

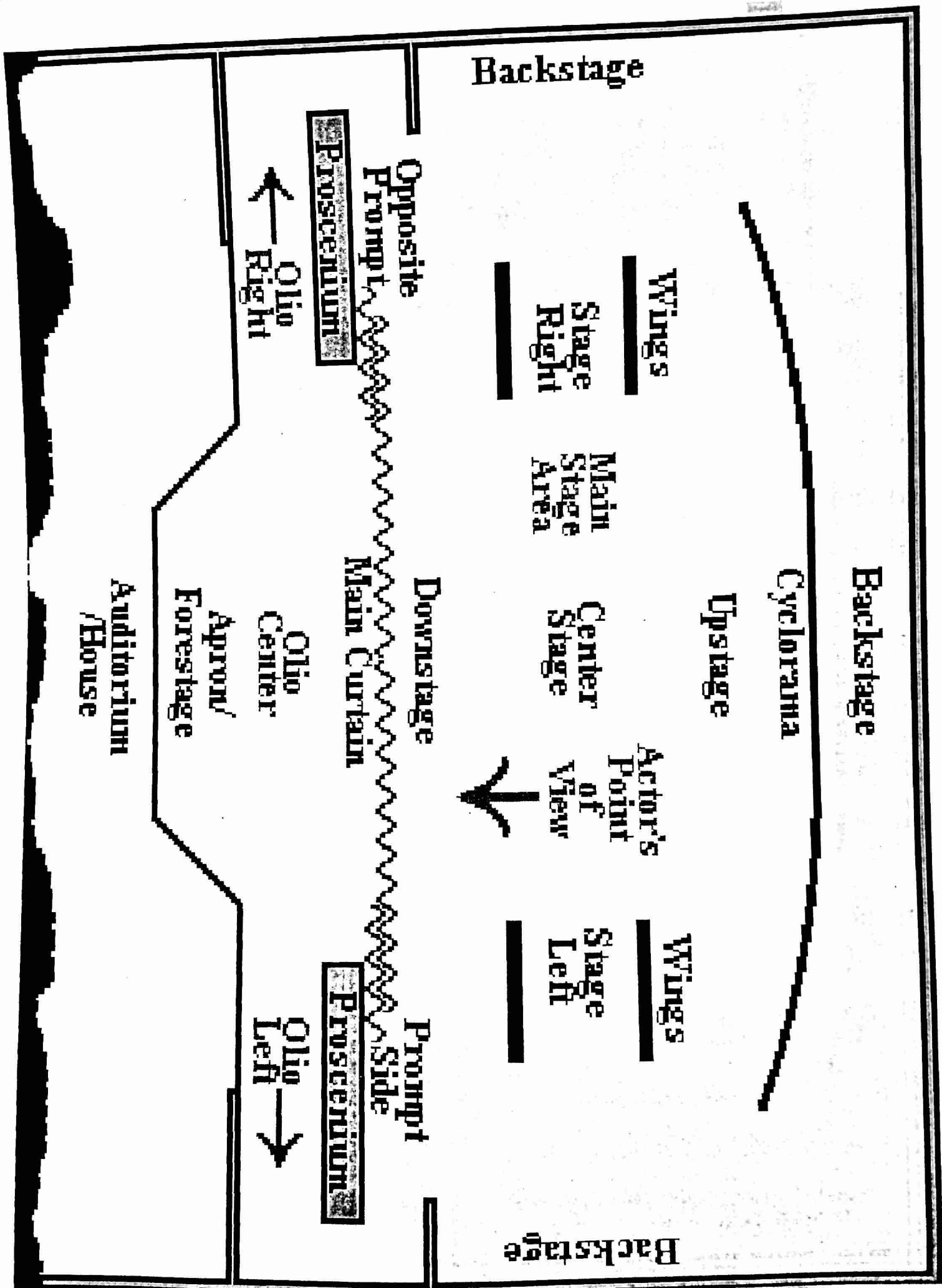
the first great dramatist (who had fought in the ships at Salamis), acted in his own plays; Sophocles followed his example but then, we are told, abandoned the stage because his voice was not strong enough. His younger contemporary and competitor, Euripides (born in the year Salamis was fought) never, as far as we know, appeared on stage.

