

# Roman Theatre

*Loosely edited from The Essential Theatre by Oscar G. Brockett and the Stage and the School by Harry H. Schanker and Katherine Anne Ommanney*

Plays by only three Roman dramatists have survived: Plautus and Terence (both of whom wrote comedies) and Seneca (who wrote tragedies).

Titus Maccius **Plautus** was born in 254 B.C. He started writing plays when he was almost 50 years old. 21 of his plays have survived. Some of his famous plays include *Pseudolus*, *The Menaechmi*, and *Miles Gloriosus*. Owing to his witty dialogue, distinctive characters, and farcical plots, Plautus was extremely popular in his own day for long after his death.

Publius Terentius Afer (195- or 185-159 B.C.) wrote six plays, all of which survived: *Andria*, *Mother-in-Law*, *Self-Tormentor*, *Eunuch*, *Phormio*, and *The Brothers*. The chief interest in **Terence** plays lies in character and the double plots that provided him opportunities for showing contrasts in human behavior.

At the time Terence and Plautus were writing, there were no permanent theaters. The stage was erected only when needed for a presentation. Over the next two hundred years interest in entertainment evolved, and theaters expanded into amphitheaters, large circular arenas that were surrounded by tiers of seats.

In the first century A.D., Lucius Annaeus **Seneca** (c. 4 B.C.-A.D. 65), wrote plays about many of the same subjects treated by Greek dramatists. Nine of his tragedies have survived including *Medea*, *Oedipus*, and *Phaedra*. His plays different from the Greek plays in terms of the amount of violence he included. In part because of his graphically depicted horrors onstage, scholars believe that Seneca's plays were written to be read rather than performed. The many violent scenes in the English plays of Shakespeare's time owe much to Seneca.

As power came to rest almost wholly with emperors and armies, the people were offered increasing numbers of public entertainments, many of them bloodthirsty. During this time, theatres and **amphitheaters** (such as the Colosseum) were built throughout the empire.

The Roman preference for variety entertainment and short plays drove regular comedy and tragedy from the stage. The favorite form in late Rome was the **mime**, a short, topical usually comic, and often improvised playlet. (It was not silent, as today's mime is.) In the mime, female roles were played by women, mime apparently being the first form in which female performers were permitted to appear. Mime used more realistic conventions than tragedy or comedy. The dramatic action of mimes in late Rome often centered around sexual encounters, and the dialogue was often obscene. As Christianity grew, its sacraments and beliefs were frequently ridiculed in the mimes.

In addition to the mimes, late Roman festivals increasingly emphasized blood sports, which, along with mimes and variety entertainment, remained integral parts of religious festivals until around A.D. 400. Perhaps not surprisingly, the **Christian church became a strong opponent of the theatre**—not only because of what was performed but also because it was associated with the worship of pagan gods.