#TheatreHistory1

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KIARA PIPINO

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Introduction

Let's be clear: this is a manual, a tool for the instructor to use as they teach the class in the direction they feel best serves their curriculum. Feel free to call it a "handout" if you'd like.

My goal was not in the least to "rival" the splendid and thorough available textbooks on Theatre History, but rather to provide easy and affordable access to basic information that students and instructors can expand on.

I feel strongly about making resources more accessible to students, and if this manual removes an obstacle even for just one student, I will be content.

Clearly, this book was conceived for Theatre History 1, which is part of the curriculum for the Theatre Major at least in the U.S.A. It is the first class where students are exposed to the subject (aside from a brief historical overview that might be included in Intro to Theatre courses). As we become increasingly absorbed in contemporary theatre, Broadway, and off-Broadway shows, it is easy to lose historical perspective. Whatever is older than the past, what, ten years? Tends to be immediately labeled as "old" or "ancient."

I always find it extremely rewarding when I teach the Greeks, or Commedia dell'Arte, or Shakespeare, or any non-contemporary style, because the students walk into the class at the beginning of the semester with that "I hate this so much" attitude. I valiantly proceed, challenging them: "By the end of the semester, you will love it!"

It is easy to hate what you don't know. Most of the time, they actually do end up liking it by the end of the semester. And if they still hate it, at least they will have more solid reasons to do so.

I also want to point out that this is and will be a "work in progress" for some time, as I will expand some of the chapters as needed and following the feedback that I would love to receive from all y'all.

My understanding is that there is no way I can "track" the downloads and know who is using the book, so I would really appreciate it if those of you who find it useful would send me a note and some feedback. For those of you who hate it, I apologize for ruining your experience of theatre history, but you don't have to reach out and tell me directly.

Lastly, I would like to thank everyone who has supported me in this project, including the students who have helped with editing and formatting and who have contributed to it with original illustrations.

Brian Gershowitz has worked on the editing and formatting. He has recently graduated with a double major in Theatre and English. I am sure his future will be bright and successful.

Original illustrations and photos were created for this book and are also licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License.

Arlee Peterson, Jessie Reed, and Lazaro Mahar have all contributed original illustrations.

On the institutional side, I am super grateful to Ed Beck and Sophia Dunne for helping me navigate the complexity of Pressbook and grant writing. This project was funded by SUNY Central, and to them goes my heartfelt gratitude.

My friends and colleagues, Caterina Mordeglia – who contributed to the book with the chapter on the Romans- and Jennifer King -who contributed with historical timelines and other content, have both been an invaluable resource and support throughout this whole process.

Special thanks to Mary Lynn Bensen and Margherita Rubino, who made sure that I wasn't completely off the rails.

Most photos have been taken by me or by friends and colleagues; my thanks go to Andrea Izzotti, Francesco Franchin, and Christine Schmidle. Unless differently specified, I authored the written content of the book.

Thank you.

Kiara Pipino

PART I

THE ORIGIN OF THEATRE THROUGH THE MIDDLE AGES

1. The Origin of Theatre and the Greeks

Introduction

If you are reading this book, you are probably a student with some – or more than some- interest in theatre. You might have already familiarized yourself with the stage, with the thrill of performing, or you might have contributed to a production in different capacities, as back stage crew or even designing, for example. Quite likely, you have an idea about what is being produced on Broadway, which famous actor is doing what, and have a go-to showtune you keep humming from time to time. You have heard of Shakespeare (hopefully), but you have mixed feelings about him. And now you have to learn about the history of theatre. You probably have mixed feelings about this as well.

Why is it important to study theatre history?

While there is no simple answer to this question, we can start by saying that learning history is important in every field. It allows us to understand the evolution of a specific topic, how we got to where we are now, what was successful (or not), and what consequences were triggered by something or someone. In other words, we learn from the past and we can apply that knowledge to what we do today and moving forward.

In theatre, specifically, it is safe to say that nothing we see nowadays is truly original. Even the most contemporary play or musical relies on elements that are part of the culture of the field. As much as it sounds cliché and might make you arch your eyebrows, it is quite likely that most of what we see on stage, to some extent, goes back to Shakespeare, the Greeks, or Brecht.

Theatre history teaches us why theatre is important to begin with, how it originated, and developed. It also helps us better understand the evolution of society itself, since it is a reflection and a commentary of it, and is oftentimes a direct response to it. For example, by studying Brecht, we learn not only about a specific theatrical style but also about the reason why that style was introduced. And that reason relies on the socio-political environment contemporary to Brecht. As society evolves, theatre evolves with it, and while that makes some texts feel "dated" or somewhat "obscure" at first, it all contributes to a vocabulary that is constantly morphing into a new language. In a way, theatre history shows the human side of history by presenting us with how human beings individually respond to global events, facts, and daily circumstances. It makes history personal, subjective, and easier to comprehend, since it is easier to relate to a scene that imitates reality and whose characters are like us. Aristotle mentioned in his *Ars Poetica* that theatre originated because humans tend to imitate and represent life, because they want to see what they are living through, either for educational purposes or for pure enjoyment. We will see how Aristotle elaborates on this later in this textbook.

Many of us live "in the moment"; we are so overstimulated and overwhelmed by what is going on around us and being thrown at us in so many different ways that it feels we don't have the time or the need to just stop, take a breath, and evaluate the circumstances somewhat objectively. The pace at which society moves is so fast that our collective memory has a hard time keeping up, much like the film of an old-fashioned SLR camera — the thing that leaves an imprint is the very last thing to hit it.

That is why dedicating some time to intentionally study the past becomes imperative.

You were not born yesterday, and you are who you are because of the life you have lived and the circumstances you have experienced up until now. If this is true for you, it is true for all things that have a past, theatre included.

With so many different platforms available to us, live theatre becomes just one of the options available for performance fruition. Starting with the radio in the late 1800s, the big and small screens have later become a staple in our lives and in our daily consumption of entertainment, storytelling, and educational material.

Although it might sound inconceivable to many, there was a time when live performances, in theatres or specifically dedicated spaces, were the only option. And to this day, against all odds, audiences still go to the theatre to see live performances because the experience of live theatre is unique and cannot be compared to anything else. Theatre has survived and thrived since the dawn of time; it finds its way into our lives and our society because it speaks our language and evolves with it. This is exemplified by the recent COVID-19 pandemic, which caused theatres all across the world to shut down for over a year. Many feared that that was it, and that the theatre business would never recover. And yet, here we are, with some of the most exciting and thought-provoking theatrical pieces being conceived and produced worldwide. Audiences all over the world are lining up to be "in the room where it happens."

The Origin of Theatre.

Long ago, theatrical storytelling originated in ritualistic practices, both religious and secular.

The congregation would perform to please the Gods, to pay tribute to them, or they would do it for the spirits of Nature, to propitiate better conditions for their agricultural needs (a healthy harvest, rains). These performances would include dancing – or some form of choreographed movement- singing and chanting, and at times, even elaborate costumes and masks. Depending on the culture, participation in these rituals could include everyone or just a few select individuals. There is, unfortunately, very little material that has survived about these forms of theatre, as most of their traditions were passed down orally.

Yet, there are exceptions, where some cultures have documented events through art.

The cultures that we know used theatrical storytelling are the Egyptians, the Mesopotamians, the Greeks, and several Asian cultures, including those in China and India.

Egypt

In Egypt, almost every aspect of daily life – and death- was tied to a god, and paying tribute to the Gods was of the utmost importance. Life heavily depended on agriculture and the Nile River, whose floods brought much-needed nutrients to the sandy terrain, and that functioned as the main outlet for transportation.

One of the most famous Egyptian rituals followed burials, with the deceased being accompanied on their last voyage into the underworld by a specific boat that would grant them safe passage. The very detailed ritual is recorded on *The Book of the Dead*, written in hieroglyphs on papyrus and left beside the deceased in their final resting place.

Depending on their wealth, the dead would be buried in an underground chamber along with objects they would use in the afterlife, as well as a miniature of the boat itself. Clearly, Pharaohs would receive the most luxurious treatment, and the images of the Pyramids stand as a testament to the Egyptians' construction abilities and resilience.

Osiris was the god of the afterlife as well as the god of fertility and agriculture. Most rituals were dedicated to him and his sister-wife, Isis, the goddess of motherhood, fertility, healing, and death. One of the most famous rituals was held in Abydos, and it told the mythical story of Osiris, who ruled Egypt and married his sister, Isis. Osiris' brother killed him out of jealousy and scattered his dismembered body throughout the kingdom. Yet, Isis collected all the pieces and, with the help of a god, was able to bring his spirit back to life. Because he couldn't live on earth as a spirit, his body was buried in

Abydos, and he became a god in the underworld. Every year, from 2500 to 550 B.C., thousands of Egyptians would visit Abydos to attend the ritual of the reenactment of this story.

We know that Egyptian rituals made use of music, as archaeological remains of instruments have been found, along with images of musicians included in frescos. Dancing seemed to be part of it as well.

Historians also believe the Egyptians enjoyed performing arts as a form of entertainment, mostly for the more educated and the Pharaoh's inner circle. Clues about this rest in the architectural remains of several palaces, where the space seems to suggest a potential division between performers and audience members.

Minoan Civilization

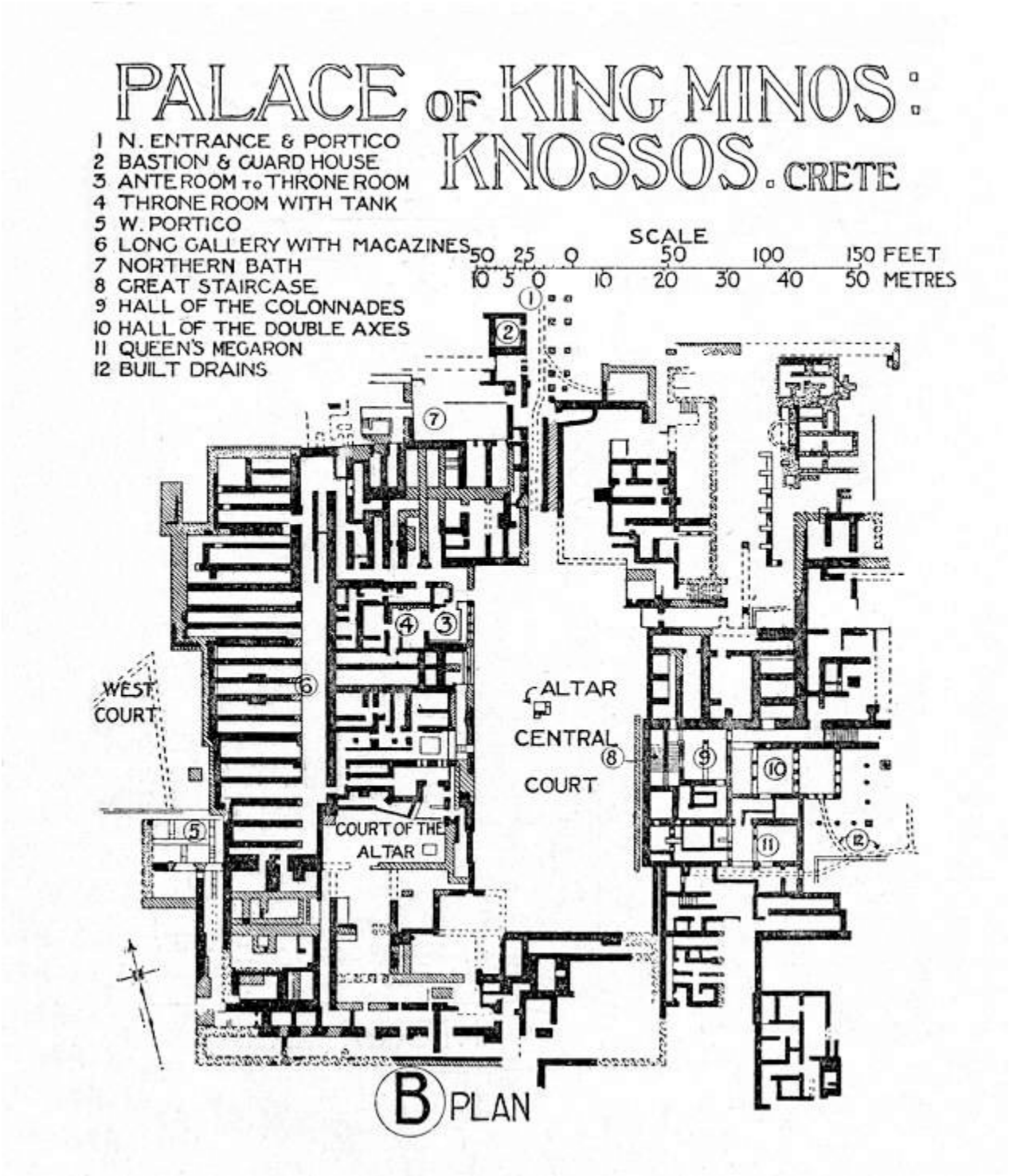
A similar situation can be found in Crete, where the Minoan society thrived between 2900 and 1400 B.C. They are considered one of the first advanced civilizations in Europe and beyond. The Minoans formed a very close-knit community, with a few independent settlements on the island. They were peaceful and didn't engage in wars, so they instead dedicated their time to the arts. The archaeological remains of their citadels, or castles, show a great mastery of building techniques and advanced uses of engineering. For example, they had a system for collecting the water as well as a system to dispose of their waste. There won't be anything as advanced as this until the Romans, much later.

Their palatial "castles" featured housing for most of the population of the settlements and included spaces that were specifically conceived and dedicated to performance. Remains of them can still be seen today in Knossos and Malia. Moreover, the palaces were very richly decorated with frescoes, many of which detail dances, musical performances, and other forms of entertainment, including sporting activities.

The Minoan civilization disappeared abruptly. Historians are still researching to conclude why that happened. Many believe that it was one of the consequences of the disastrous eruption of the volcano on Thera Island, the modern Santorini, around 1600 B.C.

The eruption made most of the island of Thera sink into the ocean, and the width of the caldera can still be seen today when visiting Santorini. The catastrophic event likely triggered a tsunami, destroying and gravely damaging several other islands, including Crete. Some believe that the floods on the Nile, mentioned in the Bible, were also a consequence of the Thera volcanic eruption.

Regardless, the Minoan civilization lost most of its power and withered away. What is left of it are the archaeological remains of the citadels/castles, scattered on the island of Crete. The Palace of Knossos is probably the most majestic site, and it has been heavily restored by Sir Arthur Evans at the beginning of the 20th Century. While his goal was to recreate the beauty of the site, he reconstructed several parts of the settlement with modern materials, stirring a great deal of controversy.



The Palace of Minos at Knossos Plan Illustration from: Fletcher, Banister. A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method, 1921.

Unfortunately, while the Egyptians' ancient hieroglyphs language has been codified and translated, the Minoans' writing system of hieroglyphs, known as Linear A, has yet to be deciphered, so it hasn't been possible to associate scripts with their performance practices just yet.

Asia has been a cradle for the arts in all of their forms, and theatre is no exception.

India

One of the richest Asian cultures when it comes to theatre is India. There is evidence of theatrical activities dating back to 1200 B.C. with the *Rigveda*, the oldest Vedic Sanskrit text. The text is divided into several books, each one focusing on a different topic, including cosmology, the gods, and more philosophical aspects of life. Its representation provided a form of theatrical storytelling that consisted of dancing and chanting along with dialogue.

Classic Sanskrit literature produced several theatrical pieces throughout the centuries. It is also a culture that has recorded the names of some playwrights, which is new for this time in history and won't happen again until the Greeks. For example, we know of playwright and Buddhist philosopher Asvaghosa, who authored *Buddhacarita*, which is the first known Sanskrit drama. Generally, for Indian theatre, it is important to mention that while it had a strong religious and ritualistic element, it also provided an insight into characters and traditions belonging to worldly matters and was conceived as a form of entertainment as well. Scripts also included comedies, adaptations of fables, adaptations of religious Indu and Buddhist texts, and romantic storytelling.

Sanskrit drama flourished throughout several centuries and has influenced the evolution of theatre styles and genres, even outside of Asia and in more modern settings.

Another famous Sanskrit playwright is Kalidasa, who was active in the 4^{th} Century A.D.. He has written several plays, some with a romantic nature and some adapted from the *Mahabharata*. One of his works has influenced Goethe's *Faust*. Another known playwright is the emperor Harsha (600-648 A.D.), who is mostly famous for his comedy *Ratnavali*.

Latin America

Latin America also featured early forms of theatrical activities tied to the religious rituals of the indigenous people, and a lot of that tradition is retained in contemporary theatrical practices.

It has to be noted that most of these performative events, while similar in structure and concept to the Egyptians and the Indians, took place later in time compared to the other civilizations we have discussed.

The Aztecs and the Maya were probably the most prolific. They had Festivals to celebrate and propitiate nature, honoring the gods of rain to ensure a good harvest season. They also had staged representations dedicated to the gods of war, to gain their favor.

It is worth mentioning the Aztecs' ceremony of the Flowery War, which included very choreographed and complex fights and ended with a human sacrifice.

The most famous Mayan theatrical ceremony was called *Rabinal Achi* [Man of Rabinal]. It tells the story of a warrior who protects the kingdom of Rabilnal with the aid of a Jaguar and an Eagle. He is attacked by a villain from a nearby land, but in the end, he captures him and brings him to justice. Interestingly, the narrative also features secondary female characters, such as the warrior's wife and daughter.

The ceremony heavily used masks, elaborate and vibrantly colored costumes, music, and dance.

TAKEAWAYS so far.

The first forms of theatre were recorded in Europe, Africa, Asia, and Latin America.

Most theatrical storytelling stemmed from rituals, usually of the religious kind.

Performances originally featured everyone, not specifically actors.

Performances included dancing, singing, or chanting, and at times, some form of dialogue.

Some forms of costuming and masks were common.

Research opportunities.

Sanskrit drama and the several adaptations of the *Mahabharata*.

Peter Brook's *The Mahabharata*. This very stylized movie adaptation of a stage play of the Mahabharata, directed by the same Brook, can provide an insight into Hindu storytelling and theatricality.

The Greeks



The Theatre of Dionysus, Athens, Greece. Photo courtesy of Kiara Pipino.

It is safe to say that Western theatre originated in Greece, specifically in Athens, between the 6th and the 5th Centuries B.C.. The very word "theatre" comes from the Greek word "*theatron*", which translates to "the viewing place".

Thespis is also a household name today, as we have many Thespian Festivals around the country (U.S.A.), and we normally refer to actors as "thespians"; why? Because Thespis is the first actor whose name has survived, thanks to Aristotle, who mentions him as the first person who appeared on a stage impersonating a character other than himself.

He is also known as the "Inventor of Tragedy" as he is credited as the person who modified the structure of the *dithyrambs*, a form of poetry close to a hymn, into a dramatic script. He was active in the 6th Century B.C.

In the first chapter of the *Poetics* (335 B.C.), Aristotle mentions that theatre originated because humans have an interest in imitating and reproducing reality, which is, at its core, what theatre is. Specifically, Aristotle used the term "*mimesis*," which means imitation. All things considered, the attempt by Thespis at transforming a poem into a scene with dialogue does indeed make for a more realistic approach to life.

Theatre was part of the everyday life of the citizens of Athens, and it was strictly connected to the cult of the god Dionysus. Most theatrical representations were held during city festivals and rituals dedicated to the God. These festivals were organized and produced by the Athenian government and culminated in a competition among productions. The participating plays were only tragedies, as that was considered the most appropriate, elevating, and culturally relevant genre of theatre.

Yet, comedies and satyr plays were also popular, although they had less of a patronage from the city. We will investigate the reason shortly.

There were three theatre festivals: the Lenaia (end of January), the Rural Dionysia (end of December) and the City Dionysia (end of March/beginning of April), or Great Dionysia, and all of them were related to the cult of the Dionysus and originated in the 6th Century B.C..

The Lenaia and the Rural Dionysia were of a smaller scale. They lasted for fewer days and featured fewer productions than the City Dionysia.

The Rural Dionysia took place outside the city-state [*polis*] of Athens, in Attica, between December and January to celebrate the winter solstice. The Great Dionysia instead happened first in Eleutherae, Attica, about three months after the Rural Dionysia as part of the celebration of the spring solstice. Then, the Eleuthereans brought the statue of Dionysus to Athens, intending to move the festival there as well. Yet, the Athenians weren't originally keen on doing that, except that legend has it that Dionysus punished them with a plague that hit the men's genitalia. When the Athenians finally accepted the statue and committed to the cult of Dionysus and to producing the festival, the plague was lifted as the god's will had been satisfied. Every year, there would be a procession of Athenian citizens carrying bronze and wood phalloi as a remembrance of the event.

Despite the initial reluctance, Athens soon fully embraced the festival and grew very fond of theatrical competitions. Athenian citizens attended the festival as part of a civic duty.

The festival lasted several days and was very structured. The rituals started with a procession featuring all the producers, or the sponsors, dressed in expensive and complex costumes. Animal sacrifices were part of the opening ceremony as well to pay tribute to the god. The first day was dedicated to poetry, with a competition of *dithyrambs*, a form of poetry similar to a hymn and accompanied by music. At the end of the competition, animals – mostly bulls and goats- were sacrificed to the god.

The second and third days were dedicated to the theatre, with the presentation of the playwrights and their plays on the second day and then with the performances from the third day onward. Each following day would feature three tragedies and one comedy, all written by the same playwright. The festival culminates in a ceremony awarding the best tragedy, the best comedy, and later on, the best actor.

The festival was "produced" by the city of Athens, with an elected official, called an *archon*, in charge of putting together and supervising the team of judges evaluating the plays, as well as selecting the plays within a year before the festival. Moreover, the *archon* selected a producer, the *choregus*, for each play that was selected. Differently from today, where the producer is in charge of all the expenses and costs of a production but rarely uses their own money, the Greek

choregoi (plural for *choregus*) personally paid for everything. The commitment to the festival was so strong that all the producers heavily invested in the productions, as it was a great honor to win. The festival lasted for several days.

All genres, tragedies, comedies, and satyr plays had a space in the City Dionysia, although there were great differences in each of their roles.

Everything happened either in the Theatre of Dionysus, on the slope of the Acropolis of Athens, directly below the temple of Dionysus, or in the Odeon, which was also right below the Acropolis. It is important to understand that all performances were held in the open air and during the daytime. Attendance was always high, with people coming from all over Greece. Whichever war was happening – and there was always a war somewhere in the region- it would be stopped for the entire duration of the festival to allow for people to attend the performance. It has been estimated that at the peak of its popularity, the City Dionysia was attended by 17,000 people, as there is evidence that roughly that many people could have been seated in the Theatre of Dionysus. To put things into a modern perspective, this kind of attendance is comparable to the American Super Bowl – which usually draws anywhere between 60,000 and 70,000 supporters.

The first tragedy to be performed is believed to be one by Thespis, in 534 B.C., and he was rewarded with a goat. The very word "tragedy" comes from this, as *tragos*, in Greek, means "he-goat."

Spotlight: What is a *polis?*

The word "*polis*" in Ancient Greek means city, but its meaning spans wider than what we consider a "city" today. During Classic times, the Greeks were organized in structured communities functioning as independent, self-sufficient, and organized states. A polis was a small state. Ancient Greece was not a unified country, like today, but rather a territory comprised of several communities organized in a *polis*, which, most of the time, were at war with each other. For example, the rivalry between the *polis* of Athens and Sparta generated the *Peloponnesian War* that lasted almost thirty years (431-404 B.C.).

Theatrical Genres

We briefly mentioned the *dithyrambs* being the first form of performance, and how they evolved into what we can consider the first tragedy under the hand of Thespis.

Tragedies soon became the most renowned genre and would develop greatly throughout the centuries ahead. This was through the work of some of the most important classic Greek playwrights, such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides.

Other important genres of performances included comedy and satyr plays.

Let's break down each genre.

Tragedy

It is worth mentioning that scholars haven't unanimously agreed on what is the origin of tragedy. There simply isn't a lot of data that has survived, and most of what we know comes either from Aristotle's *Poetics* or from later writings by the Roman historian Horace. We do know that Thespis introduced the division between the actor and the chorus, creating dialogue that allowed for the dramatic action to be more "realistic." Further development of the structure of the tragedy came later with Aeschylus (523-456 B.C.), who introduced the second actor onstage, and finally with Sophocles (496-406 B.C.), who introduced the third actor and set the number of chorus members to fifteen. It is important to know that the playwrights were also directly involved in the production of their pieces, and often acted in them too.

The structure of the classic Greek tragedy is quite rigorous.

They start with a *prologue* providing exposition about events that happened before the play began. The prologue is followed by a *parodos*, marking the entrance of the chorus. At times, the parodos substitutes the prologue. Then we have a succession of *episodes* – three to six- where the story is developed. In between the episodes, we find *stasima*, choral songs. The play ends with the *exodus*. Tragedies were written in verse and only featured characters of noble birth. Most of the texts were sung, or chanted, and dance played a significant role in the productions.

Tragedies focused on myths that were very popular among the Greeks, and the playwrights had the freedom to interpret them according to what message they were trying to convey. That is why there are several "versions" of the same myth in the remaining Greek plays. An example of this is the myth of Helen of Troy, whose story is told very differently from common knowledge in Euripides' play, *Helen*. In Euripides' play, Helen didn't run away with Paris to Troy, abandoning her husband Menelaus and thus causing the Trojan War. Instead, she was kidnapped by the gods and stranded on the shore of Egypt, where she was held captive, while a ghost of her was sent to Troy. The takeaway of Euripides' *Helen* is therefore that the war at Troy had been triggered by a lie.

While the addition of dialogue and actors was intended to provide some realism to the production, we are still in a very stylized world. The three male actors played multiple roles, including female roles, because women were not allowed to act.



ISTANBUL, TURKEY -Istanbul Archaeological Museum. Euripides. Photo courtesy of Andrea Izzotti.

The use of masks allowed for a quick transition in characters. The masks being utilized represented the archetypical version of the characters, such as the messenger, the king, the queen, etc. They were likely made with a combination of straw and papier mâché, with a wide conic aperture by the mouth that allowed for a rudimentary amplification of the voice of the actors. The description of the masks, along with most of the terminology we are aware of regarding classic Greek theatre, comes from a much later source, the *Onomasticon*, a compendium written by historian Pollux around 170 A.D. He mentions the existence of twenty-five masks: three representing old men, eight representing young men, three representing servants, and eleven representing women.

Overall, tragedies tended to deliver a lot of exposition from the beginning to almost the middle of the play, thus reducing the main dramatic action almost to a minimum.

Most remaining tragedies abide by the Aristotelian unities of action, time, and location, meaning each play would focus on the development and resolution of one main issue. This would happen in chronological order over a day and would take place in one location.

The characters interacted with the chorus. Usually, the characters occupied a space opposite the chorus, as the chorus needed more space for the stylized movement/dance. When we speak of dance, it has to be noted that it was likely more a set of symbolic rhythmic movements associated with certain emotions, concepts, or characters, and widely known and recognizable by the audience. There wasn't choreography as we know it today.

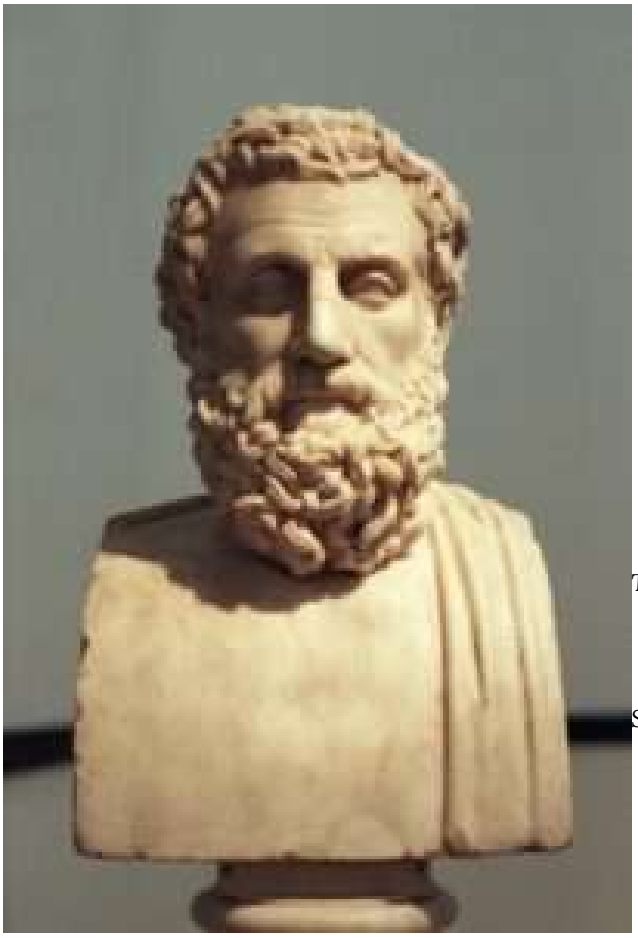
The function of the chorus is multifold. First, it provided some exposition for the audience to better understand the action; sometimes it functioned as "the voice of the people", opposed to the character, providing insights on the framework of the ethical and social issue at stake in the tragedy. Then, it allowed for moments of change of pace in between the dialogue between the characters, thus making for a better experience for the audience. It also provided spectacle because of the dancing. Finally, at times, the chorus worked as the "ideal audience member", directly reacting to what was going on between the characters and providing their point of view to the characters.

For the City Dionysia, each playwright was asked to write a trilogy – a set of three plays- and a satyr play. It is worth mentioning that only very few plays (31) have survived of the thousands that were produced between 534 and 400 B.C., and among the surviving ones, there is only one trilogy, Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. This means that most Greek tragedies we read and produce today are the beginning, middle, or ending episode of a much wider storyline.

All the remaining plays were written by only three playwrights: Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. Clearly there must have been many, many more, but alas, only these three names have survived.

Classic Greek tragedies are still very popular today, with many of them being produced every year all over the world. Many of them have also been adapted in new plays by later playwrights throughout history and to this day.

Aeschylus (534-456 B.C.)



Aeschylus, Naples National Archaeological Museum. Zde, CC BY-SA 4.0

Aeschylus is remembered for adding a second character to the structure of the tragedies, although a third actor is present in the trial scene of his *Eumenides*. He was very active in the City Dionysia and won thirteen times. Aeschylus' style and poetic structure are strongly rooted in history and myths, which he used to further his concepts. His plays focus more on the chorus than on the characters – it has been noted that in most of his plays, half of the lines are spoken by the chorus- and explore social concepts, such as justice, honor, and ethics. The characters engage in dialogue with the chorus to debate or confute the social issue, but most of the narrative is usually carried by the chorus.

There are records of over eighty plays authored by him, but the only surviving ones are:

The Persians – a history play about the Persian defeat after the battle of Salamis in 480 B.C. This is the oldest play that has survived.

Seven Against Thebes – the play revolves around the rivalry between the sons of Oedipus, and it was part of a trilogy called *Oedipodea*. The other two plays of the trilogy, namely *Laius* and *Oedipus*, along with the satyr play *Sphinx*, are lost.

The Suppliants – the protagonists of the plays are the Danaids, maids who fled their country in order to escape arranged marriages with the Egyptians. They seek refuge in the sanctuary city of Argos, where they ask for the help of the king. This play was likely the third play of the *Danaid* trilogy, which featured two other tragedies of which only the titles have survived, *The Egyptians* and *The Daughters of Danaus*. The satyr play concluding the suite is believed to be *Amymone*, also lost.

The Oresteia (*Agamemnon*, *Libation Bearers*, *Eumenides*) – as mentioned before, this is the only trilogy that survives (aside from its satyr play). It develops the concept of justice, as it shows how personal revenge does not make it right, while only the rule of the land will restore true justice.

Prometheus Bound – the play tells the story of Prometheus, a Titan who defied Zeus by stealing fire and donating it to mankind. The authorship of this play is still debated, as some scholars believe its style suggests someone other than Aeschylus wrote it.

Sophocles (496-406 B.C.)

Sophocles lived a long and successful life. He is believed to have written over one hundred and twenty plays. He introduced the third actor and set the number of chorus members to fifteen in the tragedy, sanctioning the final form of the genre. He is believed to have won over twenty-four City Dionysia.



Sophocles, Pushkin Museum. CC BY-SA 3.0

Sophocles' plays revolve more around characters and character development than on the complexity of the plot, both elements that make him quite different from Aeschylus. Sophocles' choruses are important, but they mostly support or antagonize the characters rather than functioning as characters themselves. This is also quite different from Aeschylus.

His plays also stood out for their elegance in the language and the overall structure. It is one of his plays, *Oedipus the King*, that Aristotle utilized as an example to describe "the perfect play."

Only seven plays written by Sophocles have survived, and they are:

Oedipus the King – The preamble to the play is the myth of Oedipus, who flees his home to escape the Oracle of Delphi's prophecy that he would kill his father and marry his mother. When he arrives in Thebes, he can eradicate a plague by solving the Sphinx riddle, and for that he is rewarded with the kingdom, and he marries the deceased king's wife. Years later, a new plague hovers over the town, and to uplift it, the oracle tells him that he needs to find out who killed the previous king. In pursuit of the truth, he will discover that he had been adopted and that when he fled home, he set in motion his fate. He had killed a man at a crossroads, and that man turned out to be his real father and the previous king of Thebes. Hence, Oedipus had also married his mother, who bore him five children. Oedipus takes responsibility for his actions, blinds himself to show everyone that he had been blind all his life, and leaves Thebes in exile with his two daughters, Antigone and Ismene.

