

# Drama 30

## Unit 2: Theatre History

### Background Notes

#### Classical Theatre

When did theatre begin?

- ritual played a role in the development of drama in the days of early people.
- ancient societies used ritual to embody their understanding of the human condition and of the world around them.
- ritual had a religious purpose, and instructive purpose (teaching), it was also a form of entertainment.
- common elements are found in ritual - music, dance and elaborate movement, mask and costume.
- 1200 BC in Greece, the "Cult of Dionysis" practiced ritual celebrations of fertility, which over time altered and became Spring rituals with theatre at the centre of the celebration.
- a key part of the rites of Dionysus was the dithyramb - performed by a chorus of 50 men dressed as satyr, playing flutes and drums, dancing and chanting (this was religion remember!)
- in 500 BC we see the beginnings of Western theatre in Athens (2,000 years before Shakespeare!) with the spring festivals - drama competitions featuring plays of Tragedy and Comedy.
- ancient Athenians created a theatre culture whose form, technique and language are used today.
- plays written at that time are still regularly performed today.
- Thespis added an actor to interact with the chorus, and won the first drama competition in 534 BC, thus are actors to this day called "thespians".
- Aeschylus is considered the earliest playwright & introduced the idea of an antagonist.

- Sophocles added the concept of a third actor to the play.
- Euripedes and Aristophanes developed plays with more realism and dialogue.
- major theatres were constructed at this time, notably at Delphi and the Acropolis.
- competitions drew as many as 30,000 spectators.
- plays were performed in the day time (no electric lights!)
- actors wore masks - some say which helped to amplify the voice and show characters through exaggerated features.
- there were no costumes or sets, the focus was on the chorus and later, the actors.
- only men acted.
- tragedy (literally goat song) told a story intended to teach religious lessons, and the right and wrong path in life.
- tragic protagonist is the one who refuses to accept fate, either out of weakness or strength.
- examples are: Oedipus Rex, Agamemnon, Orestes..
- Aristophanes wrote comedy - a type of lampoon of high brow culture.
- comedy relied on satire, topical issues of the day and made fun of celebrities (namely tragic writers).
- classic comedy types were born of this time, such as the miser, the grouch, the arrogant, etc and relied on stories of mistaken identity, romances and situational humour.
- the end of Greek times was heralded by the death of Sophocles, the arrival of the Spartans and times of war.

source: The ELAC Guide to Ancient Greece

<http://www.perspicacity.com/elactheatre/library/pedia/greek.htm>

## Shakespearean Times

- the Renaissance is the name given to a period of history that lasted from about the 14th, 15th and 16th century (between the Middle Ages and the Industrial Revolution).
- the Renaissance began in Italy about 1300, and spread throughout Europe over the next 200 years.
- it swept away customs and institutions that had dominated Europe for a thousand years.
- meaning "rebirth", it marked the transition from the medieval world to modern thinking.
- this era marks the work of many great writers, poets, artists, composers and scholars.
- the Elizabethan Age was named for Elizabeth I, Queen of England, who ruled from 1558 to 1603.
- Shakespeare lived 1564 to 1616, (he was born the same year in which Michelangelo died).
- Other playwrights of note are Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson, and in later years, Moliere.
- Milton and Donne are poets of note from the period.
- leading up to this time, theatres had been closed for about a thousand years - the church believed it to encourage sloth and viewed entertainment as sinful.
- travelling troupes, fairs and puppets shows moved from town to town as the theatre was banned.
- the first theatre, The Theatre, was built in London in 1576 by James Burbage.
- other theatres, The Curtain, The Rose, The Globe, and The Fortune open in the following years.
- 1592 - 94, the theatre is closed often with the spread of the plague.
- in 1590, plays had little more claim to literary distinction than comic books do today.

- Shakespeare wrote for all people and his work has had a huge impact on the development of language.
- some 1,500 new words in the English language are accredited to his work.

## **Positions in the Theatre Company**

*Player* - the main actors, they were also "sharers" which meant they held shares in the theatre and were paid from the profits.

*Hired Men* - other actors hired on to fill parts, were paid a wage and did not receive profits. Young boys apprenticed with the company as "gophers" and played the roles of women. They were not paid much.

*Book Keeper* - person hired to copy the play (by hand), and the parts for each actor, and an outline which was pinned up backstage for actors as a guide. Actors would only receive a copy of their specific part, not the entire play. The play was carefully guarded and locked up to prevent it being stolen.

*Tiremen* - a very important position in the company. This person was responsible for all of the costumes. Costumes were worth a lot of money (often donated cast offs from the nobility) and were treated very carefully. With no set to rely upon, the actors were transformed through costume.

*Writer* - hired to supply plays. Play writers were known as poets, because all serious plays were written in verse. They might be asked to write new plays, or work on someone else's play - just a job like any other. Not particularly well paid either.

