

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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WESTERN EUROPEAN CULTURE - Theatre

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ANCIENT PERIOD

Frontier. Once again we imagine Western Europe, the western frontier of the Roman Empire, to have been barren of literary culture in pre-Christian times, and we can go farther and doubt that there were even non-theatrical performances at the time on the western frontier—it being possible, always, that a non-writing, even non-verbal dramatic tradition could establish itself. Therefore in looking for the origins of western European drama we will need to begin with the dramatic actions of the early Christian Church, as it gradually replaced the declining Roman Empire. We may thus start by reminding ourselves that for the fourth century St. Augustine, one of the culture giants for the values of the early Christian world, the stage was a home of vice and wickedness, and the practice of simulating others' moods and behaviors an inherently wasteful use of the mind. Thus even in the new theater world, Roman theater as it was experienced by the first Christian intellectuals, there was resistance to the notion of the theatrical.

MEDIAEVAL

Division. Two totally diverse forms of theatrical life emerge from the largely empty record of the first five centuries. The Byzantine Empire, in its center, Constantinople, sported two theaters, at which, according to slight surviving evidence, comedies, dances, and tragedies were performed to enthusiastic audiences. (The same, here and there in pre-decline Rome, was to be found, for there the great work of Plautus and Terence continued to live sporadically among the scattered intelligentsia.) The other form of theatrical life known to us from western Europe is itinerant bands of performers of skits or rural plays, of which we know nothing textual now, except that the Church considered them pagan and dangerous.

Church. Already early in the mediaeval period, churches in Europe had begun staging small plays illustrating biblical topics; these plays were performed in connection with the church calendar, and increasingly were coordinated with events in the drama the mass unfolded. Using for stage properties many of the appurtenances of the mass—censers, altars, vestments—the makers of these small dramas developed their own kind of liturgical pre drama, the first written and recorded being *Whom do you seek?*, an Easter trope—see entry on music in Western Europe—composed around 925. By the tenth century formal dramatic work had set in, centered as the surviving work all is, around Church festivals and the appurtenances of the mass. The first vivid theatrical creator was Hroswitha (935-973), a northern German canoness, who wrote six plays modelled on the comedies of Terence, the earliest master of Latin drama. They are the first known plays written by a female dramatist, and the first truly recognizable plays of the Western postclassical period.

High Middle Ages. By the high middle ages liturgical theater—focused on the practice and theology of the Catholic mass—was springing up around every major worship center in western Europe. One byproduct of these theatrical dramas was the Feast of Fool thematic, in which comic episodes would be set aside in which the lesser clergy could mock their pompous seniors, and even the way—though never the substance of the way--the seniors dealt with the mass. It cannot have been long, given this turn to

internal critique, that performances of religious plays outside the church began to crop up. Smaller playlets were joined to larger, and before long substantial small plays, still of course built out of Christian thematics, were omnipresent in western Europe.

In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries there was an increase in the number of religious plays performed outside the church, and frequently in the correspondingly growing number of towns in which people could gather for entertainment. A number of twelfth century plays remain, like *The Mystery of Adam* (1150) or a variety of contemporary plays in French, plays on *The Resurrection* or *The Three Magi*.

Cycles. In the following two and a half centuries, to the brink of the Renaissance, there was rapid development of towns, new political structures, intercity and even international trade, and with this growth there was a corresponding growth of mystery plays and morality plays, the former often staged in the form of play-cycles (The York cycle, 48 plays); (The Chester cycle, 24 plays); the Wakefield cycle, 32 plays)—to pick only examples from the British Isles, while the fact was that such large scale dramatic creations were springing up throughout Europe ;at a festival drama cycle in Valenciennes France (1547) for instance, seventy two actors, mostly local, performed in more than one hundred roles. The diversity of roles increasingly included, as we will not be surprised to know, thoroughly secular role intruders—villains, clowns, devils—lest we forget that this drama was on its way to eventual transformation into the secular powers of Renaissance English drama.

The secular. Secular dramatic performances gradually grew up throughout Europe. Many of these 'plays,' like *The Play of the Greenwood* (1276) by Adam de la Halle, were full of satirical scenes, ghosts, and fairies, clearly cutting a path into the real/imaginary world lived by the peasant on the street. Satirical plays were created throughout the continent after the thirteenth century—usually directing their barbs at the corrupt and comical in or out of the church. The best known of these satirists is the German Hans Sachs (1494-1576), to whom we are indebted for 198 satire-plays.

Actors. As the drama gradually passed away from its dependence on the church, professional actors appeared performing both in England and across the channel. The end of the strictly mediaeval period of drama history, in Europe, was approaching, with the decline in the authority of the Roman Catholic Church, with the Protestant Reformation, and in fact—from the mid sixteenth century on-- with the banning of religious theater in many countries.