Ajax – The play follows a Trojan warrior, Ajax, who is enraged from being denied Achilles' armor and is driven to madness by the goddess Athena.

Antigone – This play is one of Sophocles' most famous plays. It explores the concepts of justice and ethics. Should the law of the land bypass the law of nature and ethics? Antigone is one of Oedipus' daughters. After a long war, both her brothers, Eteocles and Polynices, are dead. Yet, they were on opposite sides. Creon, Antigone's uncle and the ruler of the land, Polynices attempted to usurp, establishing that only Eteocles was entitled to burial rites, while Polynices' body was to stay exposed to the elements to rot as an example for the people. Antigone questioned the righteousness of this decision and challenged it, knowing she would be facing death for her action. Yet, she claimed both brothers had to be buried to give them peace. When she is discovered, she faces death.

Oedipus Colonus – the play follows blind Oedipus in his exile in the final years of his life. Oedipus and Antigone are in the small village of Colonus, and Oedipus has to defend himself from the villagers, afraid that his lack of morals would bring a curse on them all. Oedipus advocates for himself, but understands that his end is near, as predicted by the oracle. King Theseus of Colonus agrees to protect him while news from Thebes opens new wounds. Oedipus' sons – Eteocles and Polynices- are at war with each other as Eteocles had commended Polynices to exile for the attempt

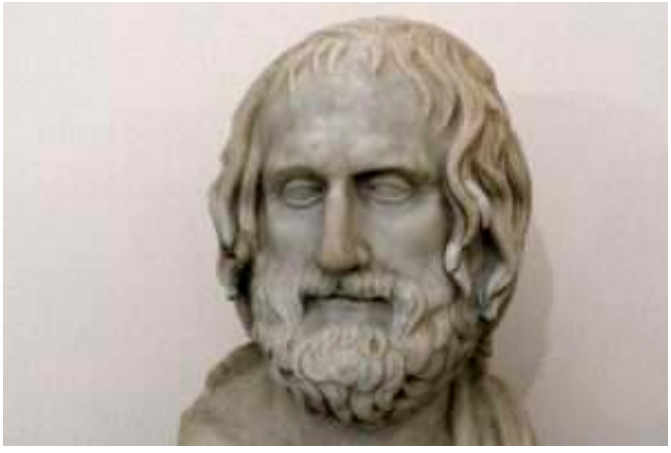
at usurping power. Polynices seeks revenge – and eventually this will lead to a war, killing both brothers. Oedipus interprets a sudden thunder as Zeus' sign of his coming death, and walks away, followed by King Theseus and his children. Oedipus dies, King Theseus attends his burial and does not reveal its location to preserve the peace of the site.

Elektra – During the ten-year Trojan war that kept Agamemnon away from Argos, Clytemnestra had become the ruler of the town and had chosen a new lover in Aegisthus. When Agamemnon comes back from the war, Clytemnestra kills him with the help of her lover. She justifies the murderous act as a rightful revenge for Agamemnon's sacrifice of their younger daughter, Iphigenia. Clytemnestra's remaining two children, Orestes and Elektra, wanted to avenge their father and therefore became a threat to Clytemnestra. Orestes fled Argos to escape being killed, and Clytemnestra got rid of Elektra by marrying her off to a countryman, far away from Argos. As Orestes comes back and finds his sister, they plot their revenge and kill both Aegisthus and their mother, Clytemnestra, to avenge their father.

Philoctetes – the play follows the Greek warrior Philoctetes, who was abandoned on the island of Lemnos by Odysseus as they were sailing towards Troy because he suffered an infectious wound that had a rotten stench. Years later, a prophecy told the Greeks they would never win the war at Troy unless they retrieved Philoctetes' divine bow and arrows. Neoptolemus and Odysseus then sail back to Lemnos to trick Philoctetes and steal the divine weapon. Yet, Neoptolemus gets to know Philoctetes and is ashamed of the deceitful plan. In the end, Neoptolemus asks Philoctetes to join them in the war against Troy.

Trachiniae – The play focuses on Heracles, who comes home after having accomplished the twelve labors. His wife, Deianeira is led to believe that a love potion provided by Lichas, a deceitful messenger, would make sure Heracles never leaves her side – and her family- again for any other labor of in search of a new and younger wife, so she applies said potion to a garment she gives Heracles as a gift. The love potion turns out to be a magic poison that horrendously kills Heracles. Deianeira commits suicide immediately afterwards, overwhelmed by guilt.

Euripides (480-406 B.C.)



Euripides, Marble NAPLES, ITALY. Photo courtesy of Andrea Izzotti.

Euripides was also a very prolific Greek playwright who is believed to have written over one hundred plays, out of which only eighteen have survived. He was less popular in his time than either Sophocles or Aeschylus, but his popularity grew later in time, which is probably one of the reasons more of his plays are widely available to this day.

Euripides' style was less elegant than Sophocles', and his attention to detail and structure was less specific than Aeschylus'. His text is clunky at times, his monologues repetitive, and the overall timeline of his plays is sometimes inconsistent. He also uses the apparition of the gods (the so-called deus-ex-machina) a lot, mostly to "resolve" the action that could not be resolved otherwise.

His plays focus on a wider variety of myths, some of which are lesser known. In his time, he was considered controversial, which was likely one of the reasons why he wasn't very popular, since his plays often questioned the order of society and power. He criticized the government and introduced the idea that the gods might not have much to do with earthly matters after all. This same feature, along with his very strong characters, is what will appeal to future audiences and what makes some of his plays very popular today as well.

It is important to note that several of Euripides' plays do not end with tragic and horrific deaths, but that doesn't make them less of a tragedy. The genre is defined by the amplitude of the scope and of the subject matter rather than by the technicality of the ending of the play.

The eighteen plays that we know of are:

Alcestis – the play follows Alcestis, who offers herself to the god of the underworld, Thanatos, in place of her husband Admetus. When Heracles visits Admetus' house, he learns about Alcestis' sacrifice and ventures into the underworld to fetch her and bring her back to the world of the living.

Medea – the play is about the Medea, the young queen of a foreign country who had helped the Greek noble man Jason steal the Golden Fleece and was married to him in return, only to be abandoned by him years later when a new, younger bride would also grant him the ability to become king. Now residing in Greece, where they find her cultural differences barbarian and akin to witchcraft, she is rejected by her husband and ordered to leave the country, leaving her children behind. Instead, she uses her magic to kill Jason's new bride, then she kills her children, leaving the city of Corinth on the chariot of the sun with the children's corpses, while Jason mourns his losses.

Hippolytus – Because of a spell cast by the goddess Aphrodite, Theseus' wife Phaedra falls in love with her step-son Hippolytus, but her love is unrequited. She kills herself out of shame, but leaves a letter accusing Hippolytus of having seduced her. Nothing will convince Theseus of his son's innocence; he exiles and curses him, asking Poseidon to avenge him. As Hippolytus leaves, a divine bull unleashed by Poseidon causes the chariot to run out of control, and Hippolytus falls to his death. Learning the news, Theseus is overjoyed, believing justice has been served. Yet, the goddess Artemis appears and reveals the truth: Hippolytus was innocent.

Troyan Women – In the immediate aftermath of the defeat of Troy, the widows of the Trojan warriors are gathered outside the walls of the city, waiting to know their fate. Among them, Hecuba (King Priam's wife), her daughter Cassandra, and Andromache (Hector's wife) with her newborn child, Astyanax. All the women will be assigned to Greek warriors as slaves as part of the loot, but some will prefer to die rather than leave their country and be degraded.

The Bacchae – King Pentheus and his mother, Agave, ban the cult of the god Dionysus from Thebes, questioning his status as a god. Dionysus is the son of a mortal woman, Semele, and of Zeus. Yet, Agave and Pentheus believe Semele made up that story to justify her pregnancy. Dionysus is enraged and plans his revenge. He drives the women of Thebes, including Agave, into a frenzy. They leave town and go into the woods, where they wildly engage in rituals, hallucinate, kill flocks, and kidnap children. Dionysus, disguised as a mortal, suggests Pentheus wear women's clothes to go spy on the women to find a way to stop the frenzy. Yet, when Pentheus is close to the women, the god appears to them and lets them believe he is a wild animal. Pentheus is trapped and killed by his own mother, who will carry his head back to Thebes. As the madness slowly fades away, the horror sets in.

Iphigenia in Aulis – To win the war at Troy, Agamemnon is told by a prophet he needs to sacrifice his younger daughter, Iphigenia. He summons her and her mother, Clytemnestra, deceitfully telling them the young lady will be marrying Achilles. When the scam is revealed, Clytemnestra is enraged, but Iphigenia accepts her fate. Yet, as the sacrifice takes place, a god intervenes. Iphigenia disappears and is replaced by an animal.

Iphigenia in Tauris – This play is somewhat a follow-up to *Iphigenia in Aulis*. Once she disappeared from the sacrificial altar in Aulis, Iphigenia was transported by Artemis to Tauris, where she became a priestess. When her brother Orestes washes ashore and is sentenced to be sacrificed, Iphigenia helps him out and they escape together.

Helen – the play is based on a variation of the myth of Helen of Troy. Here, Helen never abandoned Menelaus for Paris and never fled to Troy. Instead, the goddesses Athena and Hera sent her off to Egypt, while they sent to Troy a mere phantom of the woman. When the war is over, Menelaus shipwrecks on the coasts of Egypt and finds himself face to

face with Helen, who has a lot of explaining to do. When Menelaus understands what happened, they plot their escape and flee Egypt together.

Ion – Being raped by Apollo, Creusa gives birth to Ion, but she abandons him in the wild. Apollo saves the child and brings him to his temple in Delphi. Years pass, and Ion has become an attendant of the temple. Creusa travels to Delphi to ask the god to help her conceive a child with her newly married husband. Ion and Creusa are initially unaware of being related, but in the end, they find out and are reunited.

Orestes– After killing their mother, Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthus, Orestes and his sister Electra plan to kill Menelaus' wife, Helen, out of revenge. When they're about to do it, she vanishes, as Zeus intervenes and transforms her into a constellation. Orestes kidnaps Menelaus' daughter Hermione, and just before the standoff with Menelaus' men, Apollo appears and averts another bloodshed. Hermione will marry Orestes, while Electra will marry Orestes' best friend, Pylades.

Andromache – In the aftermath of the war of Troy, Andromache, Hector's widow, has been assigned as a concubine to Neoptolemus as part of the loot. After having her first son killed by the Greeks, Andromache tries to save her second child, conceived with Neoptolemus, but she is unsuccessful.

Hecuba – King Priam's widow, Hecuba, loses two more children. Her younger daughter, Polixena, is sacrificed by the Greeks while her baby boy, Polydorus, washes ashore, dead. Hecuba had confided in a nearby former ally of Troy, Polymestor, to protect the child. Yet, Polymestor had killed him to please the Greeks. When Polymestor comes to the Trojan camp and meets Hecuba, she executes her revenge with the help of the other women. She kills Polymestor's sons and blinds him.

The Suppliants – revolves around the mothers of the warriors who were killed in Thebes as they travel to Athens, the cradle of democracy, to advocate for their right to see their children buried with the due rites to the king of Athens, Theseus. The king listens, is moved, and provides support.

Electra – This play tells the story of Electra and of how she avenged her father's murder, killing Clytemnestra and Aegisthus with the help of her brother Orestes. This play doesn't differ much from previous renditions of the myth by the hand of Aeschylus and Sophocles. The main difference lies in the style.

The Children of Heracles – Heracles' sons are at war against Mycenae's king, Eurystheus. A Prophecy informs them that they would only win if a maid is sacrificed to the gods. Heracles' daughter, Macaria, offers herself for the sacrifice, granting victory to her brothers.

Heracles – the play follows Heracles as he is driven into a frantic state by the goddess Hera. In his madness, he kills his wife and his three children.

The Phoenician Women – Jocasta, Oedipus' wife, hopes to see her two sons reconcile and avoid the war, but she is unsuccessful. Eteocles and Polynices keep fighting one against the other, and they both die. Jocasta kills herself. This play provides a different take on Jocasta's demise. In Sophocles' play [*Oedipus the King*], she killed herself before Oedipus blinded himself. In Euripides' version, she doesn't commit suicide and stays in Thebes when Oedipus leaves town in exile, as a blind man.

Cyclops– this is not a tragedy, but a satyr play. The play follows Odysseus as he and his men wash ashore and are detained by the Cyclops, who intend to eat them. Odysseus plots his escape and executes it, blinding the Cyclops. It is worth noting that of all the satyr plays that were written, this is the only one that has survived.

Satyr Plays

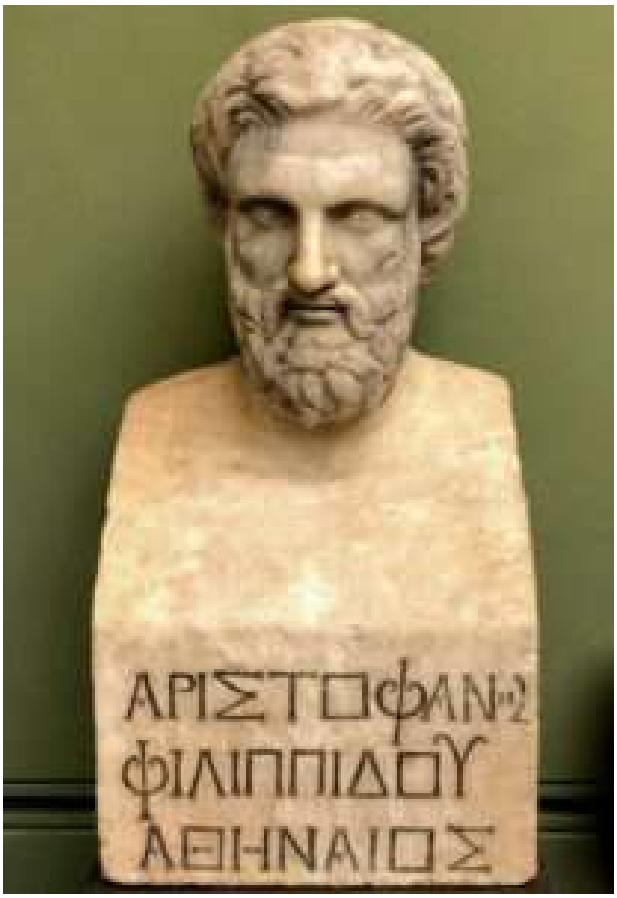
There is evidence that points to Pratinas as the first playwright to introduce satyr plays. As we have mentioned, playwrights who wanted to be considered for the City Dionysia were asked to present a trilogy of tragedies and a satyr play, which means…. Thousands of them have likely been written. Yet, only Euripides' *Cyclops* has survived, along with some parts of Sophocles' *The Trackers*.

The satyr play is named after the chorus, which is populated by satyrs – half-beast beast/half-human creatures. The chorus leader (*coryphaeus*) was Silenus, the father of all satyrs. Satyr plays were very different in style from tragedies, although they often used the same material. First off, the language was different. There was no attempt at a heightened language, and nothing was written in verse. There was also an abundant use of foul and indecent language, mostly for comedic purposes. Because satyr plays were performed after the trilogy of tragedies, they aimed at providing the audience with some comedic relief. Most plays dug into myths, but emphasized some of the features and characters for comedic purposes. In a way, they leaned into the caricature style. They also heavily relied on dance and music.

Comedy

Comedies were also produced and performed in the City Dionysia in Athens, and they set a completely different tone from tragedies, which is quite intuitive. They also featured three actors and a chorus, like for tragedies, although the comedic chorus was much larger, featuring up to twenty-four members. Women were not allowed to act, and here, there was also the use of music and dance, although the style was significantly different from tragedies. The music and the dancing, in particular, were less composed and stylized. The dancing was often inspired by animal movements and celebrations of many sorts.

The main intent of the playwright was to entertain the audience, to make them laugh, while also providing some specific social commentary. Comedies distanced themselves from any form of realism and had a wider pool of subject matter. Some of them were set in a fantasy world, with fantasy characters, like for example *The Clouds*, *The Birds*, and *The Wasps*, all plays by **Aristophanes** (446-386 B.C.). Comedies had a fast pace, almost farcical, and at times featured characters who really existed. For example, in another one of his plays, Aristophanes makes fun of Euripides (*The Acharnians*).



Aristophanes, Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy. Alexander Mayatsky, CC BY-SA 4.0

As for style, there was no intention to use heightened language. Common elements of the plots included allusions to sex, heavy drinking, and more generally, leisurely activities. The structure is also simplified, with a prologue setting up the story and prepping for the main idea, then there is the entrance of the chorus that triggers the debate (*agon*) of said idea, and finally, there is the execution of the idea. In between, there is a choral ode, called *parabasis*, where some social or political issue is discussed, which usually has ties to the main idea.

Most of what we know about comedies comes from the plays that have reached us, which happen to be written by only one playwright: Aristophanes.

Aristophanes was not the most prolific playwright, in particular if we compare him to Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. He is believed to have written around forty plays, out of which only eleven have survived. They are: *The Clouds*, *The Knights*, *The Wasps*, *The Birds*, *Lysistrata*, *The Frogs*, *The Acharnians*, *Peace*, *The Women at the Thesmophoria*, *The Assembly Women*, and *Plutus*.

Aristophanes' plays are still very popular today and are frequently produced; below is the synopsis of some of the most popular ones.

Lysistrata – the play is a social commentary on the Peloponnesian War, which saw Athens fighting against Sparta for many, many years. In the play, the women decide to undergo a sex strike to stop the war. In other words, they wouldn't satisfy their husbands' needs unless they stopped fighting. As you can see, the motto "make love not war" is grounded in *Lysistrata*, a play written in 411 B.C.! An element that adds more comedy to the plot is the fact that, because women were not allowed to act: as such, their roles were played by men. The play also featured male characters – the husbands-, who at some point dress up as women to go spy on their wives. That makes for yet another, very comedic, element.

The Frogs – The play features Dionysus heading down to the underworld in disguise to bring Euripides back to life. He finds him "dueling" against Aeschylus to determine who was the best writer of tragedies. Dionysus decides that the winner will be brought back to life, but both playwrights do well, and that makes his decision very difficult. He then says he will bring back to life the one who will give the best advice on how to save Athens (from the wars). Aeschylus wins. *The Frogs* has been adapted into a musical by the same name, authored by Stephen Sondheim.

Peace – in another anti-war play, where a middle-aged Athenian Tygaeus succeeds at ending the Peloponnesian war by visiting the gods and getting peace, set free from the cave where she was kept. The war ends, and many Athenians are overjoyed, while those who profited from the war are unhappy with Tygaeus.

Costumes

There is very little evidence about what kind of costumes were utilized in Classic Greek theatre, in particular when it comes to tragedies.

Some believe that actors would wear a decorated tunic, called *chiton*, with maybe a short cloak, the *chlamys*, or a long one, the *himation*, to go on top of it. Actors apparently wore platform shoes, called *kothornos*, with laces coming up to their calves. Other scholars argue about the existence of more complex costuming, tailored to the needs of a specific production. Yet, nothing has been proven for certain. What we know mostly comes from some painted fragments of vases and pottery.

As for comedies, apparently, they allowed for a less elegant or stylized approach to costuming. It is believed both the actors and the chorus would use garments that were adapted from everyday clothes, with the occasional addition of grotesque elements to add to the comedic effect. Sexual attributes, such as the penis, the bottom, and female breasts were exaggerated and added to the costumes as well. On many occasions, the comedic chorus is populated by animals, for example, in Aristophanes' *The Frogs*. In that case, costumes would try to provide an idea of the animal as well.

How did the Greek Theatre respond to its society?

The tragedy *Trojan Women*, written by Euripides and produced in 415 B.C., is a direct response to the Siege of Melos (the current island of Milos), during the Peloponnesian Wars of 416 B.C., where Athens invaded the island, killed, and enslaved its population. While the playwright could not directly attack the Government, the Greeks did indeed introduce "democracy" [*demos*=people + *cratos*= power, power to the people], but it was not exactly the same concept of democracy we have today. He wrote about the aftermath of the Trojan War, when the Greeks set Troy on fire, killed all the men, and enslaved the women, assigning each one—including the widows of the king and the warriors—to Greek commanders and warriors. For example, Hecuba, the wife of King Priam, was assigned to Odysseus, and her daughter Cassandra to Agamemnon. In a famous passage, Taltybius, the Greek messenger, announces to Hector's widow, Andromache, that she must relinquish her newborn child to the Greeks because he has to be killed. The Greeks feared that once an adult, the baby boy would seek revenge.

Below are a couple of famous quotes from the play, and as you can see, while they are directly connected to the plot of the play, they do lend themselves to a more generalized and universal criticism about the Greeks.

Andromache: You Greeks have invented savage new crimes:
Why are you killing this innocent baby?

(V 764-765)

Hecuba: You, Achaeans, have greater pretense at the spear
than sense. Why, in fear of this child, have you
committed a new murder? (V. 1158-1160)

Achaeans, your spears weigh more than your judgement,

Why, you are afraid of a child, and therefore, you commit murder.

Another example of how theatre commented on society is well presented in Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*. Research exercise: read the play and find the connection between the text and its social commentary.

Music in Greek Theatre

Classic Greek plays used a ton of music, including instrumental pieces and songs, as an element of spectacle and to emphasize the relevance of certain concepts. The Greeks, in fact, believed music had some ethical qualities, in particular when played to highlight a specific idea or emotion. Unfortunately, very little has survived of the original scores. There are a few fragments, but nothing as extensive as to allow us to reconstruct the score of any play in its entirety.

The instruments that we know were utilized are the flute, the lyre, the trumpet, as well as a variety of percussion instruments. Musicians played alongside the chorus, likely sitting closer to the audience.

Who is the Greek Hero, or the Tragic Hero?

The Greek Hero, or Tragic Hero, in a Classic Greek tragedy is the protagonist of the play. Nowadays, the term "hero" carries various meanings and immediately brings to mind over-the-top characters who fight— and mostly win—against inconceivably tough circumstances to "save the world." When it comes to Classic Greek theatre, this couldn't be further from the truth.

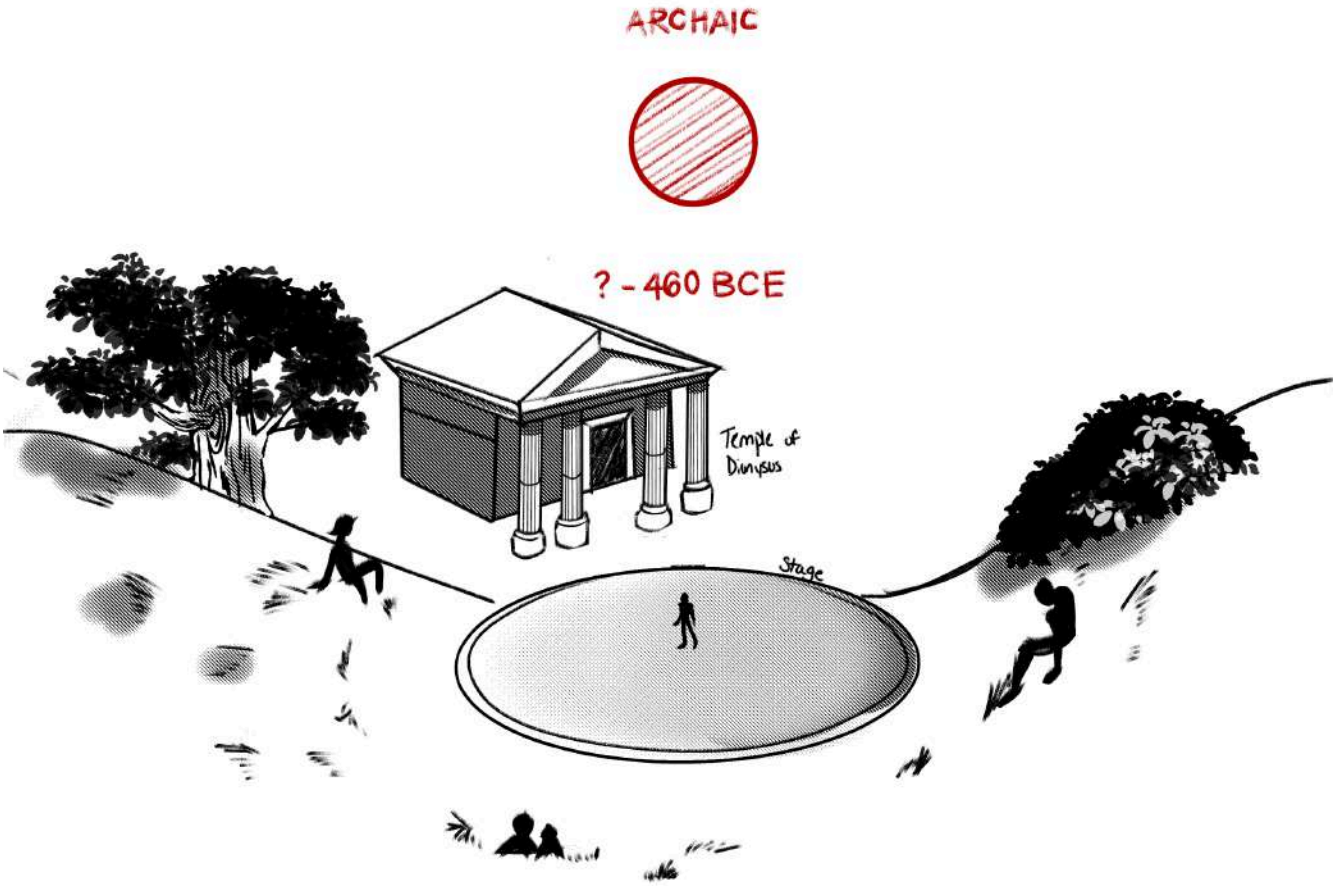
In a Classic Greek tragedy, the Greek hero is always a male character of noble birth – as it had to be someone the audience looked up to, someone who could set an example. He, like everyone, isn't perfect and therefore makes a mistake due to a character flaw, also known as *hamartia*. That mistake is at the core of the tragedy and sets in motion the hero's demise. Yet, what makes the character a hero is that he ultimately understands his mistake, takes responsibility for his actions, and bears the consequences of them.

For example, in Sophocles' *Antigone*, the tragic hero is Creon, Antigone's uncle. His tragic flaw is his pride, or *hubris*. While he believes he is doing what is best for Thebes, he is too proud to listen to other people's advice and ultimately refuses to admit he is wrong. By prioritizing the state over his own family and condemning Antigone to death, he loses the support of the people as well as his son, who commits suicide. He loses everything. He will live bearing the consequences of his actions, becoming the living example of what happens when we are too proud to accept the advice of others.

In Euripides' *Medea*, the tragic hero is Jason, whose *hamartia* is ambition. Because he is not content with his social standing, he rejects his wife and abandons his children to marry the daughter of the current King of Corinth and advance his social status. This triggers Medea's revenge, as she first kills Jason's soon-to-be new bride and the king, and then kills her and Jason's children. Once again, Jason is left with nothing. Medea even carries away the corpses of his children, so that he wouldn't have the opportunity of providing them burial rites and properly mourn them.

Theatrical Spaces and Design Elements

Athens featured one of the biggest theatrical spaces in Greece, the Theatre of Dionysus. It is located at the bottom of the Acropolis, in the sacred area dedicated to the cult of the god.

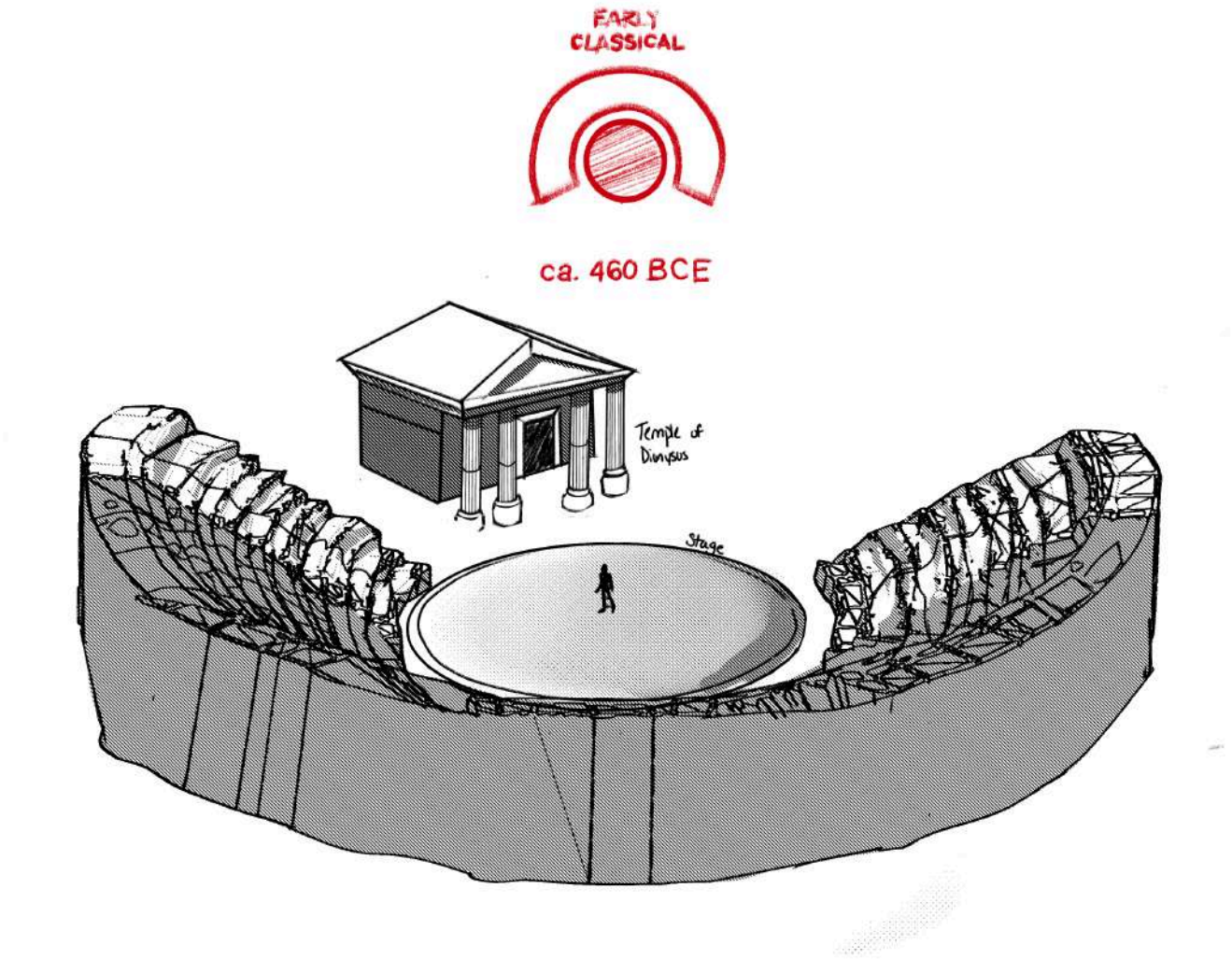


Theatre of Dionysus, 460 B.C. Arlee Peterson, 2025

The theatre evolved greatly throughout the centuries, so tracing back its origins can be quite challenging.

Likely, at the end of the 4th Century B.C., there wasn't much of a structure per se. The main area was a circular space called the *orchestra*, located at the bottom of the slope known as the *theatron*. There was a sacrificial altar somewhere in the orchestra, possibly in the center.

The chorus would reside in the orchestra. The actors would probably be standing on a wooden platform on the opposite side of the slope, tangent to the *orchestra*. The audience would sit on the natural slope of the land. Initially, there wasn't much of a dedicated seating area, but around 498 B.C., wooden benches (*ikaria*) were added, and the *theatron* was shaped into terraces to facilitate seating.

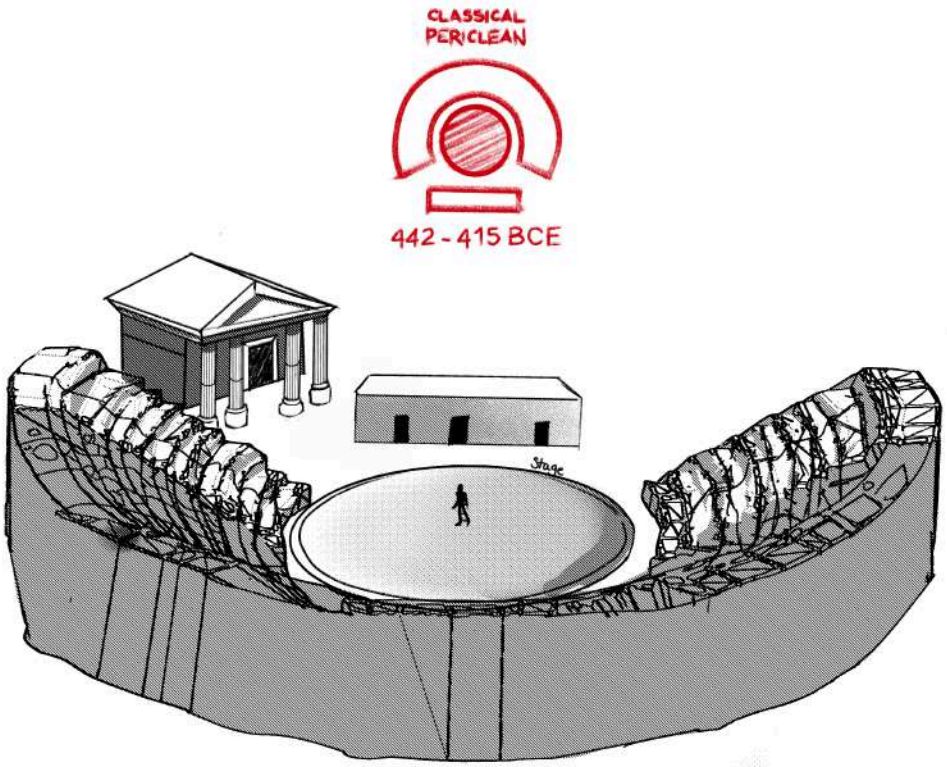


Theatre of Dionysus, ca. 460 B.C. Arlee Peterson, 2025

Next (5th Century B.C.) was the addition of the stage building, also called *skene*. It was originally a simple wooden structure with three doors, a wider one in the center, and two smaller ones on the sides. The central door was devoted to the entrance of the most important characters, while the side doors were for the minor characters and the messengers. The roof of the *skene* was utilized for the apparitions of the gods or other special effects.

