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Aeschylus

Popularly considered to be the 'Father of Tragedy', Aeschylus began his literary career in a time when the tradition of theater was still in its infancy. Very little is known about his personal life. He was born in the Greek city of Eleusis, around 524 BC. The city was famous as a religious center for the worship of the goddess Demeter, and during his childhood, Aeschylus was exposed to many of the secrets of the cult.

Records concerning Aeschylus' early writing career are scarce. Although there are references to unnamed plays produced in the first years of the fifth century, the first concrete mention of his writing does not occur until 'the same year Euripides was born,' or about 484 BC. In that year, records state Aeschylus won first place in the Great Dionysia. The Great Dionysia was a springtime festival honoring the god Dionysus, held every year in Athens. It included a competition for tragic plays, which became so popular that it was the main place that tragic theater was performed. For a playwright, winning this honor would have marked the beginning of his public career.

In his lifetime, Aeschylus had the honor of winning first place at the Great Dionysia 13 times. Other sources suggest that he may have won further awards at other competitions in other cities, placing his total number of victories as high as 28. By combining these records together, it has been estimated that Aeschylus wrote as many as 100 plays over the course of his life. Today only seven remain.

It is difficult for the modern reader to understand the enormous effect Aeschylus had on the Greek notion of tragedy. Tragic plays, as they existed before Aeschylus, were very different from modern theater. A play consisted of a chorus, or group of dancers, and a single actor, generally wearing a mask. The chorus and the actor alternated between reciting poetry, and performing interpretive dances intended to supplement the poems. Aeschylus changed this tradition.

Aeschylus introduced the idea of multiple actors on stage, and of creating complex characters who were noble and grand. He produced exotic and ornate costumes for his actors, used musical instruments, and pioneered the notion of astounding the audience with visual effects such as paintings, tombs, altars, and trees. He thrilled audiences with terrifying characters, such as the group of fearsome, flesh-eating, winged women known as the Furies, who flew about dispensing divine justice in his play *The Eumenides*, and awed them with innovative ideas, such as the first ghost scene in recorded drama, which appears in his play *The Persians*.

Aeschylus was well loved and respected by his contemporaries. Although teased from time to time for the serious, elaborate way that his characters spoke, and the occasionally incomprehensible complexity of his metaphors, he had changed forever the way plays would be written.

Aeschylus died in about 456 BC, in Sicily. Over the centuries, many fantastic stories have been created about his death, but history is silent on the matter. The only certainty regarding his death is this: He was so admired that after his death, the city of Athens passed an unusual law. Traditionally, only new plays were allowed to be performed at the Great Dionysia, but the people of Athens made a special exception so that Aeschylus's plays could be performed every year at the great festival.

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Comprehension

Read the following questions based on the text, and select the best answer.

1. Which of the following best represents our knowledge of Aeschylus' childhood?
 - a. As a child, he wrote many plays celebrating the cult of Demeter.
 - b. He was born in Eleusis, a city famous for the cult of Demeter.
 - c. When he was a baby, his father was always very sad.
 - d. He was born in 524 BC, and was a deeply religious child.

2. Why did Aeschylus win first place in the Great Dionysia?
 - a. He wanted to honor the god Dionysus.
 - b. He wrote and produced his first play there.
 - c. He participated in the springtime festival honoring the god Dionysus.
 - d. He wrote a tragic play that was the best in the competition.

3. How many of Aeschylus' plays can be read today?
 - a. seven
 - b. thirteen
 - c. twenty-eight
 - d. one hundred

4. Which of the following was NOT true of theater before Aeschylus?
 - a. Dialog consisted of lines of poetry, read out by the actors.
 - b. Paintings onstage were popular.
 - c. The characters onstage wore masks.
 - d. While an actor read poetry, the chorus danced.

5. Which of the following represent theatrical techniques first used by Aeschylus?
 - a. multiple actors onstage, masks, and visual effects
 - b. dancing, musical instruments, and poetry
 - c. ghosts, costumes, and multiple actors onstage
 - d. paintings, poetry, and costumes

6. Which best describes the way Aeschylus' plays were viewed by his fellow citizens?
 - a. His characters were amusing, but no one could understand his dialog.
 - b. Although his characters were serious, his plays were very exciting.
 - c. Although his costumes were beautiful, his characters were too scary.
 - d. His plays were silly, and he was often teased about them.

7. How did the people of Athens honor Aeschylus after his death?
 - a. They performed some new plays for him at the Great Dionysia.
 - b. They created many fantastic stories about his death.
 - c. They allowed his plays to always be performed at the Great Dionysia.
 - d. They wrote a new play about his death in Sicily.

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Answer Key for Aeschylus

1. b
2. d
3. a
4. b
5. c
6. b
7. c