CHAPTER XXI

THE LARGE THEATRE

Performances upon the stage were first given in Rome in the year 364 B.C.; a pestilence was raging, and the Romans thought to appease the gods by a new kind of celebration in their honor. The performers were brought from Etruria, and the exercises were limited to dancing, with an accompaniment on the flute. There was as yet no Latin drama. The first regular play was presented more than a century later, in 240 B.C., and the playwright was not a Roman but a Greek from Tarentum, Livius Andronicus, who translated both tragedies and comedies from his native tongue. The next dramatist was a Campanian, Gnaeus Naevius. The building of a theatre was not yet thought of; a temporary wooden platform was erected for the actors, and the spectators spread themselves out on the green slope of a hillside facing it.

When the censor Cassius Longinus in 154 B.C. commenced the erection of a theatre on the Palatine hill near the temple of Cybele, at whose festivals plays were given, the ex-consul Scipio Nasica rose in the Senate and in a speech full of feeling warned the Romans not to countenance this foreign amusement, on the ground that it would sap the foundations of the national character. His words produced so deep an impression that the Senate not only voted to pull down the part of the building already erected, and to refuse permission for the erection of similar buildings in the future, but even prohibited altogether the renting of seats at theatrical representations; Romans who wished to see a play must remain standing during a performance, or sit on the ground. Naturally so stringent measures could not long remain in force. Nine years later Mummius, the destroyer of Corinth, presented dramas in connection with his triumph, and put up
wooden seats for the spectators. The first stone theatre in Rome was built by Pompey, the rival of Caesar, in 55 B.C. In Pompeii, on the contrary, a permanent theatre had been erected at least a hundred years earlier.

The Oscan culture was so completely merged in that of Rome that our knowledge of it as an independent development is extremely slight; and no information has come down to us regarding the history of the native drama. From literary sources we know only of a crude form of popular comedy in which, as in the Italian Commedia dell' arte, there were stock characters distinguished by their masks,—Maccus a buffoon, Bucco a voracious, talkative lout, Pappus an old man who is always cheated, and Dosennus a knave. The scene of these exhibitions was always Atella, the Gotham of Campania, whence they were called Atellan farces.

The Theatre at Pompeii, however, is a proof that as early as the second century B.C., in at least one Campanian city, dramatic representations of a high order were given. Here, perhaps, as at Athens, they were associated with the worship of Dionysus; for the satyrs were companions of the Wine-god, and the head of a satyr, carved in tufa, still projects from the keystone of the arch at the outer end of one of the vaulted passages leading to the orchestra. Greek verse, and native verse modelled after the Greek, must have gained a hearing at Pompeii, and the works of Oscan poets—not a line of which has come down to us—must have stirred the hearts of the people long before Livius Andronicus, and Naevius, who brought inspiration from his Campanian home, produced their dramas at Rome.

In describing the Theatre it will be best to take up in order the three main divisions common to Greek and Roman buildings of this class: the cavea, the large outer part shaped somewhat like half a funnel, containing seats for spectators; the orchestra; the small semicircular portion enclosed by the cavea, with an entrance, parados, on either side; and the stage, facing the orchestra and the cavea. The accompanying illustrations give a plan (Fig. 64), and a view of the ruins in their present condition (Fig. 65); the exterior as seen from the south is shown in Fig. 61.

The cavea afforded seats for about five thousand persons. The greater part of it, from the orchestra to the vaulted corridor under the summa cavea (Fig. 64, 6), lies on the slope of the hill; the floor of the corridor is on a level with the Forum Triangulare.

The seats are arranged in three semicircular sections. The lowest, ima cavea (4), next to the orchestra, contains four broad ledges on which, as well as in the orchestra itself, the members of the city council, the decurions, could place their chairs, the 'seats of double width.'