It is assumed that originally the *skene* was a temporary structure, being built specifically for the City Dionysia every year. Later, it became a permanent, stone building. Either way, it represented the backdrop for all of the production, and it started to be decorated around 460 B.C., which is when both Aeschylus and Sophocles were active.

At the top of the performance, the actors and the chorus would enter from the *parodoi* (*parodos*, singular), two aisles at the side of the *skene* at the bottom of the slope.



Theatre of Dionysus, 442-415 B.C. Arlee Peterson, 2025



Greek Theatre of Segesta, Sicily (Italy). 4 Century B.C. Photo courtesy of Kiara Pipino.



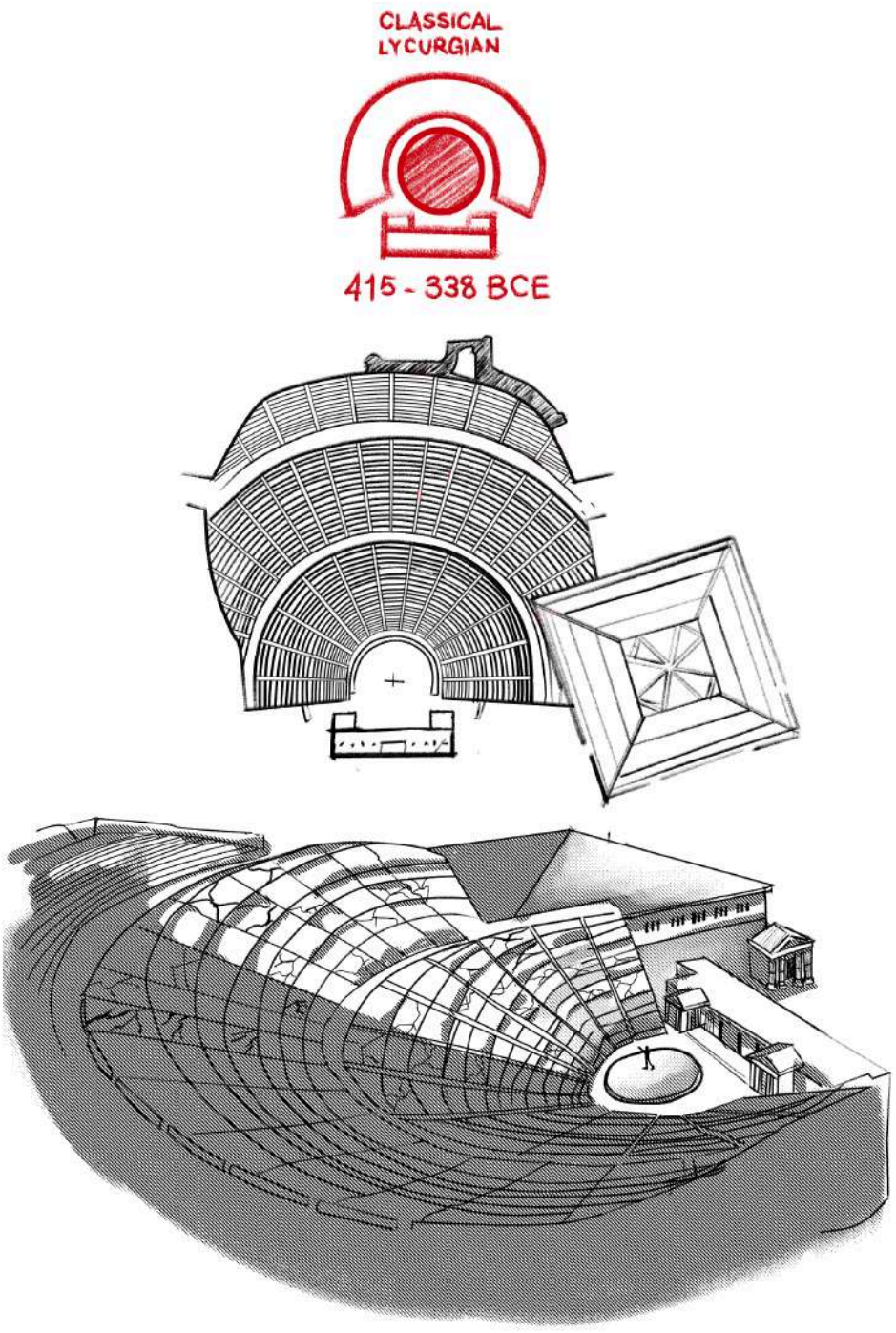
The Greek Theater in Palazzolo Acreide, 300 B.C. (Italy) .Photo courtesy of Andrea Izzotti.

At the end of the 5th Century, the wooden benches were substituted by stone seating, and finally, the skene was also built in stone.

The seating area was called *koilon*, and as the theatre grew in popularity and required more seating, it was divided into two different sections by a middle aisle, the *diazoma*.

The seats closer to the orchestra were for the notable citizens of Athens, and members of the polis would also have dedicated seats, known as the proedria—small throne-like chairs positioned directly above the orchestra.

At the peak of its popularity, the Theatre of Dionysus would seat about 17,000 people. Tickets had different prices, depending on the location of the seat. Pericles had also established a fund to allow poor people to have access to tickets. All the money coming from ticket sales would go towards the upkeep of the theatre.



Theatre of Dionysus, 415-338 B.C. Arlee Peterson, 2025

The Theatre of Dionysus kept growing all throughout the Hellenistic times and with the Romans as well, gaining seats and a building at the back of the *skene*. Containment walls had to be built as well, in order to secure the seating area.



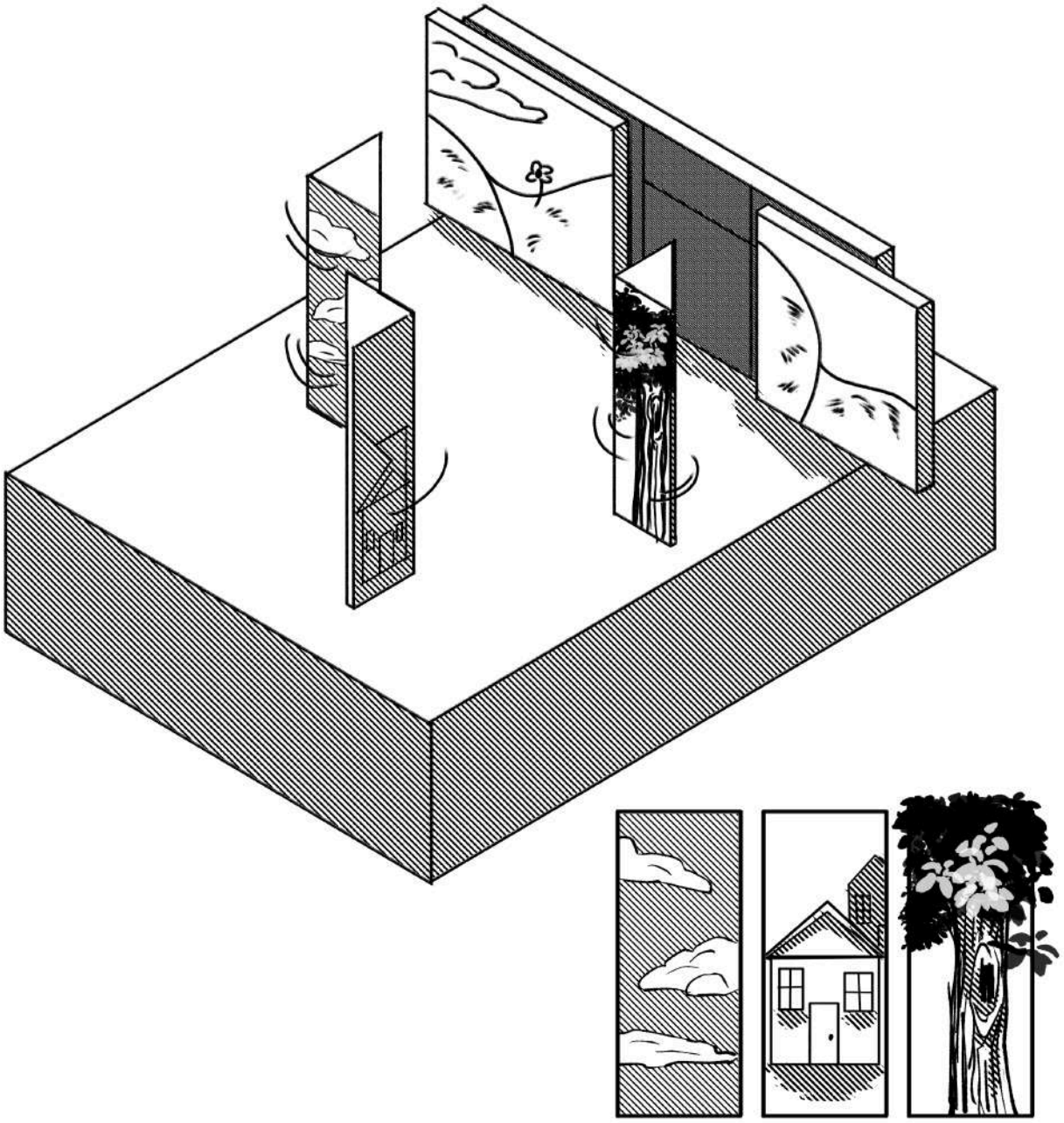
Greek theatre of Siracusa (Italy). Photo courtesy of Kiara Pipino.

When it comes to scenic design, there are a few elements that are believed to be popular. *Pinakes*, for example, were wooden panels that could be painted according to the needs of the play. They could be switched during the production thanks to in-ground ridges in front of the *skene*. Another scenic element was the *periaktoi*, triangular prisms that could rotate on a central pivot, showing a different design on each side. They were located on the side of the skene. Unfortunately, it's impossible to claim that these elements were surely used in the 5th Century B.C., but we do have records of them being used later.

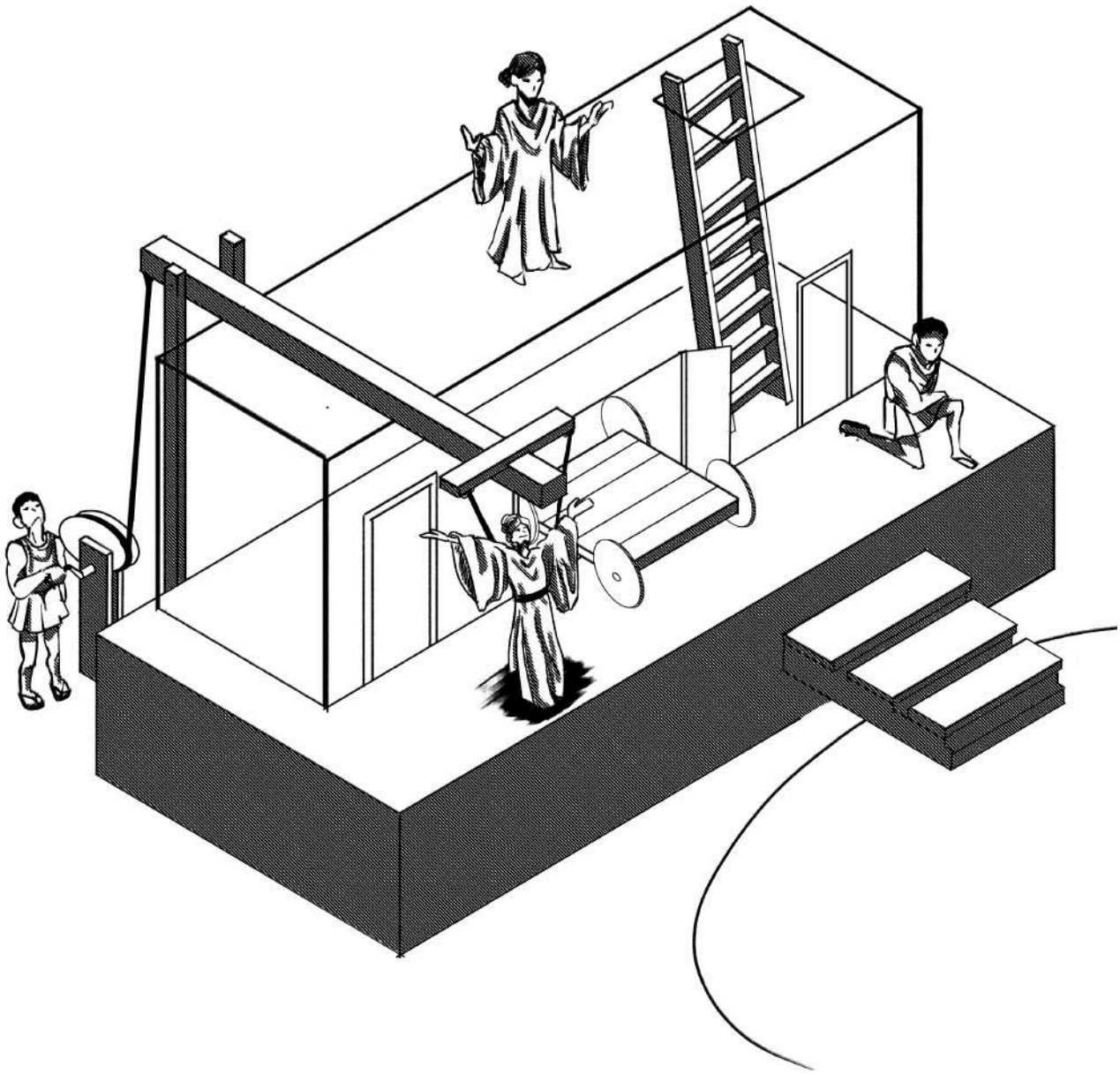
Another important scenic element was the *ekkyklema*, a small platform on wheels that could be pushed in and out of the main door of the *skene* to create a surprise effect.

Lastly, there was the *machina*, a crane of some sort that sat behind the *skene*, allowing for characters or elements to be lifted, thus appearing as though they were flying. This would have been necessary, for example, at the end of Euripides' *Medea*, when the Chariot of the Sun takes Medea and the corpses of her children away from Corinth. Many of Euripides' plays seemed to have benefited from the *machina* as a way to resolve the play with spectacle.

And this is what originated the Latin expression deus-ex-machina – literally, "god out of the machine"- as a way to abruptly put an ending to a play, without leaving space for a proper dramaturgical resolution.



5th/6th Century Periaktoi and Pinakes set elements. Arlee Peterson, 2025



5th/6t^{h} *Century Special Effects. Arlee Peterson, 2025*

Aristotle (384-322 B.C.)

In the *Poetics* (335 B.C.) Aristotle investigated the social and educational value of theatre. He considered tragedies as the prime genre, and comedies not to be morally relevant. He considered Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* the perfect example of a good play, and as he analyzed it, he emphasized the elements that contribute to its greatness. They are the following:

Plot (mythos)

Melody (melos)

Characters (ethos)

Language (lexis)

Spectacle (opsis)

Thought (dianoia)

For a play to be good and educational, it needed to have a compelling plot (in Greek, mythos), a story that needed to be told. *Oedipus the King* portrays this well, telling the story of a young man who tries to defy his destiny. Thanks to his intelligence and good nature, Oedipus becomes a King only to experience a ruinous downfall that will force him to accept his fate and become the living example of his wrongdoing.

Melody and language are also important elements. Melody can be achieved with music as well as with the rhythm of the language. Classic Greek tragedies used verse, which gave the speech rhythm and rhyme. They also had music in them – with dancers performing in the orchestra.

According to Aristotle, characters needed to be of noble birth to help the common citizen learn a lesson. If someone above their status made a mistake, recognized the mistake, and accepted their punishment, that character would be a good role model. The argumentation highlighted in the dialogue would make the protagonist's personal journey more believable.

Finally, in order to keep the audience engaged, Aristotle recognized that some form of spectacle needed to be present. This could be achieved through dancing or by the ghostly appearance of a God.

How did the audience learn from the play, and what did they learn?

According to Aristotle, the play presented a setup—a scenario, in which a powerful character, the Greek hero, makes a mistake, due to a personal flaw. In the case of Oedipus, his tragic flaw was his arrogance, which led him to believe himself to be smarter than the gods. Once the mistake is committed, a chain of events will lead the character to face the truth and realize that they were wrong and must take responsibility for their actions.

Because the tragic hero, like Oedipus, is a man of integrity, who does not intend to harm but seeks to prevent a greater evil—and because he proves to be a good ruler—the audience follows his downfall with sympathy. The audience undergoes what is called "catharsis", an emotional release which allows them to better understand the resolution.. As the audience walks out of the theatre, they have learned that trying to deviate from the order of things is wrong, and that punishment will come regardless of social status. Even a king cannot escape his fate.

Adaptations of Classic Greek Myths/Tragedies

There are countless later adaptations of Greek classic plays and myths. Because of the universality of the topics they explored, plays such as *Medea*, *Antigone*, *Oedipus Rex*, the *Oresteia*, and *Helen*, just to name a few, have been and continue to be revisited in the modern age. Some of them have even been adapted into operas and musicals.

For the most part, adaptations explore tragedies, but there are also a few adaptations of some of Aristophanes' other works, mostly of *Lysistrata* and *The Frogs*. Below you will find a short list of them, as an example. You could find many more titles with a brief research.

As the 17th Century Europe rediscovered the classics, also thanks to translations from Greek into Latin finally being

available, several playwrights revisited some of the Greek plays. It all started with the fall of the Roman Empire in the East, in 1453, when the Ottomans conquered Constantinople. As a result, scholars fled to Italy and France, carrying with them the manuscripts of the Greek Classics. This marks the beginning of the European exposure to Sophocles, Euripides, and Aeschylus. Greek works were then published in their original language and later translated into Latin.

Access to these works was mostly for the most educated and wealthy, yet soon enough, their circulation improved, leading to a significant evolution in European theatre and literature in general.

Below is just a sample of adaptations of classics from the 17th Century onward.

Two French playwrights, Pierre Corneille (1606-1684) and Jean Racine (1639-1699), wrote several.

Pierre Corneille wrote: *Médée* (1635), *Oedipe* (1659), *La Toison d'Or* (1660. This is based on the myth of the Golden Fleece, and features Medea and Jason as main characters. In this version of the myth, Jason does not marry Medea and leaves her in her homeland),

Jean Racine wrote: *La Thébaïde* (1664, based on *Antigone*), *Andromaque* (1667), *Iphigénie* (1674), and *Phèdre* (1677)

In England, roughly in the same period, John Dryden (1631-1700), who was mostly known for his comedies, wrote a gruesome adaptation of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, titled *Oedipus* (1679).

In the 18th Century, Germany, Goethe (1749-1832) wrote *Iphigenia in Tauris* (1779), later Franz Grillparzer wrote *The Golden Fleece* (1821), and Hugo Von Hofmannsthal wrote *Elektra* (1903).

Modern and contemporary adaptations include:

Andre Gide – *Philoctète* (1899), *Oedipe* (1931).

Bertolt Brecht – *Antigone* (1948).

Jean Anouilh – *Antigone* (1944), *Medea* (1953).

Heiner Müller – *Philoctetes* (1968).

Derek Walcott – *Ione* (1977) *The Isle is Full of Noises* (1984, based on Sophocles' *Philoctetes*).

Rita Dove – *The Darker Face of the Earth* (1994, based on the myth of *Oedipus*).

With the larger availability of texts thanks to, amongst other things, the internet, the proliferation of classic-inspired texts has grown exponentially in the course of the latter part of the 20th Century and continues to these days. Selecting adaptations of the classics becomes a futile endeavor; hence, what you will find below is just a sample to provide an idea of the scope of the work.

Christopher Durang and Wendy Wasserstein– *Medea* (1994, a tragicomedy in one act)

Seamus Heaney – *The Cure at Troy: a Version of Sophocles' Philoctetes* (1990) and *The Burial at Thebes: a Version of Sophocles' Antigone* (2004).

Neil LaBute – *Bash: Latter-Day plays* (1999, three short plays investigating Iphigenia and Medea).

Luois Alfaro – *Electricidad* (2003, based on Sophocles' *Electra*), *Oedipus El Rey* (2010), and *Mojada* (2013, based on *Medea*).

Some musicals include:

The Gospel at Colonus – score by Bob Telson, book and lyrics by Lee Breuer, based on Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*. It first opened off Broadway in 1983. It opened on Broadway in 1988.

Marie Christine – score, book, and lyrics by John LaChiusa, based on Euripides' *Medea*. It opened on Broadway in 1999.

Lysistrata Jones – book by Douglas Carter Beane, score and lyrics by Lewis Flinn. It opened on Broadway in 2011.

While Shakespeare could not have access to Greek classic plays, as they hadn't been translated yet, he was familiar with the Greek myths as they were reported by Roman historians and playwrights. His play *Troilus and Cressida*, for example, is based on the Trojan Wars.

TAKEAWAYS – GREEK THEATRE

Thespis is the first actor/playwright we have records of, and he invented the tragedy by introducing dialogue in the 6th Century B.C.

Theatre was part of the rituals in honor of the god Dionysus.

Originally, tragedies had one actor interacting with the chorus. Later, Aeschylus added another actor, and Sophocles added a third one.

Sophocles also set the number for the chorus to fifteen members.

The plays were produced within a festival, the most important of which was the City Dionysia, in Athens.

The City Dionysia presented a trilogy of tragedies and a satyr play per playwright. Later, comedies were also produced.

The "golden age" of classic Greek Theatre is the 5th Century B.C.

The most famous playwrights of the period – and the only ones whose work has survived – are Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, who wrote tragedies, and Aristophanes, who wrote comedies.

In 335 b.C Aristotle wrote the *Poetics*, a treatise where he discusses theatre, its social function, and analyzes the structure of what he considers a good play (*Sophocles' Oedipus the King*)

The Theatre of Dionysus was located at the bottom of the Athenian Acropolis and was where the City Dionysia took place. The theatre greatly evolved from the 6th to the 4th Centuries and beyond. At the peak of its popularity, it could seat 17,000 people.

Classic Greek plays are still very popular for the universality of their subject matter.

Vocabulary

Aristotle

Poetics (Ars Poetica)

Abydos

Osiris

Crete

Minoan civilization

Knossos

Rigveda

Buddhacarita

Mahabharata

Ratnavali

Aztecs

Maya

Flowery War

Rabinal Achi

Thespis

Theatron

Dithyrambs

Tragos

Mimesis

Dionysus

City Dionysia

Rural Dionysia

Lenaia

Polis

Archon

Choregus

Theatre of Dionysus

Odeon

Tragedy

Comedy

Satyr Play

Aeschylus (plays)

Sophocles (plays)

Euripides (plays)

Aristophanes (plays)

Prologue

Parodos

Exodus

Stasima

Episodes

Pollux, *Onomasticon*

Catharsis

Pratinas

Chiton,

Chlamys

Himation

Kothornos

Tragic hero

Hamartia – tragic flaw

Koilon

Ikaria

Orchestra

Altar

Proedria

Skene

Koilon

Diazoma

Pinakes

Ekkyklema

Periaktoi

Machina

Deus-ex-Machina

ACTIVITY FOR THE CLASSROOM

Let's recreate a Greek agon (a disputation)!

Divide the students into four groups of four people.

Group 1- The group represents Aeschylus. Each student needs to read one of Aeschylus' plays, preferably *Agamemnon*, *Libation Bearers*, *Eumenides*, or *Prometheus Bound.*

Group 2 – The group represents Sophocles. Each student needs to read one of Sophocles' plays, preferably *Antigone*, *Oedipus the King*, *Electra*, and *Philoctetes.*

Group 3 – The group represents Euripides. Each student needs to read one of Euripides' plays, preferably *Medea*, *Trojan Women*, *Orestes*, and *Iphigenia in Aulis.*

Group 4 – The students in this group will be the jury. They will have to read a play by each of the playwrights, but not any of the ones read by the other three groups. For example, they could read Aeschylus' *The Suppliants*, Sophocles' *Ajax*, and Euripides' *Alcestis*. All the students in this group should be familiar with the three plays, so that they will have a better idea of the differences between the three playwrights.

Groups 1,2, and 3 have to advocate for their playwright and make the argument that he is the best Greek playwright. The students' arguments need to be based on the style, the storyline, the characters, the social relevance of the pieces they have read, and on how relevant they are still today.

The students in group 4 will listen to the other groups' arguments, and then they should challenge each group with some questions coming from their acquired knowledge of each playwright.

The debate should conclude with the determination of who is the best classic Greek playwright.

(For the instructor: this exercise is based on the assumption that the class is capped at 16. If the number of students differs, adjustments in the group should be made accordingly.)

Historical Timeline by Jennifer King

Time Period	Event	Significance
c. 3000–1100 B.C.	Minoan & Mycenaean Civilizations	The Minoans (Crete) and Mycenaeans (mainland Greece) laid the foundation for Greek culture, trade, and early writing.
c. 1100–800 B.C.	Greek Dark Ages	Collapse of Mycenaean civilization; loss of writing and decline in population; oral traditions like Homer's Iliad and Odyssey emerge.
c. 776 B.C.	First Olympic Games	The start of a pan-Hellenic tradition, reinforcing Greek identity and competition among city-states.
c. 750–700 B.C.	Homer Composed *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*	Marks the emergence of Greek literature and mythology, influencing Greek identity and values.
c. 621 B.C.	Draco's Law Code (Athens)	First written law code in Athens; extremely harsh, but established the principle of law over personal vendettas.
c. 594 B.C.	Solon's Reforms (Athens)	Abolished debt slavery and laid the foundation for democracy by reorganizing political structures.
c. 508 B.C.	Cleisthenes Establishes Athenian Democracy	Introduced democratic institutions, expanding citizen participation in government.
490 B.C.	Battle of Marathon	Athenian victory over Persia proved the strength of Greek city-states against larger empires.
480 B.C.	Battles of Thermopylae & Salamis	Leonidas and 300 Spartans make a legendary stand; the Greek naval victory at Salamis turns the tide against Persia.
447–432 B.C.	Construction of the Parthenon	Symbol of Athenian power and the height of Greek classical architecture under Pericles.
431–404 B.C.	Peloponnesian War	Prolonged conflict between Athens and Sparta led to Athens' decline and Sparta's short-lived dominance.
399 B.C.	Trial and Death of Socrates	Socrates is sentenced to death, marking a crucial moment in philosophy and the struggle between democracy and individual thought.
336 B.C.	Alexander the Great Becomes King of Macedon	He began his conquests, spreading Greek culture throughout the known world.
323 B.C.	Death of Alexander the Great	Marks the end of the Classical Greek period and the beginning of the Hellenistic Era.
146 B.C.	Roman Conquest of Greece	Greece falls under Roman rule, though Greek culture remains highly influential in the Roman world.

2. The Romans

CATERINA MORDEGLIA

The Roman drama: origins, developments, theatrical organization

As with the Greeks, the origin of theater for the Romans was linked to religious practices. The Latin historian Livy (Titus Livius) in his *Annales* (7.2.1-7) tells us that in 365 B.C. the Romans instituted 'scenic games' (*ludi scaenici*) to appease the gods so that they would put an end to a violent plague that had been vexing the city for some time. The Romans, therefore, brought in dancers from nearby Etruria, an Italic civilization that at that time was more culturally advanced than the Roman one, to dance to the sound of the flute. Gradually, dialogue and songs (*Fescennini*) began to be added to the music and dance, first in unconnected and improvised scenes to be performed by young Romans (*saturae*) and then gradually written with a full plot (*fabulae*) and performed by professional actors. This evolution really pleased the audience of the time.

The earliest evidence of such a performance, always according to Livy, is poet Livy Andronicus' verse Latin translation of Homer's *Odyssey* in 240 B.C. This work represents a turning point in the history of Roman theater. In fact, the performance blends different international and intercultural influences: the original Etruscan one and the Greek one, as the Romans had learned about Greek culture as they expanded their empire in the south of Italy. This new style of performance becomes entirely original for the choice of the subject matter, its setting, and its technicality.

Over time, different stage practices and performances developed, inspired by either the Italic and Roman traditions and/or by the Greek tradition, and sometimes being a combination of the two different influences, and they can be grouped as follows:

- The *fabula palliata*: a Latin comedy with Greek subject matter and setting. This genre is modeled after the so-called 'new' Greek comedy championed by Menander and other Greek comic poets of the 4th-3rd centuries BC. The name "fabula palliata" comes from "*pallium*", which is the classic Greek word for cloak.
- The *fabula togata*: a Latin comedy with an original subject matter and set in Rome. It takes its name from the *toga*, the traditional Roman dress. This genre of performance had a very short and unsuccessful life.
- The *fabula cothurnata*: a Latin tragedy with Greek subject matter and setting, that is modeled after the Greek tragic poets of the 5th Century B.C., such as Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. It is named after the "*cothurni*", the platform shoes worn by classic Greek actors when they performed tragedies.
- The *fabula praetexta*: a Latin tragedy of Roman subject and setting. Named after the ornate purple dress worn by all freeborn Roman youths.
- The *fabula Atellana*: a performance of a comic and farcical nature, probably shorter than a regular comedy. It featured a written plot that actors could improvise from and included stock characters. This kind of comedy can be compared to the later Italian Commedia dell'Arte. It is named after the town of Atella, in the current Italian southern state of Basilicata. The *Fabula Atellana* truly represents the Italic style in all of its features and will eventually greatly influence Roman comedy.
- Mime: a performance of popular and improvised nature, that arrived in Rome from Magna Graecia and Sicily during the 3rd Century B.C, after having originated in the 5th Century B.C. It eventually gets to be scripted, featuring stereotypical plots and characters similar to those found in comedy. After 73 B.C., mime was included in theater festivals and became very popular throughout imperial Rome. Much of its success is because it is the only kind of performance that allowed women to participate in, although their role often almost exclusively featured undressing (*nudatio mimarum*) and bawdy acts.

- Pantomime, this form of performance, is the forerunner of modern dance. It is mainly based on mythological and classic tragic subject matter. The actor, silent and wearing a mask, performs through movement alone the story as it is told by the chorus to the accompaniment of music, impersonating both male and female characters with his dance. The actor may also be joined by an ensemble of female dancers. This style of performance was introduced in Rome in 22 B.C. by Pilades of Cilicia and Batillus of Alexandria, and it became a staple form of entertainment of the imperial age, with great success. Pantomime was also performed in between the acts of a tragedy.
- Circus games: they are enormously successful, especially during the imperial age, when, together with mime and pantomime, they effectively supplanted traditional theater. They included gladiator combats, fights with feral animals (*venationes*), reproductions of naval battles (*naumachiae*), chariot races, and athletic contests.

As was the case in the Greek world, all plays and theatrical performances took place during the day as part of multi-day festivals that were produced by public officials and paid with public money. The following are the most important Roman festivals:

- *Ludi Romani*: since 367 B.C., this festival took place annually in mid-September in the Circus Maximus and was organized in honor of Jupiter Optimus Maximus. Because of their incredible popularity, they went from being three days long to a full nine days. They included athletic activities such as running contests, boxing, wrestling, and horse racing. In 364 B.C., they started including theatrical performances. Gladiator combats were added starting in 264 B.C.. The first Latin tragedy was staged in 240 B.C.; it was Livy Andronicus' *Odusia*.
- *Ludi Plebeii*: this festival was dedicated to Jupiter and happened in mid-November in the Circus Flaminius. It initially only included sports, but later it hosted theatrical performances as well. During the imperial time this festival could last up to 14 days.
- *Ludi Apollinares*: this festival was held in July and was dedicated to Apollo. It was established in 212 B.C. and began to host theatrical performances starting the year 199 B.C. It originally took place in the Circus Maximus.
- *Ludi Megalenses*: this festival was established in 204 B.C. as a tribute to the goddess Cybele, also known as Magna Mater. Her cult was strong in Asia Minor and was later introduced in Rome. Theatrical performances were added to the festival in 194 B.C. and took place annually in April.
- *Ludi Florales*: this festival was established in 238 B.C. and became an annual event in 173, taking place between late April and early May. Of all the festivals, this one is almost a parody of it all, featuring a "reinterpretation" of circus games. For example, gladiator combats became mock fights between prostitutes. They were a kind of parody of circus games: instead of gladiator fights, there were mock fights between prostitutes and hares or goats or particularly licentious mimes.

