

# *The HISTORY of THEATRE*

*An Exploration into the Human Story.*





**Okay....**

- It's not the WHOLE history of theatre.
- Just a "*quick*" look at the evolution of Western Theatre.
- Therefore this is not the complete story! Remember there was a lot of other theatre happening around the world.

# GREEK THEATRE

(From 7<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.E)



- Greek theatre was created to celebrate religious festivals.
- A chorus was used to either sing or chant the script.
- It is unknown if *Thespis* was a playwright, an actor or a priest, but he has been credited for creating the “first actor” who broke away from the chorus and would speak to the chorus as an individual character. This is why actors are also known as “Thespians”.
- This led to the creation of character.
- Masks were used to allow the actors to play more than one character.

# Greek Theatre – The creation of Character

The following playwrights contributed to the creation of character:

- *Aeschylus* introduced the idea of using a second and third actor which allowed for interaction between characters.
- *Sophocles* continued the creation of character by using the chorus less, and creating more dialogue between characters.



Greek Theater Performance

# ROMAN THEATRE

(From Approximately the 4<sup>th</sup> Century B.C.E)

- The Romans were greatly influenced by Greek Theatre.
- The word “play” comes from the Latin word “*ludus*” which means recreation or play.



- The Roman playwright Terence introduced the concept of a subplot allowing the audience to contrast the reactions of different characters to the same events or circumstances.
- Roman Theatre was less influenced by religion than Greek theatre.

# ROMAN THEATRE

- The audience was often loud and rude. The audience did not applaud, but rather were always shouting insults and booing.
- Since the audience was so loud, much of the plays were pantomimed and repetitive.
- The actors developed a code which would tell the audience about a character just by looking at them.
- For example:
  - A black wig: the character was a young man
  - A red wig: the character was a slave.
  - A yellow robe: the character was a woman
  - A yellow tassel: the character was a god.



# Medieval European Theatre

(Approximately began in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century)

- After the fall of the Roman Empire, cities were abandoned, and Europe became increasingly more agricultural.
- After several hundred years, towns re-emerged.
- The Roman Catholic Church dominated religion, education and politics. It also had a strong influence on theatre.
- Theatre was “reborn” as “liturgical dramas” which were written in Latin and performed by priests or church members. Plots were taken from the Christian Bible.
- Performances also were held to celebrate religious festivals (as in Greek times)



# Medieval European Theatre



- Later “vernacular dramas” were written in common language (therefore everyone could understand).
- These plays were performed in town squares on wagon stages.
- There were three types of “vernacular dramas”:
  - Mystery plays – based on the Old and New Testament
  - Miracle plays – based on the lives of the saints
  - Morality plays – taught a lesson through symbolic characters representing virtues or faults.

# Commedia Dell'Arte

## Italy's Contribution

(Approximately began in the 14<sup>th</sup> Century)

- In Italy, a unique form of theatre was created for the common people – “*Commedia dell'Arte*”.
- *Commedia dell'Arte* required few props and no sets.
- The plays did not come from scripts but by “scenarios” which were an outline of a plot.
- The actors improvised the dialogue with comedic stunts (called *lazzi*).
- Actors wore half masks which indicated to the audience which character they were playing (Just like the Greeks).
- A *Commedia* troupe typically consisted of 10 to 12 members, a few of which were women
- Plays were based on stock characters, for example:
  - Pantalone, an elderly Venetian merchant (Mr. Burns)
  - Arlecchino, a servant who was a trouble maker (Bart)



# Renaissance and Reformation

(Approximately began in the 15<sup>th</sup> Century)

## Italy's Contribution

- Further contributions to Theatre were made by Italians through the development of the proscenium, or “picture frame stage”.



