

Station C: Drama (Theater of Dionysus)

- 1. Learn about the site.** You are at the Theater of Dionysus (pronounced DY-un-EYE-suss), a place where dramatic plays are performed in Athens.
- 2. Read the information about drama, and take notes.** Carefully read and discuss the information below about Greek drama. Then, list three important facts about Greek drama in the Station C section of **Student Handout 2.2A**.

Theater was an important part of Athenian social life. In the 400s and 500s B.C.E., Athenians developed two types of plays that we still have today: tragedy and comedy. Tragic plays presented the downfall of a great hero. Extreme arrogance toward the Gods, or *hubris* (pronounced HEW-briss), usually caused this downfall. The somber lesson of the tragic plays was that humans should act with respect toward the Gods, and that dishonorable behavior had severe consequences. Comedy did not contain serious messages, and it provided entertainment for Athenian audiences. Comic plays made fun of, or *satirized*, Athenian politicians and other well-known personalities.

Athenian plays were staged in outdoor marble theaters, which were built into the sides of hills. In a typical theater, stone rows, or *tiers*, of seats were arranged in a semicircle around the stage area. Behind the stage area, wooden or marble columns, which were draped with cloth, formed a tent. Actors changed their costumes and masks in this tent, and extra scenery was stored when it was not in use. Sometimes painted scenery was hung in the front of the tent to provide the backdrop for a play.

During ancient Greek plays, two or three male actors performed both male and female roles on stage. They were joined by a chorus of 15 to 24 men who stood at the side of the stage and helped explain the action of the plays. The actors and chorus wore huge masks with exaggerated expressions to indicate the personalities of their characters. The feelings of the characters were shown through the use of colored costumes. Bright colors indicated happiness, and black showed despair.

Many plays were staged at the Theater of Dionysus, built in honor of the God Dionysus. This theater could hold more than 14,000 people. All classes of society, except slaves, attended the performances. Athenian playwrights presented their new plays in competitions held during the spring religious festivals. A panel of nobles judged each play for excellence and quality of performance.

3. Complete the task described below.

- Examine the image of the Greek theater and answer these questions:
How does the seating arrangement in this theater make it easy for the audience to hear and see what is happening on stage? Why would it be important for actors to wear large masks and colored costumes while performing? In what ways does this theater resemble modern theaters you have seen? In what ways is it different?
- With your partner, read aloud the excerpt from *Hecuba*, a tragedy by Euripides (pronounced yur-IP-ih-deez). Each of you should read the part of a different character. Try to make your reading as dramatic as possible.

4. Respond to the following prompt. Complete the drawing of the character Hecuba on **Student Handout 2.2A**. Your drawing must include a mask, appropriately colored garments, and a dramatic backdrop. Below your drawing, explain why you chose the costume, mask, and backdrop.