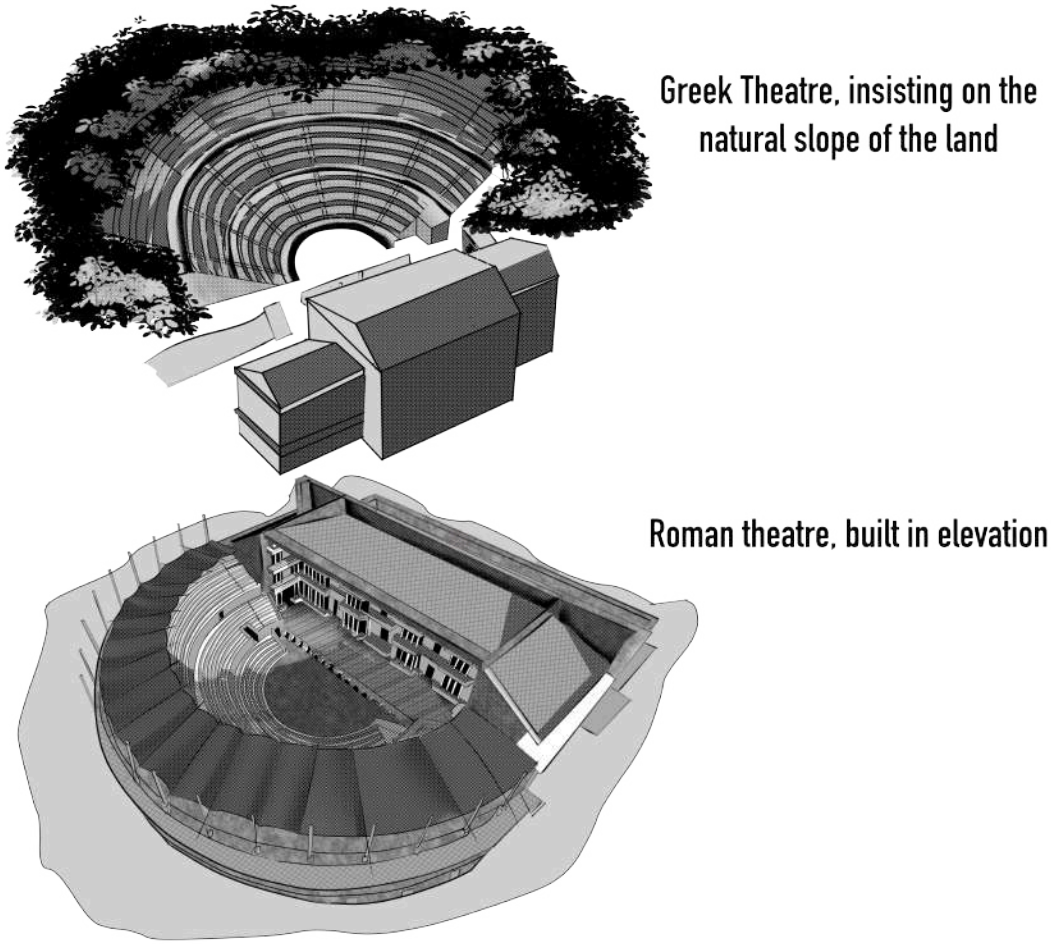
Theatrical performances took place on temporary wooden structures built specifically for events inside the circus (where the *Ludi* were held), usually near temples or other public buildings. To have a permanent theater building, we would have to wait until 55 B.C., when the Theatre of Pompey was built in Rome near the area known today as "Campo dei Fiori". The theatre was named after the Roman general and triumvir who financed it, probably to please the Romans in view of the upcoming elections (*nihil sub sole novum*.., "nothing new under the sun"…). A few years later, Julius Caesar, in order to rival his enemy, had a new theater built in the Campus Martius under the Campidoglio (the Roman Capitol Building), but it was not completed until under the Principate of Augustus. The theatre was named Theatre of Marcellus, after Augustus' nephew, and it was inaugurated in 13 B.C.. Its remains can still be seen in the Jewish Quarter. This theater, which underwent many restorations under different emperors, was probably used until the end of the Roman Empire (476 A.D.). The last known renovation of the Theatre of Marcellus dates to 421 A.D.

Interestingly, theatre buildings started to be built at a time when productions started to lose popularity, or at least experienced less success than in the previous century. The causes must be sought in the ideological resistance towards theatre coming from the conservative political class, in power in Rome in the 3^{rd}-2^{nd} Centuries B.C., and represented above all by Cato the Censor. He was adamant about discouraging theatre as he perceived it as a distraction from war-

like activities and civic duties, which any good Roman citizen should engage in. Classic Greek works in particular were mistrusted for their philosophical content and ideology. Other forms of entertainment – mostly games of various forms – were seen more favorably. Therefore, it is apparent how the Roman social landscape was quite different from the Greek one, where theatre was perceived as an instrument of civic and social education.

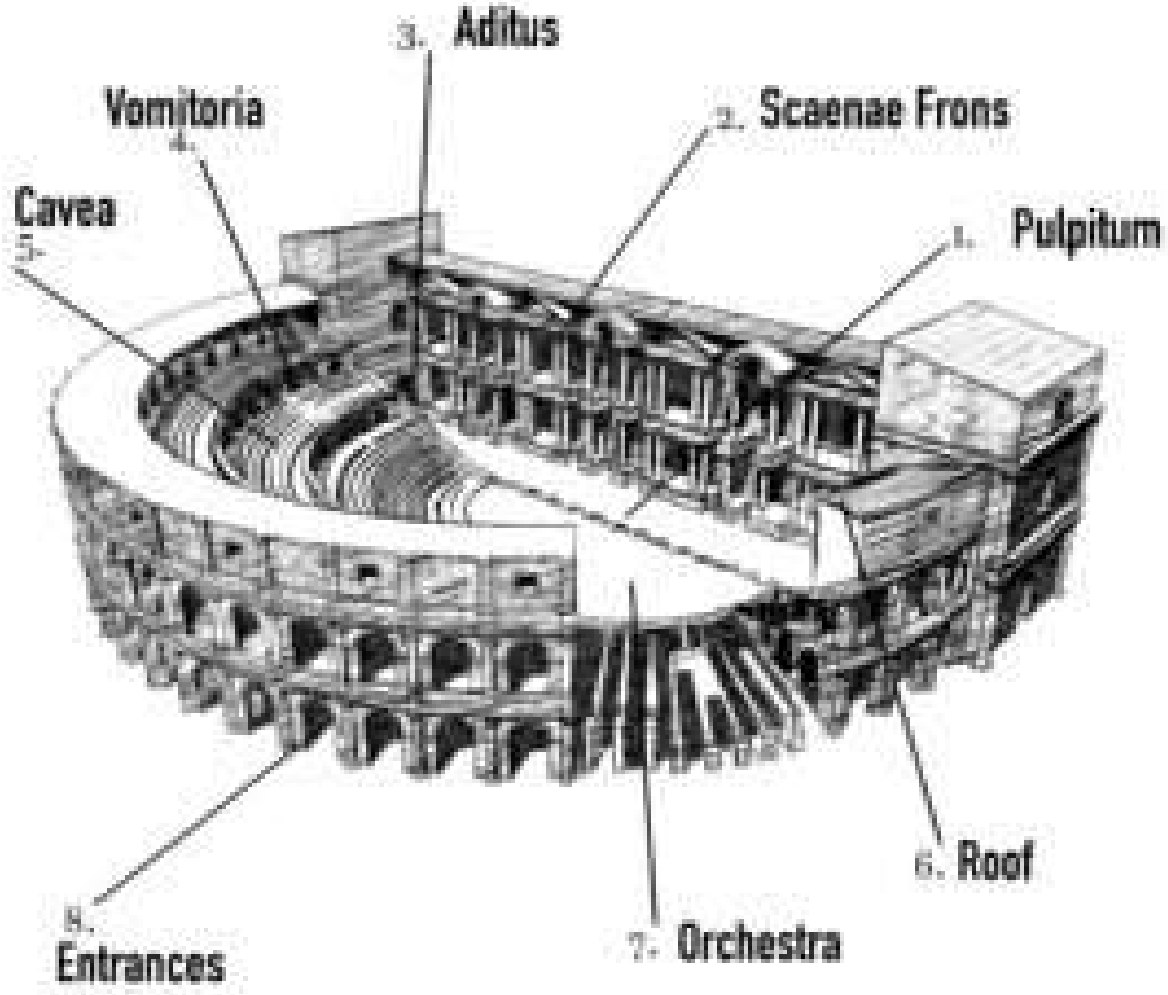
Because the wooden theatre structures had to be disassembled and reassembled each time, necessarily, the stage itself, between the mid-3rd Century B.C. and the mid-1st Century B.C., had to be simple and essential. The only permanent element was the altar, which is further proof of the original sacral character Roman theatre. From what we can gather from reading the plays and some texts from contemporary scholars, the stage most likely had a backdrop with two/three doors representing a temple, a palace, a cave for tragedies, and one, two, or three houses for comedies. Usually, the stage was oriented so that on the audience's right side, there would be the forum (or the marketplace) while on the opposite side, there would be the countryside. The main curtain (*auleum*) was not introduced until 133 B.C., but, unlike modern usage, it descended at the beginning of the play and rose at the end.

The permanent theatre building of the late republic and imperial ages, as we can learn from archaeological remains, is a semicircular self-standing structure, very much unlike the Greek theatre, which was built upon the slope of a hill. The Roman theatre features a narrower space dedicated to the chorus – as opposed to the Greek theatre – so that the tiers of seating areas (*cavea*) could be connected to the stage. While in the Greek Theatre, actors and audience would enter from the *parodoi*, open-air side passages between the seating area and the orchestra, in Roman theatres, these corridors were roofed. There were also more passages to access the *cavea*, which were called vomitoria. The stage (*pulpitum*) is closer to the ground than in Greek theatres and is overall much wider. The front of the stage sits on the diameter of the orchestra, which means that the orchestra itself is semi-circular rather than a full circle. Also, differently from Greek theatres, the orchestra at times provided seating for notable audience members. There was also a special box, facing the stage, for the emperor or for the organizer of the festival. When not used for seating, the orchestra was used by dancers, or for animal fights or other games..At the back of the stage, facing the audience, there would be a stone backdrop featuring several orders of columns and floors. At the stage level, there would be three doors; on the second level, there would be windows framed within columns and statues. The whole building was heavily decorated, to some extent, that was a way to counterbalance the cultural impoverishment and insignificance of the performances it hosted. As the seating area had no roof, large linen or silk tarps (*velaria*) were spread over the *cavea* to protect the spectators from the sun or rain starting at the end of the republican period. A detailed description of the theatrical buildings of the Imperial Age can be found in *De Architectura* (1st Century B.C.), a treatise written by Latin scholar Vitruvius.



Comparison between the Greek and the Roman theatre buildings. (Original illustration by Arlee Peterson)

Examples of this type of theatre from the imperial age can still be found in France or Spain, as they were wealthy Roman provinces at the time. Examples include the theatres of Nimes and Orange (France) or the theatre of Mérida (Spain). The latter is still in use today and hosts a famous Spanish theatre festival. This type of theatre should not be confused with the amphitheater, which is a fully elliptical building mostly devoted to hosting athletic events, circus games, and gladiator fights. The most famous example of an amphitheater is the Flavian Amphitheatre, better known as the *Colosseum*, which was inaugurated in Rome by Emperor Titus in 80 A.D.



A *Roman theatre and its parts. Illustration by Arlee Peterson.*



Theatre of Pompei, Italy, 55 B.C. Photo courtesy of Kiara Pipino.

When it comes to the structure of the play, the Romans followed the Aristotelian "rule of the third actor", although in a less rigid way. It meant that there couldn't be more than three actors on the stage, which does not exclude the presence of other silent characters or "ensemble" scenes. As in Shakespeare's time, only men could act; hence, they had to pick up female roles as well. We have to wait until the fourth century to find evidence of the presence of women on stage. Scholars are divided about the use of masks in Roman theatre. Likely, however, masks were used in those plays that relied on mistaken identities or similarity between characters (e.g., Plautus' *Amphytrio* or *Menaechmi* where there are twin characters). Acting was characterized by an almost total absence of realism, and the ability of the actor (*actor* or *histrio*, an Etruscan term that harkens back to the origins of Roman theater) was measured mainly in his use of the voice and his gestures. A good actor also had to be able to sing – and sometimes dance too – since in traditional plays the dialogue (*deverbia*) was often accompanied by music and included songs (*cantica*). On stage, there was always a musician playing the flute (*tibicen*, *tibia* player, a kind of flute with two reeds), who was usually both composer and performer. Unfortunately, there is no record of the times that have survived. Quite likely, the music was never written down and was learned by the actors "on the go". Scripts were written in verse, although the meter depended on whether it was a song (lyrical verse), dialogue (iambic verse), or dialogue accompanied by music (iambic or trochaic verse).

Actors were organized into theatrical companies (*catervae* or *greges*) managed by the *dominus gregis* (literally 'the master of the herd'. Remember! The Romans were originally a people of shepherds and farmers, and so many terms in Latin reflect these origins. However, the troupe only had a few performers, among whom the leading actor stood out for his special skills. Some actors achieved great success, such as Pellione, interpreter of Plautus' *Bacchides*, Ambivio Turpione,

who acted for Terence, or Roscio, who was defended in court by Cicero with his defense speech "*Pro Roscio comoedo*". The second and third actors played parts that did not require specific skills.

Troupes were represented by guilds, such as the *Collegium scribarum histrionumque*, for playwrights and actors, which was established in 207 B.C., and the *Collegium tibicinum*, for musicians and founded at the time of Numa Pompilius, the second king of Rome.

Because it was believed that the actor's trade was not suitable for a good Roman citizen, professional actors were mostly foreigners and slaves. If a Roman man wanted to be an actor, he would lose his citizenship, a fact that shows how theatrical practices in Rome encountered quite a lot of political and cultural resistance – at least in the Archaic and Republican ages.

Roman plays have been handed down to us partly directly in the form of manuscripts from the 5th Century onward and then throughout the Middle Ages until the 15th Century, and partly through the works of grammarians, commentators, and scholars, who reported partial fragments of plays that had not been confirmed otherwise. It is important to note that, whatever the case, we only have plays that were written down to be read, not performed. Troupes had "working copies" of the scripts, which likely looked very different. Yet, none of those working copies has survived.

Comedy

Of all the types of Roman comedies, the only ones that have survived are the "*palliatae*", which are the ones with Greek subject matter and setting. The only thing we know about the "*togata*" comedy, the comedy of Roman subject matter and setting, is that it was introduced late and was short-lived, possibly because the conservative Roman society of the times could not embrace the subversion of values and social roles promoted by that kind of comedy within the boundaries of a local environment.

Following the Aristotelian tradition, the characters in comedies could only be ordinary people and slaves. The point of attack of the play is a conflictual situation leading to the mandatory happy ending. The plot always follows the same pattern: a character (or a group of characters) tries to win/have access to "something" (usually the love of a maiden, but also money) and to do so, obstacles must be overcome, usually through subterfuge and deception. A decisive role in the resolution of the intrigue is undertaken by a servant (*servus callidus*), usually the poet's alter ego, who is ultimately also the author of the hoax. Compared with the Greek models, Roman comedies are more focused on the development of mask characters (stock characters) and on the fast, farcical pace, both distinctive elements of the Italic tradition.

Most successful Roman comedies date between the second half of the 3rd Century and the first half of the 2nd Century B.C.. At this time, Rome gradually expands into the Mediterranean with the Punic Wars and comes into contact with the Greek culture, thus also importing Greek plays that will be imitated and contaminated with each other.

The first major Roman playwright was the Neapolitan poet Gnaeus Nevius (270-201 B.C.), who is mostly remembered for his comedies, although he penned tragedies and historical pieces as well. Nevius was highly successful until he fell into disgrace for attacking the powerful Metelli family. Metelli imprisoned him and sent him into exile. This is likely the cause of the loss of most of his works, as only a few fragments have survived.

The only works that are available to us in an overall complete form are Plautus' and Terence's plays.

Plautus (254-184 B.C.)



Plautus in a 1770 engraving by Pierre François Barrois. British Museum, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Titus Maccius Plautus was born in Sarsina, central Italy, between 255 and 250 B.C. and died in Rome around 184 B.C. The last name "*Maccius*", along with "*Titus*", was probably added after his death to conform to the Roman name system. It recalls the name of a mask of the *Atellana*, thus suggesting that Plautus was also an actor.

Plautus was very popular during his lifetime and beyond, in fact, in the 1st Century B.C., nearly 200 years after his death, more than 130 comedies were circulating under his name. In reality, the grammarian Varro narrowed the number of Plautus' authentic comedies to just 21, and these are the ones we still consider his own today. Most of those 21 comedies are complete, while some of them are incomplete. Scripts have been passed down to us through the medieval tradition in the following order:

- *Amphitruo* ("Amphitryon"): The god Jupiter wants to "spend the night" with Alcmena, wife of the Theban general Amphitryon. To do so, he assumes the identity of Amphitryon and is accompanied by Mercury, who assumes the identity of Sosia, Amphitryon's servant. From the mistaken identity comes a most amusing game of misunderstandings.
- *Asinaria* ("The Comedy of Asses"): a young man wants to set his sweat heart, a prostitute, free. He succeeds with his servants and his father's help, although his father becomes his rival in love.
- *Aulularia* ("The Pot of Gold"): the protagonist is the old miser Euclio, who is robbed of his pot of gold.
- *Bacchides* ("The Bacchides"): the protagonists are twin sisters. The deceptions triggered by two young men in order to win their love interest are complicated by the resemblance of the two women.
- *Captivi* ("The Prisoners"): the protagonist is an old man who manages to recover the two sons he had lost, one kidnapped as a child and the other taken as a prisoner of war. This play has more serious undertones and doesn't feature any kind of romance.
- *Casina* ("Casina"): an old man falls in love with the same slave-girl his son is in love with. He eventually finds himself tricked (by his wife) into bed with a handsome young man instead of the girl.
- *Cistellaria* ("The Casket"): A young man, forced by his father to marry a maiden he does not love, is in love with a young slave girl, who will later turn out to be of free birth.
- *Curculio* ("The Weevil"): the protagonist is a parasite slave who helps his young master who is in love with a prostitute to trick the pimp and free the girl.
- *Epidicus* ("Epidicus"): Epidicus, a slave, helps his young master, who is in love with two girls.
- *Menaechmi* ("The Two Menaechmuses"): the protagonists are two identical brothers who do not know each other because they were separated at birth. One of the two, having happened upon the other's town, takes his place without knowing it, with misunderstandings ensuing as a consequence of mistaken identities. Shakespeare takes it as a model for *The Comedy of Errors*.
- *Mercator* ("The Merchant"): A young merchant's rival in love is his old father, who will ultimately not win the girl.

- *Miles Gloriosus* ("The Braggart Soldier"): The protagonist is a boastful soldier who will be cheated and robbed of his concubine. It is the archetype for many future portrayals of the vainglorious soldier, including Shakespeare's Falstaff.
- *Mostellaria* ("The Ghost Play"): The servant makes the old man believe that his house is inhabited by ghosts so that he could protect his young master and his friends who are mingling with their sweethearts.
- *Persa* ("The Persian"): A slave dresses up as a Persian to help another slave succeed in tricking the pimp and setting his beloved free.
- *Poenulus* ("The Little Punic Man"): the protagonist belongs to a Carthaginian family, and the lovers eventually discover they are cousins and are reunited by mocking the pimp.
- *Pseudolus* ("Pseudolus"): Pseudolus is Plautus' most successful and famous depiction of the character of the servant/slave. It is an alter ego of Plautus himself and a champion of deception to the detriment of the pimp.
- *Rudens* ("The Rope"): The play is set on the beach right after a shipwreck.
- *Stichus* ("Stichus"): a man has two married daughters whom he wants to push into divorce because their husbands are always traveling; the husbands' return brings joy back to the family.
- *Trinummus* ("The Three Coins"): the protagonist is a young man who squanders his wealth and is eventually rescued thanks to the trickery of his father's friend.
- *Truculentus* ("The Surly"): the protagonist is a prostitute who crafts a series of tricks to deceive her three lovers.
- *Vidularia* ("The Trunk"). There are only about 100 verses of the play that have survived, although they make it possible to figure out its plot. A young victim of a shipwreck will be recognized by the objects contained in a trunk found at sea by a fisherman.

Stylistically, Plautus' work adds to the Greek model of the New Comedy a greater farcical component and characterization of the comedic stock characters (the servant/slave, the parasite, the young lover, the horny old man, the bitchy wife, the young prostitute, the old drunkard). This is probably a heritage of the Atellan Farce and overall of the Italic spirit. Another distinctive feature is the variety of the meter (verse) and the presence of songs, which make the plays look more like variety shows (similar to a modern-day recital), where comedic scenes are intertwined by a common thread.

Plautus has the goal of making his audience laugh, a goal he achieves perfectly even today. He makes people laugh with his use of language: he invents many words, uses puns, innuendos, the same names of the characters, and hyperbolic metaphors. Yet, it must be noted that Plautus is never crassly vulgar in language and does not use profanity or explicit references to sex and bodily functions. His comedy comes from caricaturizing his characters: the braggard s soldier, the miser. But he makes people laugh most of all because of the situations he crafts: the tricks, the misunderstandings, and the beatings. With Plautus, the stock character of the servant, already experimented with by Nevius, is brought to its maximum comic and expressive potential and ends up representing the playwright himself, in a metatheatrical way.

Most of the comedic elements Plautus banks on come from the society he lives in. He makes fun of the mercenary soldiers who fought in the Punic wars, the women who deceive their husbands, the fathers who fall in love with their sons' lovers, the sons who squander their fathers' wealth, and the foreigners – mostly the Greeks, but the Carthaginians as well – who compromise the Roman youth and society. Yet Plautus is perfectly integrated into the Roman society of the time, and he shares its conservative ideology. His comedies don't aim at attaining an alternative reality, which is, on the other hand, exactly what Aristophanes tried to do with his works in the 5th Century B.C. Greece. Plautus' comedies don't want to subvert the existing social hierarchy: while the slave is the undoubtedly the protagonist of many of his plays and the women – mostly prostitutes, who are also slaves – deceive and trick the male characters, this does not mean that Plautus wants to advance an alternative social model or that he identifies as a rebel who wants to revolutionize his society. He is not interested in reforming gender inequality either. Plautus jokes about the vices and the obsessions of the Rome of the time, of which he feels a part, and keeps a conservative stance, which is why he is liked by his audience. He is recognized as someone like them.

Plautus's work would go on to influence comedies of the following centuries. His works were translated as early as the mid-15th Century in Italy and throughout Europe. They were produced, adapted, and reworked. William Shakespeare read his works in Old English, and Plautus became a source of inspiration for many of his works, including *The Comedy of Errors*, which is a remake of Plautus's *Menaechmi.* Aside from that play, which is a true adaptation, many comedic devices Shakespeare uses come directly from Plautus, who indeed was the first to introduce them in Western Theatre. Such comedic devices include the comic duo (and the twins), which trigger mistaken identities, the use of the aside, and the compulsive beatings.

Terence (195/185-159? B.C.)

Publius Terentius Afer (Terence) was born in Carthage, North Africa, around 190 B.C., which is a generation after Plautus. Terence was of Berber ethnicity, which would make him the first non white Latin poet. We have this information thanks to Roman Imperial historian Suetonius, who writes *De Viris Illustribus* (On Famous Men) and dedicates the section *Vita Terenti* (The Life of Terence) to Terence. In this section (chapter 5), Suetonius describes Terence as *colore fusco* (of dark complexion). He arrived in Rome as a slave and, thanks to his beauty and talent, soon became a free man. He mingled with the Roman upper classes and the nobles, particularly with the Scipiones family, who were strong advocates of Greek culture and had more progressive views in politics. The Scipiones still represented a minority when it comes to social/political and cultural views, as the greatest change would occur later.

Terence died in 159 B.C. at a young age while he was traveling in Greece and Asia Minor. He wasn't even 30. This implies that there are only very few plays he left behind that have survived. The following six plays are all that we have, and they were probably written between 166 and 160 B.C.:

- *Andria* ("The Woman from Andros"): the protagonist is a young woman from the Greek Island of Andros, who is loved by young Panfilo, whom she doesn't love back. Yet, thanks to the servant Davo, Panfilo succeeds in winning her love and marrying her.
- *Hecyra* ("The Mother-in-law"): The protagonist is a mother-in-law who goes out of her way to resolve the disagreements between her son and his sweetheart.
- *Heauton Timoroumenos* ("The Self-Tormentor"): Old Menedemus self-punishes by condemning himself to hard labor because he had opposed his son's marriage, which led the young man to enlist in the army and be deployed in Asia.
- *Eunuchus* ("The Eunuch"): The protagonist pretends to be a eunuch to get the custody of the woman he loves from the soldier who owns her.
- *Phormio* ("Phormio"): Phormio is a parasite who, through a series of controversies, will help two cousins marry the women they are in love with.
- *Adelphoe* ("The Brothers"): Two brothers are at odds over educational methods for their children, one being more liberal, the other more strict.

Terence draws his plots from the Greek New Comedy, similarly to Plautus. Some of the features he used are: complicated love stories, deceptions, misunderstandings, and reconciliations. Yet, Terence is less popular than Plautus among the Roman audience, who criticize him and would rather attend circus games than see one of his plays – we learn that from Terence's own words in the prologues of some of his plays. Terence's comedies are deeply influenced by the new values settling in Rome after the increasing cultural exchanges with the Greek world as a consequence of the colonization wars of the 2nd century B.C. Terence embraced the new concept of the "man-to-man" respect, the respect for the different, a liberal approach to the education of children, and a greater sensitivity to women. In a way, he was too much ahead of his time to be fully appreciated by his contemporaries. He provided greater psychological and human depth to his

characters and addressed social issues rather than being preoccupied with just making people laugh. And indeed, even today, Terence's comedies still don't read wildly funny.

Terence's new sensibility, along with his simpler and more elegant use of language (as opposed to Plautus), made him a very popular read in the Middle Ages, when he was considered a model for the Medium Style.

Tragedy

Latin theatre, along with all the Latin literature, originated with Livy Andronicus' tragedy *Odusia*, a Latin translation in Saturnian verse (a typically Roman verse) of Homer's *Odyssey*, which was produced in 240 B.C.. However, Romans were never too fond of tragedies, being more inclined to indulge and develop farcical comedies, which in the end are more akin to the Italic culture.

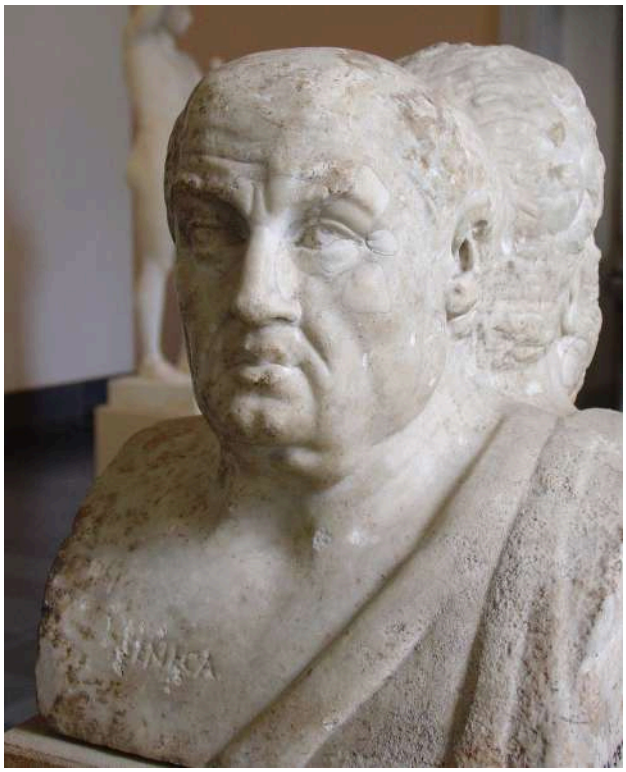
True to the tradition of the genre, the characters in Roman tragedy include gods, heroes, kings, and mythological characters, while the plot develops from a prosperous beginning into a dramatic ending. The Latin poet Quintus Horatius Flaccus, known as Horace (65-8 B.C.) in his *Ars Poetica* – a treaty in verse about the rules of poetic composition- while reviving the Aristotelian theoretical regulations, also provides a long dissertation about theatrical compositions (vv. 153-294), with a specific focus on the genre of tragedy. Horace confirms the cathartic goal of tragedy and provides its composition and staging features, including the five-act structure. Such detailed descriptions and instructions seem to indicate that Horace meant to guide new dramatists and playwrights in the hope of a revival of the genre during the reign of Augustus.

Rome witnessed a flourishing season for the tragic genre during the republican period, featuring playwrights such as Naevius and Ennius in the archaic age and Pacuvius and Accius in the late republic. Naevius invented the tragedy of Roman subject matter (*praetexta*), while Ennius (239-169 B.C.) established the canons of style and content for the tragedy of Greek mythological subject matter (*cothurnata*), which stayed true until tragedists Pacuvius (220-130 B.C.) and Accius (170-86 B.C.). Not much has survived of the works of these playwrights, aside from a few fragments and titles, and maybe that is not so unfortunate.

The only Roman playwright writing tragedies whose body of work has survived in its completeness is the philosopher Lucius Anneus Seneca (4 B.C.-65 A.D.).

Seneca (4 B.C.-65 A.D.)

Lucius Anneus Seneca was born in Cordova, Spain, at the very beginning of the 1st Century A.D. He was the son of the rhetorician Seneca the Elder. He was educated in Rome, where he lived under the reigns of Emperor Claudius (who sent him into exile in Corsica for 8 years, from 41 to 49 A.D.) and Emperor Nero, serving as his tutor for the first 5 years of the empire. In 62 A.D., he was forced to retire to private life, and in 65 A.D., he was forced into suicide on Nero's orders. He was one of the greatest philosophers of Antiquity and a follower of the Stoic doctrine, which made him a popular reading for the early Fathers of the Christian Church, which were sympathizers of the Stoic ideals, in particular in regards to the providential concept relating the wordily matters and the existence of one and only god.



Seneca, part of a double-herm in Antikensammlung Berlin. I, Calidius, CC BY-SA 3.0

Of all his works, what remains today are philosophical treatises and dialogues, a collection of letters addressed to his friend Lucilius, and 8 tragedies of Greek subject and setting (*cothurnatae*), based on Greek myths:

- *Agamemnon* ("Agamemnon"): The play tells the story of the Greek hero Agamemnon, who returns home victorious from the Trojan War with his slave Cassandra and is killed by his wife Clytemnestra and her lover, Aegisthus.
- *Hercules Furens* "The Mad Hercules"): Juno casts a spell on Hercules, making him insane. When he comes back from the underworld, he kills his wife and children. When the spell fades away and he returns to his senses, he finds out what he had done and attempts to kill himself, but he is stopped by his father and a friend.
- *Medea* ("Medea"): the sorceress Medea kills the Corinthian King Creon, his daughter Creusa, and her children to punish her husband Jason, who had rejected her to marry Creusa. Medea leaves Corinth by flying away on her father's chariot of the Sun.
- *Phaedra* ("Phaedra"): Phaedra, the wife of King Theseus, is made to fall in love with her stepson Hippolytus by Aphrodite. Hippolytus rejects her, and she proceeds to accuse him of assaulting her. Her husband, Theseus, is outraged and asks the god Poseidon to help him punish his son. Hippolytus is thus killed, but Phaedra also kills herself out of remorse.
- *Phoenissae* ("The Phoenician Women"): the title alludes to the Phoenician women who were held captives and were destined to serve the god Apollo. They were the protagonists of Euripides' tragedy by the same title. This play has come to us in a fragmentary form. We only have two complete scenes: in the first Oedipus one, accompanied by his daughter Antigone, intends to return to Mount Cytheron where he had been abandoned as a child; in the second one Jocasta, aided by Antigone, succeeds in averting a war between her two sons but he fails at restoring peace between them.
- *Thyestes* ("Thyestes"): Mycenae's king, Atreus, takes revenge on his brother, Thyestes, who is guilty of taking his kingdom away from him, by killing his children and having them served to him as part of a meal.
- *Troades* ("The Trojan Women"): The play is about the Trojan women, particularly Hecuba, Polyxena, and Andromache, after the defeat of Troy by the Greeks.
- *Hercules Oeteus* ("Hercules on Mount Oeta"): Hercules is poisoned by his wife Deianira, who is jealous of Iole, her

young rival in love. He climbs Mount Eta and, in excruciating pain, sets himself on fire after learning that Deianira kills herself.

Aside from *Thyestes*, all of Seneca's tragedies follow the Greek model. There is another play, *Octavia*, whose manuscript bears the name of Seneca, yet scholars believe that it is more likely the work of an anonymous rhetorical master, past Nero's reign. The play is inspired by the tragic end of Nero's young wife, and it is interesting to us because it is the only tragedy of Roman subject matter (*praetexta*) that has survived in a complete form.

The timeline of Seneca's tragedies is not known to us. Quite likely he wrote them after he retired from Nero's tutelage, alternating them with his philosophical treaties, in which is mostly discusses his Stoic views and how he wishes to implement them within the Roman society. Specifically, he advocates for the implementation of virtue (*virtus*) and the exercise of free will as a defense against the violence of the passions (*furor*), such as wrath, the blind desire for revenge, wild eros, and the craving for power.

Seneca's tragedies retain the verse type and structure of the classic Greek tragedy, being divided into episodes and choruses. Likely, they were not written to actually be performed, but rather to be read in public gatherings. By Nero's time, traditional theatre was declining in popularity in favor of mime performances, circus games, and gladiatorial combats. Because of this kind of "competition," Seneca's works tend to be quite gruesome, with many "splatter" scenes that include massacres, cannibalistic banquets, and blood baths, very much in the style of Quentin Tarantino's movies. He likely did that to "challenge" his competition and appeal to the taste of his audience.

