The Greek Chorus Dynamic in Ancient and Contemporary Theatre

by Celine Delcayre

Since its origin in classical Greek theatre, the theatrical device of the chorus has changed and evolved, both in its composition and in its function as a storytelling device. From musicals to contemporary plays like Mac Wellman’s *Bad Penny*, the chorus has taken many different forms, adding depth and complexity to the way we tell and share stories. [define]

**The Chorus in Ancient Greek Theatre**

The Greeks, often considered to be the pioneers of Western theatre, were the first to introduce the chorus as a dramatic element. At the beginning of the fifth century B.C.E., choruses were made up of approximately fifty actors confined to a space we now call the orchestra pit. Through song and movement, the chorus helped to tell the story of the theatrical piece of which they were a part. Despite the large size of these early choruses, they represented a collective consciousness, or a single body, often wearing masks to create a sense of unification and anonymity. As time passed, the chorus was reduced to twelve by the Greek playwright Aeschylus, then raised to fifteen by his successor Sophocles. These smaller choruses took a more active role in storytelling, either by taking on a role in the narrative, or by representing a collective character such as a group of townsfolk or an army.

Throughout Greek plays such as *Oedipus Rex*, *Antigone*, and *Lysistrata*, the chorus functions as a storytelling device by serving as a link between the audience and the piece itself, highlighting important aspects of the scene and projecting and emphasizing the current emotional state of the piece. The chorus achieves this either through direct narration and explanation, or through analytical commentary or conversation about the events and characters of the play. In some instances, the chorus is in direct conversation with characters and actively moves and participates in the events of the story. However, many times the chorus speaks through songs called *odes* that are separate from the action of the play.

This dichotomy between directly plunging into the play versus watching and commenting on it creates an interesting dynamic, catching the audience between two opposing forces. Sometimes the imagery, rhythm, and music of the chorus pull the audience into the piece on a sensory level. At other times, the thought and rhetoric of the chorus alienates the audience, causing them to view events and characters from an outside perspective.
The Chorus in Contemporary Theatre

This role of the chorus, as both an internal and external influence, is still present in theatre today. One of the more well known examples is the role of the chorus in modern musical theatre productions. Members of a musical theatre chorus use song and movement, much like the Greeks, to highlight certain moments or themes. This is an amplification of the sensory, emotive qualities of the early chorus. Also similar to the ancient Greek chorus, musical theatre chorus members adopt roles that help to set the scene or give context to the actions and interactions of other characters. This makes the chorus somewhat of a spectator to the action of the story alongside the audience. For example, in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Oklahoma! (1943), chorus members take on the role of townsfolk during the auction scene, then appear as guests in the wedding scene.

These chorus dynamics are not limited to musical theatre. In fact, many modern playwrights still use the chorus as a storytelling element. Paula Vogel’s Pulitzer Prize-winning play How I Learned to Drive (1997) provides an excellent example of a modern-day use of the chorus. How I Learned to Drive shares the story of a girl, Lil’ Bit, growing up in Maryland during the 1960s and the intimate relationship she shares with her Uncle Peck.

In this five-actor play, all voices and roles, besides those of the two main characters of Peck and Lil’ Bit, are represented by members of a three-actor “Greek Chorus.” Vogel’s Greek Chorus members move between representing specific characters involved in the story, and being neutral bystanders watching the events of the play unfold. In this case, the use of the chorus helps focus the audience on the two lead characters and their experiences. This concept of isolating the central aspects of the story is very similar to the guiding functions of the ancient Greek choruses.

The Chorus in Bad Penny

The chorus does not always present itself and its strategy so transparently. In Mac Wellman’s play, Bad Penny, the chorus is more mysterious. Their presence in the play, as well as the cryptic nature of their language inspires thought provoking questions about the nature of their presence and its effect on the world they inhabit.
Understanding the dynamics of the chorus and the ways in which they engage with both the story and the audience can help to deepen the understanding of the piece as a whole.