RENAISSANCE

Commedia dell' arte. From 1575 on, originating in Italy, the *Commedia dell'arte* was a loosely organized actor-centered kind of theatrical movement, which made its way across Europe—let's say a far more urban and sophisticated folk theater move than that of the fairly disorganized and folksy bands of jongleurs and comedians who had for centuries provided a base level of entertainment for country Europeans. The *commedia* plays utilized stock characters—the *lover*, the *master*, the *servant*—involving a cast of thirteen or fourteen, who took a share of the company's profits—whose fortunes and slapstick misfortunes became stock material for 'the masses' in the following centuries, and who remain til today reminders of the great comedic traditions of Plautus.

Playhouses. Building on many native theatrical traditions, and meeting entertainment needs in the more cohesive and sophisticated cities, 'companies of players'—or equivalents in other countries than Britain—were formed, attached to the households of leading aristocrats—as inhouse performers. So much appreciated were these relatively proficient actors, something new, that the older acting groups, were banned and labelled 'vagabonds.' In this case the special patronage of the Queen, Elizabeth I, was important in supporting the new acting companies. Theaters sprang up in the suburbs of major cities, from London to Paris. The popularity of this new form of entertainment—after all we're talking about Elizabethan drama in England, and one of the world's most creative stage moments—was high throughout the sixteenth century. It was a period during which Shakespeare and Marlowe, to name only two of many brilliant writers, showed how to be both a popular dramatist and a complex, erudite, and potently imaginative playwright, touching the farthest limits of human thought in speech. It was a period of seeming incandescent power but it ran out into the roadblock of the Puritan Revolution, and of the

powerful contempt of Charles I for anything like public entertainment; in 1642, at the outbreak of the English Civil War, the performance of all plays was banned within the city of London.

SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

Restoration. With the end of the Civil War (1642-1651) the Restoration Theater—Congreve and Wycherley will spring to mind—was ready to make its own of the thriving British theater of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. At that point-- the greatest period of truly people-based, genius-led, widely ranging theater in British history comes to a sliding transition. But it is at that point that we need to step back, for there is no limiting ourselves to the story in England.

Spain and France—whose theatrical greatneses belong to the same brilliant rush of discovery which had bowled us over when we discovered Shakespeare, Marlowe, or Kyd—were deploying their theatrical mastery at the same time that the British were creating a new dramatic world around the Globe Theater, in the sixteenth century. In France, Moliere, (1622-1673), Corneille (1606-1684), and Racine (1639-1699); in Spain Lope de Vega (1562-1635) and Calderon de la Barca (1600-1681): both sets of names reference powerful theatrical minds which share with Shakespeare their intrepid grasp of the whole strange human adventure, and do so in poetic language which is at the same intertwined with the rough hewn street base of the writer's language. Never before, since ancient Athenian audiences gathered in outside theaters for awe of their great tragedians, has civic culture aligned so deeply with artistic power.

EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Bourgeoisie. The middle class began to replace the aristocracy—which was itself declining as a social force—and to require entertainment that reflected its own values. Hundreds of new theaters were built across Europe at this time--Milan's La Scala opera house, completed in 1778, provided room for more than 2000 spectators--and in lieu of great dramatists there was a fervent theatrical industry, with acting companies, distinguished actors, and various kinds of popular spectacle, to meet the leading requirements of the time. Spectacles—what were called 'English opera'--were immensely popular, and enthralled audiences with their carnivalesque showmanship, magic tricks, flying actors and fireworks; the Disneyesque crowd pleasers of the eighteenth century stage throughout Europe.

Audiences. (Many audiences—higher in class and education—who had sucked in their breath at the elegance, or the careful irony, of Moliere, were now content with the *drame bourgeois* of Diderot the encyclopédiste, the sharp edged satirical dramas of Voltaire, or the tearful, and ultimately feel-good comedies of Colly Cibber in England. What may have fallen short in inherent artistic power, on the eighteenth century stage, was compensated by the great acting of geniuses like David Garrick, the greatest of interpreters of Shakespeare, who became Manager of the Drury Lane Theater in London, setting as he did demanding new standards for stagecraft and décor—and, in a move typical of the time, clearing the spectators off the stage, as Voltaire had also done in France.

Sturm und Drang. Achievements were boiling on the German stage where the *Sturm und Drang* movement was taking the sentimental turn of French and English drama into far deeper and nobler perspectives, frequently harking back to the Greek foundations, and making the verse theater of such as Lessing, Goethe, and Schiller into masterpieces of world theater.