Although Seneca didn't specifically write for production, his plays do retain strong theatrical features despite the sometimes excessive use of rhetoric. Because Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides' tragedies didn't have much (or any) exposure until the Renaissance, because of the language barrier (the Greek language was not well known in Rome), we owe the birth of the "modern" tragedy to Seneca's works.

Modern theatre owes Seneca for the invention and implementation of some of the tragic devices, such as ghosts, revenge, subterfuge, power dynamics, incestuous passions, murder, and poisonings. Yet, the most relevant achievement in Seneca's work is the creation of a much more modern tragic character. In classic Greek theatre, the hero is a one-dimensional, never-yielding character, and he is always a man. Instead, in Seneca's works, the hero – man or woman – is much more conflicted, has inner struggles and emotional insecurities and second thoughts, particularly in the most climactic moments – when they are close to committing the crime.

Seneca's tragedies have inspired many famous later playwrights, such as Shakespeare, Sarah Kane, and Caryl Churchill.

The Classics on Broadway

Because of the blending of music and dialogue, Plautus' plays could remind us of modern musical theatre. Indeed, several contemporary musicals took inspiration from his works, the most famous being "A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum," a musical with music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim and libretto by Burt Shevelove and Larry Gelbart, which is loosely based on Plautus' comedies *Pseudolus*, *Miles Gloriosus*, and*Mostellaria*. The musical premiered on Broadway in 1962 and ran for 964 performances. Then it toured to London (West End) and even to Australia. It won seven Tony Awards and was so successful

that in 1966 it was also adapted into a movie starring Zero Mostel and directed by Richard Lester. Although some of the satire and the depiction of female characters are not in line with today's social sensibilities and appropriateness, the musical continues to be extensively produced.

Plautus is not the only author from ancient Rome whose works have been adapted for the Broadway stage. The musical *Hadestown*, with music and lyrics by Anais Mitchell, is inspired by Virgil's poetic depiction of the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. The musical tells the indie-punk tale of Orpheus' journey to the Underworld to get his beloved Eurydice back, in a post-apocalyptic setting loosely inspired by the Great Depression. The musical debuted Off-Broadway in 2016 under the direction of Rachel Chavkin and, after numerous revisions, moved to Broadway in 2019. It was nominated for 13 Tony Awards and won 8 of them, including Best Musical.

Takeaways

- Roman theatre, like Classic Greek theatre, originated in the context of religious practices and was performed as part of public festivals, often dedicated to the gods.
- In early plays, especially in comedy, the Italic cultural component merges with the Greek. Italic cultural components include the taste for farce, the introduction of stock characters, and the introduction of songs.
- The permanent theatre building in Rome was built only in 55 B.C. (Theatre of Marcellus) because there was ideological resistance to theatrical activities. Earlier, performances were held in wooden theatres that were assembled and disassembled when needed. The stage of these theatres was very simple.
- In Rome, theatre is seen as entertainment and distraction, not as a means for social growth and civic insight for the citizens, as it was in ancient Greece.
- Alongside traditional theatre, which flourished mainly in the 2nd and 1st Centuries B.C., there were other forms of entertainment in Rome that were more popular, even in the imperial age, such as mime, A*tellana* (a kind of Commedia dell'Arte), pantomime (ballet), circus games, and gladiator fights.
- The actors were only men, mostly foreigners or slaves. Women were allowed to act only in mimes.
- Most of the complete plays that have survived are mainly comedies on Greek topics (*palliatae*): 21 by Plautus, 6 by Terence, for a total of 27 comedies, which featured a combination of dialogue and songs.
- The only complete tragedies that have survived are Seneca's, for a total of 8, and all of which were inspired by Greek models (*cothurnatae*).
- O*ctavia*, which for a long time was falsely attributed to Seneca, is the only tragedy on a Roman subject that we know of (*praetexta*).
- All of the other playwrights of the time are only known by their names or because of a few fragments of text, as nothing else has survived.
- Plautus is credited with introducing most of the comedic devices and mechanisms that are still in use for that genre in modern theatre.
- Seneca is credited with introducing most of the tragic devices and mechanisms that are still in use today for that genre in modern theatre.
- William Shakespeare was inspired by Plautus for comedies and by Seneca for tragedies.

Vocabulary

Atellana
Etruscans
Greeks
Palliata
Togata
Cothurnata
Praetexta
Mime
Pantomime
Circus games
Gladiator combats
Marcellus Theatre
Colosseum
Choirs
Cantica
iambic verse
Livio Andronico
Nevius
Plautus
Terence
Seneca

ACTIVITY FOR THE CLASSROOM

Let's investigate the stylistic connections between Seneca's tragedies and splatter/horror movies.

Seneca's tragedies feature scenes of extreme violence and psychological intensity, which anticipate in many

ways what will be the key elements of splatter horror movies. Let's analyze the cultural, philosophical, and emotional functions of that kind of graphic violence in both traditions.

Students should read the banquet scene in Seneca's *Thyestes* and the infanticide scene in Seneca's *Medea.*

Students should watch splatter scenes from movies such as *Evil Dead*, *Saw*, and *Hostel* (the instructor and the students could suggest other titles as well).

Students should then discuss the specific features of both Seneca's style and the horror movies to find similarities, differences, and outcomes.

A follow-up discussion should focus on how students reacted to READING the violence as opposed to SEEING it on screen. (Remember! Seneca's work was likely read out loud rather than performed!)

The instructor should divide the class into two different groups, the first including those students who preferred READING the violence, and the second including students advocating for seeing it on screen.

Both groups should make their arguments, trying to contextualize their reactions in order to make them more objective.

Students should discuss whether Seneca's tragedies -such as *Thyestes* and *Medea*- would lend themselves to a screen adaptation.

If time allows it, in a second session, students should be divided into two new groups.

Group 1 should read *Thyestes* as homework, while Group 2 should read *Medea.*

When in class, the two groups should work together to create a storyboard – a sequence of vignettes of the scenes of the play- so that they could visually tell the story of the play to the other group.

Historical Timeline by Jennifer King.

Time Period	Event	Significance
509 B.C.	Founding of the Roman Republic	Transition from monarchy to republic; Rome begins to expand politically and culturally, setting the stage for future artistic and theatrical developments.
c. 364 B.C.	Etruscan performances	Early form of ritual performance introduced to Rome; marks the beginning of theatrical activity tied to religious festivals.
240 B.C.	Livius Andronicus wrote the first Latin play	Adaptation of a Greek play into Latin; recognized as the beginning of Roman literary drama.
c. 205–184 B.C. (approx.)	Plautus Writes Popular Comedies	His plays use slapstick, music, and stock characters; shape Roman comedy and influence future playwrights, including Shakespeare.
c. 170–160 B.C. (approx.)	Terence wrote and staged literary comedies	Introduces refined language and complex characters; emphasizes moral themes and education.
146 B.C.	Roman Conquest of Greece	Roman exposure to Greek drama and aesthetics increases; Hellenistic influence on Roman theater architecture and literature grows.
55 B.C.	Pompey Builds First Permanent Stone Theater in Rome	A major turning point—transition from temporary wooden stages to permanent venues; the theater becomes central to Roman public life.
27 B.C.	Start of the Roman Empire Under Augustus	Augustus uses theater to promote state ideology; he funds lavish spectacles and performances as part of imperial propaganda.
13 B.C.	Theatre of Marcellus Dedicated	State-of-the-art venue commissioned by Augustus, an enduring model of Roman theater architecture.
1st–2nd Centuries A.D.	Height of the Roman Empire	Public entertainment dominates; pantomime and mime rise in popularity as literary drama declines.
c. 100–200 A.D.	Pantomime Becomes the Primary Theatrical Form	Lavish solo performances with music and dance attract large audiences; **s**pectacle overtakes storytelling in public favor.
313 A.D.	Edict of Milan: Christianity Legalized by Constantine	Theater begins to decline as Christian leaders condemn it; actors and performances are associated with immorality and paganism.
c. 400–476 A.D.	Fall of the Western Roman Empire	The collapse of the empire leads to the end of Roman theatrical institutions; theater largely disappears to re-emerge as liturgical drama in the Middle Ages.

3. 6th-16th Centuries European Theatre

Introduction

Discussing the Middle Ages in the Arts and Theatre is a very controversial topic, since scholars disagree on just about everything. This happens because, while there is quite a lot of evidence that has survived, a lot of it is contradictory in nature. Moreover, each country in Europe experienced different social and political occurrences, which significantly determined the evolution of the arts in general, and of theatre specifically. In some instances and countries, Medieval practices morphed into the new aesthetic of the Renaissance. In other countries, they lingered for a longer period, effectively delaying the rise of the Renaissance. And in some cases, there was an overlap between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, where the two cultural and artistic trends coexisted.

This chapter will provide an overview of the theatrical practices and their evolution between roughly 900 A.D. and as late as the 16th Century. Scholars divide the Middle Ages into two periods: the Early Middle Ages (from 500 to 1000 A.D.) and the High Middle Ages (from 1000 to 1500). Some scholars prefer to call the Late Middle Ages the time between the 14th and the 16th Centuries, as that is clearly when there is overlap with the Renaissance.

In the past, the Middle Ages were also called the Dark Ages, as the belief was that with the fall of the Western Roman Empire (476 A.D.) and the turmoil that ensued in Europe, survival was everyone's main goal, leaving culture and the arts in a disadvantaged position. This viewpoint has been completely debunked, which might be the only thing contemporary scholars agree on when it comes to the Middle Ages! Although indeed, the lack of governance (particularly in the Early Middle Ages) determined a significant adjustment in society, the arts and culture were cradled and honed, and the seeds that were planted would later determine the blossoming of the Renaissance.

As a rule of thumb, we can say that the fall of the Western Roman Empire gave way to invasions and wars to assert power over the individual European countries. Quite predictably, wars lead to a general impoverishment of the population and to the deterioration of the quality of life. The wealthiest fled cities and towns – as those tended to be the target of most of the violence and looting — in favor of the countryside, where they were somewhat more protected and could rely on their land to sustain themselves. Trade became more difficult and dangerous, which led to a general shortage of goods and a spike in prices. The plague(s) didn't help, and neither did the famines that followed.

During their tenure, the Romans enforced the use of Latin as the official language of the empire. Coincidentally, Latin also became the language utilized by the Church for functions and in holy scriptures. Monasteries became the main cultural centers of the Middle Ages, as they studied, preserved, and eventually translated the works of most Greek and Roman scholars, first into Latin and later in the vernacular. Later in the Middle Ages, monasteries were replaced by the newly formed universities, which developed at a time when cities and towns regained some footing.

With the empire gone, Latin was no longer enforced, and the people moved more steadily towards speaking the vernacular, which would eventually become the national language.

This is quite significant when it comes to the development of theatre (and of literature in general). Roman plays were written in Latin and were mostly meant to be read rather than being fully staged. With fewer people able to read and speak Latin, and cities being depopulated, conventional theatre came to a halt. Yet, theatre itself did not disappear altogether: it morphed into a variety of outlets that better suited the rising needs of society.

In the end, we always go back to the fundamental questions: what is theatre, and what is its function?

We have theatre every time someone – preferably an actor- stands in front of an audience (as small as one person!) and tells a story that springs out of an artistic intent.

Theatre can speak to the universal nature of mankind, bridging cultures and periods, and can specifically respond to the needs and issues of its time.

Between the early 500s to 900 A.D. theatre provided the opportunity to "take a break" from everyday life thanks to the performances of traveling troupes that relied mostly on physical theatre, comedic skits, circus games, and other forms of storytelling, which were pretty much a heritage of the Roman mime. Some pagan festivals still happened, and they would attract most of these theatre artists. The Church did not approve of those forms of entertainment, but its ban was difficult to truly be enforced.

In Eastern and Northern Europe, where the Roman influence had been weaker, the figure of the "scop" became popular. The scop was the German/Teutonic version of the jester, who might be at the service of a noble family or a traveling artist. He was a musician, a singer, a storyteller, and a poet, his stories would mostly rely on local mythology – hence, not Classic — and heroes.

Conversely, Medieval theatre also served the needs of the Church in various ways, and we will develop this shortly.

The lack of centralized governance — as had been provided by the Roman Empire — is what triggered the Church to substantially "step in" to provide some structure to the overall chaos. This is very important, as the Church ended up becoming the main catalyst for the evolution of culture and of the arts well beyond the Middle Ages. For a brief period, there was also an attempt at a stronger socio-political model, with the crowning of Charlemagne as the Emperor of the newly formed Holy Roman Empire (800 A.D.). Charlemagne was a lover of the arts and promoted them vicariously. Yet, his reign only lasted until 814, when he died.

Hrosvitha – by Caterina Mordeglia

Hrosvitha (935-1001 A.D.) of Gandersheim was a canoness, which is a nun who does not necessarily have to live in a monastery and has less strict life obligations. She lived in Saxony, the present-day Germany, and attended the imperial court of Otto I.

Hrosvitha is a woman who writes about women, which was unusual in the Middle Ages, as women were largely considered an emanation of the devil (*ianua Diabli* = "the devil's door," with an obscene allusion). She is the first known female playwright in history.

She wrote eight hagiographic poems, two historical works (a biography of Otto I and the history of the monastery of Gandersheim, where she mostly lived), but above all six dramatic dialogues in rhymed prose (*Abraham*; *Dulcitius*; *Calimachus*; *Paphnutius*; *Gallicanus*; *Sapientia*). Hrosvitha wrote all of her works in Latin.

Hrosvitha aimed at somewhat rewriting Terence's six comedies to promote a new image of women, opposed to the one in the Latin poet's original works. Specifically, she mentions in the preface of the collection of her plays that she wanted to "glorify the Christian virgin." Hrosvitha, like most scholars of the time, had access to most of the Roman texts and was quite fond of Terence. Yet, the nature of Terence's plots would conflict with the ethical models preached by the Church. Hence, she also aimed at providing a "new version" of his plays that could serve an educational purpose. From Terence, Hrosvitha borrows the dramaturgical

mechanism while vastly modifying the plot source material and the characters. Moreover, her plays were likely not written to be performed or staged, but rather to be dramatized and read at the emperor's court.

As of today, her plays tend to receive staged readings rather than full-blown productions.

The protagonists of Hrosvitha's plays are no longer the prostitutes (*meretrices*) of Latin comedy, devoted to free love, but rather young Christian virgins who resist the devil's temptations and the threats of powerful evil men at the cost of sacrificing their own lives to preserve their virtue. In her worldview, virginity becomes the instrument of emancipation against male power. This is a very strong Christian message, which is in line with the preachings of some Fathers of the Church – St. Jerome, for example.

Recent interpretations of her work – and herself as an artist — aligned it with a more radical feminist approach and highlighted lesbian undertones (as for example in 1973, Rita Mae Brown's novel *Rubyfruit Jungle*). Yet, those claims don't seem to be truly supported.

Early Middle Ages

Liturgical theatre

As the Church gained footing in establishing its organizational, educational, and cultural model, theatre started to be re-integrated and considered a potential asset.

Most scholars agree on the theatricality of religious ceremonies and rites, and this stands true for Medieval Christian functions and processions as well.

Every day life was punctuated by church events: it was a way to keep the congregation engaged and devoted. Special religious occurrences were celebrated with specific services and processions, both of which had theatrical value and somewhat relied on spectacle and audience participation.

The Christian church had several kinds of services, out of which the most "rigid" was the Mass itself. Yet, all other services – such as the Hours, for example – provided a good opportunity to incorporate a theatrical element in the rituals. And this is how Liturgical Drama came to be, and it is safe to say that by the 9th Century A.D., the genre had fairly extensively developed all throughout Europe. The Easter service and procession were the most popular events, allowing for such performances.

Liturgical "plays" were quite short, based on stories from the bible and featured mostly songs and music. Most of these performances were based on the visitation of the three Marys to Jesus' tomb, which makes sense as the prime occasion for those tropes was, indeed, Easter. Later, some passages in prose were added to the structure of the trope to add to a greater dramatic component. They all used Latin. All of those "plays" (or tropes) were performed inside the church, or within holy buildings such as monasteries and convents. They would move outside later in the 13th Century. Their purpose was mostly to educate the young clergy, as they were not performed for a general audience. It was only later, between the 10th and the 13th Centuries, that we have records of them being performed for the congregation, either inside the newly built bigger cathedrals, or right outside of them.

Performers were members of the church, such as monks or choirboys.

There are several plays that have survived, although today they are only considered for scholarly purposes and not for production. As mentioned above, most of the texts were inspired by Christ's resurrection, to be performed for the Easter services, but a number also dealt with the Nativity and the lives of the Prophets. Both the tropes themselves and the information about their staging have survived through the manuals of the many churches of the time.

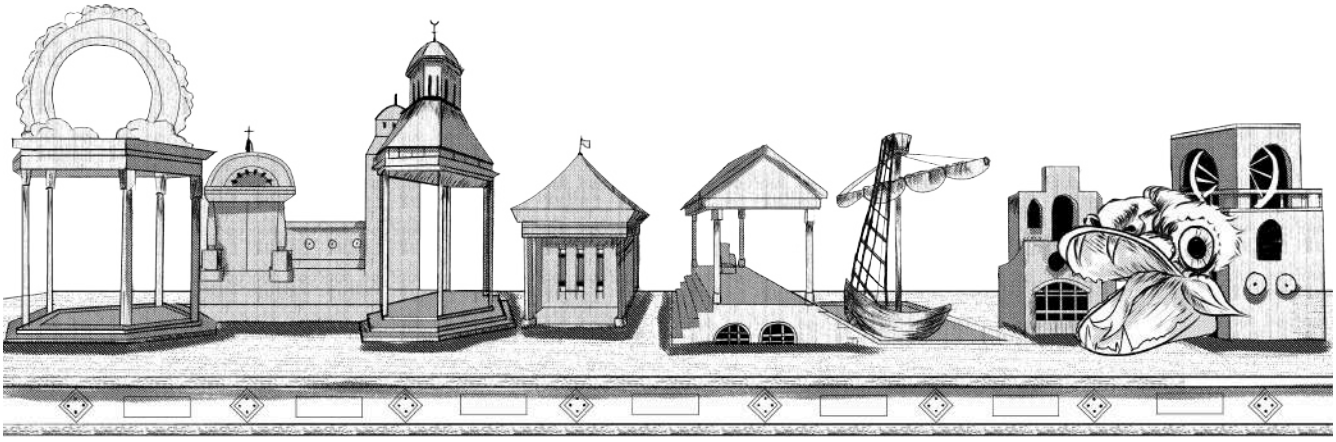
Aside from Hrosvitha, it is worth mentioning another nun who wrote several short plays, which included a lot of music. Her name is Hildegard von Bingen (1098-1179). Her plays mostly dealt with the lives of saints and with the Holy Mary. Hildegard von Bingen also wrote in Latin.

When it comes to the staging of liturgical drama, it is important to mention that it was highly stylized and relied on conventions. The performing space was divided into two parts, the "*mansion*" and the "*platea*." The *platea* represented the playing space, where the performers would be, while the mansions were small structures providing visual information about the world of the play. If several locations were needed in the troupe, there would be several mansions at the back of the *platea* and the performers would move in front of each one according to the dramaturgical needs. This meant that all the mansions were visible for the entire time.

As we get closer to the Renaissance, stagings grew in complexity… in particular when it comes to scenery and special effects. For example, there is mention of a piece of flying machinery, which was to be used – for example – for the Annunciation.

Costume-wise, the performers used religious garments, with the occasional addition of an element to better specify the character. Women would have their heads covered and wear long robes (*dalmatics*).

Religious plays continued to be very popular throughout the Middle Ages, although their structure, content, and scope varied vastly. The biggest difference was the gradual shift to vernacular and away from Latin, likely to make the performances more "audience-friendly."



Example of stations of a cycle play. Original illustration by Arlee Peterson.

Mystery (or Cycle) plays.

Mystery plays directly evolved from Liturgical Drama, as they were still based on stories of the bible and/or dramatized the lives of the saints from the New Testament. Yet, they represent the shift to vernacular drama and show a greater

complexity in their structure, often extending and developing into many plays – rather than just one—, hence the term "cycle." Most importantly, they had a "self-standing" nature, as they were not performed and staged as part of a specific ceremony, but rather as their own theatrical event (but still as part of some religious celebration and festival). Most times, mystery plays were performed outside, and at the peak of their success, they became so elaborate and intricate that they could last for several days, which implies that they were mostly produced in the spring and summer months. They spoke to the audience of their time, hence the characters had Medieval features despite being sourced from the holy books. Spectacle started to be considered necessary, and there are several records of very complex mechanisms and machinery purposely conceived and built to accommodate some form of spectacle. For example, there is detailed information about the production of a play about Noah in the city of Mons, where a complex system of barrels was conceived to "reproduce" the deluge. Violent scenes tended to be avoided (there are very few plays about the Crucifixion), but when there was action that called for a dangerous situation, actors were replaced by dummies. Some comedy slowly crept into some of the mysteries later in the 14th Century and well into the 15th Century, while still being respectful of the religious subject. In other words, there was no attempt at blasphemy but just at some comedic relief.

Dramaturgically, the plays tended to be episodic and to forego verisimilitude both in the shift between one scene and the other and in the chronology of the play timeline.

Vernacular religious drama reached its peak of popularity between 1350 and as far as 1550, and while there is a great variety of these plays that have survived and are available to us, there is little to no information about playwrights. This might also be because plays were in a sort of continuous evolution, having to adapt to the reality of their environment and production needs.

The introduction of the celebration of Corpus Christi gave way to the establishment of a Festival related to it, which became the main outlet for theatrical performances. This is often interpreted as the church's attempt to further include the congregation in celebrating and honoring religious matters. In fact, during the Festival of the Corpus Christi, most trades were represented in the procession, while they also participated in the production of the performances. It is to be noted that during this time (between 1200 and 1350), towns and cities started to be revived and populated again, while the feudalist system somewhat lost footing. Guilds were established, thus representing the various trades of the time and giving artisans more power in negotiating their work and providing rules and standards for each craft.

France, Germany, and England produced the majority of mystery plays. In particular, it is worth mentioning that the French *Play of Adam* proved to be successful and generated several adaptations and productions into the 12th and 13th Centuries. This play features dialogue in French and choral songs in Latin, providing a bridge from Liturgical dramas into fully vernacular plays.

England has probably preserved the largest amount of cycle plays, starting around 1375. Most of them are grouped after the city where they were performed, which gives the name to the cycle. English cycle plays are all connected within each cycle and were conceived to be produced and performed in sequence. The known English cycles are the Chester Plays, with 24 plays; the York Plays, with 48; the Towneley (or Wakefield) Plays, with 32; and the N-Town Plays – named as such because it is unclear where they were performed— with 42 plays.

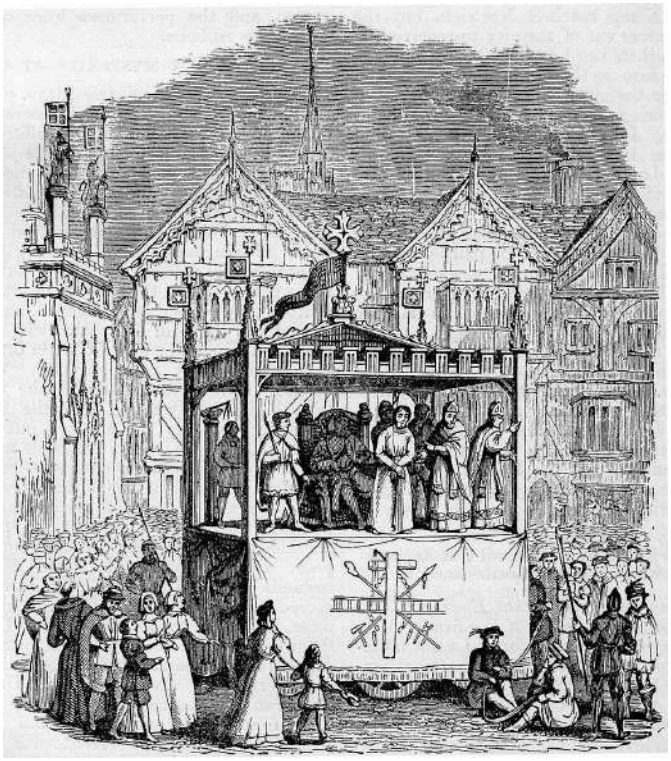
The Second Shepherd's Play

The Second Shepherds Play is one of the most famous British mystery plays, dating around 1372 A.D.. It is part of the Wakefield cycle and is found in the HM1 manuscript, which can be found in Towneley Hall.

The play is about Nativity, but is truly a mix of contemporary Medieval elements and biblical characters.

The plot sees the three shepherds as they meet in a field to complain about a variety of things: the weather (too cold, not unusual for a British winter), their wives, the people in power, and how hungry they are. They are joined by a notorious thief, Mak, who tricks them into believing he is also quite unfortunate, as he complains about his drunk wife, who is only able to give him more children (and mouths to feed). As the shepherds fall asleep, Mak only pretends to do so, and instead he steals a sheep and brings it home to his wife, Gill. When the shepherds wake up, they realize they've been duped and immediately head over to Mak's house. Gill pretends to be in labor with twins, having just given birth to one of them. She hopes this would scare the shepherds away, or at least make them not uncover the cradle where she had hidden the sheep. In the end, the ruse is revealed, and the shepherds get hold of their stolen sheep. They punish Mak by wrapping him up in a canvas and tossing him up and down until they grow tired. After all that, the Angel appears…. And the biblical story begins.

As you can see, the original part of the play heavily relies on contemporary features and is intended to be quite comedic. The play also well depicts the typical episodic nature of these works, as the whole first part is completely separate —and different in style, subject, and nature – from the second one.



David Gee – Image scanned from the first edition of the Chambers Book of Days (1864) by Robert Chambers (died 1871).

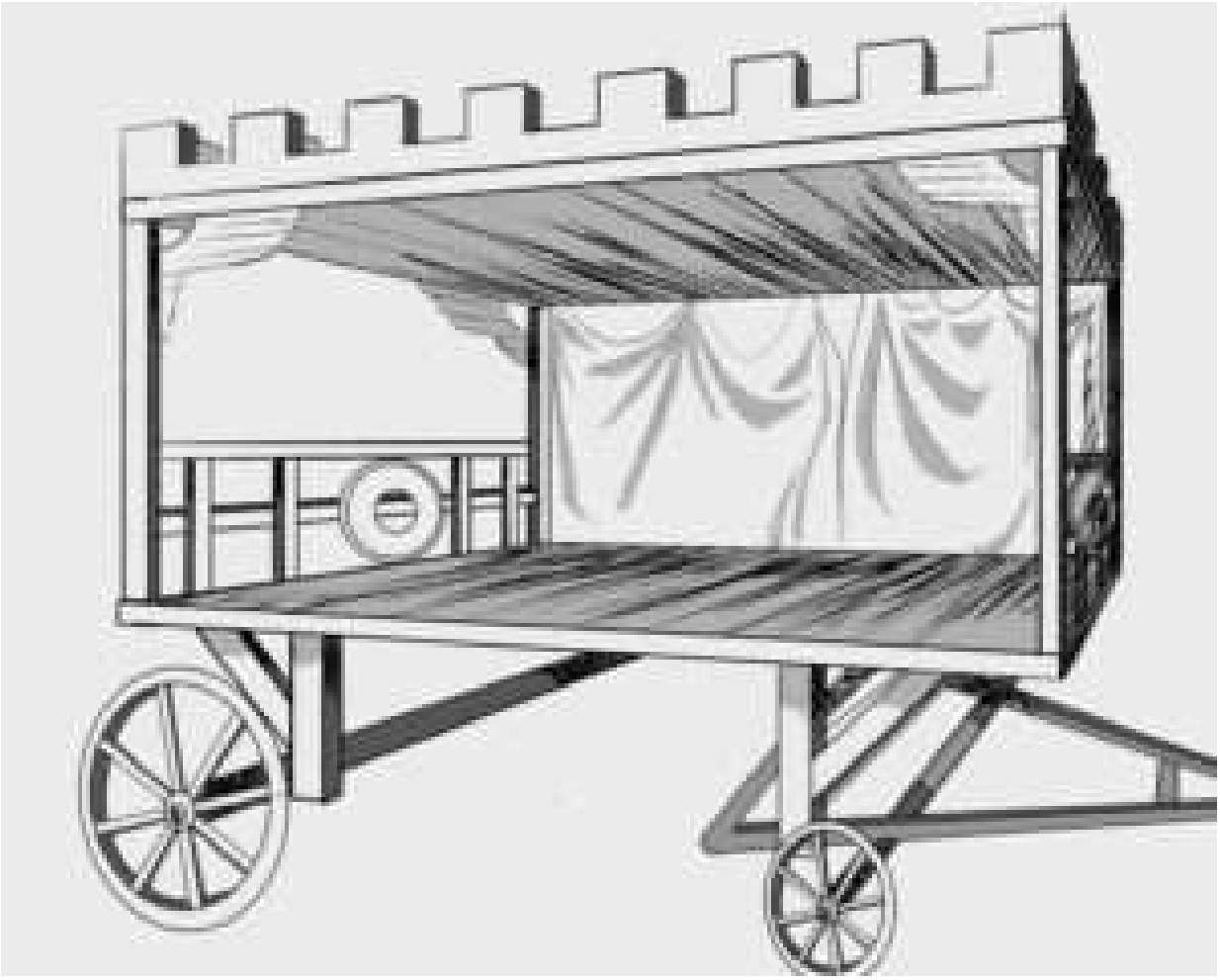
Cycle plays became more and more complex, requiring long preparation and, at times, involved an ever-growing number of actors. In other words, it soon became a community effort, where religious confraternities supervised and assigned tasks and roles, but everyone had to contribute in one way or another.

Trade guilds were involved, each one of them working on something akin to their trade. At times, a guild was in charge of producing the whole play, which would mean that they were financially responsible for all aspects of it – from providing the costumes, the scenery, the pageant wagons, and the actors. In return for their efforts, the production would become a showcase for their work, potentially bringing them more popularity and business, which would explain how soon these productions also triggered fierce competition among what we would today call producers.

Other times, the city was financially involved too.

Performance would normally have free admittance, but not always, depending on whether all the production costs had been covered.

Because of the amount of work and people that had to be coordinated, someone was appointed as the "Pageant Master". This person would be awarded a salary and would be selected by the guild either among their members or elsewhere. The position was incredibly taxing, as it included direct supervision of all aspects of the production, from sourcing the material to building the scenery, to supervising the build itself; from finding the costumes, the actors, and attending rehearsals to make sure everyone showed up on time and had done the work: the list goes on and on. In modern times, the Pageant Master would likely be a combination of a producer, a designer, a stage manager, and a director.



Example of a theatrical wagon. Original illustration by Arlee Peterson.

Mystery and cycle plays didn't feature huge casts; they had eight to ten characters at most. Yet, the number of performers would outnumber that, considering that those plays were performed as cycles and not individually, not to mention the number of non-speaking roles that were added for spectacle.

All actors were amateurs – there was no guild for their trade just yet! – and sourced from the local population, primarily in the lower and working classes, and in the clergy. Women were allowed to act, too, although that was not a common practice. When they were cast, the actors were asked to swear they would take the role "seriously" as they accepted the role. They had to be on time and off book (with their lines fully memorized) for rehearsals. If they didn't abide by these rules, they would be fined. If they had to miss their work to go to rehearsals, arrangements would have to be made by the organizing guild, which would also provide libations during rehearsals. While we don't have names to associate with those actors, it has been noted that several of them were quite passionate about doing it. The best ones were famous for their resounding voice and for their willingness to "take risks", which at times led to dangerous situations. Actors usually were in charge of their costumes, although if they had to portray special characters (like kings, soldiers, angels, demons), either the producing guild or the pageant master would source the costumes for them. In general, though, characters would be costumed in Medieval contemporary clothing as there was no real interest in historical accuracy.

The Staging of Mystery and Cycle Plays

Scholars are very much divided when it comes to the staging of the cycle plays.

Because most of the time the plays were part of festivals, such as the above-mentioned Corpus Christi Festival, it is plausible that the pageant wagons in the procession would also serve as the location for each cycle play and the playing area, therefore providing a processional, dynamic staging of the cycle. Yet, there's no agreement on this. Some scholars believe that while the wagons would be part of the procession, the actual performance would only start at the end of the procession. Other scholars further believe that at the end of the procession, each pageant wagon representing the background for a cycle play would travel to different locations within the town, in order to create an itinerary style of production.

Surprisingly, there is no agreement on what pageant wagons looked like and how they functioned. Yet, there are several assumptions. Likely, they were wooden structures on wheels. Some believe they had two rooms, one on top of the other, as this would allow the actors to have a space to change and store stuff (below) and a place to perform (on the upper level). Others believe that the wagons had only one level where they would accommodate both the playing space and the old-fashioned mansions, providing a scenic background for the play.

Another kind of staging was the stationary one. In this case, all the pageant wagons needed for the production were lined up facing a platform functioning as a stage. Stationary productions took place in big courtyards, in city squares, or even in the old Roman amphitheaters. The arrangement was reminiscent of liturgical dramas, where all the mansions signifying the different locales were located side by side right in front of the playing area (the *platea*).

Originally, stationary stagings only featured one wagon, but then, as productions grew in complexity, the wagons multiplied. At times, they were positioned in order to reproduce the journey of the character, and other times, they would represent the two polar opposites: Heaven and Hell. In this specific circumstance, the wagons were positioned opposite each other and featured a great deal of specific decoration. For example, the wagon representing hell would look like a monster, with an open mouth, whereas the "heaven" wagon would likely carry the flying machinery. If the journey of the characters would bring them to several other locales, those would be represented by wagons lined up between heaven and hell.