The middle section, media cavea (5), was much deeper, extending from the ima cavea to the vaulted corridor. It contained twenty rows of marble seats arranged like steps, of which only a small portion is preserved. On a part of one of these, individual places, a little less than 16 inches wide, are marked off by vertical lines in front, and numbered; they probably belonged to some corporation which found it necessary, in order to avoid confusion, to assign places to its members by number. In Rome the fourteen rows nearest the bottom were reserved for the knights. Whether a similar arrangement prevailed in the municipalities and the colonies is not known, but if so the number reserved here must have been smaller.

The upper section, summa cavea (6), supported by the vault over the corridor, was too narrow to have contained more than four rows of seats.

The ima cavea was entered from the orchestra. The media cavea could be entered on the lower side from the passage (diazoma, praccinctio) between it and the ima cavea, which at the ends was connected by short flights of steps with the parodoi leading outside; on the upper side six doors opened into the media cavea from the corridor, from which flights of
steps descended dividing the seats into five wedgelike blocks, *cunei*, with a small oblong block in addition on either side near the end of the stage.

The corridor was accessible by four doors, one from the Forum Triangulare, another from the open space between this and the rounded exterior of the Theatre, a third at the end of an alley east of the temple of Isis, and a fourth opening from a steep passage leading up from Stabian Street. The summa cavea, which for convenience we may call the gallery, was entered by several doors (the exact number is uncertain) from a narrow vaulted passage along the outside. This passage, however, did not extend the whole length of the gallery, but stopped where the outer wall of the Theatre joined that of the Forum Triangulare. Here a stairway led to it; there was a second stairway at the rear of the Palæstra, and a third leading from the alley east of the temple of Isis; the three are shown on Plan III. At the edge of the Forum Triangulare, a narrow stairway, built in the thick wall, led directly to the gallery (Fig. 64).

The outer wall back of the gallery rose to a considerable height above the last row of seats. On the inside near the top were projecting blocks of basalt (seen in Fig. 65), containing round holes in which strong wooden masts were set; from these the great awning, *velum*, was stretched over the cavea and orchestra to the roof of the stage, protecting the spectators from the sun. This sort of covering for the theatre was a Campanian invention, and here, where the cavea opened toward the south, was especially necessary. In the Coliseum, and the well preserved theatre at Orange, the arrangements for fastening the masts are on the outside of the wall. The upper part of the wall of our Theatre has been rebuilt in modern times, and it has been doubted whether the blocks of basalt and the pieces of cornice above with corresponding incisions are ancient; the latter surely are not modern, and their slightly wedged shape shows that from the beginning they must have been on the inside of the wall.

Near the front of the orchestra at the right and the left were small rectangular platforms; one is shown in Fig. 65. They were supported by the vaults over the entrances (7, 7), and were reached by small stairways near the ends of the stage. They were called tribunals, and here, as in Rome, were no doubt reserved for the seats of those to whom special honor was paid. One was set aside for the use of the magistrate who gave the play; in Rome the vestal virgins, in accordance with a decree of Augustus, occupied the other, and in Pompeii their place was very likely taken by the city priestesses.

![Fig. 64—View of the Large Theatre.](image-url)

The shape of the orchestra is that of a semicircle enlarged in the direction of tangents at right angles with the diameter; a complete circle could be inscribed in the space. It was probably never used for a chorus, but was occupied by the seats of prominent spectators, particularly the city officials and their friends. It was entered by means of the vaulted passages under the tribunals.

The steps leading from the orchestra upon the stage (Fig. 65) can be explained only on the supposition that even in the Roman period, to which the steps in their present form belong,
actors who took the part of persons arriving from distant places came upon the stage through the orchestra. In the niches in front of the stage, as we learn from a wall painting, sat those charged with the maintenance of order in the Theatre, two perhaps in the rectangular niches, or one in the semicircular niche in the middle.

