, the second with hunting in the wilderness. Aphrodite by the doorway represents a body space with an interior, a body space that can be penetrated, while Artemis, virgin goddess of the open spaces, admits no one. As in most plays, death is conceived as a farewell to the sun, and the death of the heroine takes place indoors in the space of darkness. Repeated images of light and dark which seem monotonous to the modern reader had a different force for an audience warmed by the sun in early spring.

From above

Entry could also be effected by using the roof of the skênê, and gods may have been given further elevation by a structure called the

Plate 9 The power of the doorway. Euripides, *Electra*, directed by Costas Tsianos. 1989.