# Renaissance and Reformation England's Contribution

- The emphasis in plays were on the dialogue. Plays also continued to have moralistic themes.
- Later religious themes were replaced by themes of loyalty to the government.
- Performers were organized into troupes or companies who developed a repertory of plays that they could perform.
- Many plays were written for nobility



# Renaissance and Reformation England's Experience



- In the 16<sup>th</sup> Century, England's government swung back and forth from Catholicism to Protestantism.
- Playwrights who worked to revive plays written in Latin, were believed to be supporting the Catholic Church.
- Playwrights who worked to revive Greek plays were associated with Protestantism.
- Depending on who was in power at the time, a playwright could be put to death for reviving the "wrong" play.
- Many playwrights began to avoid the revival of classic work, and wrote non-political and non-religious plays.

# Elizabethan Theatre

(16<sup>th</sup> Century)

## A Theatre “God” is Born



- William Shakespeare is the most famous playwright in the history of theatre.
- Lived and wrote during the Renaissance Era
- Queen Elizabeth great patron of the arts
- During this time period, there are other notable playwrights including: Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson.
- Shakespeare and his contemporaries encouraged a more natural style of speaking and acting.
- During this time, plays were still presented in open-air theatres or at times, presented at court.
- Globe Theatre
- Plays famous for his use of monologue or long speeches by a single actor or actress. These are often used in auditions.

# The Republic and The Restoration

(Approximately began in the 17<sup>th</sup> Century)

## France's Contribution to Theatre

- In 1642, the English Parliament closed all the theatres in England.
- Many English actors fled to France.
- Theatre in France began to focus on scenery and creating spectacle.
- Plays now included costume, dance and clever scenery which also required scene changes. These aspects of theatre were more emphasized than acting or the plot.
- Theatres also used the proscenium style of stage, where the acting took place on the forestage and the stage behind the proscenium was used to display the scenery.
- **The French also allowed women to perform on stage. (When Theatre returned to England in 1660, women were allowed on stage there too. This is due to the French influence).**



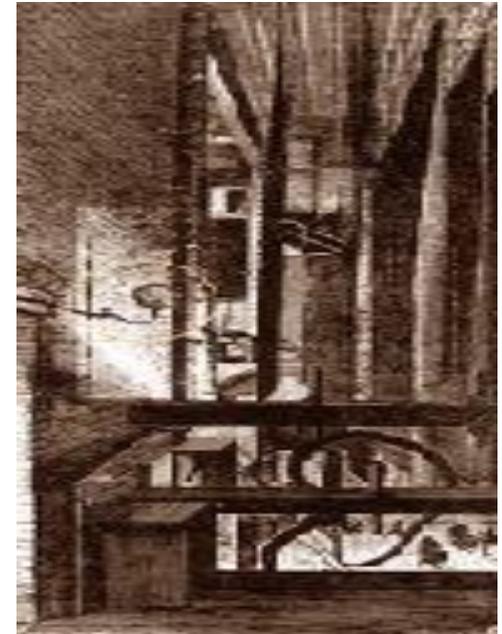
# 18<sup>th</sup> Century Theatre

- In the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, Theatre became a popular pastime.
- Rise of the middle class
- During the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, actors assumed poses and performed their lines in a “sing-song” manner.
- Actors dressed in modern fashionable clothes.
- There was a rivalry between actresses as to who would wear the finest dress.
- Pantomime was still popular and promoted the development of spectacular staging, slapstick and special effects.



# 19<sup>th</sup> Century Theatre Lighting and Stage Advancements

- The Industrial Revolution of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century changed theatre as well.
- Gas lighting was first introduced in 1817 in London's Drury Lane Theatre.
- By the end of the century, electrical lighting made its appearance on stage.
  - Hung by long metal pipes called battens
  - Still used today
- Elaborate mechanisms for changing scenery were developed, including fly-systems, elevators, and revolving stages.
  - Fly systems: ropes, counterweights, pulleys that could enable a crew to hoist newly invented components
  - Still used today
- Large canvas or muslin curtains were used as backdrops



# 19<sup>th</sup> Century Theatre Melodrama



- The poor quality of lighting and the advances in set design lead to a theatre style which emphasized action and spectacle and not acting.
- Melodrama was created.
- Comes from "music drama" – music was used to increase emotions or to signify characters .
- Actors performed their characters using gestures and body poses to demonstrate their characters.
- A simplified moral universe; good and evil are embodied in stock characters.
- Many special effects were part of the performance: fires, explosions, and or earthquakes.
- Traditional form: the villain poses a threat, the hero or heroine escapes, etc, ends with a happy ending.
- During the first half of the century, playwrights were poorly paid.