The stage is long and narrow, measuring 120 by 24 Oscan feet; the floor is a little more than three feet above the level of the orchestra. The rear wall, as in ancient theatres generally, was built to represent the front of a palace, entered by three doors, and adorned with columns and niches for statues. In each of the short sections of wall at the ends of the stage is a broad doorway, extending across almost the entire space. The long narrow room behind the stage, used as a dressing room (postscenium), was entered by a door at the rear, which was reached by an inclined approach. No trace of the roof of the stage remains, but from the better preserved theatres at Orange, in the south of France, and at Aspendus, in Asia Minor, we infer that it sloped back toward the rear wall. The floor was of wood.

The room underneath the stage was divided into several parts. Between the front wall and that just back of it (seen in Fig. 65) was the place for the curtain, which, as in Roman theatres, was let down at the beginning of the play, and raised at the end. The space between the parallel walls must have been covered, leaving only a narrow slit for the curtain; otherwise it would not have been easy to go upon the stage from the steps in the orchestra.

Underneath the place for the curtain is a low passage, in the vaulted roof of which are two rows of holes, a little more than a foot square, cut in blocks of basalt, and evidently designed to hold upright timbers. This passage has in recent years been entirely cleared. In the floor, directly under the openings in the vaulted roof and corresponding with them, were square holes. In those nearer the front of the stage were remains of timbers and of square pieces of iron fitted to the ends of these, a larger and a smaller piece for each hole. It seems likely that, as Mazois suggested, hollow upright beams were set in the holes, and in them smaller hollow beams were placed, in which were still smaller poles or iron rods; by the sliding of these up and down, the long horizontal pole on which the curtain was hung could be raised or lowered. The use of the inner row of holes has not been satisfactorily explained.

The room under the right of the stage is so low, about three feet, that it could not have been available for any purpose, but that at the left is higher, and was used for theatrical machinery, the scanty remains of which arouse our curiosity without satisfying it. In the floor are set two oblong blocks of limestone, about four feet in length. Each has in its upper surface a round hole, between two and three inches deep, with an iron socket, in which there are still remains of an iron cap once fitted to the lower end of a vertical wooden shaft that turned in it; the upper end of the shaft—assuming that the blocks are in their original position—must have revolved in a socket fixed in one of the joists of the stage floor. There is besides on the upper surface of each block a rectangular depression, and on either side a shallow incision; the purpose is altogether obscure.

A third stone, similar to these two, is set in the north wall of the same room, and opposite it was fitted another; here, then, a horizontal shaft turned; there was a similar pair of stones at the left end of the place for the curtain. These arrangements suggest the crane-like machine by which floating figures were brought upon the stage, as Medea in the play of Euripides riding in a chariot drawn by dragons, and the familiar deus ex machina; such machinery, according to Pollux (Onomast. IV. 128), was placed on the left side of the stage.

When plays were presented, the front of the palace at the back of the stage was concealed by painted scenery. As several pieces might be produced one after the other, it was necessary to arrange for the shifting of scenes. This was accomplished by drawing one set of decorations off to the sides, thus bringing the next set into view (scena ductilis); the ends were changed by turning the periacont, huge three-sided prisms, each side of which was suited to a different scene (scena versilis). In spite of the clumsiness of the arrangements, as contrasted with those of the best modern theatres, the mount-
ing of plays was artistic and impressive, and compares favorably with that of Shakespeare's time.

The only allusions to matters connected with theatrical representations at Pompeii are in inscriptions relating to actors, as Sorex (p. 176). A number of graffiti scratched on walls in various parts of the city mention an Actius Anicetus, whose name is given in full in an inscription found at Puteoli, C. Ummidius Actius Anicetus. He seems to have been a very popular actor of pantomime, at the head of a troupe. One of the inscriptions reads: *Acti, ali[or] populii, cito redi,* —‘Actius, darling of the people, come back quickly!'

