

# The history of western theatre



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Theatre within human society since the dawn of time has been part of man's community existence. Long before the first Stone amphitheatre was erected Men had already produced dramatic presentations concerning the prophesising and worship of their gods. Ancient tribes performed " Rain dances" and story told surrounded by their audience, this is thought to be the inspiration behind theatre in the round. However theatre as it would be recognised today, began in Greece between 400 and 500BC In ancient Greece, theatre was a place of social gathering and entertainment.

The Audience would be divided according to social status; the most powerful and rich members would sit in the God's (elaborately decorated seats placed above the ground) whereas the lower class members would be sat closer to the front. The amphitheatre's themselves were situated on hillsides so that the mise-en-scene would be that of the heavens. Greeks used masks in order to represent their characters, however they also used high-soled shoes in order to give the character a taller stature.

Of course the use of masks and platforms reduced the movement of the actors in-fact the " actors" were not originally an aspect of Grecian theatre at all, and were only developed by playwrights in the late 400's. It is well known that most western dramatic traditions originate from ancient Greece such as the three main genres of theatre, Tragedy, Comedy and satire. According to Aristotle Greek drama or specifically Greek tragedy began whilst a choir were singing the dithyramb, a choral hymn dedicated to the god Dionysus.

Aristotle claimed that the lead singer a man called Thespis added an actor to the chorus; this may have initiated the beginning of dramatic action. There

were three more key Grecian playwrights Aeschylus (525-456 BC) who is world renowned for his tragedy Oresteia, Sophocles (496-406 BC) who is famed for the trilogy Oedipus rex and Euripides (480-406 BC) who's was although the lesser known playwright, employed a far more relaxed and natural style of theatre. Euripides was the last Greek classical theatrical dramatist.

Although the Roman theatre may not be as respected and renowned as their Greek counterparts, many of our modern day theatrical traditions were influenced by it. An example of this is the word "play" which is derived from the Latin word ludus, which quite literally means recreation. A famous playwright during this period is Plautus (c. 250-184 BC) who wrote plays of farce and physical humour. Other forms of entertainment for Roman socialites involved gladiators and chariot races.

The theatre as it would be recognised today, a raised stage and semi circular orchestra originated from the Romans, of whom also produced a more relaxed and vigorous form of acting. Theatre in Roman times often featured naked dancers, low bent humour and is thought to have encouraged buggery, which caused huge offence and uproar within the Christian church. This would later seriously retard the growth of theatre for centuries. The Roman theatre however never quite reached the level of Grecian, as they had little interest in highly dramatic serious pieces. Instead they preferred sensationalism and Comedy.

The only serious dramatic endeavours were little more than Greek translations. Gnaeus Naevius (c. 270-c. 199 BC) for example imitated Greek

models within his tragedies, which sadly never quite surpassed the huge level of violent melodrama. The Roman love or gore and spectacle combined with the Christian suppression of theatre led to a severe lack of drama towards the decline of the Roman Empire. Contrary to popular belief jongleurs or travelling performers were not the only form of theatrical entertainment in medieval times, In-fact as ironic as it may seem the Christian Church was primarily the reason drama was kept alive as an art form.

The reason the Church began to involve itself with theatre was in order to establish itself within a society still rife with pagan celebrations and rituals. To begin with simple re-enactments of the nativity scene and worship of the Magi were acted out by the priests within the church boundaries, however soon enough members of the local town guilds involved themselves and although the plays were still in close connection with the Church they had more freedom of expression.

These plays were known as Morality or passion plays and as the sands of time trickled became more and more adventures featuring characters that were more complex and dimensional. In the 15th and early 16th centuries Theatre became once more the sociable pastime it had been. The ancient works of the Greeks and Romans were discovered and performed within France and Spain (renaissance). However most the plays within England, were still within the themes of religious virtue, and still ran by guild- like companies featuring a group owner, journeymen and hirelings.

The stage by this point in time had completely evolved from simple enclosed courtyards into a centre stage surrounded by its audience; this was commonly called an "apron stage". The emphasis within the plays during this period was mainly on dialogue instead of dramatic action. As time went on the content of theatre began to change, religion and morality were replaced by patriotic or socialist plays. England in the 16th Century underwent many religious changes.

During the reign of King Henry VIII (Catholic-Protestant) Queen Mary (Protestant-Catholic) and Queen Elizabeth I (Catholic-Protestant) a playwright could lose his life if his theatre was thought to rebel against the chosen religion by the monarchy. This also meant that a revival of Latin (associated with the Catholic church) or Greek (associated with Protestant England) plays were made impossible, instead playwrights began to create their own original, secular works in which there would be no political or religious themes.

The theatre companies, however revolutionary were still cast to the outskirts of society during the 16th Century. There were many towns and cities that would refuse a travelling theatre company entrance, prostitutes and thieves saw a theatre as an ideal place to meddle and there was also the added risk that the company could be carrying the plague. These reservations towards the theatre eventually led to the licensing of official drama companies by the throne.

Therefore theatre for the first time in centuries became a respected form of entertainment. Often referred to as the 'golden age' of theatre the

Elizabethan era gave birth to William Shakespeare (1564-1616) easily the most famous playwright to place pen on paper. His characters for the first time in history were dimensional; his insight into the human nature was unreal and his use of wit without doubt was pure genius. He wrote 37 plays in all, and was part owner of the globe and Blackfriars playhouses.

Theatres in England during this period were still presented in large open-air buildings, many could only be watched whilst standing unless you were rich or noble enough to afford an upper level seat. The floor would have been covered with straw and the stench would without doubt have been horrendous. Although the many Elizabethan playwrights (including Shakespeare) did encourage their actors to adopt a more natural form of acting, most could not advocate the degree of realism that a modern day audience would expect. Instead often enough the actors would over dramatise and emphasise.

William Shakespeare however was not the only revolutionary playwright during this period, both Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson wrote and directed plays such as 'Edward the second' and 'Catiline', which although not as famous within history were just as avant-garde. From the ancient Greeks to William Shakespeare in three short pages, obviously I have been forced to edit out other areas of less importance for example the Egyptians and the Aztecs both enjoyed theatre as a form of entertainment. Theatre over the last 500 years has changed drastically.

Although essential dramatic traditions still remain, actors have a freedom of expression that the likes of Shakespeare could only have dreamed of.

Theatre has returned to being a respected form of entertainment. Nowadays theatres are seated (other than theatre in the round) and roofed often decorated with grand sculptures and paintings, frequently enough paintings that are based on ancient Greek or Roman cultures. Showing that Theatre is proud of its dramatic history, indeed it should be. As it is my opinion that there is no-other form of art that can captivate and move the on-lookers as much as theatre