We have already discussed the use of the flying machine as one of the "special effects" that were so in fashion at the time. Special effects were called "secrets" and, as such, were "guarded" by the pageant master, as the success and popularity of a production would greatly depend on them. Other secrets would be the use of smoke – which would provide an even greater devilish look and feel to the wagon representing hell, halos to signify the sanctity of characters, and the use of trapdoors.

Morality Plays

The other genre of play in vernacular is represented by the Morality Plays, which sit right at the edge between religious and secular plays. While they deal with ethical and "moral" subject matter and sometimes source their plots from the holy scriptures, they are also less faithful to the religious content. Morality plays revolve around the depiction of good versus evil and of the moral journey of the characters.

They heavily rely on allegories, which are figures of speech where an abstract idea or concept is represented by something or someone. In the case of Morality plays, characters represent concepts, such as good, evil, greed, honesty, gluttony, and so on, and the plot follows their journey as by the end they learn a moral lesson.

As you can see, Morality Plays are deeply rooted in Christianity and pursue an educational purpose. They were particularly popular in England and France, where they were staged way into the 16th Century. Like cycle plays, they featured segments in vernacular and at times (but not always) resorted to Latin for the songs.

Because Morality plays became popular in the High Middle Ages, it is quite likely that they were performed by professional actors. As for the staging, they were likely treated as cycle plays, with the same kind of wagon arrangement.

The most famous Morality play is *Everyman*, dating from the early 16th Century. Everyman (who represents mankind) is a sinner. He is visited by Death, who tells him that it is his time to leave this world. In despair, Everyman seeks help and company from Goods, Beauty, and Kin, but they all desert him. He turns to Good Deeds and Knowledge. When he understands that only by confessing his sins will he have a peaceful passing, Good Deeds finally consents to follow him in his final journey.

Secular Theatre

Medieval secular theatre was certainly not as popular, widespread, or organized as religious theatre, but it did exist, and will heavily contribute to the further development of comedy and physical theatre in the following centuries.



La Farce de Maitre Patelin. Engraving. 1850. Bibliothèque Nationale de France.

Pagan festivals had been banned by the Church, but never really disappeared, and those became the preferred performing venue for the jesters, minstrels, mimes, dancers, and the circus artists of the late Roman tradition. Those performers used popular imagery, obscene innuendos, and physical, crass comedy to please the less pious or cultivated masses. In short, secular theatre presented itself as a polar opposite to religious theatre. Where the latter would pursue virtue and morals, the former would capitalize on the vices and the weakness of mankind for comedic purposes.

Fun Fact – The Feast of Fools

Not all religious drama was exclusively serious! We have already mentioned how some elements of comedy appeared here and there as a way to engage the audience and to make the performances more in tune with the reality of the time. Yet, there were occasions where more intentionally and structurally complex comedy was introduced in religious festivals. This is the case of the early medieval Feast of Fools, a procession/ festival taking place on January 1. The festival was presided over by "the bishop fool" and featured a variety of comedic episodes where the lesser clergy made fun of their superiors and of the monastic lifestyle. Jokes relied on the misuse of language, innuendos, physical comedy, and inverted hierarchy. The festival is clearly

reminiscent of the late Roman pagan festivals, and while the Church did not approve of them, they survived well into the 16th Century.

Many scholars believe the roots of secular medieval comedic theatre can be found in the Feast of Fools.



The Festival of Fools, print, after Pieter Bruegel the Elder, Pieter van der Heyden (MET, 69.598)

At times, storytellers were a part of this mix, putting together a performance alternating music, songs, and the recounting of the life of some local (folk) hero.

Secular comedic theatre was mostly episodic in structure, with short, disconnected scenes. A through line was the fast pace that would eventually become standard in later comedies and farces. Those would feature a unified plot, like a modern one-act.

Eventually, comedies started to be penned down, and there are a few titles and playwrights' names that have come down to us. For example, French playwright Adam de la Halle (1237- 1288) is credited with writing two comedies: *The Play of Greenwood* and *The Play of Robin and Marion*. Both plays focus on folk, pastoral tales and characters, featuring sporadic elements of supernatural nature.

The most famous comedy/farce of this genre is probably the much later French *Pierre Patelin* (1470), where the protagonist is a humble, illiterate servant who ends up having the upper hand over a lawyer.

Secular theatre was particularly popular in France, Germany, and generally in northern continental Europe.

As we get closer to the 16th Century, comedic actors gained popularity and eventually formed traveling troupes.

Vocabulary

Monasteries
The Fall of the Western Roman Empire (476 A.D.)
Charlemagne
Hrosvitha
Liturgical Theatre
Hildegard von Bingen
Mansion
Platea
Mystery (Cycle) Plays
Bible/New Testament
Vernacular
Festival of the Corpus Christi
Play of Adam
Chester Plays
York Plays
Towneley (or Wakefield) Plays
N-Town Plays
The Second Shepherd's Play
Pageant Master
Morality Plays
Everyman
Secular Theatre
The Feast of Fools
Adam de la Halle
Pierre Patelin

ACTIVITY FOR THE CLASSROOM

The instructor should divide the students into small groups, no more than 5 students per group.

Each group should be assigned a type of medieval theatre (Liturgical Drama, Miracle Play, Morality Play, and Mystery Play). The instructor should also provide the full text of each type of play for reference as a take-home reading.

Having read their play of reference, each group should engage in adapting a biblical story (or a saint's story) into a short 5-minute play in the style of the type of medieval play they had been assigned. They should focus on using a similar pattern when it comes to style, language (verse/prose), and they should incorporate at least one allegorical character (Death, Faith, etc) in the story. The short play should carry a "moral" or a message.

Each group should also provide a simplified storybook focusing on the staging, which also has to resonate with the medieval staging practices.

Each group should present their play to the classroom. The presentation could be a reading or a simplified staging.

Following the presentations, a discussion could focus on both the style and the religious nature of medieval theatre and how theatricality helped (or not) strengthen it.

Historical Timeline by Jennifer King.

Time Period	Event	Significance
313 A.D.	Edict of Milan: Christianity Legalized by Constantine	Theater begins to decline as Christian leaders condemn it; actors and performances are associated with immorality and paganism.
c. 400–476 A.D.	Fall of the Western Roman Empire	The collapse of the empire leads to the end of Roman theatrical institutions; theater largely disappears until the medieval revival in liturgical drama.
c. 467 A.D.	Fall of the Western Roman Empire	Theater declines with the collapse of Roman institutions; it survives primarily in church rituals and festivals.
c. 925 A.D.	First Liturgical Drama Recorded (Regularis Concordia)	The earliest example of drama within Christian worship is performed by monks the night before Easter inside monasteries.
10th–11th Centuries	Growth of Liturgical Drama	Religious dramatizations expand, using Latin and performed by clergy inside churches, illustrating Biblical stories.
12th Century	Vernacular Religious Plays Emerge	Drama moves outside the church, performed in local languages, making biblical stories accessible to broader audiences.
13th Century	Corpus Christi Festival Established	A major catalyst for the development of Cycle Plays, it dramatizes Biblical history from Creation to the Last Judgment.
14th Century	Mystery, Miracle, and Morality Plays Flourish	Religious and moral storytelling becomes widespread; trade guilds sponsor performances in town squares.
c. 1376	First Recorded Performance of a Mystery Play in England (Chester)	Marks a formalization of the mystery play tradition, performed as part of civic and religious celebrations.
15th Century	Morality Plays Rise (e.g., Everyman)	Allegorical plays teach moral lessons through symbolic characters; reflect concerns with salvation and personal conduct.
Late 15th Century	Decline of Mystery and Miracle Plays	Social, religious, and political changes (including early Reformation sentiments) contribute to a decline in cycle plays.
1517	Start of the Protestant Reformation	Religious theater faces growing opposition; secular forms begin to rise in popularity.
Late 16th Century	Transition to Secular and Professional Theatre	Medieval religious drama gives way to Renaissance theater (e.g., Shakespeare); professional companies and permanent theaters emerge.

PART II

THE RENAISSANCE

"Renaissance" is a French word literally meaning "coming back to life." The term has been associated with the historical period immediately following the Middle Ages, which for a long time was labelled as "the Dark Ages." While common knowledge has now given back the Middle Ages their historical, cultural, and artistic importance, "Renaissance" is still the term we use for the time roughly between the 14th and the 17th Centuries A.D.

All throughout Europe, the Renaissance saw a major development in all the arts, but each country has its specific features and timelines. It was a time when some of the general attention had shifted from exclusively sacred subject matters to aspects of earthly life. For this reason, the Renaissance is also associated with *Humanism*. To be clear: while this shift in a way endows individuals with free will, the Renaissance does not, by all means, move towards an atheist society.

In the following chapters, we will be exploring what happened in Great Britain and continental Europe.

4. The English Renaissance

Timeline:

Elizabethan Theatre – named after Queen Elizabeth I (1558- 1603), House of Tudor

Jacobean Theatre – named after King James I (1603-1625), House of Stuart

Caroline Theatre – named after King Charles I (1625- 1649), House of Stuart

England had somewhat of a late start to the Renaissance, mostly due to the ongoing wars within the island and in France. On top of that, famines and plagues played a large role as well. In short, the focus was primarily on surviving, quite literally- rather than developing new trends in the arts.

It is only with the beginning of the House of Tudor – with King Henry VII in 1485 – that the cultural environment starts to change. Many scholars believe this happened because of the influence of continental humanists, such as Erasmus, who traveled to England, and because classic literature was finally available in translation at the two main universities, Cambridge and Oxford. Universities fostered and promoted Humanism in the arts and theatrical performances happening on campus. Productions were student-led, some of them were in Latin, while others were in English.

Yet, it was really during Queen Elizabeth I's reign (1558-1603) that theatre in England experienced the greatest growth, which later continued under the two following kings, James I and Charles I, up until 1642, when the Puritans took control (eventually killing Charles I in 1649), and banned any theatrical activity for the next eighteen years.

Back in Queen Elizabeth's London, the humanist ideals were promoted in the *Inns of Court*, institutions that provided further education to young men, mostly Oxford and Cambridge graduates. The curriculum focused on law, politics, and economics, and yet a strong emphasis was devoted to the arts, including classic literature and theatre. These institutions targeted wealthier students, who also constituted the intended audience of any cultural and theatrical event.

In other words, it was culture for the elite, not for the masses.

More popular theatrical events and performances were still available, although they still echoed the structure and the fashion of Medieval entertainment.

Most Inns were in the financial district, the most famous ones being The Inner Temple, the Middle Temple, The Grey's Inn, and the Lincolns' Inn.

The Inns housed theatrical performances all throughout the 16th and 17th Centuries and shared other theatrical spaces, such as the public theatres and the private theatres (more on those later).

Warning! Nowadays, the term "Inn" is normally associated with guest houses or pub-like businesses. That was not the case at the time.

It is at one of those Inns, the Inner Temple, that in 1561 *Gorboduc* (also known as *Ferrex and Porrex*), the first English tragedy in blank verse, was produced. The play was written by Tomas Sackville and Thomas Norton. The plot was rooted in English history, and its style echoed Seneca's tragedies – so, very grim. All the main characters eventually die a bloody

death, which is supposed to teach a lesson about the importance of securing a line of succession to the throne. For today's aesthetic, this play would be a hard watch. It is long, very wordy, and has many characters that add complexity to the plot. At the time, it was a huge success and set the standard for a whole generation of playwrights.

As playwrights and actors understood the potential of live performances, they felt the need to widen their audience. In order to see that happen, they slightly changed their approach to storytelling with the new goal of making it more compelling and easier to follow.

The University Wits, a group of learned men primarily active in academia, worked in this direction. The most famous among them were **John Lyly** (1554-1606), **Thomas Kyd** (1558-1594), **Robert Greene** (1560-1592), and **Christopher Marlowe (**1564-1593).

Lyly's interest focused on comedies and pastoral plays, sourcing his material from classic mythology and English history. His style was refined and almost fairytale-like. His works appealed to the aristocracy.

Kyd more strongly embraced Seneca's subject matters and stylistic elements, such as ghosts, the chorus, and soliloquies.

Greene leaned towards romantic comedies featuring strong female characters.

Marlowe is without a doubt the most famous of the group. His *Doctor Faustus* continues to be successfully produced today and was seminal in defining a style and a character that would later appear in many other forms of narratives.

Marlowe writes more psychologically complex characters who face extraordinary circumstances. He is also one of the first playwrights to introduce the episodic plot, where the timeline of the play does not follow a cause-and-effect chain of events.

Some of his plays include the above-mentioned *The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus*, *Tamburlaine* (*Parts 1 and 2*), and *The Jew of Malta.* Most of his plays were produced by the Admiral's Men.

His life was unfortunately cut short in 1593. Many scholars believe he would have rivaled Shakespeare if he hadn't been killed.

As theatre grew in popularity, it soon became clear to the government, and to the monarchy specifically, that it needed to be regulated or, better still, kept under control. Even before the Tudors, actors needed the support and the employment of a gentleman, functioning as a sponsor, to perform and travel. Without said support, they would be persecuted as vagabonds. Gentlemen would employ a troupe of actors to have exclusive access to their entertainment and plays, but once they no longer needed them, they would allow the troupe to tour. A sponsor would provide actors with a small allowance and often donate their discarded clothes to be used as costumes.

When Queen Elizabeth I took the throne, she had to address a huge growth in the number of theatre troupes, most of which were misusing their patronage and producing plays whose content undermined the stability of her reign and of the church. Hence, she instituted that only local public officials, appointed by the monarchy, could issue public performance permits and that political and religious matters could not be discussed in plays. In 1572, she also established that to sponsor a theatre troupe, the sponsoring gentleman had to be at least of the rank of a baron.

With the new restrictions and regulations, theatre companies could also opt not to have a noble sponsor, but they then needed to get a permit from a local Justice of Peace to perform in that town. This new system indicated that a license was to be obtained in every town the troupe wanted to perform, and that traveling from one town to another did not represent an act of vagabondage any longer.

Needless to say, to obtain a license, troupes had to pay a fee, which made this whole ordeal quite profitable for the crown. Just to provide an idea, it has been estimated that between 1572 and roughly 1642, there were around one hundred theatre troupes on tour through England.

In 1574, a Royal Patent was instituted and it provided an even stronger royal control over the troupes. It gave the power to license a company's plays directly to the Master of the Revels, who was in charge of the queen's entertainment, and who served directly under the Lord Chamberlain (the manager of all the needs of the royal household).

From 1598 onward, the Master of the Revels was also in charge of licensing playhouses: the theatrical spaces.

As the population and the need for entertainment grew exponentially all over England, the situation became particularly challenging in London, with theatre troupes fighting over spaces and plays. The queen's response to this was to give the monopoly of performing in London and its suburbs to only two professional theatre companies: the Admiral's Men and the Lord Chamberlain's Men. For the record, said monopoly worked to a certain extent but didn't last past the Tudor monarchs. With the advent of the Stuart monarchs, the royal patent was retained, but licensing through the Master of the Revels also became an option.

Let's take a look at professional theatre companies working at the time.

The **Lord Chamberlain's Men** was arguably the most important theatre troupe operating in London. It was founded in 1594 and included the most famous and revered actors and theatre artists of the time, including Richard Burbage (one of Shakespeare's leading actors, who originated the roles of Hamlet, Richard III, Lear and Othello), Will Kempe (who played comedic roles), and last but not least, Shakespeare himself. From 1599 onward, the company performed almost exclusively in the newly built Globe Theatre in the summer, an outdoor public playhouse just outside the city close to the River Thames, and in the Blackfriars Theatre in the winter, an indoor private theatre within the city limits. When James I became king in 1603, the company was renamed the King's Men.

The Admiral's Men first performed at the Rose Theatre, an outdoor public playhouse not far from the Globe Theatre, and then moved to The Fortune Theatre. The most prominent actor in the company was Edward Alleyn.

Professional theatre companies were organized as a cooperative, which means that in order to be part of the company, the actors had to become *shareholders*. As shareholders, they would cover the leading positions, including the main roles in the play and in the management, they would get a share of the profits, but they would also be financially responsible for the cost of the productions and of the maintenance of the space.

London-based companies had up to twelve shareholders, while touring companies tended to be smaller, with about half a dozen of them.

Companies sometimes had a resident playwright, as in the case of Shakespeare for the King's Men, and if that was the case, it wasn't unusual for plays to be written keeping in mind the specific actors available within the troupe. Otherwise, troupes would hire a playwright and commission new work. While copyright laws didn't exist at the time, hired playwrights would receive a flat fee, the amount of which depended on the popularity of the playwright.

Good plays were a property of the troupe and could potentially be published if they obtained the patent for it. Yet, the most successful plays stayed unpublished so as not to allow access to them by other companies, which is why none of Shakespeare's plays were published during his lifetime. Once the company owned the play, it still needed to be licensed by the Master of the Revels to be produced. One of the tasks of the Master of the Revels was to make sure that the play didn't deal with destabilizing subject matters. Anything politically or morally troubling was cut, or censored.

Each company had a rule of conduct everyone should abide by that determined fines for actors if they, for example, arrived late at rehearsals, damaged a costume, were drunk on the job, and so on.

Aside from shareholders, there could be *hirelings* – actors hired to cover a specific, usually small, role in a production – and finally, *apprentices* – young aspiring actors who were assigned to a resident actor for training and who often played female roles, as women were not allowed to perform.

Both the King's Men and The Admiral's Men were adult companies, meaning all of the actors were adults, as opposed to what happened in boys' companies, which were also popular.

These were professional troupes which had to obtain the same kind of license as the adult companies to perform, and which had a similar shareholding structure, except that the actors – the boys- could only reach the status of apprentice. Most of the young actors came from choir schools and were then funneled into acting in plays to improve their communication skills. Boys' companies were popular at court, and they also performed in smaller venues, such as the Inns and the first Blackfriars Theatre (as opposed to the second Blackfriars Theatre, where the King's Men would perform). The most famous boys' troupes were The Paul's Boys and The Blackfriars Boys. Boys' companies would get their plays from notable playwrights such as Ben Johnson and Thomas Middleton.

A theatrical season could last a bit short of fifty weeks, with up to forty being produced by the same company, hence the ongoing need for new plays. A successful play could be revived and rewritten several times, but the amount of new work was always higher. That meant that many playwrights dug into pre-existing material such as chronicles, classical myths, and novellas as the spine of their works.

Successful theatre companies would be very busy and would always have a production running, which meant that they had a repertoire of plays and assigned roles that could facilitate a quick turnaround. Rehearsals for a new play couldn't last long and could not disrupt the performance schedule of the company. Because of this, it was common practice to have a *prompter* close to the stage, to feed the actors their lines should they need it.

The greatest obstacle to the continuity of theatrical activities was … the plague, which caused theatres to suspend all activities for months at a time, like in 1609.

Most of the time, actors were only given the *sides* containing their lines and their cues, while the entire script was kept somewhere safe. That prevented, to some extent, the theft of scripts. Actors would have access to the overall plot and timeline of the play – as they would be available backstage.

When it comes to the acting style of the time, scholars have little to go on, and therefore, nothing definitive can be said.

A famous scene in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* (Act 3, Scene 2, see BOX) could shed some light on the matter. While discussing with the touring acting troupe that had just arrived at Elsinore, Hamlet makes specific requests about the way the actors should deliver their lines and their performance. That text suggests a realistic style of acting, with a final emphasis on respecting the text as provided by the playwright. Fun fact: many think that the line: "and let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them" is a direct reference to one of the King's Men company members, Will Kempe, who played comedic roles and might have taken some liberties on his provided text, displeasing Shakespeare.

While Hamlet's speech on acting is truly wonderful and can indeed be applied to *modern* acting, it seems unlikely that realism—at least in the way we conceive it today— was really what Elizabethan acting was all about. First of all, women were not allowed on stage, and all female roles were played either by boys, sometimes the apprentice, or by company members if roles required older actors. There was likely a convention about stylized gestures, postures, tone, and pitch of the voice that differentiated characters, both in terms of gender and of status. These elements alone defeat any attempt at realism.

Secondly, most of the focus was on the language as the primary vehicle of storytelling. There was little or no scenic design as a visual support for the play (more on this later). Details about locations and environment were delivered through exposition, that is to say, within the dialogue between the characters. What the audience would see is something very close to a bare stage, with actors entering and exiting at the beginning and at the end of each scene.

Lastly, most companies needed to assign several roles to the same actors due to the characters outnumbering the actors they had available.

Hamlet's Speech on Acting. *Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 2)

HAMLET

Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced
it to you, trippingly on the tongue. But if you mouth it
as many of your players do, I had as lief the town-crier
had spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much – your hand, thus – but use all gently. For, in the very
torrent, tempest and, as I may say, the whirlwind of
passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that
may give it smoothness. O, it offends me to the soul to
see a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to
tatters, to very rags, to split the ears of the groundlings,
who for the most part are capable of nothing but
inexplicable dumb-shows and noise. I could have such
a fellow whipped for o'erdoing Termagant – it out-
Herods Herod. Pray you avoid it.

PLAYER

I warrant your honor.

HAMLET

Be not too tame neither, but let your own
discretion be your tutor. Suit the action to the word, the
word to the action, with this special observance – that
you o'erstep not the modesty of nature. For anything so
overdone is from the purpose of playing whose end,
both at the first and now, was and is to hold as 'twere
the mirror up to Nature, to show Virtue her own
feature, Scorn her own image, and the very age and
body of the time, his form and pressure. Now this
overdone, or come tardy off, though it make the
unskilful laugh, cannot but make the judicious grieve,
the censure of the which one must in your allowance
o'erweigh a whole theatre of others. O, there be players
that I have seen play and heard others praise – and that
highly – not to speak it profanely, that neither having
the accent of Christians nor the gait of Christian,
pagan nor no man have so strutted and bellowed that I
have thought some of Nature's journeymen had made
men, and not made them well, they imitated humanity
so abhominably.

PLAYER

I hope we have reformed that indifferently with us, sir.

HAMLET

> O, reform it altogether – and let those that play
> your clowns speak no more than is set down for them.
> For there be of them that will themselves laugh to set
> on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too,
> though in the meantime some necessary question of the
> play be then to be considered. That's villainous and
> shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it.
> Go, make you ready.

Because of the lack of scenery, the spectacle relied on costumes. Theatre companies cherished their "stock" of costumes dearly. Most of their items would come from donations from noble families and the occasional purchase, also made possible thanks to the allowance they would receive or from the revenue coming from the box office. Actors were asked to treat their costumes with care, and they were not allowed to wear them when not on stage. Failing to comply with this rule would result in a hefty fine.

All costumes reflected the fashion and the style of the time, which means that there was no attempt at period style costuming if the play required it: Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, for example, would have actors wear Elizabethan costumes instead of period-appropriate Roman-style garments. Needless to say, this element also works against a realistic approach to production.

When it comes to style, subject, structure, and characters, Elizabethan theatre varied significantly. The Aristotelian unities (unity of time, space, and action as discussed in previous chapters) were not respected, as all plays presented several locations.

Comedies had more complicated plots, seldom included at least one character that functioned as the "fool" or as a "clown", tended to be shorter than tragedies, and featured characters who were not necessarily of noble birth (but could be). The subject matter could vary from pastorals, household themes, complicated love stories with, of course, a happy ending.

Both prose and verse were utilized in comedies, and music was frequently added as well.

Tragedies presented a serious subject matter and didn't have the ultimate "happy ending," while they did deliver some sort of moral in order to make sense of the character's demise. Tragedies also used both verse and prose, depending on which character was delivering the lines. While this is not a universal truth, noble characters would normally speak in verse (in particular when talking to each other), while lower-class characters would speak in prose. Elizabethan tragedies featured characters of noble birth as their leads. In terms of structure, tragedies tended to focus more on the main action, with fewer subplots. Shakespeare often introduced some sort of comedic relief element in his tragedies to allow the audience to "catch a breath" now and then.

The one common element for all plays was their length: they were much longer than what we are used to today. Most Elizabethan plays produced today (including all of Shakespeare's plays) are heavily edited and cut to keep the production under two and a half hours.

In their time, performances would go way beyond the three-hour mark. Playwrights had to accommodate lots of repetitions, mostly because audiences were not as "disciplined" as we expect them to be today. Performances in public playhouses in particular could see the actors being seriously challenged by the audience, as people used to go to the theatre not only to experience the play, but also to meet with friends, discuss whatever matters they needed to, and…to

drink! You can imagine how that might have contributed to discussions getting more heated and devolving into fights. In short, actors had to repeat the text in order for the rowdy audience members to catch up with the story.

The situation was overall better in private playhouses, as they were smaller and more expensive to attend.

The Iambic Pentameter or Blank Verse

The Iambic Pentameter (or Blank Verse) is a verse that has a specific syllabic rhythm (unstressed, stressed) and structure. "Iamb" stands for a metrical foot of two syllables, while "penta" means five in Greek, which implies that a line of verse in Iambic Pentameter uses five feet of two syllables, for a total of ten syllables.

The rhythm has been exemplified as follows:

"da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM da DUM"

Each "da DUM" is a foot of two syllables, the first one (da) unstressed, the second one (DUM) stressed.

Example (unstressed syllables are lower case, stressed syllables are upper case):

"shall I compare thee TO a SUMmer's DAY?"

(William Shakespeare, Sonnet 18)

Theatrical spaces

We have briefly mentioned a few theatrical spaces in the previous sections. Now we are going to explore them in greater detail.

University student-led productions would premiere in the main halls in Cambridge or Oxford, where removable theatrical structures were positioned. If they were successful, they would move to London and perform in the Inns of Court, in what would now be the financial district. The Inns of Court were the following: Gray's Inn, Lincoln's Inn, the Inner Temple, and the Middle Temple. These spaces belonged to the lawyer's associations and consisted of several buildings such as libraries, lounge areas, accommodations for students continuing their education in the field (in law, but also the arts), and a church. Access to these facilities was not for everyone, as you can imagine. Performances were public, but with space being limited, tickets would be expensive. The type of performances was also a discriminating factor: both the subject matter and the style tended to be elevated and comprehensible to a more educated audience.

There were also other Inns throughout London that appealed to less academic and learned companies. Some of them included The Cross Keys and The Bell, and The Bull. In these cases, the yard area was adapted into a performance space with the addition of a removable wooden structure functioning as the stage, while the audience would either stand in the yard or sit in the surrounding galleries.

Playhouses were also popular. These were buildings specifically conceived and built for theatrical activities, and they were very popular in London, specifically.

There were two types of playhouses: outdoor public ones and private indoor ones.

The outdoor public playhouse is the most iconic and the one that is commonly associated with Shakespeare. It saw several developments during the following centuries, culminating with the 1997 reconstruction of The Globe Theatre in London, in a location supposedly not far from the original playhouse by the same name. Despite its popularity, the evolution of the architecture of the outdoor playhouse isn't totally clear to scholars. There is some late 16th Century artwork by Johannes De Witt, depicting The Swan Theatre as well as the actual contracts for the construction of The Fortune Theatre and The Hope Theatre, dated 1600 and 1613. Yet, these documents aren't exhaustive and only provide an idea of some aspects of the buildings rather than covering the general concept behind them.

What we can conclude about the buildings and how they functioned is the following:

All the outdoor public playhouses were made of wood, mud, and straw, which didn't make for the safest and most durable buildings. Theatres often burned to the ground and had to be rebuilt several times.

Most of the buildings had a polygonal ground plan, enclosing an inner yard.

The stage was a 4-feet high raised platform that extended into the inner yard – thrust style- from one of the sides and out of the *tiring house*, the Elizabethan equivalent of the Greek *skene*. The Tiring house had several doors onto the stage to allow entrances and exits and provide the actors some backstage space where they could store properties and change costumes. Some scholars believe there might have been a smaller, removable, and adaptable structure to be placed on the stage, against the tiring house, to make "revelation moments" possible. While this theory would explain and solve several blocking needs in most Elizabethan plays, there is no hard evidence to support its existence.

The Tiring house had a second level, with windows open to the stage, which would help when levels were needed – think of the balcony scene in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

The stage and the Tiring house were roofed, and were referred to as the "heavens" because they were painted with images of the heavens.

As for the audience seating, there were several options. There were three tiers of seating around the perimeter of the building. The first tier was divided into boxes, also known as the Lords' rooms, for the wealthiest patrons. The other two tiers represented the galleries, with wooden seating on the second level and standing places at the top level. Finally, the cheapest tickets in the house were for the yard itself, or the pit, where the groundlings, as they were called, would stand, trading a cheaper ticket price and greater proximity to the stage for being completely exposed to the weather, as the yard had no roof.

Public houses worked primarily in the summer because of the warmer temperatures and light conditions. Performances started at 2 pm and could last up to four hours.

Eating and drinking during performances was allowed! Popular concession items were nuts, fruits, oysters, wine, and beer.

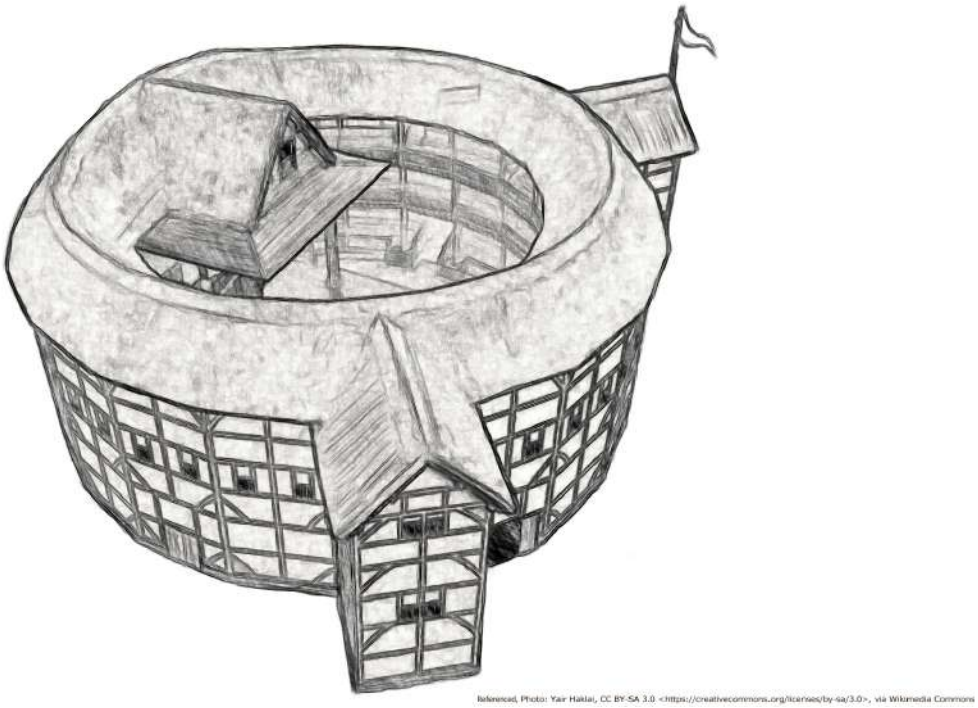
Fun fact: there were no restrooms. If you needed to go… You could use a bucket, or go to the river (if you could make it that far).

Between 1567 and 1623, we know of thirteen public playhouses in the London area. All of them were actually outside the city limits, as public theatrical activities were not allowed in the city. They all varied in overall size, seating capability, and stage dimensions. At the peak of their popularity, it is believed that public playhouses could house 1000 to 3000 people.

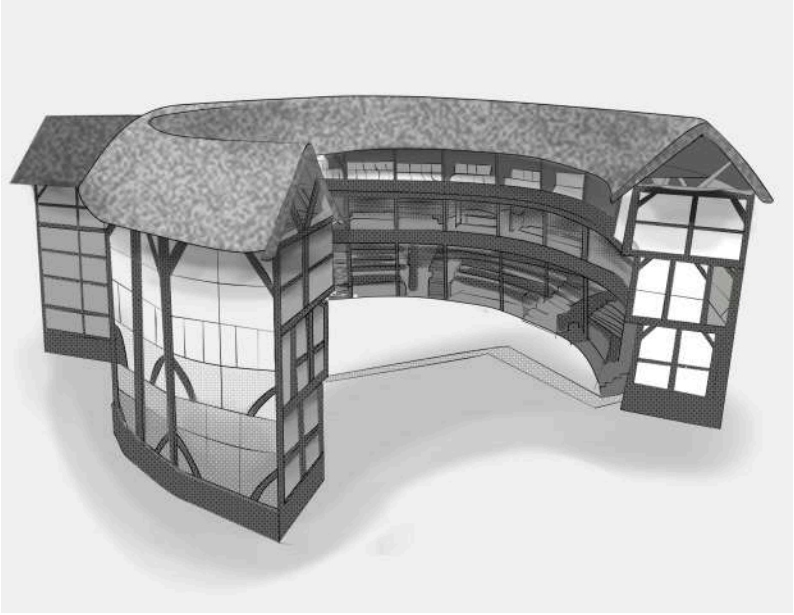
Out of all the public playhouses, the most important ones are: The Red Lion, The Rose, The Theatre, The Globe, The Swan, The Fortune, The Boar's Head, and The Curtain.

The Theatre, built in 1576, was for a long time considered the model for all

the others. It had been built by James Burbage. In 1599, its lease expired, and Burbage's two sons, Cuthbert and Richard (also the famous actor in the King's Men) dismantled it and used its wood to build The Globe Theatre.