The theatre in antiquity was by no means reserved for scenic representations alone. It was a convenient place for bringing the people together, and was used for public gatherings of the most varied character. In the theatre at Tarentum the memorable assembly met which heaped insults upon the Roman ambassadors and precipitated war with Rome. At Pergamos King Mithridates was to be crowned in the theatre by a descending Victory, but by some mishap the wreath fell to the floor, an omen of evil. When the Ephesians, stirred up by Demetrius the silversmith, wished to take measures against Paul and his companions, “They rushed with one accord into the theatre.” On such occasions we may suppose that the front of the palace at the rear of the stage served as a background without other decoration. This use of the theatre for general purposes was a Greek rather than a Roman custom, but the theatre itself in Italy was an importation from Greece; and we may suppose that the theatre at Pompeii was on more than one occasion the scene of notable demonstrations.

Our Theatre, as is evident from the character of the construction, in its original form belonged to the Tufa Period, but was rebuilt in Roman times. Some particulars in regard to the rebuilding are given in an inscription: *M. M. Holconii Rufus et Celer cryptam, tribunalia, theatrum,* — ‘Marcus Holconius Rufus and Marcus Holconius Celer (built) the crypt, the tribunals, and the part designed for spectators,' that is, the vaulted corridor under the gallery, the platforms over the entrances to the orchestra, and the cavea.

The two Holconii lived in the time of Augustus. The elder, Rufus, was duumvir for the fourth term in 3–2 B.C. The work on the Theatre was probably done about that time; for soon afterwards, before his fifth duumvirate, a statue in his honor was erected in the Theatre, as we learn from an inscription. Later, in 13–14 A.D., the younger Holconius also, when he had been chosen quinquennial duumvir, was honored with a statue. The masonry of the corridor and of the exterior arches supporting it, as well as of the tribunals, well agrees with that in vogue in the Augustan Age; we find brick-shaped blocks of tufa and reticulate work. The marble seats in the cavea may be assigned to the same period; in the original structure the benches must have been of tufa. About the same time the present wall at the back of the stage was built, in the place of an older and much simpler façade, but not by the Holconii; if this also had been rebuilt by them, it would have been mentioned in the inscription.

 Possibly the tribunals were an addition due to the Holconii. The corridor under the gallery, however, must have been built in the place of an earlier corridor, for the piers on the outside rest on foundations similar in character to the oldest parts of the building. As these piers served no other purpose than to sustain the passage opening into the section of seats above the corridor, this must have formed a part of the original plan.

The statues of both the Holconii probably stood in niches in the wall at the back of the stage. Holconius Rufus was further honored with a monument of some sort in the cavea. The lowest seat of the media cavea had at the middle, directly opposite the stage, a double width for a distance of about five feet, gained by removing a portion of the next seat above. Here was an inscription in bronze letters: *M. Holconio M. f. Rufo, II. v. i. d. quingenti, iter[um] quing[ue annali], trib[uno] mil[itum] a p[opulo], flaminii Aug[usti], patr[ono] col[o] niae, d[ei curionum] d[ecreto],* —‘[Dedicated] in accordance with a decree of the city council to Marcus Holconius Rufus the son of Marcus, five times duumvir with judiciary authority, twice quinquennial duumvir, military tribune by the choice of the
people, priest of Augustus, and patron of the colony.' The object placed here was of bronze, and was made secure by fastenings set in twelve holes; what it was is altogether uncertain. The ancients had the custom of conferring lasting honor upon a deserving man after death by placing in the theatre a seat inscribed with his name. We should be glad to believe that a 'seat of double width,' bisellium, the use of which was allowed to members of the city council, was placed here, but the arrangement of the twelve holes is difficult to reconcile with this explanation.

The architect employed by the Holconii, a freedman, was not honored with a statue, but his name was transmitted to posterity in an inscription placed in the outer wall near the east entrance to the orchestra: M. Artorius M. [Libertus] Primus, architectus, — 'Marcus Artorius Primus, freedman of Marcus, architect.'

The plan of the Theatre could not have been taken from a Roman model; it conforms, as we should have expected, to the Greek type. In the Roman theatre the orchestra was in the form of a semicircle, of which the diameter was represented by the stage. In Greek theatres, on the contrary, the stage according to Vitruvius was laid out on one side of a square inscribed in the circle of the orchestra; the orchestra, as shown by existing remains, in most cases was either a complete circle or was so extended by tangents at the sides that a circle could be inscribed in it. The latter is the case in our Theatre, of which the orchestra has essentially the same form as that of the theatre of Dionysus at Athens.

