



SYMBOL OF THEATRE

Background of the Comedy and Tragedy Masks

It is frequently said that the comedy/tragedy symbol reminds us of happiness right on the edge of sadness.

Comedy tragedy theatre masks, like the concepts of comedy and tragedy in theatre were born in ancient Greece. Twenty-five hundred years ago, two thousand years before Shakespeare, Western theatre was born in Athens, Greece. Between 600 and 200 BC, the ancient Athenians created theatre.

Whenever a theatre festival came to a Greek town, a great number of ceremonies were always present. In the evenings there would be a group of men who would wander the streets, along with a musician. This group would be called a “comus” and their fun songs a “comoedia.” It doesn’t take much to see where our word “comedy” derived.

Conversely, the sad songs of satyrs were called “tragoedia” from where, of course, we get the word tragedy.

Masks were worn in ancient Greek theatre during the Golden Age, around 500-300 BC. Plays were written in honor of the god Dionysus, the god of fertility and procreation, and were either Comedies or Tragedies. All the actors were male, and they all played multiple roles, so a mask was used to show the change in character or mood. Masks gave the actors the ability to easily play more than one character in succession with a simple change of mask.

Masks also conveyed a kind of static emotion that must have created an atmosphere very different than our modern theatre. The masks and dress were usually highly stylized and exaggerated, making the characters easy to identify even from a great distance.

The traditional “Comedy Tragedy” masks are used now as a universal symbol for drama. Since masks were always a vital part of Greek theatre, it was inevitable that these two masks would have eventually been created to depict the two foundational elements of Greek theatre. The laughing comedy mask and the weeping tragedy mask were born and have been with us ever since.

As hard as it is to believe that something as simple as these two masks could have endured into the modern age with their original intent still being known and adhered to, that is in fact what has happened with these two masks.