

History of the Theatre

by

Andrew Jordan

February 19, 2002

The theatre is an entertainment product that suits both young and old. It has a broad history, going back even to ancient Egypt. The four basic categories of the theatre are the building, the costumes, the actors, and the special effects. But from Ancient Greece to the Middle Ages to Elizabethan England, the elements in these categories changed as time went by and enthralled the audience more and more.

The Greeks were the first known people to develop the theatre and the dramatic arts. They built their theatres into hillsides. In the middle of the theatre was a dirt floor that served as a dancing area for the actors and chorus (Hartnoll 20). The musicians sat on an altar in the middle of the dancing area. Behind the musicians was a stage building divided in two, with the upper stage functioning as a platform for the gods (Brockett 33). There was no scenery except for triangular blocks with a scene painted on each side. Of course, the blocks could be rotated to change scenes (Hartnoll 22).

The cost to see a play was at first free, then later a small charge was made. The poor were always given the necessary money to attend since attendance at the theatre was compulsory (Hartnoll 21). The audience sat in a semi-circle of benches surrounding half of the theatre. The crowds were very large. One theatre housed 14,000 to 17,000 people (Brockett 38).

Hopefully, the Greek audience liked the play, or the actors would have very messy costumes from all the food the audience threw at them. The standard costume for all Greek tragic actors was a sleeved tunic, a cloak, and shoes or boots (Brockett 27). (Tragic plays were ones with the main character having a flaw that leads to his downfall.) Sometimes the comic costumes were skin-tight, to represent nudity (Brockett 29). (Comic plays were light and humorous with a happy ending.)

The actors also wore light masks. No masks have survived since they were made with perishable items (Hartnoll 17). The masks were huge and covered the whole head, so that the audience could see the actor better from a distance. Occasionally, facial hair was added to the mask (Brockett 30).

Just as there were different types of Greek costumes, there were different types of Greek actors. The number of tragic actors in one play was three, while the number of comic actors in one play was five. In tragedies, actors focused on movement and gesture rather than facial expression, since masks covered their faces. In comedies, all movements were exaggerated for comic purposes (Brockett 23-4). No women acted, so men played women's parts.

Other Greek actors formed the chorus, but they were considered performers rather than actual actors. The chorus came in after the prologue, and usually stayed throughout the play (Brockett 25). In the early tragedies, the chorus had a major role (Brockett 24). Usually, the tragic chorus held 115 members, while the comic chorus held 24. The comic chorus had more freedom of dance than the tragic chorus. Sometimes there were two Greek choruses. They communicated with the actors, gave advice, and sang (Brockett 25).

Just as the Greek period influenced the theatre, so did the Medieval period. The plays were all religious ones, so it was natural for a religious group of actors to perform them. What could be better than priests? The church first performed the plays, but later they stopped. When the plays were no longer performed by the church, guilds put on the plays that went with their trades. For example, "Noah's Ark" was performed by the shipbuilders, and "Jonah" by the fishmongers (Hartnoll 44).

The stages on which the medieval actors played could be moveable or stationary, but both were highly in use (Brockett 99). One way of presenting the innumerable small scenes was called static. The scenes were arranged in a semi-circle, with the audience in front of them. There was also an early version of theatre-in-the-round, with the scenes grouped around a central area, and the audience on raised tiers around that (Hartnoll 41). Sometimes the scenes were even mounted onto carts which paraded through town. Since the plays were all religious ones, they were called the Corpus Christi plays. Corpus Christi means "writings about Christ" (Hartnoll 44). Some sources say that the wagons were very cumbersome, being two-staged. The upper stage was used for the performance, while the lower stage served as a dressing room (Brockett 101).

These moveable dressing rooms contained numerous costumes. The medieval actors were dressed in their contemporary counterpart's clothes. For example, King Herod wore a costume resembling the pope's outfit. The costumes were very expensive, which called for a very high fine if someone went home with his costume. The costumes were also lavishly decorated (Brockett 99).

The actors must have been very proud of the majestic costumes their troupes owned. The majority of these medieval actors were amateurs drawn from the population. About 80 days passed between the first rehearsal and the performance, but the number of rehearsals is unknown. In the period, the sponsoring organization supplied the cast with food. If a medieval actor got sick, another actor took his place. The sick actor paid for this to happen (Brockett 97)

But if the replacement was a part of the group that operated the equipment behind the stage, the whole troupe would be in a bind trying to fill the sick actor's role and have enough stagehands. The special effects helped the medieval play to run smoothly. Its inventory included the crane that was used to suspend people, a workable Hell's Mouth that opened, belched smoke, and closed, and hidden mechanisms under the stage. One very important effect was water. It was useful for a number of things like "raining" if it were stored on the roof in barrels. Another important effect was the effigy, a dummy. Effigies were substituted for medieval actors who had to be "executed." For instance, when one actor had to be burned, an effigy filled with bones and animal entrails gave the gruesome and smelly effect. There was also a need for animals, such as sheep, birds, rabbits, donkeys, and oxen. Some were used for sacrifices, and others were used to ride on (Brockett 100).

Although the medieval theatre was very exciting to the audience, a new type of theatre was born in the 1500's: the Elizabethan theatre. In this period lived many famous actors and playwrights, such as Will Kempe, Richard Burbage, Edward Alleyn, and William Shakespeare. Richard Burbage's father, James Burbage, built the first Elizabethan theatre. He called it "The Theatre" (Hartnoll 73). Although The Theatre was the first Elizabethan theatre, it was not the most well known. That honor belonged to the Globe, which captured the population's attention. The Globe was made with timber from The Theatre, which had gotten torn down earlier. Other theatres included the Curtain, Rose Swan, Fortune, and Hope. But none of these Elizabethan theatres survived, since they were eventually torn down or burned. The average theatre held a raised and railed platform stage. Behind the platform stage was a wall, with a door for easy access backstage. And over the stage was a blue canopy with stars painted on it (Hartnoll 74). The canopy was attached to the roof (Morley 29). Around the stage were galleries with stools or benches (Hartnoll 74). People paid a penny to see a play. Two pennies got them a seat, and three pennies got them a cushioned seat with a good view (Morley 28).

The audience in the balcony could see the costumes better than the people standing in the front. Most of the costumes were versions of fashions at that time. They were sometimes real royal clothing given to the actors by nobles (Morley 21). (In that case, they needed a sizeable wardrobe.) Other than that, the actors furnished their costumes (Morley 20). They used inks and powders to add to a character's facial features (Morley 30). The actors put it on themselves.

Even with their magnificent costumes on, it was sometimes hard for the actors to gain the rowdy audience's attention. They sometimes tried to get it by horseplay. If the audience didn't like the play, they cursed the actors and threw food. Fortunately, no women acted on stage. Boys with a high voice and no beard played female roles (Morley 19).

Just as it was important for the Elizabethan actors to help the play run smoothly, it was also important for the special effects to help the play also. The most essential part of machinery was the crane that enable someone to ascend or descend to or from the ceiling (Morley 31). When an actor got "stabbed," a vinegar-soaked sponge under the armpit was given a hard squeeze. Thunder was made with drums, and bird song was made by blowing into a pot of water with a hollow reed.

The history of the theatre, however, was not hollow. It was always bursting with new ideas throughout the Greek, Renaissance, and Elizabethan periods. In the Greek period, tragedy and comedy were born. In the Renaissance period, the variety of plays spread widely. And in the Elizabethan period lived many famous playwrights, like William Shakespeare. In conclusion, the theatre was a powerhouse in the land of entertainment.

Works Cited:

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