# 19<sup>th</sup> Century Theatre

## “The Era of Theatre Greats”

- In the later half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, 3 incredible playwrights changed theatre.
- Their work began the movement of “realism” (which was to bring “real life on stage”)
- It would be as if the audience was watching through a “fourth wall” spying on these characters.

- These amazing playwrights were:

- Henrik Ibsen, who wrote in Norwegian



- George Bernard Shaw, who wrote in English

- Anton Chekhov, who wrote in Russian



# 19<sup>th</sup> Century Theatre

## The Greatest of All

- The serious and realistic drama that was being created in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century challenged actors to learn a new method of acting.
- Konstantin Stanislavski wrote several works on the art of acting, such as *“An Actor Prepares”*.
- Stanislavski’s method of acting is called METHOD ACTING and is still used today
- Considered to be the best training for actors.
- The following actors have studied Stanislavski’s methods: Jack Nicholson, James Dean, Marlon Brando, Robert DeNiro, Al Pacino, Benicio Del Toro, and Johnny Depp. (And many more).



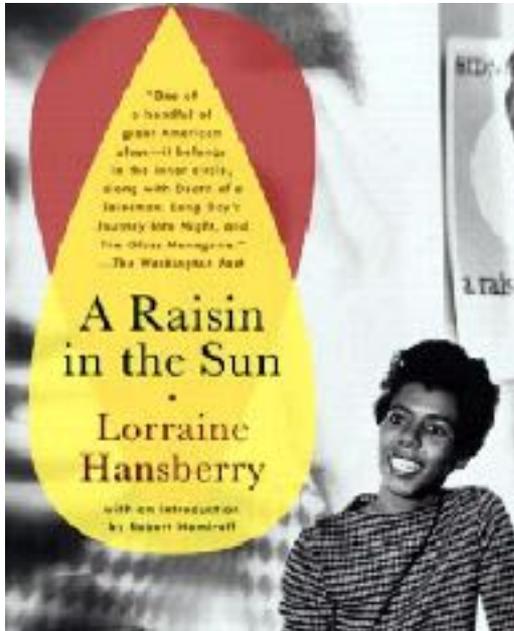
# 20<sup>th</sup> Century Theatre

## Absurdism



- Theatre of the Absurd, which grew out of the post-modern movement which believed that life has no meaning, and there is no God.
- Albert Camus, Philosopher
- Absurdism refers to the conflict between the human tendency to seek inherent value and meaning in life and the human inability to find any
- Europe in the late 1940's.
- A reaction to the senseless waste of life that took place during World War II
- Some used "Stock Characters"
  - This is a stereotypical character (i.e. dumb blond, nerdy librarian, etc.)
  - Flat characters (they don't change)
  - Easy targets for parody
- May not follow a typical story line

# African-American Theatre



- 1930s saw the creation of African-American Theatre
- Lorraine Hansberry
- August Wilson
- Douglas Turner Ward
- All black theatre companies
- Harlem Renaissance

# The End...?

- Believe it or not, there was a lot of Theatre History that was not included (i.e Theatre of the Oppressed, Improv Theatre, Children's Theatre, Cabaret, Vaudeville, Street Theatre, Mime...etc, etc, ETC! Not to mention theatre that was happening in other parts of the world.
- The craft of acting and of theatre is constantly changing in reaction to audiences' tastes, political and social movements, and advances in technology.

# Final Thought

Oscar Wilde said it best:

- “I regard the theatre as the greatest of all art forms, the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be a human being”.