Festival Of Dionysus Essay, Research Paper

“Zeus’ divine childrelishes the happy lifeHe loves peace who sheds happinessPeace who nurses admirable youthsAnd gave of the rich and poorHe hates those who do not do their bestDay and wondrous nightTo live happily.” Eurip. Bacchai (416 – 426) To the Greeks, the festival was a crucial event that could not be missed. Religious festivals in honor of the god of wine and fertility, Dionysus, occurred twice a year in January/February and March/April. The festivals included fifth century comedies and tragedies. The motifs ran anywhere from destiny and fate; to freedom and responsibility, and man vs. the Gods. Along with the comedies and tragedies were afterpieces called “satyr” plays (Starr 76) . Dionysus is the son of Zeus and Semele, the daughter of Cadmus. He is the god of joy, fertility, agriculture, and the vine; the name “Dionysus” itself means “he who gives the wine” (AOL Academic Assistance Center 1). He bares the nickname, “twice born” from two different myths (Gross 1). One states that while he was still being carried in Semele’s womb, she was killed by Zeus’ lightening bolts; however Zeus rescues his son and he therefore “undergoes a second birth” from his father’s thigh (Gross 1). The second myth says that Dionysus was actually the son of Zeus and Persephone, and he was referred to as Zagreus. Hera lured him with toys and then she and the Titans “rip him to shreds” and ate everything except his heart which was saved by either Rhea, Demeter or Aphrodite. Using the heart Zeus recreates his son and “plants” him in Semele to carry and bears Dionysus Zagreus, born for the second time. Dionysus was referred to in the Homeric epics rarely, and when he was it was with some hostility, and all with the same plot; Dionysus appears in a city and is resisted, and he is destroyed by “those who oppose him” (Gross 1). The Festival of Dionysus was a huge affair as was it’s preparation. Many people were involved in making the festival perfect in order for approval from Dionysus. There were countless comedians and tragedians, an archon, a producer or the choregus, the actors, the chorus, and many others. The comedians had to submit one play each while the tragedians had to prepare a set of three “common themed or otherwise” plays (Starr 76-77). An archon is the person that all the plays were submitted to and the one who had to choose which plays were to be in the festival. The archon was very similar to what we consider a “judge” of a contest, he took his opinion of which plays were best suited to the festival and chose them. The archon must choose three to five comedies and three sets of tragedies. All tragedies and comedies that are chosen are “sponsored” by the state (Starr 77). The choregus is usually a very wealthy man; he must pay for the chorus (there are about twelve to fifteen men in a chorus) and all costumes needed and used. All actors were paid for by the state (Starr 76). When a set of tragedies are chosen, the tragedian is given a producer and a set of actors by the archon (Starr 77). The themes of their plays can differ from anywhere from “Man and the Gods” to “Destiny and Fate”, “Freedom and Responsibility” and “Hybris: Pretense and Self-Assertion” (Theater of Dionysus 1).

Along with the actors and the behind-the-scenes people, their was also the orchestra. But, the orchestra wasn’t like what we think of today. During the festival it meant “dancing place”, but there was also the traditional orchestra. “There were musicians and instruments included flutes, drums, cymbals and trumpets. Music, however, was always subordinate to words” (Theater of Dionysus 1) The theater itself where all this took place was magnificent, although there are many different descriptions. “The theatron was much larger than the seating area that appears in the picture. Crowds were large. It is estimated that between 14,000 and 17,000 persons were present for a typical Greek play” (Theater of Dionysus 1) “The stage consisted of a circular orchestra with an alter of Dionysus, about which the chorus marched or solemnly danced, and a permanent backdrop representing a temple or palace. The actors proper preformed on the shallow steps in front of the scenery, or, if they depicted gods, might appear on an upper balcony.” ” theater of Dionysus, a structure with wooden seats on the south slope of the Acropolis” (Starr 76). Along with the seats and the stage, there was also a seat dedicated for Dionysus himself (Theater of Dionysus: Diagram 1). Twice a year citizen’s came to the festival and paid 2 obels a piece to see the tragedies, and pay respect to Dionysus (Starr 77). The obels went to the “general upkeep” of the theater. “Admissions to the theater was, at first, free. Later a ticket was required. Price of admission was two obels, about twenty five cents Concessions were important, even in the Greek Theater. The audience brought food to eat while the play was in progress. Vendors roamed the crowds selling refreshments” (Theater of Dionysus 1). At the conclusion of the festival, prizes are handed out to the best productions. ” the poet who won got a crown of ivy; the choregus, the right to spend yet more money by setting up a triumphal tablet; the best actor, an inscription on a state list in the Agora” (Starr 77) The Greeks believed that to miss the Festival of Dionysus was to disrespect him. The festival was important to them as church may be to others. It was an annual event that had to be gone to according to them, and they stuck to it faithfully for many years.

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