
The Theater of Marcellus

The Theater of Marcellus was a large entertainment venue located near the Tiber River and was one of the three permanent theaters in the city of ancient Rome. The theater's construction was originally begun by Julius Caesar before his death in 44 BC and was later completed by Emperor Augustus in 11 BC. Augustus named the theater in honor of his nephew and son-in-law Marcellus, who was to be Augustus' heir but who had died of an illness at the age of 19 in 23 BC.

Theatrical productions in Rome date back to at least 240 BC. However, the productions were usually performed in temporary wooden theaters which were taken down after the theatrical production had finished. By the first century BC, Rome had three permanent theaters. The first was the Theater of Pompey, constructed in 55 BC by the Roman general and statesman Pompey the Great. The second permanent theater was the Theater of Balbus, constructed in 13 BC by the Roman proconsul Lucius Cornelius Balbus. The third and most important permanent theater in Rome was the Theater of Marcellus.

The Theater of Marcellus, built near the Tiber River, was an open-air theater, three stories high, capable of accommodating up to 15,000 to 20,000 spectators. The building was entered through the lower archways, beneath which were corridors and stairways leading to many different sections of seating. Inside, the theater was comprised of a semicircular auditorium with tiered seating, a semicircular orchestra area and a shallow stage, which extended almost the entire width of the seating area. Directly behind the stage was a building known as a scaena, with several balconies and columns. The scaena was as tall as the seating area, three stories high, and provided a decorative background to the stage as well as a dressing area for the actors. In an enclosed courtyard behind the scaena were two small temples which are believed to have been dedicated to Diana, the goddess of the hunt and Pietas, the goddess who represented the Roman virtue of duty.

Performances at the theater included plays of Roman historical events, tragedy and comedy as well as productions of mime, pantomime, poetry and music. In 17 BC, before the theater was fully completed, it was used for the theatrical productions of an important Roman religious celebration known as the Ludi Saeculares (Latin for "Century Games"). The celebration of Ludi Saeculares took place over a period of three days and included religious sacrifices to the gods, chariot races, hunting displays and theatrical productions. It marked the end of a saeculum (Latin for "generation" or "century") and the beginning of the next.

After the introduction of Christianity in the fourth century AD, the theater's use gradually declined. In the Renaissance a palazzo (Italian for "palace") was built on top of the ruins of the theater, in the area once occupied by the theater's auditorium and stage. Today, you can still see part of the first and second stories of the ancient theater's semicircular seating area on the exterior of the Renaissance palazzo