

## THEATRE PRODUCTION IN ROME

### ACTORS AND ACTING COMPANIES

Roman production practices differed slightly from those of Greece. Festivals were under the jurisdiction of a local government official who hired an acting troupe. The *dominus*, or head, of a troupe—who was usually the leading actor—made financial arrangements, bought dramas from playwrights, hired musicians, and obtained costumes. Since several companies were hired for each festival, there was an atmosphere of “unofficial” competition, with popular performers vying for rewards from prestigious audience members. Popular entertainments, however, frequently overshadowed the traditional dramatic presentations.

Actors were called *historiones*. Acting companies hired to stage drama consisted of about six male members; the Romans ignored the Greek “three-actor rule” even though it was endorsed by Horace. Roman acting technique emphasized detailed pantomime and broad physical gestures, which were necessitated by the size of the Roman theatres; it also stressed beautiful vocal delivery. As noted earlier, probably about two-thirds of the lines in Plautus’s comedies were accompanied by music.

In today’s theatre, actors who play the same kinds of roles over and over again are less esteemed than those who perform a variety of roles. The Romans, however, admired performers who specialized in playing one type of role and who refined a stock characterization. Facial expression was unimportant, since full linen head masks were worn. The masks included an attached wig and therefore covered the entire head. Only mimes performed without masks. The costumes worn by performers followed practices inherited from the Greeks.

The position of actors in Roman society continues to be debated by theatre historians. Some believe that actors were usually slaves and that the *dominus* who organized a troupe was a free man who purchased his performers. Other historians note that “stars” in Roman theatre were highly respected, well rewarded financially, and accepted socially. Aesopus and Roscius were two such stars. Claudius Aesop (known as Aesopus), who died in 54 B.C.E., left an estate estimated to have been worth the equivalent of perhaps \$1 million. Quintus Roscius Gallus (Roscius) was so well connected socially that his friends included the statesman and orator Cicero; when Roscius died in 62 B.C.E., his estate was evidently worth more than the equivalent of \$1 million. Still, the majority of actors were probably slaves or unesteemed members of Roman society, barely able to survive financially.

### THEATRE BUILDINGS AND SCENIC ELEMENTS

To make theatre available to large numbers of people, the Romans built many impressive theatres throughout the empire. They redesigned the Greek amphitheatre but, ironically, did not construct a permanent theatre, the Theatre of Pompey, until 55 B.C.E.; thus, dur-