

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

NORTH AMERICAN THEATRE

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Overview From its inception, theatre in America had more of an entertainment and instructional role than perhaps classical Greek and Roman theatre. At the same time, theatre tended to be divided into two different types: the entertainment for the elite, with clear antecedents in European beaux arts, and rather bawdy fun for the new nation, which found a pressure release for social tension in its minstrel shows, exotically romantic Wild West enactments, and skits by scantily clad actresses. As the nation's borders stopped expanding and evolving and technology made film and radio a more convenient place for performance, the theatre's role changed. It still relied on the immediacy of emotional impact, but it also served as a proving ground for future films or hit musical recordings, and its content became more fraught with politically or psychologically-charged messages.

ANCIENT PERIOD

PreHistory

Clovis culture (18,000 – 8,000 BC):The Clovis culture artifacts suggest that the Clovis peoples practiced a shamanistic form of religion that incorporated dances, enactments, and the use of drums and rattles (especially those made of turtle shells).

Classical

Southwest Pueblo (1200 BCE – 1300 AC): Pueblo and Hopi Indians practiced different types of dances that were narratives that told a story, particularly in conjunction with an important date. They were performed only with the individuals in their close community and even now are secret. The Turtle Dance and Eagle Dance were other dances that were performed in conjunction with phases of the moon, and which represented a ritual of respect to nature, prayers for rain, and a transfer of divine energy. In conjunction with the performance were the creation of figurines used in conjunction with the Kachina religions, which asserts that there are divine being in the world around us, and they act as intermediaries between humans and God. Important in the narratives are the trickster figures, the Kokopeli.

Eastern Woodlands (1000 BCE – 1000 AD):Blended with dance and music, the Iriquois, Seneca, Mohawks, and others performed both social and religious dance / theatrical enactments. Dances such as the Stick Dance, Smoke Dance, and the Rabbit Dance incorporate folkloric tales. For example, the Rabbit Dance is a dance that shows gratitude for the rabbits for providing valuable sustenance. It features hunters in the forest, and then a big rabbit that thumps his leg a prescribed number of times. Other traditional works are similar in the sense that they both incorporate everyday experiences and they instruct the people to feel gratitude, thus building social harmony.

Colonial (Early Modern)

Spanish Colonies: Theatre in the form of religious pageants was prevalent in the Spanish-controlled parts of North America, especially during in Semana Santa (Holy Week). The missions of Texas and California used productions to instruct the indigenous peoples in Biblical stories, and they illustrated history and lessons. The theatres incorporated elements of indigenous beliefs and traditions, and many of the saints took on aspects of the indigenous deities.

English Colonies: The earliest theatre in the English colonies in Williamsburg, Virginia in 1716. Later, Charleston, South Carolina, the Dock Street Theatre. Performances included plays by Shakespeare. Theatre was not allowed by the Puritans in Massachusetts.

Revolutionary War theatre –Some of the anxiety about theatre (and potential decadence) was overcome by the staging of political (and highly propandistic) plays by Hugh Henry Brackenridge which were about heroism, sacrifice, and nation-building.

Nineteenth Century

Walnut Street Theater, Philadelphia: It was perhaps the first formal theatre in the new republic. Established in 1809, with plays by Sheridan, Goldsmith, Shakespeare and later, adaptations of novels, such as *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the Walnut Street Theatre bridged the culture of Europe and America.

Minstrel Show: Featured white actors in blackface, performing comic skits, buffoon / clownish skits and slapstick. There were a number of racist themes. These were performed in theatres and also on Mississippi steamboats in "showboat theater."

Victorian Burlesque: Entertaining spectacles featuring dancing, music, and scantily dressed women. "Polite society" considered them roue and immoral even though they were very popular, and tended to be the first kind of theatre to establish themselves in gold mining camps, Western frontier towns, and river towns.

Melodramas and Farces: They were perhaps the most popular theatrical form in the young nation, and they provided playwrights an opportunity to see their work performed, and to earn a living. The most popular of the plays included James Nelson Barker's *Superstition; or, the Fanatic Father*, Anna Cora Mowatt's *Fashion; or, Life in New York*, Nathaniel Bannister's *Putnam*, the *Iron Son of '76*, Dion Boucicault's *The Octoroon; or, Life in Louisiana*, and Cornelius Mathews's *Witchcraft; or, the Martyrs of Salem*. Late 19th century playwrights include David Belasco, Steele MacKaye, William Dean Howells, Dion Boucicault, and Clyde Fitch.

Twentieth Century

Vaudeville: Emerged in the early twentieth century, vaudeville acts included burlesque comedies, stand-up comedians, short one-act skits, and song and dance. They were considered "low" culture, but nevertheless were very influential, especially as the film industry developed. Stock characters appeared in film, especially those that challenged racial, class, and gender role boundaries.

Revues: A pastiche of sketches, comedy routines, music, dancing (Ziegfried dancing girls). Most revues took place in population centers such as New York, San Francisco, and Chicago, and they tended to stay in one location for an entire season.