*Stage Keeper* - responsible for cleaning the stage and for carrying the props on the stage.

*Musician* - hired to play sackbuts (like trombones) and drums. Music helped provide a set for the scene, and added emotional qualities.

*Gatherer* - responsible for taking money from audiences. People paid a penny to stand, an extra penny to sit, and a third penny for a cushion in the upper balcony.

## Neo-Classical Theatre

- Classicism is a philosophy of art and life that emphasizes order, balance and simplicity.
- Ancient Greeks were the first great classicists - later, the Romans, French, English and others produced classical movements.
- the Restoration period marked a Neo-Classical movement (1600 to 1700), modelled on the classics of Greece and Rome.
- reason and restraint became the standard for writing.
- John Dryden became the leading poet, critic and dramatist - upholding common sense, moderation and conformity as the ideal.
- Charles II encouraged new playhouses to be built and a renewed interest in drama.
- noted for elaborate scenery, costumes and lighting.
- women for the first time were allowed on stage to act!
- actors employed highly particular ways of standing, speaking and gesturing.
- two types of drama: 1) the heroic tragedy and 2) the comedy of manners.

### **The Heroic Tragedy**

- heroes and heroines faced exaggerated conflicts between love and honour.
- characters expressed noble ideals in high sounding speeches (couplets).
- example: Dryden, All for Love, based on Shakespeare's Antony and Cleopatra.

### **The Comedy of Manners**

- pictures the carefree, immoral world of the aristocracy.
- brilliant, witty comedies.
- "virtue" comes from succeeding in catching a lover or cuckolding a husband without getting caught.
- "honor" comes from reputation, not integrity.
- "witty" — saying things in clever ways.
- influenced by the comedies of Moliere in France.
- example: Tartuffe, by Moliere; or The Country Wife, by Wycherley.

## Realism & Contemporary Theatre

- the 19th century began a period characterized by naturalism and realism.
- playwrights such as *Ibsen, Chekhov, Shaw, and Strindberg* led the way in this new type of theatre which reflected a language and style more natural to real life - excess and melodrama play lesser role.
- actors began to use the "fourth wall", imagining a wall where the audience sits, keeping the belief entirely in the scene and not speaking to the audience.
- *Stanislavski* (see Unit 3, Acting Technique for more information) developed Method Acting for the new theatre. The "Method" requires actors to approach their work from a personal response, identifying the psychological and emotional life of a character.
- playwrights were concerned with social and economical problems of the day - rather than provide an escape, theatre engaged in discussion and illumination.
- playwrights gave: characters specific stage directions; characters are individuals - not stereotypes, heroes and heroines; detail to physical appearance of character.
- Theatre repertoire also expanded to include burlesque, music halls and lyric opera. The Industrial Revolution brought more people into the city and there was a call for more popular "vulgar" entertainment.
- in the early part of the 20th century, an artistic revolt begins against the commercial stage. Similarly, artists, musicians and dancers are experimenting further with the concept of art.
- two directions were: 1) increasingly graphic and more sophisticated forms of realism; and 2) move into symbolism and non-illusionistic forms of theatre. Both involve experimentation in aesthetic and technical aspects of the theatre.

- increasing use of experimental sound, lighting, costume and innovation in design of sets.
- theatre played many roles: sometimes meant to capture the inner landscape of the mind and the collective unconscious; or to move people to social action; or to re-examine older, alternative traditions in the East; to explore national identity; or to provide drama in education.



## World Theatre

- **Bunraku** is a form of Japanese puppetry and storytelling.
  - the form goes back about 1,000 years - but became most popular about 300 years ago.
  - it is enjoying a revival today in modern times, but is not the national passion it once was.
  - tells old tales, sometimes stories about history, is very traditional.
  - often involves confucian teachings(ie: loyalty over personal feelings).
  - the artists strive for realism in the puppets.
  - the puppets are about a metre tall, may have moveable eyes, eyebrows and jaws.
  - may take three puppeteers to move one puppet.
  - musicians played an important role in the play.
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- **Noh** is a form of Japanese theatre.
  - highly stylized performances.
  - developed in the 1300's.
  - 80 different characters in traditional Noh theatre
  - slow-moving, dignified and elegant.
  - performers use masks, made of wood.
  - each mask shows the mood and character of the part.
  - a chorus chants much of the story to music of a flute and drums
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- **Kabuki** dates back to the 1600's.
  - dance-dramas which are similar to Noh, but is somewhat livelier and easier to understand.
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- **Beijing Opera** (also called Peking Opera) has existed over 200 years.
  - it is regarded as the highest expression of Chinese culture.
  - there are thousands of pieces, inspired by the history and literature of China (and some from the west).

