

WESTERN WORLD THEATRE HISTORY

From Greek Theatre to Absurdism

Greek Theatre – 500 BC

- 'Thespis' – the first actor (thespian)
- Festival of Dionysis – God of fertility and wine
- Amphitheatres – hold 20,000 people
- All plays performed in the daytime and lasted several hours
- The principle actors performed on 'skene' and the chorus in the 'orchestra'
- All male actors
- Use of masks
- Tragedies – Aeschylus, Sophocles (Oedipus Rex), Euripides. Performed at spring festival
- Comedies – Aristophanes, Menander. Performed at the winter festival.
- Euripides inspired the naturalistic approach to theatre
- Music and dancing, not so much delivering of lines
- Actors wore thick clothing and big shoes to help them to stand out to those at the back of the amphitheatre

Roman Theatre

- Romans 'borrowed' theatre from the Greeks, yet we identify with Roman theatre more today
- Took two forms: *Fabula Palliata* (Greek plays translated into Latin – subplots were introduced, and more complex characters) and *Fabula Tagata* (farcical and physical theatre)
- Gladiators, chariot races – other entertainment. Less influenced by religion and ceremony
- Few roman plays exist today
- Romans introduced the raised stage and more vigorous acting style
- The Church of Rome disapproved of theatre – many of the Roman plays were coarse
- Playwrights: Plautus and Terence
- Audience were rude and loud so plays were mimed and repeated

Roman Theatre

- Actors developed a kind of code:
 - A black wig meant the character was a young man
 - A gray wig meant the character was an old man
 - A red wig meant the character was a slave
 - A white robe meant the character was an old man
 - A purple robe meant the character was a young man
 - A yellow robe meant the character was a woman. (This was needed in early Roman theatre, as originally female characters were played by men, however as the Roman theatre progressed, woman slaves took the roles of women in plays.)
 - A yellow tassel meant the character was a god.

Medieval Theatre

- The Church needed to be popular so, ironically, used theatre to bring back its popularity (despite bringing theatre down in Roman ages) by communicating religious stories through acting during special holidays (e.g. Christmas)
- Drama moved out of the Church and into the streets. Guilds began to do performances
- Passion plays, morality plays, miracle plays, mystery plays – close connection to the Church but stock characters introduced
- Travelling troupes introduced stock characters
- Theatre/Plays kept alive by street performers ('jongleurs') jugglers, acrobats, animal trainers, street actors
- During the reformation, theatre became further secularized

Renaissance & Reformation

- 15th and 16th Century theatre
- 'Renaissance' means 'rebirth' – of rediscovery of the classical arts which influenced theatre development
- Italy – proscenium stage developed
- In other parts of Europe, plays were still performed in courtyards (on apron stages surrounded by galleries)
- Emphasis was on dialogue rather than action
- Moralistic tones to the plays
- Troupes/companies of actors developed a repertory of plays. Companies were owned by wealthier types, or by actors themselves
- Simple plots
- The Protestant Reformation, when the Protestant Church broke from the Catholic Church, from doing classic plays and tended toward works of a general, non-political and non-religious nature
- Puritans opposed the theatre
- Fear of the plague influenced theatre-going
- Civil unrest (through drinking) was an issue
- Upper class women didn't attend. They thought theatre was below them
- Domination of theatre by the state
- Some women were eventually allowed to act in religious plays
- Moliere was a well-known playwright in the Restoration period.

Commedia dell'Arte

- Improvised theatre
- Originated in Italy in 1560s
- No scenery and few props used
- No scripts, just scenarios to work from
- Comic interludes – lazzi
- Stock characters – lovers, masters, servants
- Servants = zanni
- Term 'slapstick' from Arlecchino's stick he banged around the place
- 13-14 members in a troupe (no women)

Elizabethan Theatre

- Willaim Shakespeare – 1564 – 1616
- Wrote and acted in plays
- Other playwrights include: Christopher Marlow and Ben Jonson
- Was a shareholder in his acting company – The Lord Chamberlain's Men and The King's Men (was a favourite of King James I)
- Part owner of the Globe Theatre and Blackfriar's Theatre
- Wrote tragedies, comedies, histories and tragi-comedies, as well as sonnets
- Had a family in Stratford-Upon-Avon. Rarely saw them.
- Characters were realistic, but
- Actors were somewhat more naturalistic, but 'big' acting was still Shakespeare's thing
- English Civil War (1642) – Theatre was banned in London

Eighteenth Century Theatre

- Theatre dominated by David Garrick – who emphasised a much more natural way of speaking and acting
- He directly influenced the growth of the realism and naturalism movements
- He strongly encouraged the proscenium theatre – not the apron style of Shakespeare's day
- 18th Century – commercial theatre found it's way to North America

Nineteenth Century Theatre

- Industrial Revolution
- Gas lighting introduced in 1817
- By the end of the 1800's, electric lighting was being used to light the stage
- Melodrama grew – emphasis not on content, but on big acting and spectacle
- Basic technology (for effects/using props) started to be used
- Great playwrights include: Henrik Ibsen, George Bernard Shaw, Anton Chekov
- Stanislavsky's ideas about the art of acting (his 'method') were brought to the fore – and are still considered well worthy today.

Twentieth Century Theatre

- Furthering ideas on realism, naturalism. Introducing symbolism, impressionism, expressionism, surrealism, stylized anti-realism (absurdism, theatre of cruelty), post-modernism
- Major musicals performed e.g *Porgy and Bess*, *Oklahoma*, *Miss Saigon*, *The Phantom of the Opera*
- The cost to produce shows makes it difficult for theatre to compete with Hollywood
- Playwrights: Arthur Miller, Samuel Beckett, Bertolt Brecht, Antonin Artaud