The Globe Theatre. (Original Illustration by Lazaro Mahar)



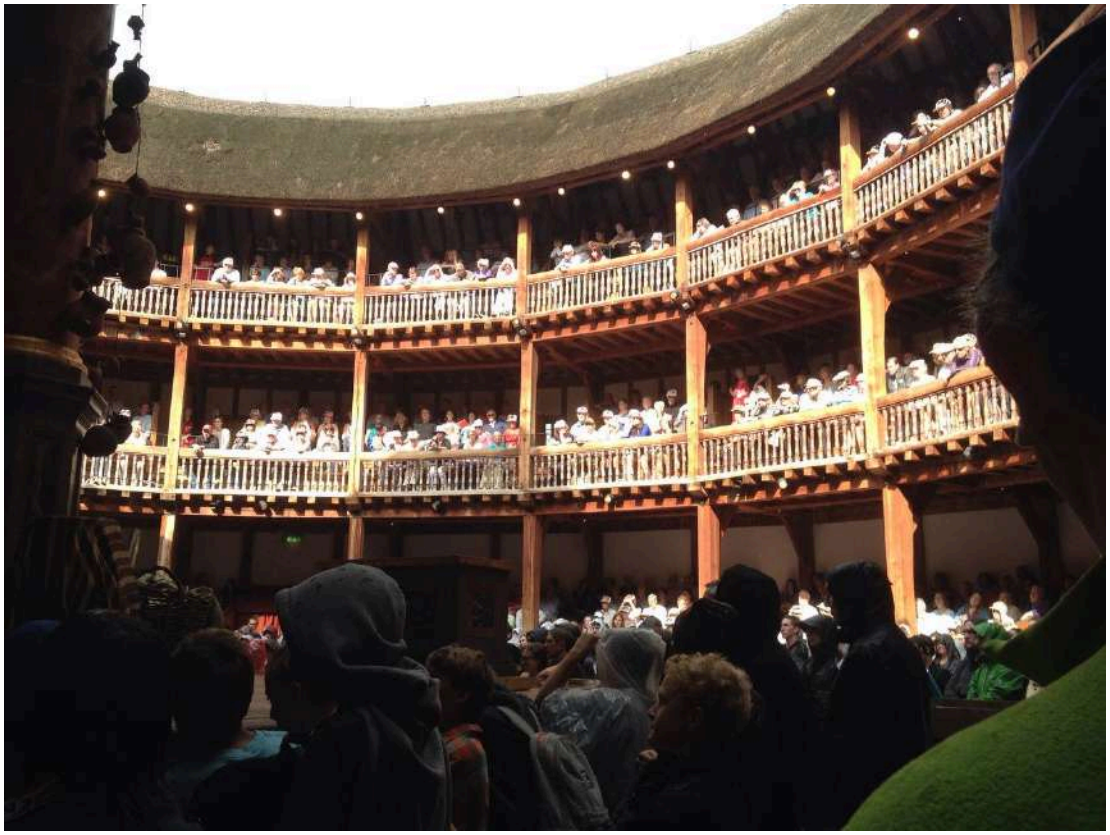
Section of The Globe Theatre. (Original illustration by Arlee Peterson)



The London Globe. (Photo courtesy of Christine Schmidle)



The stage of The London Globe. (Photo courtesy of Christine Schmidle)



The London Globe, interior. (Photo courtesy of Christine Schmidle)

Private indoor playhouses were located inside the city limits. It is believed that between 1575 and 1635, you could find eight private theatres in London, including the first Blackfriars (built in 1576) and the new (or second) Blackfriars (built in 1596).

These theatres were smaller than public houses, with a seating capacity set between 500 and 1000 people. Originally, they were exclusively used by Boy's companies, but after 1608, adult companies took over most of them. These spaces made for a more intimate theatrical experience, being confined within one big room and a building.

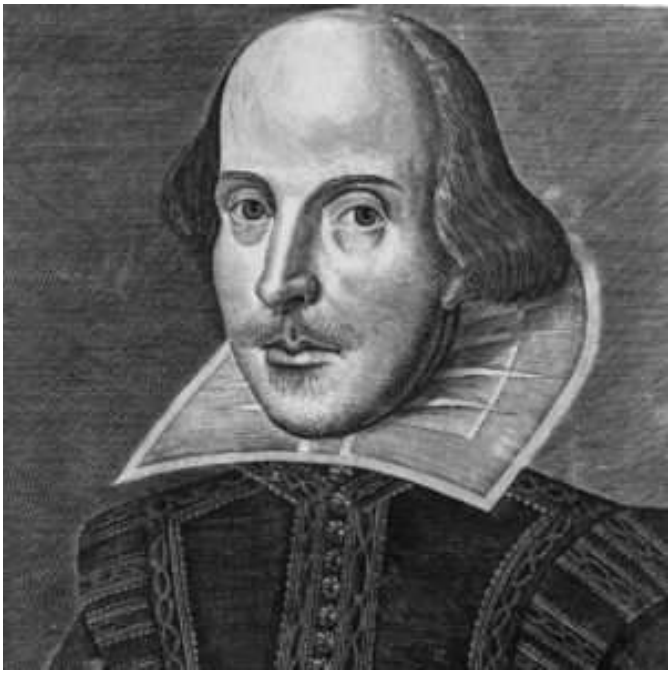
While they were called "private", they were indeed open to the public! Tickets were more expensive compared to public outdoor playhouses, due to the limited number of seats. Depending on the theatres, there were two or three orders of galleries, some boxes, and pit seats. There was no standing area.

The stage was on a raised platform, much like in public playhouses. Usually, there was no seating on the side of the stage, making it less of a thrust. Yet, the lack of a proscenium arch didn't make for a proscenium arrangement either. The actors had access to a "tiring house" upstage as well, allowing entrances and exits, off-stage costume changes, "revelation moments" and prop storage.

The most important private theatre is by far the second Blackfriars, built by James Burbage and utilized by the Blackfriars boys as their home venue until 1608, when King James I passed it down to the King's Men.

Playwrights

Shakespeare (1564-1616)



William Shakespeare, by Martin Droeshout, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

The time has come to discuss the "elephant in the room": William Shakespeare, certainly the greatest English playwright, arguably the greatest in Western Theatre, and a household name all over the world. For the economy of this book, it is impossible to provide an accurate recollection of all the reasons why he is so popular and important, and deciding what to write about him here is definitely a challenge.

Shakespeare was born into a relatively wealthy family in Stratford-upon-Avon, a small town ninety miles north-west of London. He grew up there and attended the local Grammar School, where he was exposed to the classics and most of Plautus' comedies, written in Latin. He was likely fluent in Latin and might have known some French. We don't know exactly when he moved to London, but it is assumed that he pursued acting there for a while prior to his turn toward playwriting and producing.

He became a shareholder of the Lord Chamberlain's Men (later the King's Men) in 1594 and remained so until his retirement in 1613. After him, John Fletcher (1579-1625) became the resident playwright for the King's Men.

Most of his work fell under two different monarchs: Queen Elizabeth I and King James I.

He was a popular playwright in his own time, although not nearly as much as he is now.

At the time, he was just as famous as Christopher Marlowe, Ben Johnson, or Thomas Middleton.

A lot about Shakespeare's life is still unclear. Some scholars even question his actual existence…or the authorship of "his" works!

The evidence and the documentation that survived don't allow for a precise recollection of his biography or his works.

In his over twenty year long career he surely wrote more plays than the surviving thirty eight, but because he never published any of them in his lifetime we are only able to enjoy the ones that were put together by his company after his death and that were published in the first anthology of his works: The *First Folio* (1623).

Some scholars have argued that he might not have been the sole author of some of his plays, and there is indeed a strong possibility, based on the differences in writing style that can be found in sections of certain plays, that he worked together with Thomas Middleton (possibly on *Macbeth* and *Timon of Athens*), George Wilkings (possibly on *Pericles*), and John Fletcher (possibly on *Two Noble Kinsmen* and *Cardenio*). There is also the belief that he might have worked with Christopher Marlowe on the *Henry VI* plays. Yet again, all this is speculation based on the analysis of the text rather than on facts coming from hard evidence.

Regardless, Shakespeare wrote a lot and fast because he needed to provide his company with new plays almost constantly. And while this is not unusual for the time, it has to be said that all of his work, except for *The Tempest*, is not original in subject matter. He heavily relied on previous sources, such as historical chronicles, novellas, and Latin literature.

Some of the features that make Shakespeare stand out are: the attention to character, the compelling storytelling, and the brilliant use of language.

Differently from previous (or many of his contemporary) playwrights, Shakespeare's characters show an innate humanity that has allowed them to become at the same time archetypical and universal. Romeo and Juliet are the epitome of the "lovers", but at the same time, the depth of their individual growth throughout the play gives them qualities that are unique to them. Similarly, Hamlet embodies the "coming of age" that is so typical of teenagers, while also showing a spirit of nobility and commitment to a cause well beyond his age. These examples could go on and on. Shakespeare focuses on the characters' emotional – and physical— journey and then builds the plot around them, in particular when it comes to tragedies, so that the audience can empathize with them and follow the play more easily. Another device he uses is to make the main conflict and themes of the plays very relatable: jealousy, betrayal, injustice, ill-starred love, dysfunctional family dynamics, and honor.

Lear's unfair behavior towards his one faithful daughter versus his doting over his other two deceitful daughters was, unfortunately, a common family dynamic back then, as well as today. Audience empathized with that because they recognized and understood the situation, as they might have lived through it themselves or knew someone who had.

Shakespeare wrote thirty-eight plays, and they can be grouped as follows:

History plays:

Henry IV *part* 1 and *Henry* IV *part* 2

Henry V
Henry VI *part* 1, *Henry* VI *part* 2, and *Henry* VI *part* 3
Henry VIII

King John
Richard II

Richard III

Tragedies:

Antony and Cleopatra

Coriolanus

Hamlet

Julius Caesar

King Lear

Macbeth

Othello

Romeo and Juliet

Timon of Athens

Titus Andronicus

Cymbeline

Troilus and Cressida

Comedies:

All's Well That Ends Well

Midsummer Night's Dream

As You Like It

Much Ado About Nothing

Love's Labour's Lost

Two Gentlemen of Verona

Twelfth Night

Winter's Tale

Taming of the Shrew

The Merry Wives of Windsor

The Tempest

The Comedy of Errors

The Merchant of Venice

Measure for Measure

Pericles (this play was not included in the First Folio, as it had been previously published as a pamphlet. It was later included in the third edition of the Folio).

The Two Noble Kinsmen (this play, as well, was not included in the First Folio. It was first published in 1634).

There could be more nuances to these groups, as some plays feature a combination of elements that makes their sharp identification with just one genre problematic.

For example, *Measure for Measure* deals with the dishonesty and corruption of a politician who blackmails a young novice. If she doesn't sleep with him, he will have her brother executed on moral grounds. The play is still considered a comedy because of the happy ending where the legitimate and lawful order is restored and "true love" is rewarded.

Another example is *The Merchant of Venice*, where one of the main characters, Shylock, a Jew, is depicted in a prejudiced way while at the same time is given one of the most touching monologues about equal rights.

Measure for Measure and *The Merchant of Venice* have also been labeled "problem plays", along with *All's Well That Ends Well*, *Winter's Tale*, *Troilus and Cressida*, and *Two Gentlemen of Verona*.

"Problem plays" shift in tone and subject matter, alternating very comedic scenes with darker ones while using ambiguous language.

Shakespeare Trivia and Fun Facts

Shakespeare's plays have been translated into over one hundred languages.

They have been produced all over the world (and still are).

They have been adapted in movies, modern plays, musicals, comic books, video games, you name it.

It is safe to say that there are likely hundreds of Shakespeare's plays being produced at any given time all over the world.

In the U.S.A. alone, there are several prestigious Shakespeare Festivals, reproductions of the Globe Theatre – one of Shakespeare's preferred venues in London – universities and conservatories exclusively focusing on Shakespeare training.

Any famous actor you might think of, from Al Pacino to Benedict Cumberbatch, has performed in a Shakespeare production, if not several.

Any amateur or professional actor you might come across has likely been involved in a Shakespeare production.

Every actor, in general, is likely to have one of Shakespeare's characters as their "dream role".

Most children are exposed to at least one of his plays when they are in high school.

Shakespeare invented about 1700 new words that are still in use today. Examples include: gossip (*The Comedy of Errors*), shooting star (*Richard II*), alligator (*Romeo and Juliet*), eyeball (*Tempest*), addiction (*Henry V*), and outbreak (*Hamlet*).

Hamlet married Anne Hathaway, who was ten years older than him, and had three children: Suzanna and the twins Hamnet and Judith. Hamnet died a young boy, and it is believed that the character of Hamlet was named after him.

It is believed that Shakespeare was cast as the Ghost of Hamlet's father in the original production of *Hamlet*.

In 2020, a copy of the *First Folio*, the first anthology of his plays published after his death, sold at auction for a little under ten million dollars, making it one of the most expensive books of all time.

He wrote some of the most famous speeches of all time, including "To Be or Not To Be" (*Hamlet*, Act 3, Scene 1), "All The World's A Stage" (*As You Like It*, Act 2, Scene 7), "She Should Have Died Hereafter" (*Macbeth*, Act 5, Scene 5), "Galop apace, you fiery-footed steeds" (*Romeo and Juliet*, Act 3, Scene 2), "But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?" (*Romeo and Juliet*, Act 2, Scene 2).

Within his plays, one can find the most incredibly effective insults of all time. Examples include: "I do desire we may be better strangers." (*As You Like It*, Act 3, Scene 2), "Tis such fools as you that makes the world full of ill-favored children (*As You Like It*, Act 3, Scene 5), "More of your conversation would infect my brain" (*Coriolanus*, Act 2, Scene 1), "You have a February nose, so full of frost, of storm and cloudiness" (*Much Ado About Nothing*, Act 5 Scene 4), "Thou hast no more brain than I have in mine elbows" (*Troilus and Cressida*, Act 2, Scene 1)

He likely wrote more, but what has survived are 38 plays and 154 sonnets.

The only play with original subject matter is his last one, *The Tempest*, which is also considered his farewell to the theatre.

Examples of movies, plays, TV series, novels, and musicals inspired by or adapted from Shakespeare (in no particular order):

Star Wars Shakespeare, by Ian Doescher. The author rewrote the Star Wars saga in iambic pentameter. He also applied the same treatment to other famous movies and literature. Examples include *Much Ado About Mean Girls*, *William Shakespeare's Dracula, and William Shakespeare's Get Thee… Back To The Future*.

West Side Story – by Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim. This famous and multi-awarded musical is an adaptation of Romeo and Juliet.

British actor and director Kenneth Branagh, aside from acting in a variety of Shakespeare roles and plays, has directed several movie adaptations of the Bard's work, including: *Hamlet* (he played Hamlet), *Henry V* (he played Henry V), *Much Ado About Nothing* (he played Benedick), *As You Like It* (only directed).

Slings and Arrows – A Canadian television series about a theatre company working on a Shakespeare play.

It has been argued that *The Lion King* is a loose adaptation of *Hamlet*, as it is a "coming of age" story.

Most of Shakespeare's plays have been adapted, some even several times, into screenplays. The list would be too long to include here….. A brief research will give you the entire list.

10 Things I Hate About You, a contemporary movie adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Prospero's Books, by Peter Greenaway, is a British avant-garde movie adaptation of *The Tempest*.

Kiss Me, Kate by Cole Porter is also an adaptation of *The Taming of the Shrew*.

Rosencrantz and Guildenstern are Dead, by Tom Stoppard. The plot revolves around the two Hamlets' "friends". Originally a play, it was also turned into a movie.

Ran, by Akira Kurosawa, is a movie adaptation of *King Lear*.

Something Rotten! Book by John O'Farrell and Karey Kirkpatrick, and music and lyrics by Karey and Wayne Kirkpatrick. This musical comedy tells the story of Shakespeare's theatre company. In the original 2015 Broadway production, Christian Borle played Shakespeare, winning a Tony Award for his performance.

The Boys from Syracuse, music by Richard Rodgers and lyrics by Lorenz Hart, is based on *The Comedy of Errors*.

And Juliet, featuring music of Swedish pop songwriter Max Martin and book by David West Read, is a re-telling of Romeo and Juliet, with a very different ending.

Kill Shakespeare, a comic book limited series centered on several of Shakespeare's characters.

Shakespeare's plays have also been rendered into graphic novels and manga.

Fat Ham, a play by James Ijames, is a modern adaptation of *Hamlet*. The play was awarded the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 2022.

American playwright Lauren Gunderson has written several plays based on or inspired by Shakespeare's work and life. Examples include *A Room in the Castle*, a re-telling of *Hamlet* from the perspective of Gertrude, Ofelia, and Ofelia's handmaid, *The Book of Will*, about the creation of the First Folio, and *Exit Pursued by Bear*, which uses Shakespeare's words and quotes within a completely original framework.

Thomas Middleton (1580-1627)

Middleton wrote and co-wrote several comedies and tragedies, although his style and dramatic structure were not the most compelling. His comedies focused on the life of wealthy Londoners and are characterized by a witty use of language. Comedies include: *Michaelmas Term* and *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside.*

Middleton's tragedies focused on the demise of the main character due to corruption and had really dark tones. Examples include: *The Changeling*, *A Game at Chess*, and *Women Beware Women.*

Ben Johnson (1572-1637)

Johnson is probably the most famous playwright of the time, after Shakespeare.

He came from a lower-class family that could not afford to send him to school, so he fed his thirst for an education in the classics by studying on his own. He was particularly fascinated with the neoclassic principles, which he tried to incorporate in his works.

Later, he enrolled in the army, thus gaining a higher social status when he came back from the war.

He is best known for his comedies, the most famous ones being *Volpone*, *The Alchemist*, and *Every Man in His Humour*. His characters were built following the contemporary medical theory of the four bodily "humours": blood, phlegm, yellow bile, and black bile. Doctors at the time believed that health was determined by the balance of these four humors. Johnson's characters showed an excess in one of them, therefore being unbalanced.

Ben Johnson considered writing plays just as important as writing any other form of fiction or poetry, and he thought that plays should be elevated to the rank of literature. So, while most of his contemporaries didn't bother to publish their plays, he published an anthology of his work in 1616 that he personally curated.

His later works included two tragedies, *Sejanus* and *Catilina*.

His elegant style made him particularly appreciated by the aristocracy, and he became King James I's protégé. In 1615, the king bestowed on him the title of "poet laureate" and gave him a royal pension.

He led a tumultuous life, frequently engaging in heated debates with fellow playwrights. In the so-called "war of the theatres": he wrote satirical comedies to make fun of his rivals. He was incarcerated twice, once for being involved in a production that was considered "offensive" and the second time, in 1598, for killing an actor in a duel.

John Webster (1580-1634)

Webster is remembered for his well-written tragedies and strong characters. His main characters had decisive traits, but were morally flawed, which inevitably led to their violent demise. He used very poetic language, which was much appreciated by the aristocracy.

Yet, his plays lack a strong main action, making it for a sometimes scattered plot.

His most famous works are *The Duchess of Malfi* and *The White Devil.*

He is believed to have collaborated with several other playwrights, including Thomas Dekker, Thomas Middleton, and Thomas Heywood.

Other playwrights of the time who significantly contributed to this time period are John Fletcher and Francis Beaumont, both coming from a wealthy and learned background. They frequently worked together and are believed to have authored over fifty plays, most of which were tragicomedies, which became a very popular genre in the Caroline period. Tragicomedies associated serious themes akin to tragedies, with a more uplifting and happy ending. Many scholars find their style to be the origin of what will become the typical wit of the Restoration (after King Charles II restored the monarchy in 1660).

Finally, other playwrights of the time worth mentioning are Thomas Dekker, John Marston, and Tomas Haywood.

TAKEAWAYS

England's Renaissance developed over the reign of three monarchs: Queen Elizabeth I, James I, and Charles I.

Tragedies still featured main characters of noble birth, but did not follow the unity of space.

Comedies relied on more relatable subject matters and featured everyday characters.

The productions were not realistic in style, and neither was the acting.

Women were not allowed to act; men played all female roles.

Professional theatre companies needed to have the patronage of an aristocrat or of the monarch in order to perform.

Licenses to perform were appointed by public officials, and censorship was common.

There were two different types of theatre companies: boys' troupes and adult's troupes.

Universities (Oxford and Cambridge) played a significant role in the development and the growth of the popularity of theatre.

Theatre companies would perform in London and tour outside the town (and they needed a permit to perform in every town).

Companies would perform in Inns, Indoor Private Playhouses, and outdoor public playhouses.

Theatre companies were structured as cooperatives, with the main actors being shareholders.

Of course, Shakespeare. And then, everyone else other than Shakespeare.

Vocabulary

Humanism

Queen Elizabeth

King James I

King Charles I

House of Tudor

House of Stuart

University Wits

Inns

Gorboduc

Royal Patent

Master of the Revels

Lord Chamberlain's Men/King's Men

Admiral's Men

Boys' companies

The Globe Theatre

The second Blackfriars Theatre

Iambic Pentameter/Blank Verse

Tiring house

Heavens

Tragicomedies

ACTIVITY FOR THE CLASSROOM

Divide the students into groups of 4 – no big groups for this activity.

First, assign each group a famous speech from a Shakespeare play.

Examples: "All The World's A Stage" (*As You Like It*, Act 2, Scene 7), "No matter where. Of comfort no man speak." (*Richard III*, Act 3, Scene 2); "Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears" (*Julius Caesar*, Act 3, Scene 2); "But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?" (*Romeo and Juliet*, Act 2, Scene 2); "Now is the winter of our discontent" (*Richard III*, Act 1, Scene 1); "Once more unto the breach, dear friends, once more" (*Henry* V, Act 3, Scene 1).

Give each group 10 minutes to read the speech.

Then, a representative of each group will read the speech out loud to the rest of the class. This is not an acting exercise! Just read the lines out loud.

Each group will have to say one thing they understood from each speech, just by hearing it.

Then, give each group another 10 minutes to go over the text and translate it into modern English. It would be best if the students didn't have access to phones or computers at this stage.

When they're done, each group should once again read the speech out loud, but this time in their modern English translation.

A discussion should follow about how much (or how little) they had understood of the speech before the translation. Then, they should focus on how the sound of the lines differs between Shakespeare's text to the modern translation.

Is the sound contributing to creating an atmosphere? Did the rhythm of the Shakespeare original text also play a role in the overall listening experience?

Finally, with the help of Shakespeare's lexicon (or a computer), finalize the correct word-for-word translation of the speech.

A discussion should follow about the Elizabethan rhetoric that can be found in Shakespeare (metaphors, similes, alliteration, antithesis, etc.).

Historical Timeline by Jennifer King

Time Period	**Event**	**Significance**
1485	House of Tudor Begins	Henry VII becomes king, founding the Tudor dynasty and bringing stability that enables the growth of Renaissance culture.
c. 1490s	Humanism Spreads to England	Inspired by the Italian Renaissance and Humanism emphasizes classical education, secular subjects, and individual potential, foundational to Renaissance drama.
1558	Elizabeth I Becomes Queen	Daughter of Henry VIII; her reign marks the height of the English Renaissance and strong royal patronage of the arts.
c. 1561	Performance of *Gorboduc*	The first known English tragedy written in blank verse establishes the use of iambic pentameter in English drama.
c. 1570s	Performances at the Inns of Court	Law schools in London serve as venues for early modern drama and help develop playwriting talent.
1576	The Theatre Opens	Built by James Burbage, the first permanent public playhouse in England, launched the era of commercial theatre.
1587	The Rose Theatre Opens	Built by Philip Henslowe, became a major venue for plays by Christopher Marlowe and the Admiral's Men.
c. 1580s–1590s	Rise of the University Wits	A group of educated playwrights—Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Kyd, Robert Greene, John Lyly, and Thomas Nashe—laid the foundations for English Renaissance drama.
1592	London Theatres Close Due to Plague	Outbreak of bubonic plague forces the closure of public theatres; Shakespeare begins writing narrative poetry.
1594	Lord Chamberlain's Men and Admiral's Men Form	Two dominant acting companies emerge; Shakespeare joins the Lord Chamberlain's Men, while Edward Alleyn leads the Admiral's Men.
1596	Blackfriars Theatre Leased	Indoor theatre leased by James Burbage; later becomes the home to the King's Men.
1599	The Globe Theatre Opens	Built by the Lord Chamberlain's Men, became the most iconic playhouse of the English Renaissance.

5. The Italian Renaissance

It is fair to say that Italy became the spear carrier for most of the artistic and cultural principles of the Renaissance, particularly in Continental Europe. We will see in the following chapters on Spain and France, how much Italian artists and trends have determined the development of their national cultural identities.

In Italy, the Renaissance started early in the 14th Century for a variety of reasons. First, we can't ignore the fact that most of the Roman artistic and archaeological patrimony was right there! The easy access to Roman artifacts and literature helped rekindle the interest in the Classics, which became a source of inspiration for new work.

At the time, Italy was divided into a multitude of small "independent" states, each one ruled by a noble family or a prince. These states had their currency, their language, and their laws, and they were quite often at war with each other. When not at war, they still had a fierce sense of competition when it came to showing off their wealth, mostly through architecture and the arts. For this reason, artists were able to more easily get patronage and financial stability through commissions, which allowed them to really explore and produce new work.

The Catholic Church still had a strong influence on the political dynamics of the Italian states: its favor could determine the rise or fall of a noble family's fortune and power. The religious grip also heavily influenced the arts, in both its styles and subjects, so when Clement V was elected Pope in 1303 and refused to move to Rome —establishing the French Avignon Papacy, which would last until 1377— Italy experienced new artistic freedom. This created greater interest in new, more secular, artistic subjects, new forms of literature, and even the pursuit of local idioms. Nobles started to foster, support, and commission art that was more secular in its scope. Ultimately, this is one of the main triggering factors of the Italian Renaissance.

It has to be said that Latin was still very much in use within the upper classes, but the people did not have easy access to education, and therefore, each state started developing its own language, which was, of course, somewhat rooted and reminiscent of Latin. This element will prove significant in the development of theatre in its forms throughout the Italian peninsula.

Many scholars agree in considering the Italian poet **Dante Alighieri** (1265-1321) as the artist to introduce the new artistic principles in his work, titled *The Divine Comedy*. While the very first form of literature written in Italian is Saint Francis of Assisi's *Canticle of the Sun* (dated around the end of 1224), *The Divine Comedy* is considered the first complete text written in what will become the Italian language. The text is a long poem, divided into three sections – or *cantiche* – and represents the journey of the poet himself through the circles of *Hell*, *Purgatory*, and *Paradise*. He is accompanied by the Roman poet Virgil. During his journey, Dante will meet several notable historical characters, many of whom were his contemporaries. The piece is praised for its magnificent use of the verse, its impeccable structure, and its use of allegories. Eventually, it would become a mandatory reading for Italian students, which it still is to this very day.



Portrait of Dante, by Sandro Botticelli.

Aside from Dante Alighieri, another renowned poet of the time was **Petrarch** (1304-1374), who studied the Greek and Roman classics extensively to reproduce the elegance of their style. Petrarch, like Dante, resided in Florence, where access to the Greek classics had been facilitated by **Manuel Chrysoloras**, a Byzantine diplomat who started teaching Greek to scholars and artists.

Finally, trade and commerce flourished and brought greater wealth to the notable families, which allowed stronger patronage of the arts and of artists specifically.

Later in the 15th Century, Italian scholars and artists were able to increase their exposure to the classics first through the discovery of twelve long lost plays by Plautus and later, following the **fall of the Byzantine Empire** in 1453, when many scholars fleeing Constantinople (the present day Istanbul) settled in Italy, bringing along the manuscripts of the classic Greek plays and some philosophical treaties, including Aristotle's *Poetics*.

Last but not least, **Gutenberg's printing press** (1440) was introduced in Italy, making it possible to print and publish Roman and Greek works. It is believed that by 1518, all the Roman and Greek plays known to be in existence were published, and later even translated into Italian.

EARLY STAGES

Before the rediscovery of Greek and Roman classics, Italian early Renaissance theatre still relied on plots based on the bible and the lives of the saints, in the Medieval fashion. These theatrical events were called ***Sacre Rappresentazioni*** (*Sacred Representations*), and they were almost exclusively written in Latin. They were to be performed —or just read— alongside religious festivals and events.

There were also a few attempts at plays with a secular content, such as *Eccerinus*, a tragedy by Albertino Mussato dated 1315 and centered on the (fictional) tyrant ruler of the city of Padua. As for comedies, Pier Paolo Vergerio's *Paulus* stands out. It was written in 1350 and deals with a wealthy student and his two servants.

At this stage, most playwrights attempted to mimic the style of the classics, and their works were likely meant to be read within the learned circles of the Academies rather than to be performed, meaning they were not conceived for a wide, public audience. Most plays were written in prose, not in verse.

In the 1400s, we see the rise of the ***Commedia Erudita***, a form of comedy that will later open the door to the more popular *Commedia dell'Arte*. *Commedia Erudita* plays were inspired by Plautus and Terrence and usually had complex plots, bawdy themes, and intrigue, and featured characters who didn't have much, or any, psychological insight. These comedies were somewhat popular, although most of them were still written in Latin and targeted a more learned and niche audience.

RENAISSANCE DRAMA IN ITALIAN

Comedies, Tragedies, Pastorals, Intermezzi, and Opera

It is only later in the 1500s, with the first plays written in Italian, that we can truly say that theatre returned to be fully available for public consumption. Most playwrights were also scholars, philosophers, and primarily wrote other forms of literature. In other words, writing plays came as a secondary skill set, which was mostly applied to please their noble benefactors. At times, plays were directly commissioned by the rulers of the Italian states to their literary protegees to complement special occasions, such as marriages, or as part of festivals.

Ludovico Ariosto (1474-1533) is mostly known for his epic poem in verse, *Orlando Furioso* (*The Frenzy of Orlando*), and he is one of the first scholars and writers to consistently write in Italian. His most famous plays are *La Cassaria* (*The Chest*) and *I Suppositi* (*The Counterfeits*), which are both written in prose, while his masterpiece ***Lena*** is written in verse, following the play *Negramante*. Ariosto started writing plays after 1493 when he joined a theatre company in Ferrara. The company had the patronage of the duke of the town, Ercole I d'Este, who, as a theatre lover, commissioned several plays to be staged within his dukedom. It is worth mentioning that the original production of *La Cassaria* (1508) is also the one that first included the use of scenic design elements featuring perspective drawings.

Ariosto's plays are worth mentioning mostly because of the novelty they represented at the time they were written and staged. He heavily dipped into Terrence and Plautus' works, in terms of comedic devices and plots. This nowadays makes his plays feel thin, unoriginal, and closer to an exercise of style. However, *Lena* stands out because the protagonist -Lena- is a woman, and specifically a bawd, who is charged with facilitating two young lovers whose engagement is opposed by their families. The novelty is right there: having a woman, and a "bad woman" as the protagonist. The play has a similar plot and characters to what will become a staple in Commedia dell'Arte, where the "old characters" are portrayed as greedy and lusty over the "young characters", whose dream of being together is supported by the ingeniousness and mischief of a servant.

Niccolo' Machiavelli (1469- 1527) is a true "man of the Renaissance", whose interests span from philosophy to politics to literature. His famous political treatise *Il Principe* (*The Prince*), published in 1532 but likely written earlier in the century, is basically an instruction manual for a new prince, with advice and guidelines about how to rule and subdue the people. We owe the term "Machiavellian" to The *Prince* and to the strategies Machiavelli suggested a wannabe prince should adopt to gain and maintain power. Hint: they had nothing to do with ethics and morals. The treatise is still one of the most read and quoted works on politics to this day.

More leisurely, Machiavelli wrote ***The Mandrake***, a five-act comedy in verse. The play was written around 1518, when Machiavelli had been excluded and banned from the political life of his hometown, Florence. For some, the play is

subliminally criticizing the Medici Family, who ruled Florence and chased him off. Others consider it a practical/ everyday life application of the political strategies exemplified in *The Prince*. Regardless, the play was very popular and is still widely produced today.

Machiavelli also wrote *Clizia* (1525), a comedy based on Plautus' *Casina*. Clizia is an orphan girl who was raised by Nicomaco. As she grows up into a beautiful young lady, she attracts the affections of both Nicomaco and his son, who scheme to marry her off to a servant who would "share" her with them. Sofronia, Nicomaco's wife, finds out about the outrageous plot and proceeds to dismantle it with subterfuge and ingeniousness.

The first tragedy to be written and performed in Italian is believed to be either *Orbecche* by **Giambattista Giraldi Cinthio** (1504-1574) or *Sofonisba* by **Giangiorgio Trissino** (1478-1550). While Trissino modeled his play on classic Greek tragedies, Cinthio's *Orbecche* echoes the Roman playwright Seneca. Cinthio was quite a prolific playwright whose style changed over the course of the years in order to gain greater popularity with the general audience. He indeed became popular, in particular when he started providing happy endings to his tragedies, allegedly transforming them into melodramas. He also wrote other forms of fiction with great success and influenced several other playwrights and writers nationally and internationally. William Shakespeare, for example, based his *Othello* on a *novella* (a short story) written by Cinthio.

Pastoral plays are referred to as the Italian Renaissance "adaptations" of the Greek satyr plays, in the sense that they seldom feature mythological characters alongside a chorus, are set in rural environments, and do not showcase on-stage violence. The plotline usually revolves around a troubled love story, and there is always a happy ending. Differently from the Greek satyr plays and other forms of comedies of the Italian Renaissance, pastoral plays were not particularly bawdy.