The stage falls under the limit of height, — five feet,— allowed by Vitruvius for the stage of the Roman theatre, not to mention the height of ten to twelve feet specified for that of the Greek type. The reason assigned for the moderate elevation of the Roman stage is that the orchestra was occupied by the seats of senators, whose view would be obstructed if more than a moderate elevation should be given to the front of the stage. The orchestra of our Theatre was apparently from the beginning intended for the use of spectators, not for a chorus.

The conclusions reached by Dr. William Doerpfeld in regard to the stage of the Greek theatre, if borne out by the facts, would necessitate a complete abandonment of previous views on the subject. His theory, in brief, is, that not only the chorus but also the actors went through their parts not on the stage but in the orchestra, which had the form of a circle, and that what we are accustomed to consider the front wall of the stage was rather the rear wall of the platform in the orchestra on which the actors and chorus stood, this wall being laid out on a tangent of the circle and having a height of twelve feet, as we may understand from Vitruvius and from the remains of the theatre at Epidaurus.

The main reasons advanced in support of this theory are that the platform currently regarded as the stage, which according to Vitruvius and the existing remains was hardly more than ten feet wide, must have been too narrow to allow free movement on the part of the actors, and that the height above the orchestra was too great to admit of the close relation between the actors and the chorus, of which there is abundant evidence in the extant dramas. According to Dr. Doerpfeld, the stage came into existence in Italy first, and in the Roman period, when there was no longer any chorus; a platform five feet high was built for the actors, extending to the middle of the orchestra, so that this now took the form of a semicircle and could be used for the seats of spectators.

To undertake the examination of Dr. Doerpfeld's theory in detail would not be pertinent here; yet we cannot bring our description of the Theatre at Pompeii to a close without inquiring whether this structure, which is perhaps a century older than the oldest Roman theatre, shows any trace of the arrangement which the theory assumes. Unfortunately, the evidence is not conclusive for either a negative or an affirmative answer. Just as this second edition goes to press a joint investigation of the whole matter has been undertaken by the author and Dr. Doerpfeld, whose work is being facilitated by excavations. It is yet too early to anticipate the conclusions to which the evidence thus gained will lead; we may hazard a tentative statement in regard to only one or two points.
It now appears probable that the present stage was not constructed at the same time with the other parts of the Theatre, but that it is a later addition. There is no trace of an earlier stage, and there is nothing to indicate that this was built against the part of the structure designed for the spectators. We might assume that this earlier stage was placed at a slight distance from the other parts of the building, and that the entrances of the orchestra, the parodoi, lay between, were it not for the fact that the outer doorways of the present parodoi — notably that on the west side with the head of a satyr on the keystone — unquestionably belong to the original structure; and we should not be warranted in assuming two entrances to the orchestra on each side. At the same time it is evident that the construction of the tribunalia must have involved a rebuilding of this part of the Theatre, and it is possible that originally passages led from the outer doors of the present parodoi, not to the orchestra, but to the ranges of seats. In that case, assuming that the stage was slightly removed from the rest of the structure, we may freely grant that the acting may have gone on in front of it rather than upon it, and that this may have been a Greek theatre according to Dr. Doerpfeld's view. But we are here dealing only with possibilities; it is to be hoped that further investigation will bring to light data for a final solution of the problem.

In the open space between the Theatre, the Forum Triangularis, and the Palaestra there is a deep reservoir for water (D), square on the outside and round within. It was evidently used for the sprinklings, sparsiones, with saffron-colored water, by which on summer days the heat of the Theatre was mollified. That such sprinklings were in vogue in Pompeii is known from announcements of gladiatorial combats, painted on walls, in which they are advertised together with an awning as part of the attraction,—sparsiones, vela erunt.