

The Theater and Domestic Games

Roman drama is Greek in origin, and dramatic performances, *ludi scaenici*, were originally staged in honor of a particular god. Over time, like games in the arena or Circus, the theater has become pure entertainment.

Before the late Republic, virtuous Romans thought theaters were a decadent luxury, and permanent theaters were banned. Increasing Greek influence created a greater interest among educated Romans for literature and dramatic performance, and the flimsy wooden structures erected temporarily for a festival became replaced with stone theaters.

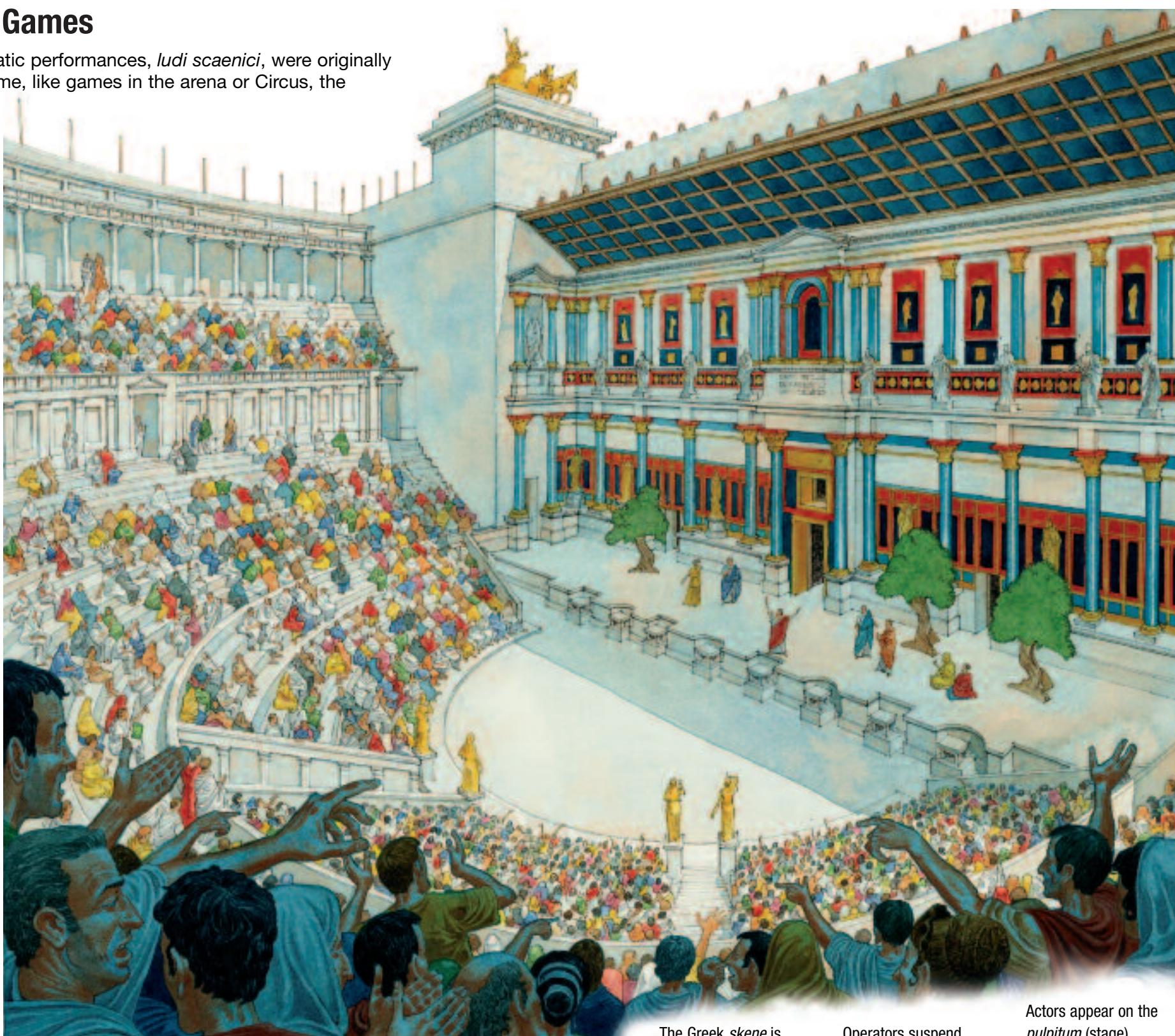
Roman theaters are similar to the Greeks', except they are of concrete and stone, far more elaborate and usually much larger. One of the first to be built in Rome, by Pompey the Great, has a seating area (*cavea*) 525 feet in diameter, and it can seat 27,000 people. Some provincial towns, with more space than Rome, boast even larger theaters.

Where the Greeks built into a hillside to create the rise of the *cavea*, Roman architects raise vast substructures to two or three levels. People can enter and exit very quickly through the intricate network of stairs and corridors of the substructure.

Actors, masks, and plays

As in Greece, the actors wear grotesque masks so their expressions can be easily seen from the back of the theater. The large open mouths of the masks also help to amplify their voices. Most actors are slaves or freedmen—many, in fact, Greek—and the profession is considered to be disreputable. As a result, a professional actor may not hold public office. In contrast to Greece, women are allowed to perform on stage, substituting heavy make-up for a mask.

Comedy and tragedy in the traditional Greek form—once popular—have been overtaken in popularity by mime, pantomime, and bawdy farces. Mime shows are undemanding tales of adventure spiced up with plenty of violence. Pantomime is a little more sophisticated. It typically involves a single *pantomimus* (“one who imitates all things”) miming the story’s action with the aid of several masks, accompanied by



musicians, a chorus, and dancers.

Romans also enjoy music concerts, which are held in smaller, covered versions of theaters called Odeons. These are also venues for lectures and business conferences.

Each part of the auditorium is reserved for a different class of people. The poorer people sit higher up.

The Greek *skene* is called *scaenae frons* in a Roman theater. It is far more elaborate, with two or three stories and up to a hundred columns.

Operators suspend realistic painted scenery backdrops from the upper floor of the *scaenae frons*. These can be changed rapidly for different scenes. Actors appear on the *pulpitum* (stage). Audience participation is noisy, especially in farces. Booring, hissing, and clapping are continual—fights break out sometimes.

Thrill of the throw

Gambling in public on the street is forbidden, but Romans are passionate gamblers anyway. Large sums of money are recklessly wagered on a throw of the dice at home, in taverns, or tucked away privately in the baths.

A similar game called *tali* is played with knucklebones made from bone or pottery, and bets are placed by both players and onlookers on the outcome of a board game played with colored counters. Among others, the emperor Augustus loved such games.