NINETEENTH CENTURY

Feeling. The distinguished *Sturm und Drang* movement in Germany, which straddled the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, brought to the European theater a new stress on *Empfindsamkeit*, feeling or sensibility, as well as on the new elements of melodrama, which had entered the western theatrical scene with Kotzebue's *Misanthropy and Repentance* (1789). In Germany, especially, there was a move toward new realism and accuracy in historical stage settings and costumes. As the century—not the greatest for either drama or theater—wound on, two kinds of taste began to make their claims, and to speak for distinct publics: these were the claims of realism, the attempt to reestablish on stage the mood

and actual properties of another historical moment, and, on the other hands, the taste for symbolism and expressionism—which were just beginning to acquire their voices

Self-awareness. While actual staging practices, for example those promoted by Georg II, Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, brought increasing historical fidelity to staging, and laid the groundwork for Wagner's highly dramatic scenographies of Teutonic scenes of love and war, another kind of realism, that of Henrik Ibsen in Norway, made for a major addition to work theatrics. In the twenty five plays he wrote at the end of the century, he covered the realities of marital break up, personal disintegration, shame, gross ambition, cynicism, and did so in a way that captured not only the fascination of the new middle class, but its developing sense of self-awareness. Toward the end of the century, a number of other urbane playwrights, some British, showed the middle class how to laugh at the unstable pendulum of the human condition.

TWENTIETH CENTURY

Change. Twentieth century rebellions in stagecraft, and in the very conception of what theater is, remind us that the 'performing arts' dimension of western drama has, until the twentieth century, and throughout such vivid changes as that from High Mediaeval to Renaissance theater, based itself on a fairly stable concept of what a theater is: a centrally focused tableau for representations of narrative action—no different from what the earliest Greek playwrights presented to their avid audiences. By the twentieth century, in Western Europe, it was clearly time to reconsider this ancient notion of stage and performer; in the poetic dramas of Yeats and the later Ibsen, for instance, there was already abundant evidence of the readiness for change in stage, narration, and acting. We move into an era, starting in the late nineteenth century, in which new techniques of stagecraft, hostility to theatrical realism, and directorial inventiveness have started to remake the theater. In a twentieth century risking all on the battlefield, opening up and revaluing all its social assumptions, and inventing a technological framework for its self-image, it is no wonder that the performance arts of theater reflected the new world creating them.

Stagecraft. Daring new stage designers—the Swiss Adolph Appia, the British Edward Gordon Craig—led the way into a new theatrical aesthetic: according to Craig's *Art of the Theater*(1905) 'the stage director alone would be responsible for harmonizing every aspect of the production—acting, music, colour, movement, design, make up, and lighting...' The path was henceforth open for a wave of new conceptions of stage and what occurs on it. In what turns out to be the century of the director—as far as the theater is concerned—we see a succession of brilliant experiments: Max Reinhardt's sense of the open theater, which led him to stage some of his finest Berlin work out in the air, in circus lots or empty urban spaces; the openness of Italian Futurism, in which Pirandello could reclaim existential mystery for the very thing a play is, and the stage itself, among some of its directors, could become a playground for acrobatics; Erwin Piscator's expressionist theater in Germany (1920's), with its use of expensive machinery like escalators and moving stairways, or cantilever bridges moved up and down; the new (mid-century) French theaters which surrounded the audience on three sides. This is not to say that the century that created Beckett and Brecht, Pirandello and Shaw, was all about technique, but that the European theatrical tradition had settled down to review and revise some of its major characteristics.

Discussion questions

What seem to you the fundamental differences between Ancient Greek theater and that of theater in the European tradition? Why do twentieth century playwrights in Europe still often return to classical drama for their inspiration or take off point? Is historical precedent an important driver for theatrical creation?

What about the twentieth century made it a natural zone for theatrical experimentation? Was there any comparable experimentation in the transition from Mediaeval to Renaissance drama? Or was that a cultural transition point which was in itself a massive experiment in change, from religious drama to Marlowe and Kyd?

How do you distinguish the words *drama*, and *theater*, and do those words seem to you to point to two quite different human developments? Is there a common root to both these developments? Is there some fundamental 'performing and narrating' impulse in human nature? Would it serve some of the purposes of evolutionary biology?

Suggested readings

Benedetti, Jean, *The Art of the Actor*, London, 2005.

Duffy, Eamon, *The Stripping of the Altars: Traditional Religion in England 1400-1580*, New Haven, 1992.

Gurr, Andrew, *The Shakespearean Stage 1574-1642*, Cambridge, 1992.

Hume, Robert, *The Development of English drama in the late seventeenth century*, Oxford, 1976.

McCullough, Christopher, ed., *Theater and Europe (1957-1996)*, New York, 1998.

Williams, Raymond, *Modern Tragedy*, London, 1966.