In addition to actors and spectators, there was a third element of the performance, one older than either of these two. It was the chorus—a Greek word that means "dance"; the chorus of Greek tragedies sang, but it was also and had been in origin a group of dancers. The way Greek theaters are built shows how central to the performance the chorus was; the rows of stone benches one below the other all the way down the hillside focus the spectators' vision not on the stage area but on the circular dancing floor. Choral performances in Greece are much older than the drama; from time immemorial dancers had worshiped the gods, celebrated athletic (and military) victories, mourned the dead and danced on the circular threshing floors which are still to be found on Greek hillsides and which are probably the original of the circular dancing floor in the theater. Drama as we know it was created when an Athenian named Thespis added to the dance and song of the chorus the speech of an actor. With the addition of a second actor, the performers could develop from a sort of dramatic narrative—actor to chorus—to a dramatic relationship—actor to actor—or even a dramatic conflict—actor against actor. This second actor was introduced by Aeschylus, and it is this innovation that entitles him to be called, as he often has been, the creator of tragedy. When Sophocles later added a third actor, the complicated play of relationships between the actors came to dominate the scene, reducing the role of the chorus to that of commentator, where before it had been an active participant. But the chorus was always there, and it has an important function: it is an emotional bridge between spectators and actors. An anonymous crowd with only a group identity—Theban citizens, inhabitants of Colonus or whatever—it functioned on stage as if the audience itself were part of the action; all the more so because, unlike the professional actors, the

chorus consisted of citizen amateurs, representing their tribal group in the dramatic competition.

For, like almost all Greek institutions, the festival of Dionysus was a contest. Three dramatists on three successive days presented their plays and at the end were awarded first, second or third prize. What these prizes were we do not know; they may have been monetary but they cannot have been substantial enough for anyone to expect to make a living by producing plays. (Sophocles' father seems to have been the wealthy owner of some kind of factory, and his son was educated by the most famous teachers of the day.) The real reward of a first prize was the glory and the admiration of one's fellow-citizens; Sophocles had his full share of such rewards, for we have evidence that he won the first prize at the Dionysia eighteen times, and it is recorded that he never won the third prize. The glory of a first prize was shared by the poet with the chorus, the actors and the *chorēgos*, a private citizen who had paid out of his own pocket for the rich costumes, the training of the chorus and a host of other expenses. He was not, however, as he would be today, the "producer," an entrepreneur who puts the package together for profit. In fact he was a rich citizen, designated by the city authorities for this function; his part in the proceedings was, in effect, a form of enlightened taxation.

The theater was not only a religious festival, it was also an aspect of the city's political life. Athens in the fifth century was a democracy, an increasingly inclusive and participatory one as the century advanced. This radically democratic system was reflected in the organization of the dramatic festival. The prizes were awarded at the end by ten judges, elected on the opening day by lot and sworn to impartiality. Feelings often ran high, and these judges must have been under considerable pressure from the audience. In 468 B. C., the year in which Sophocles first entered the contest, competing against Aeschylus, the tension was such that the magistrate appointed as judges the ten elected generals for that year, among them Cimón, the hero of the naval crusade against Persia. (They gave Sophocles the first prize.) The whole festival reflected not only the organization but



Backstage

Backstage

Cyclorama

Upstage

Wings

Stage Right

Main Stage Area

Center Stage

Actor's Point of View

Wings

Stage Left

Backstage

Opposite Prompt

Proscenium

Olio Right

Downstage

Main Curtain

Olio Center

Apron / Forestage

Auditorium / House

Prompt Side

Proscenium

Olio Left