Expressionist Theatre: Influenced by the symbolist poets of the fin-de-siecle, the most acclaimed expressionist playwright was Eugene O'Neill, with *The Glass Menagerie*, *The Iceman Cometh*, *Long Day's Journey into Night*. His depictions of family drama, individual angst, and anxiety about social roles and expectations owed a great deal to Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and German expressionists such as E. T. A. Hoffmann.

Realistic Theatre: Examples include Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*, Lillian Hellman's *Little Foxes*. Many early plays were one-act plays performed in the Provincetown Theatre near Cape Cod, Massachusetts. The themes tended to be bold, potentially controversial, as in *Trifles*, which is a "payback" drama that satisfies an audience hungry for social justice and female empowerment.

Political Theatre: Led by Arthur Miller (*Death of a Salesman*, *The Crucible*). Miller and other authors wrote to allegorize the Cold War dynamics, which pitted people against each other and resulted in black lists and very serious accusations of treason. The plays were extremely intense and dark; in retrospect it might have been more effective to take a lesson from Renaissance Europe (Rabelais, in particular) and choose satire. Fiction writers chose that direction (*Catch-22* being perhaps the most famous example), and they achieved fame and fortune. This is not to say that Arthur Miller did not; it is just that his work was narrowly framed.

Protest Theatre: During the 1920s and 1930s, influences of socialism and communistic activism found effective vehicles in plays that embodied their values. For example, Christopher Odets' *Waiting for Lefty* (1935) has to do with taxi drivers planning a strike and has as its foundation social inequality and a desire to make things right.

Musical Theatre: Musical theatre was a new genre that incorporated music (and sometimes dance) with the plot, in which the songs were perhaps more important than the dialogue in advancing the plot. *Oklahoma!* (Richard

Rodgers, music and Oscar Hammerstein, lyrics) was the first breakthrough musical theatre, which debuted on Broadway on March 31, 1943 and ran for 2,212 performances. It was based on Lynn Riggs's 1931 play, *Green Grow the Lilacs* which was set in Oklahoma Territory outside the town of Claremore in 1906. Other important works of musical theatre include *The Pajama Game*, *Bye Bye Birdie*, *West Side Story*, *Show Boat*, *The Fantasticks* (the world's longest-running musical),

Civil Rights Theatre: The grassroots movement of African-Americans to gain the right to vote and to roll back Jim Crow laws (*Plessy vs. Ferguson*) found gratifying expression in theatre (often being adapted into film). Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* was perhaps the most widely acclaimed. Other plays included *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner*.

Avant-Garde and Experimental Theatre: They were concentrated in Off-Broadway theatres in New York and also theatres in San Francisco and Chicago. Examples included La MaMa (New York), Corner Theatre (New York), Broom Street Theatre (Madison, WI), Nature Theater of Oklahoma (Theater company – New York City). Experimental plays in the 1960s included *Hair!* (perhaps the most well-known), and Rochelle Owens's *Futz*.

Broadway: In New York, mainstream plays targeted not just the local audiences of New York, Connecticut and New Jersey, but also a growing number of tourists who made New York City their destination, principally because of the Theatre District. The theatre tourists were often theatre groups from high schools from throughout the U.S., and they often sought plays that they could later perform in their own towns. For that reason, some of the most popular were ones that had a decided "Americana" feel, were perhaps musicals, and also had a love story at the core, such as *The Music Man*, and *The Fantasticks*. Some of the examples of Broadway successes included Neil Simon (*Barefoot in the Park*, *Brighton Beach Memoirs*, *The Sunshine Boys*, *Lost in Yonkers*), Sam Shepard (*Fool for Love*, *Mad Dog Blues*, *Curse of the Starving Class*), David Mamet (*Glengarry, Glenross*; *House of Games*, *Speed-the-Plow*), Harvey Fierstein (*Torch Song Trilogy*, *La Cage au Falles*, *Hairspray*)

Activist Theatre: Social justice became an extremely important focus, and in the 1990s and early 2000s, almost all successful new plays had a political message. They included *Miss Saigon* and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*. Later, plays such as *Hamilton* blended social activism, political messages, and "feel good" cathartic affirmation of self and the idea of infinite transformation.

Discussion/Questions

1. Early theatrical performances in pre-colonial and indigenous cultures centered around religious ceremonies and the enactment of beliefs. What were some of the beliefs that were enacted through participative rituals involving audiences? Why was theatre (or at least a theatrical enactment) effective?
2. The theatre that was considered dangerously decadent in Restoration England became acceptable in Colonial America, primarily because it became a place to reinforce values and a sense of identity apart from England. Explain how that happened, and why.
3. In the 19th century, theatre bifurcated into two separate paths: popular "low" culture and entertainment, and the "high" culture of European-influenced theatrical productions. Name examples of each and explain their similarities, differences, and purposes that they served.
4. In the twentieth century, American theatre split and went down different paths. On the one hand, popular theatre (including musical theatre) reinforced the values of Middle America. But, on the other hand, theatre became the voice of the marginalized and those who lacked a voice, and it both subverted and supported social change and equality. Find examples of the theatre of the mainstream and of the activist / subversive fringe, and explain why they were popular with their audiences.

Readings

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