



GROUND PLAN OF A TYPICAL ROMAN THEATRE

Roman theatres, in contrast to Greek theatres, were freestanding structures—all one building—with the stone stage house connected to the seating area, known as the *cavea*. The orchestra was a semicircle instead of a full circle as in Greek theatres. The stage was long and wide, and the stage house was several stories high with an elaborate facade.

permanent theatres because, it was argued, they might pose a danger to public morals. This ban was broken by Pompey the Great, who built an impressive stone theatre in 55 B.C.E. He insisted that it was a religious edifice, not a theatre, because he had placed a religious shrine near the top. From then on, permanent stone theatres were gradually built throughout the empire.

Roman theatres had the same three units found in the Greek buildings: the *cavea* (the Roman version of the *theatron*, or audience seating area), the *orchestra*, and the *scaena* (the Roman version of the *skene*, or scene house).

The Roman structures, however, were different from those of classical Greece. The Romans had developed the arch and other engineering techniques that allowed flexibility in construction, and they put this knowledge to good use in building theatres. Roman theatres were usually not built into hillsides but were freestanding structures with a tiered audience section connected to the scene house. The *cavea*, the audience seating area, was often larger than the Greek *theatron*; some Roman theatres could hold up to 25,000 spectators. (The seating capacity of Roman theatres varied, however; for example, one of the three permanent theatres constructed in Rome accommodated only 8,000 spectators.) Roman planners also attempted to make audiences comfortable: to protect the spectators from intense heat, awnings were set up and fans blew air over cooled water—a primitive form of air conditioning.

The orchestra was semicircular rather than circular. It was rarely used for staging, but instead was used for seating government officials and for the flooding required for sea battles. In front of the *scaena* was a large raised stage, about 5 feet high, called the *pulpitum*; its dimensions varied from 100 feet by 20 feet to 300 feet (the length of a football field) by 40 feet. Few of today's performers will have an opportunity to act on a stage that huge.