

The scaena itself was a unique feature of the Roman theatre. Two or three stories high, it was used for storage and dressing space, and a roof extended out from the scene building over the stage to protect the actors from the elements. Two side wings enclosed the pulpitum and connected the scaena to the cavea. The *scaena frons*—the facade of the scaena—was elaborate and ornate, with statuary, columns, recesses, and three to five entrances; the central entrance was the largest and had stairs leading up to it. The facade was meant to represent a typical Roman street scene, the basic scenic requirement of Roman comedy; it could also represent a palace, the customary tragic setting.

The scaena frons could serve as the basic setting because the Romans, following the Greek tradition, did not require a unique environment for each play. (At the beginning of *The Menaechmi*, for example, the actor who speaks the prologue points out that it is up to the audience's imagination to turn the playing space into the town of Epidamnus.) The Romans, however, did try to alter the scaena frons slightly by using *periaktoi*, three-sided scenic units described in Chapter 2. Where the *periaktoi* were located on the high pulpitum or scene house is a matter of conjecture; possibly one was placed in each of the doorways on the sides of the large central portal.

The Romans also used curtains to alter the scenic environment. There were two types of curtains: the *auleum* and the *siparium*. The *auleum* was a front curtain, which was raised and lowered on expandable poles from a trench in front of the stage. Given the size of the scaena, the *auleum* could not mask the entire facade; instead, its function was to conceal actors before they were revealed to the audience, much as front curtains in theatres are still used. The *siparium*, a painted backdrop placed against the scaena frons, slightly altered the appearance of the facade. Because of the size of the scaena frons, the *siparium* could never completely mask the permanent three-dimensional background.

Much of what we know about Roman theatre architecture comes from Marcus Vitruvius, who lived in the first century B.C.E. and whose ten-volume work *De Architectura* indicates that much of Roman architecture was based on Hellenistic models. Vitruvius's massive treatise, which includes a discussion of theatre buildings, became particularly influential when it was rediscovered in the Italian Renaissance. We can also reconstruct the characteristics of Roman theatre buildings by examining those that have survived the ravages of time, in such diverse locations as France, Libya, and Israel.

## POPULAR ENTERTAINMENT IN ROME

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