- involve elaborate costumes and painted faces to represent different characters.
- yellow and white = cunning; red = upright and loyal; black = valour and wisdom; blue and green = rebellious heroes; gold and silver = mystic or supernatural.
- it is interesting to read up on China's Cultural Revolution to see the effect government has had on culture and it's people.
  
- **Indonesian Shadow Puppets** are made from flat shapes out of leather or wood.
- pieces are attached to sticks for movement.
- the puppeteer sits in back of a white screen and moves the puppets to enact the story.
- a lamp throws the shadow of the puppets onto the screen.
- the puppeteer tells the story and speaks the part of each puppet.
  
- **Brazil's Theatre of the Oppressed** has gained international recognition for it's political style.
- *Augusto Boal*, the director, believes completely in the transformative power of theatre.
- using both both actors and no-actors, they move theatre into the streets in guerilla fashion.
- it can take on an invisible form, in the street, masquerading as "real-life" discussion of current political issues (in a repressive regime this activity can be seen as very dangerous).
- as word of Boal's work spread, other groups formed around the world and took on various forms - all using theatre as an agent for change and activism.

## **The Role of the Trickster & the Fool**

- a pygmy clown performed as a jester of the court of Pharaoh Dadkeri Assi during Egypt's 5th Dynasty about 2500 BC.
- Aztec fools, dwarf clowns, and hunchback buffoons were among the treasures Cortez took back (some say stole) from the Aztec Nation and brought to Pope Clement VII.
- most Native American nations had some type of clown character - they played an important role in the social and religious life of the nation, and in some cases were believed to be able to cure certain diseases.
- Court Jesters were given great freedom of speech; often were the only one to speak out against the ruler's ideas, and through humour, able to affect policy.
- Yu Sze, a jester to Chinese Emperor Shih Huang-Ti, was able to save thousands of lives when he joking talked the Emperor out of plans to paint the Great Wall of China. Yu Sze is considered a national hero today.
- during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, clowning was a theatrical art form.
- William Kemp and Richard Armin were clowns in Shakespeare's troupe (Kemp was even part owner of the Globe Theatre).
- Kemp specialized in playing the stupid country bumpkin type character - a style which would later become known as the Auguste.
- Armin specialized in playing court jester style fools. (He wrote a book on famous court jesters, one of the first on clown history published)
- the clowns would ad-lib in Shakespeare's plays, and scholars believe that their words were then incorporated into the scripts.

## **An actor's view on the Fool: "Interview with Alec McCowen"**

"I found the Fool in King Lear a most difficult part because the lines are practically incomprehensible nowadays and because we're not quite sure what a Fool is. He's not Morecambe and Wise. There's no counterpart today. I couldn't get near the part. It was goobledygook. Or it was until I found an "as if", which was simply recalling myself as a small boy, when my father, who was the "as if" King Lear, would come from work tired, angry and spikey, often very bad-tempered, and I used to keep him sweet; i used to amuse him, and tried to stop the row with my mother about the food being late or not what he wanted or whatever. I would cavort about and make him laugh. It's strange how vivid childhood memories are: I work from them a great deal. And once I remembered that, the part lost all stress for me. The struggle went out of it."

(From: About Acting, Peter Barkworth. Methuen, UK. 2001)

## Commedia del Arte

- comedy developed in the 16th century in Italy.
- modern influence can be seen in troupes such as Monty Python's Flying Circus and Kids in the Hall (Canadian), and even Bugs Bunny.
- is based on timing, physical comedy, mask, improvisation and the importance of big, broad characterizations.
- stock characters include: Pedrolino, Arlecchino, Gratiano, Pantalone, Isabella, Lelio, Capitano and various villains.
- all are standard characters, either "masters", "slaves", "lovers" or "villains".
- Masters, such as Pantalone, are old, crude, greedy, paranoid and of limited intelligence; Gratiano is usually a miserly lawyer (they are called vecchi).
- Servants, such as Pedrolino and Arlecchino (Harlequin) are clever, quick and always looking to trick the master (they are called zanni).
- 3 types of comic characters: the 1st Zany was a male servant who was a clever rogue often plotting against the masters; the 2nd Zany was a stupid male servant caught up in the 1st Zany's plans and ends up a victim of his pranks; the 3rd Zany was a female servant (actually played by a woman!), who would participate in schemes and provide a romantic story among the servants.
- Lovers - are in love (called amarusi).
- Capitano is a blustering Spanish captain who is afraid of his own shadow.

## **Clown Character**

- first recorded about 2270 BC in Egypt.
- comic spirit of clowning exists in every culture.
- ancient craft speaks to that which is human in all of us.
- many styles of clown and may know a variety of skills as a performer, such as: juggling, magic, contortion, acrobatics, story telling, puppetry, tight rope walking, singing and clever dialogue.
- known by their ludicrous antics, distinctive costume, and buffoonery.
- characterized by broad, graphic humour, absurd situations and vigorous physical action.