

PLAYS AND PANTOMIMES

The idea of drama came from Ancient Greece, and plays based on Greek tragedies and comedies became popular in Rome during the 3rd century BC. But the Romans gradually developed their own style of drama - one that could compete with the thrills and spills of chariot races and gladiator shows.

TRAGEDY AND COMEDY

The first plays seen in Rome were translations of Classical Greek plays - both tragedies and comedies. Tragedies were about Greek gods and heroes, while comedies dealt with ordinary people. Roman writers soon began adapting these plays to make them more interesting for a Roman audience. The most famous playwrights are Plautus and Terence, whose comedies were popular during the 2nd century BC.

DRAMATIC CHANGES

At first, plays were staged in temporary wooden buildings, as part of a festival for a god or goddess, and the whole building was taken down as soon as the festival was over. The first permanent auditorium in Rome - the *Theatrum Pompeii* - was built in 55BC, and similar buildings were soon put up in towns all over the empire.

Plays were accompanied by music performed on instruments such as the lyre.



Classical plays, with their complicated plots and dialogue, remained popular among some educated Romans, but most people wanted something much less demanding. So speeches were cut and plays were reduced to a series of songs sung by a chorus, with actors miming the action. This type of drama was called pantomime.

MASKS AND COSTUMES

Each play featured the same kind of characters, such as the 'wise old man' or the 'smiling fool', and the actors wore striking masks to show which character they were playing. Female characters wore pale masks, but behind the masks all the actors were men.

Different characters could also be identified by the actors' robes - red for a poor person, purple for a rich citizen and white for an elderly character.

In this mosaic, a group of actors is getting ready to perform a play. The man on the left is being helped into his costume.