The most famous example of a pastoral comedy is *Aminta*, by **Torquato Tasso** (1544-1595). Aminta is a shepherd who falls in love with Sylvia, but she doesn't love him back, despite his saving her from an evil satyr. After a series of semi-tragic events, Sylvia gives in to secure the play its happy ending.

Torquato Tasso was famous for his epic poem *La Gerusalemme Liberata* (*Jerusalem Delivered*), published in 1591, which is a fictional reconstruction of the end of the First Crusade. The poem granted him fame and success, opening the doors to some of the most important courts in Italy. Yet, his weak health and troubled state of mind worked against him. He lived a wandering life, struggling financially almost until the very end. Pope Clement VIII had resolved to provide him with a pension and to crown him Poet Laureate – a great honor- in 1594. Yet, the ceremony was deferred, and Tasso died in 1595 without receiving that title.

Intermezzi were also very popular at the end of the 1400s and all throughout the 1500s. The term literally means "in between" as they were performed between the acts of a full-length five-act play; hence, they usually came in sets of six. Initially, the six *intermezzi* were self-standing, but later in the 1500s, they started to be connected by a throughline.

Intermezzi heavily relied on spectacle, with a strong emphasis on special effects, costumes, music, and dance. Plot lines represented mythological allegories, which allowed little to no dialogue.

It is believed that the spectacular nature of the *Intermezzi* is one of the elements that facilitated the development of new devices and techniques in scenic design and construction, which will become one of the most important, if not the most important feature of the Italian Renaissance in theatre, as we will discuss later in this chapter.

The popularity of the *Intermezzi* eventually led to the affirmation of a new genre, the Italian **Opera**.

In the late 16th Century, the Florence Academy, called *Camerata Fiorentina*, started working on a new kind of performance that was modeled after the great Greek tragedies. This new genre was meant to harmoniously blend music and drama.

Early Italian operas were based on historical characters or events and Classic – mostly Greek — mythology. Operas featured a musical score and a libretto – the script.

Music had the upper hand in operas, with greater emphasis and importance devoted to the "arias" (solo songs), to choral parts, and duets. Most of the text was to be sung, while the spoken dialogue merely served as connecting material.

Composers achieved greater fame than the librettists, which is something that is still true today. When mentioning operas, it is common practice to just mention the composer, as in Giuseppe Verdi's *La Traviata* (Score: Giuseppe Verdi, libretto: Francesco Maria Piave).

The very first opera on record is ***Dafne*** (1597), scored by **Jacopo Peri** and libretto by **Ottavio Rinuccini**. The play was considered almost as an experiment, and it was produced during the Carnival festivities in the Palazzo Corsi, in Florence. Unfortunately, not much of the original opera has survived, and it was later heavily reworked by composer Marco da Gagliano. Another couple of more established early operas we should mention are ***Euridice*** (1600), once again by Jacopo Peri, and ***Orfeo*** (1605) by **Claudio Monteverdi**.

Later, it is worth mentioning composer **Alessandro Scarlatti** (1660-1725), a representative of the Neapolitan school, who perfected the "aria" and composed a great number of operas that were performed all over the country.

In the second part of the 1600s and into the 1700s, Italian opera became very popular, prompting the construction of new, bigger, and more advanced theatres almost everywhere in the peninsula. The popularity of the new genre trespassed Italian borders as well.

In France, Jean Baptiste Lully (who was born in Italy) pursued the genre and developed it into a more complete form of performance, thanks to the addition of ballet.

In the second half of the 1700s in Austria, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart would perfect the genre and become the closest thing to a star by today's standards. And in the following century, composers such as the German Richard Wagner and the Italian Giuseppe Verdi continued to develop and establish the popularity of opera.

Commedia Dell'Arte

The Italian Renaissance is most known for **Commedia dell'Arte** (literally, "Comedy of the Trade", or "Comedy of the Professional Players"), a form of theatrical improvisation that thrived between 1550 and 1750. One of its peculiarities was that it did not exclusively target the wealthier, more educated audience; on the contrary, it really appealed to the general, less educated audience.

The origins of Commedia dell'Arte are really difficult to trace back. Some scholars believe it developed out of the mime traditions within Roman culture, while others believe it sprang out of Medieval religious theatrical practices. Regardless, Commedia dell'Arte is still one of Italy's greatest theatrical achievements.

Commedia troupes featured up to ten performers, including women, and were often formed by family members. Troupes toured extensively throughout the country, crafting and carrying their costumes, props, and pieces of scenery.

We have mentioned how Italy was slowly developing its own national language, yet it has to be said that the affirmation of Italian as a unified language took centuries. Throughout the country, people spoke many different dialects, with each one functioning as its own language. Dante's "Italian" was the dialect of Florence. It just happened that the most learned scholars and academies resided in or around Florence, which, as we have seen previously, led to the first educated form of theatre being written in that dialect. It is only in the 19th Century, with the formation of Italy as a unified country, that the dialect from Florence will officially become the national language.

This is important because it directly influences the development and the success of Commedia dell'Arte. Because the actors couldn't rely on verbal communication alone (or at all), they had to be creative using narratives that were

archetypical and immediately recognizable and digging deep into physical comedy and other forms of entertainment and spectacle.

Performances were heavily based on improvisation and relied on developing some fixed ***scenarios***, with ***lazzi***, music, and dance.

Scenarios (in Italian, *canovaccio*) provided the actors with an outline of the plot, establishing the characters and their dynamics. Usually, they featured a love story between two young characters, with older characters trying to undermine the lovers and a servant or a facilitator of sorts working to please one (or both) sides.

Lazzi are sequences of physical actions and gestures that enhance the comedic effect of the scene, along with its spectacle. They tend to be heavily choreographed and can be acrobatic. Each character, or group of characters, would have several *lazzi* they could resort to and utilize based on their specific features. For example, masters and servants would often engage in *lazzi* featuring beatings and a chase.

Both *scenarios* and *lazzi* have been passed on and have survived. There are several collections of them, often referred to as *zibaldoni*.

Commedia dell'Arte characters are divided into two main categories: the young characters and the old ones. Both of these categories are very archetypical, with no real psychological insight.

The young characters include the lovers and the servants, also called ***zanni***.

The old characters are usually wealthy and corrupt in some way.

Because of the nature of Commedia dell'Arte, characters were often molded on the actors who played and originated them, which is why there are so many different servants.

Each character/actor developed a specific posture, physicality, and even a costume. The more unique and successful their character, the easier it would be for the audience to identify them and recruit them for further events.

Characters also reflected the geographical, cultural, and social peculiarities of the different Italian areas, cities, and countryside the Commedia troupes were originally from.

While language wasn't the number one element in Commedia performances, actors often developed another unique idiom, which we now call ***grammelot***, or emotional babble speech, to use in their performances. *Grammelot* is a totally "invented" language, with made-up words and grammar. Actors would utilize a wide range of sounds and onomatopoeias, combined with exaggerated gestures, to convey over-the-top feelings or situations. Now and then, they would "ground" the sentence with a real word to help the audience follow the storyline.

Here is a breakdown of some of the characters of Commedia dell'Arte:



Commedia dell'Arte characters: at the top left, Tartaglia; top right is Colombina; bottom left is Pulcinella, and bottom right is Pantalone. Photo courtesy of Kiara Pipino.

Young Characters:

Zanni: *Zannis* are servants, and they are loud. They can have their own costume/individuality, or they can work as a group, in a way becoming somewhat of a chorus. They cause mischief and chaos, move very fast, and tend to have very complicated and acrobatic choreography. Their costume features white pants and a top with half masks. The mask is usually black with a red bump on the forehead and a crooked nose.

Arlequin – Arguably the most famous character of Commedia dell'Arte. He is a servant and is originally from the lower part of the city of Bergamo, which is the poorer part of town. He is always hungry and always looking for food. Out of desperation, he could be eating his own flesh….or poop. He is quite simple-minded and seldom pairs with another servant, Brighella. He wears pants and a jacket made of colored patches and carries a "batocio" or slapstick, a long wooden spatula originally intended to stir soup or polenta in a cauldron but here used as a weapon. He wears a half-face mask, usually black, with a red bump on the forehead – a result of previous beatings. Arlequin's lazzi are very complex and acrobatic.



Fresco from the ballroom in Český Krumlov featuring Arlequin (on the right) holding his slapstick. Photo courtesy of Kiara Pipino.



Traditional leather Arlequin mask. Photo courtesy of Kiara Pipino.

Brighella – Another servant from the Bergamo area, wittier than Arlequin and always looking for ways to socially advance himself, even if that means trying to pass for his own master. He is a trickster, as his name suggests: "briga" is Italian for "trouble", which would make Brighella a "troublemaker." While Arlequin has some form of ethics, Brighella would do anything to get what he wants. He sings and plays the guitar. Like all of the zannis, Brighella's mask features the bump on the forehead, but it's made unique by a mustache.

Capitan – This character is at times part of the zanni/young category, and at times he joins the old characters; it would depend on the scenario he is in. Some scholars believe he is the Commedia dell'Arte version of Plauto's *Miles Gloriosus*. The Capitan is also called Capitan Spaventa, because he is supposed to instill immediate fear in his enemies; instead, he gets easily scared by just about anything. The Capitan is usually bragging about his heroic activity in some far-away war to impress his love interest or to obtain the favors of wealthy and older characters. Some scenarios also see him as the young lover. At times, he is called the Spaniard, as a parody of the Spanish invader, and when that happens, he uses a few "Spanish" words here and there to color his speech.

His costume has yellow and red striped pants and a matching jacket with a big and elaborate white collar. He wears a hat with a feather, and sometimes he wears a shawl. The sword is also part of the costume, although he really doesn't use it to fight.... As every time he tries to draw it, it either breaks or won't come out of its sheath. The Captain doesn't always wear a mask; when he does, it is a half-face mask with a very prominent, phallic nose and/or mustaches.



Traditional leather mask for Capitano. Photo courtesy of Kiara Pipino.

Pulcinella – this is another very famous zanni, who originated in Naples. The name "Pulcinella" comes from "chicks" because his physicality recalls the way chickens walk. He has a high-pitched, squeaky voice. He is portrayed with a slightly heavier build, but he is still very agile. He has a white, almost fluffy costume, and he wears a zanni mask, with the bump on the forehead and a beaked nose.



Traditional leather mask for Pulcinella. Photo courtesy of Kiara Pipino.

Colombina – she is a Venetian character, a servant and Arlequin's girlfriend. She is very clever and flirtatious, which drives Arlequin crazy. Most of the old characters have scenarios in which they have a crush on her. Several female servants are similar to Colombina, but have different names, such as Ricciolina (from her curly hair) and Smeraldina. Female characters have less extreme-looking costumes and usually don't wear masks.

Innamorata – the ingenue, the young daughter of one of the older, usually wealthier characters. She is in love with the **Innamorato**, also a young character, and their love is not supported by their parents. The innamorati would have names, such as Franceschina, for example, but they would change from scenario to scenario.

Old Characters:

Tartaglia – This character originated in Genoa, and his main feature is that he stutters, usually getting endlessly stuck on a difficult word. He is more on the heavy side and wears a green costume with yellow stripes. His costume is similar to Menego's, a character from Padua, and at times, the two characters are interchanged. Yet, while Menego is a simple-minded old servant, Tartaglia has a higher social status.

Pantalone– This character originated in Venice and is one of the most popular among old characters in Commedia. He is often portrayed opposite to the lovers and Arlequin. He is nicknamed "Il Magnifico" (the magnificent) and speaks with a heavy Venetian dialect. Pantalone is a merchant and a very greedy and lusty person. He wears red, tight pants and a red jacket underneath a black cloak. His mask is black with a long, crooked nose. He often carries a leather pouch full of money attached to his belt.

Dottore (also known as Balanzone) – The Doctor comes from Bologna; he is a heavy old man with a prominent belly. He is as smart as a doctor should be. As Bologna was the first Italian town to have a university, this mask likely originated because of that. The Doctor often resorts to speaking "latinorum" – made-up Latin — or complex language to impress people, only to reveal his ultimate ignorance. He loves food. He wears black pants and a black jacket with a white ruffled collar underneath a black cape. His mask is unique: it covers his forehead, featuring bushy eyebrows, and has a very large, round nose, but it doesn't cover the cheeks.

Gianduja – This character originated in Torino, and his name comes from a kind of chocolate that is typical of the area: the "gianduiotto" is a well-known truffle from Torino, still today. Gianduja is a jolly old man with a heavy build and an inclination for wine, food, and…. Beautiful ladies (who are usually younger than he). He has a girlfriend, Giacometta, who is quite jealous because of his flirtatious behavior.

When it comes to popularity, Commedia dell'Arte troupes really achieved it, and they traveled extensively because of the high demand coming from the audiences.

One of the most famous troupes was **I Gelosi** (The Zealous Ones), which was active at the end of the 16th century and into the beginning of the 17th Century. The company manager was **Francesco Andreini** (1548-1624), who started off playing the young lover (*Innamorato*) and, as he aged, moved into the role of the Captain. His young wife, **Isabella Andreini** (née Canalis), played the *Innamorata* opposite Francesco and then Colombina, and later became one of the most appreciated actresses of her time, along with being a scholar who wrote sonnets and poetry. I Gelosi toured France for several years and got to perform for King Charles IX as well. It has been said that they were an inspiration for Molière.

Other known troupes were **I Confidenti** (The Confidents), **I Fedeli** (The Loyal Ones), and **I Desiosi** (The Desired Ones). This last troupe, in particular, was directed by a woman, Diana da Ponti, and was active in the second half of the 16th Century. I Desiosi is remembered for actor Tristano Martinelli, who portrayed a remarkable Arlequin.

Commedia dell'Arte troupes usually performed outdoors or in non-dedicated theatrical spaces.

Commedia Dell'Arte Today

Commedia Dell'Arte is still taught in theatre schools all around the world, and it is an integral element in the training of actors in most conservatories.

The Italian Piccolo Teatro of Milano (now Strehler Theatre) has probably the longest-standing tradition of teaching and performing Commedia dell'Arte characters, most notably the character of Arlequin. Italian director Giorgio Strehler (1921-1997) worked on a production of Arlequin first with actor Marcello Moretti in 1947 and later in 1959 with actor Ferruccio Soleri (born 1929). The production has been revived several times, and it is touring to this very day. Ferruccio Soleri performed in it until 2018 (he was 89), when the role was taken over by Enrico Bonavera.

Other reputable institutions teaching Commedia are the Accademia dell'Arte in Arezzo (Italy), the Scuola Internazionale dell'Attore Comico in Reggio Emilia (Italy), directed by Antonio Fava, and The Commedia School in Copenhagen (NL), where training combines Commedia dell'Arte with Jacques Lecoq.

In the USA, the Dell'Arte International School of Physical Theatre in Blue Lake, California, is an important reference for training in Commedia.

The Neoclassical Idea in Theatre

Renaissance literature, architecture, and theatre are deeply influenced by the so-called Neoclassical Ideal, which is a concept that started to develop in the second half of the 16th Century after the rediscovery of classic texts. For theatre specifically, the most influential sources were Aristotle's *Poetics* and Horace's *Art of Poetry* for dramatic criticism and Vitruvius' *De Architectura* (On Architecture) for the development of theatre buildings and scenery. These texts had been translated and made available after 1549.

The three scholars who can be considered responsible for the definition and implementation of the Neoclassical Ideal are **Antonio Minturno** (1500-1571), a Catholic bishop, **Julius Caesar Scaliger** (nee Giulio Bordon, 1484-1558), a philosopher and a physician and **Lodovico Castelvetro** (1505-1571), a scholar and the greatest advocate of Aristotle's philosophy in Italy at the time.

The Neoclassical Ideals deeply influenced playwrights and scholars, particularly when it comes to the upper classes and the more elevated styles of drama.

What does the Neoclassic Ideal entail in theatre?

First off, following Aristotle's principles, there were to be only two genres: comedy and tragedy. Ideally, to have a "good" play, there shouldn't be any crossovers between the two genres. In other words, tragedies could not have a happy ending but must culminate in some sort of catastrophe.

Tragedy was considered the best genre out of the two, because it dealt with ideals and a higher scope, which was also educational for the audience. Tragedies needed to deal with historical matters or mythological stories, feature characters of higher social status, and be written in elevated language (poetry). All forms of violence need to happen off stage and be reported.

Comedies had to be about common people and common matters; they were written in prose and needed to have a happy ending.

According to the Neoclassical Ideal, theatre was supposed to teach and please – which is a concept that comes straight out of Horace's *Art of Poetry*. This is a different approach from Aristotle, who believed that theatre (and tragedy specifically) should only teach and have nothing to do with "pleasing" the audience. Spectacle was certainly something that needed to be in a play, but according to Aristotle, its function was to draw the audience's attention rather than to simply entertain them. Horace, on the other hand, believed that there is educational value in pure entertainment, as the audience tends to learn something by opposition or by experiencing it from a different perspective. So, for the neoclassic scholars, comedies had educational value as they showed how ridiculous behavior could lead to bad choices, while in tragedies, the outcomes of tragic mistakes tended to be self-explanatory.

Two key concepts of the Neoclassical Ideal are decorum and verisimilitude.

The principle of **decorum** stated that characters needed to behave appropriately, according to their given circumstances (social status, age, profession, sex, etc.).

Verisimilitude pleaded that theatre needed to be as "close to life" as possible, although our contemporary concept of "close to life" is quite different from that ideal.

In order to be "close to life," a play needed to deal with matters that were of this world and include realistic situations and characters. In other words, supernatural elements or fantastic characters were to be avoided (unless they were of mythological or religious nature). Soliloquies were to be avoided, as it is unnatural for a person to speak their thoughts in the presence of nobody.

The play also needed to respect the three unities: the unity of time, of space, and action.

The unity of time requires that the action in a play needs to unfold, develop, and resolve in a reasonable time, because the audience would be attending the production for a limited amount of time, and they wouldn't believe the character's journey if it spanned too long a period. It was agreed that all the action in the play should develop within twenty-four hours.

The unity of space wants the main action to occur in the same place: the same building, the same room, the same city, the same geographical area. Once again, this was justified by the fact that it wouldn't be believable for the action to happen in several places within the time restriction: characters wouldn't believably have the time to move from one place to the other.

The unity of action wants the play to focus on one main plot element, involving a set (and usually small) number of characters. This would translate into having no subplots, which were otherwise particularly popular, for example, in Shakespeare's works.

While the three unities were supposed to come from Aristotle, it has to be said that the Greek philosopher was never particularly strict on them, contrary to what would become the Neoclassical Ideal.

Finally, the Neoclassic Ideal wanted plays to use reality, story lines, and plots to disclose more universal and moral teachings, in terms of justice or religion.

Scenic Design

When it comes to design, it was considered important to provide information about space and time and to have characters dressed appropriately (according to decorum), yet that didn't translate to what we would consider a realistic approach to set or costumes. Design had to be suggestive, rather than naturalistic.

Scenic Design and the introduction of perspective.

Some of the greatest Italian theatrical achievements of the Renaissance pertain to scenic design and theatre architecture. The most influential works that document the Italian architectural and scenic "revolution" are: the re-discovered ***De Architectura***, by the Roman architect **Vitruvius**, **Sebastiano Serlio**'s ***Architectura*** (1545), **Nicola Sabbatini's *Manual for Constructing Theatrical Scenes and Machines*** (1638), **Guido Ubaldi's *Six Books of Perspective*** **(**1600) and Fabrizio **Carini Motta's *Construction of Theatres and Theatrical Machinery*** (1668).

In 1486, Vitruvius' *De Architectura* was published, and by 1521 it was translated into Italian, making its circulation among Italian artists and architects much easier. Vitruvius devoted an entire section of his treatises to theatrical buildings and sets, and while he did not provide any kind of drawings, he wrote detailed descriptions. The Roman Academy and several architects attempted to reconstruct the ideal Roman theatre by coming up with illustrations and models for those descriptions. The most successful at it was certainly architect Sebastiano Serlio (1475-1554), whose drawings for Vitruvius' comic, tragic, and satiric scenes became the go-to illustration for their construction. For the tragic scene, Serlio envisioned a street with monumental, stately buildings; for the comedic scene, he drew a street with popular, common buildings, and for the satirical scene, he provided a pastoral, countryside setting.

In his drawings, Serlio imagines the theatre being enclosed in a rectangular room, with the stage occupying the shorter side. The performing area was flat, quite narrow, and positioned far downstage, close to the audience. Behind it, the floor pitched upwards significantly till it met the upstage wall, to provide the illusion of distance. On the side of the raked portion of the stage, there would be four sets of painted wings, the first three of which would be positioned at an

angle, while the last one would be flat. Finally, the back wall had a painted backdrop. The painted wings and the sloped stage would follow the newly perfected rules of perspective, providing an illusion of depth and distance.

This arrangement of scenic elements was certainly a novelty and provided a much-appreciated improvement in scenic design. Yet, it was (intentionally) made very difficult, if not impossible, to accommodate scene changes, which is the issue that later architects and artists attempted to solve.

Nicola Sabbatini provided two options in his *Manual for Constructing Theatrical Scenes and Machines*. Alternate sets of wings could either be maneuvered in, upstaging the previous ones, or the existing wings could be covered with painted canvas. The backdrop would be painted on two panels, which could slide left and right off stage to reveal a new one.

Later, and with better knowledge of perspective, it became possible to substitute the angled wings with flat ones, allowing alternate sets of wings to be positioned directly behind the original ones, thus making scene changes much easier: the visible set of wings could just slide off stage. This system is often deemed "**the groove system**."

The first recorded use of this method is credited to architect **Giovan Battista Aleotti** (1546-1636) in 1606, who designed the Teatro Farnese in Parma, the first theatre to introduce the proscenium arch.

Most of the perfected technique of painting flat wings to create a perspective picture is to be found in Guido Ubaldi's *Six Books of Perspective*.

The ultimate solution for seamless scene changes will be achieved by **Giacomo Torelli**, also known as "the wizard" (1608-1678), who invented the famous "**chariot-and-pole**" system and installed it for the first time in the Teatro Novissimo in Venice around 1641.

The system featured the painted flats being mounted on poles, which would pass through the stage to be secured on small two-wheeled wagons below the stage. The wagons would move sideways on tracks operated by a complex series of pulleys, ropes, and winches. All of the wagons could be moved simultaneously, allowing all the visible flats to slide off stage, either revealing the new sets of painted wings behind them or having new sets also being wheeled in in the same fashion.

The pole-and-chariot system immediately became the number one solution for scene changes, and Torelli was often commissioned to install it in theatres all over Europe.

Fabrizio Carini Motta, who was an architect and the technical director of all theatrical activities in Mantua (Italy), later published *Construction of Theatres and Theatrical Machinery*, which includes the most accurate description and illustration of the pole-and-chariot system. His manual was widely utilized all across Europe during the Renaissance.

Unfortunately, today, there are very few theatres from that period that still have a functional pole-and-chariot system. The oldest one is the Ekhof Theatre in Gotha (Germany), then we have Drottningholm Theatre in Stockholm (Sweden), and another one is in the small Czech town of Český Krumlov (more about this theatre in Chapter 9).



Image of the stage of the Baroque Theater in Český Krumlov (Czech Republic). Photo courtesy of Kiara Pipino.

Theatrical Spaces

Throughout the 16th Century, many performances would still take place in outdoor spaces, such as gardens or courtyards. On the other hand, indoor performances would become more and more popular, usually taking place in big banquet halls and ballrooms, and then the innovations in scenic design and the research on classic architecture led to the design and construction of theatres that would respond and accommodate the new aesthetic and theatrical vision.

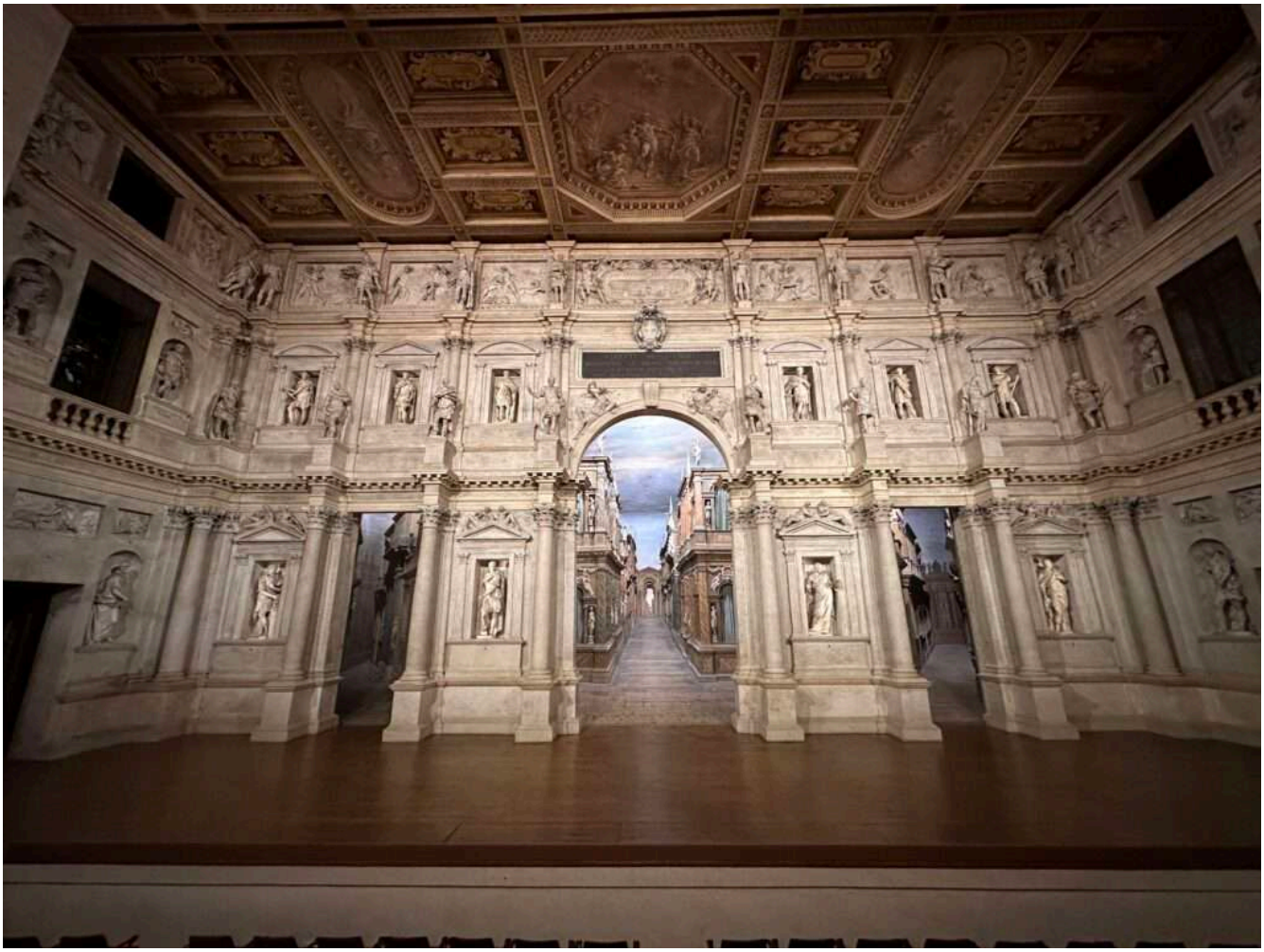
As mentioned previously in this chapter, Serlio's *Architectura* discussed theatre architecture and provided illustrations of what a theatre should look like. His drawings visually translated what Roman architect Vitruvius had described in his *De Architectura* while at the same time incorporated the new principles of perspective, taking inspiration from the sketches and drawings by a fellow architect and theatre artist, **Baldassarre Peruzzi** (1481-1536), who is credited to be the first to introduce the concept of perspective in painted theatrical scenery.

There was mention of a newly constructed theatre within the Uffizi Palace in Florence, dating 1586, named the Medici Theatre and designed by the famous architect **Buontalenti**. The theatre featured a sloped floor, which allowed the audience to have a better view regardless of how close they were to the stage, and there is mention of it having a proscenium arch, which would be the first one in history. The Medici Theatre had a short life, though, due to more theatres opening in town. It briefly served as the seat of the Senate when Florence became the capital of Italy (1865-1870), and after that, the whole building was remodeled, leaving only the entrance to the theatre in its original form.

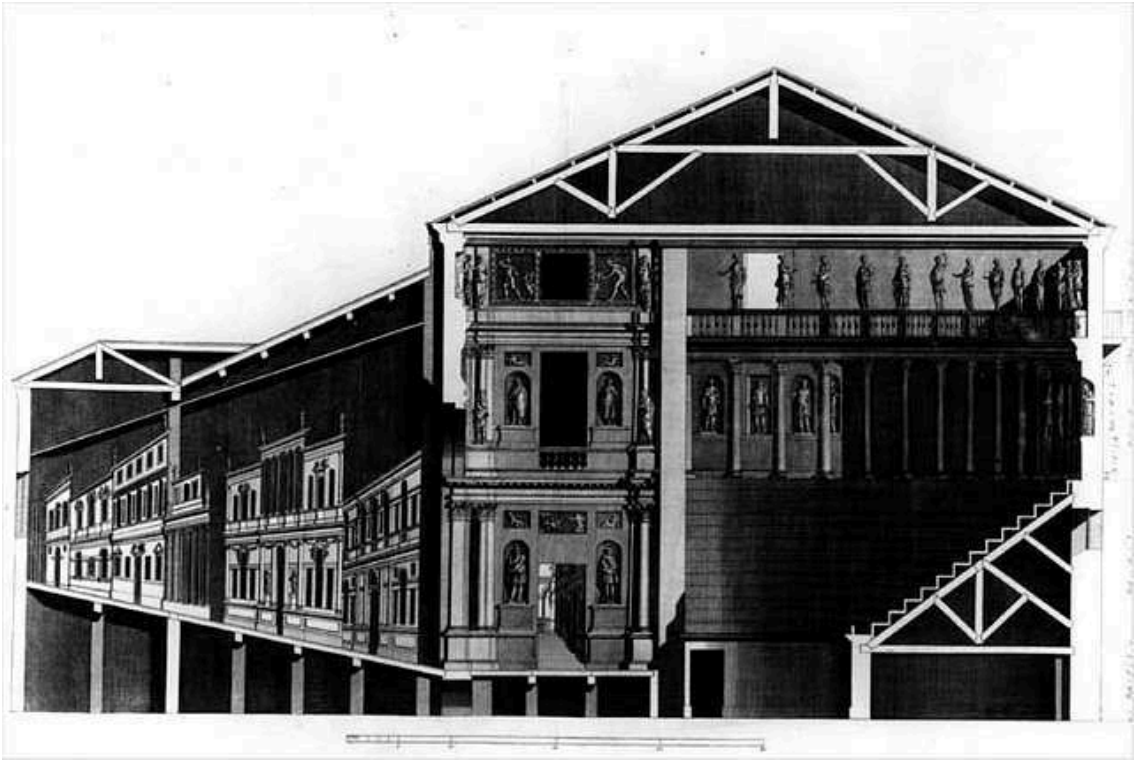
The oldest and most famous theatre of the Italian Renaissance is the **Olympic Theatre in Vicenza**, which was built between 1580 and 1584 by the Olympic Academy of Vincenza with the intent of creating a model of the "perfect" classic theatre.



The Olympic Theatre in Vicenza (Italy). Photo courtesy of Kiara Pipino.



Front view of the stage of the Olympic Theatre of Vicenza. Photo courtesy of Kiara Pipino.



Drawing of the section of the Olympic Theatre in Vicenza.

The theatre was enclosed in a pre-existing, quite plain medieval building that had originally functioned as a prison and as ammunition storage. Since the building had been abandoned, the municipality of Vicenza allowed the Olympic Academy to use it for the construction of the theatre, which was inaugurated in 1585 with a production of Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, and then, it was later used for classic stagings and recitals.

The Olympic theatre of Vicenza was originally designed to look like a Roman Odeon by **Andrea Palladio** (1518-1580), who unfortunately died before seeing it completed. Palladio gained notoriety within the Olympic Academy of Vicenza through his previous designs for classically inspired villas and for providing original illustrations to Daniele Barbaro's Italian translation of Vitruvius' *De Architectura*. When he died, the supervision over the building construction, along with the design and the build of the scenery, passed to **Vincenzo Scamozzi** (1552-1616).

The theatre features a semi-elliptical wooden seating area that surrounds a small semi-circular orchestra. The raised stage is rectangular, with a somewhat narrow downstage playing area backed by a monumental stone façade. There are five openings in the façade, three directly facing the audience and two side ones. The façade is very ornate, with three ordered columns, niches, and statues.

Scamozzi's wooden painted scenery is positioned at the sides of the openings in the façade according to the laws of perspective, so that it could provide the illusion of depth and distance. The scenery represents the streets of Thebes.

The seating area is topped by two tiers of gallery, punctuated by columns and more niches with statues. The ceiling above the seating area is painted to represent the sky, while the space directly above the orchestra and the stage has a more complex pattern design.

Palladio mentioned using the archeological remains of the Roman Berga Theatre as an inspiration for the design of the Olympic Theatre.

The theatre has survived two world wars and still stands today, perfectly preserved. It is also still being used for recitals and award ceremonies.

The success of the Olympic Theatre in Vicenza prompted the commission of another theatre for the duke of Mantua and the Academia dei Confidenti. The theatre in question was designed by Vincenzo Scamozzi and built in 1588 in **Sabbioneta**. It was smaller and simpler than the one in Vicenza and was intended to stage productions of comedies, which translated into a less monumental and ornate approach to the scenery.

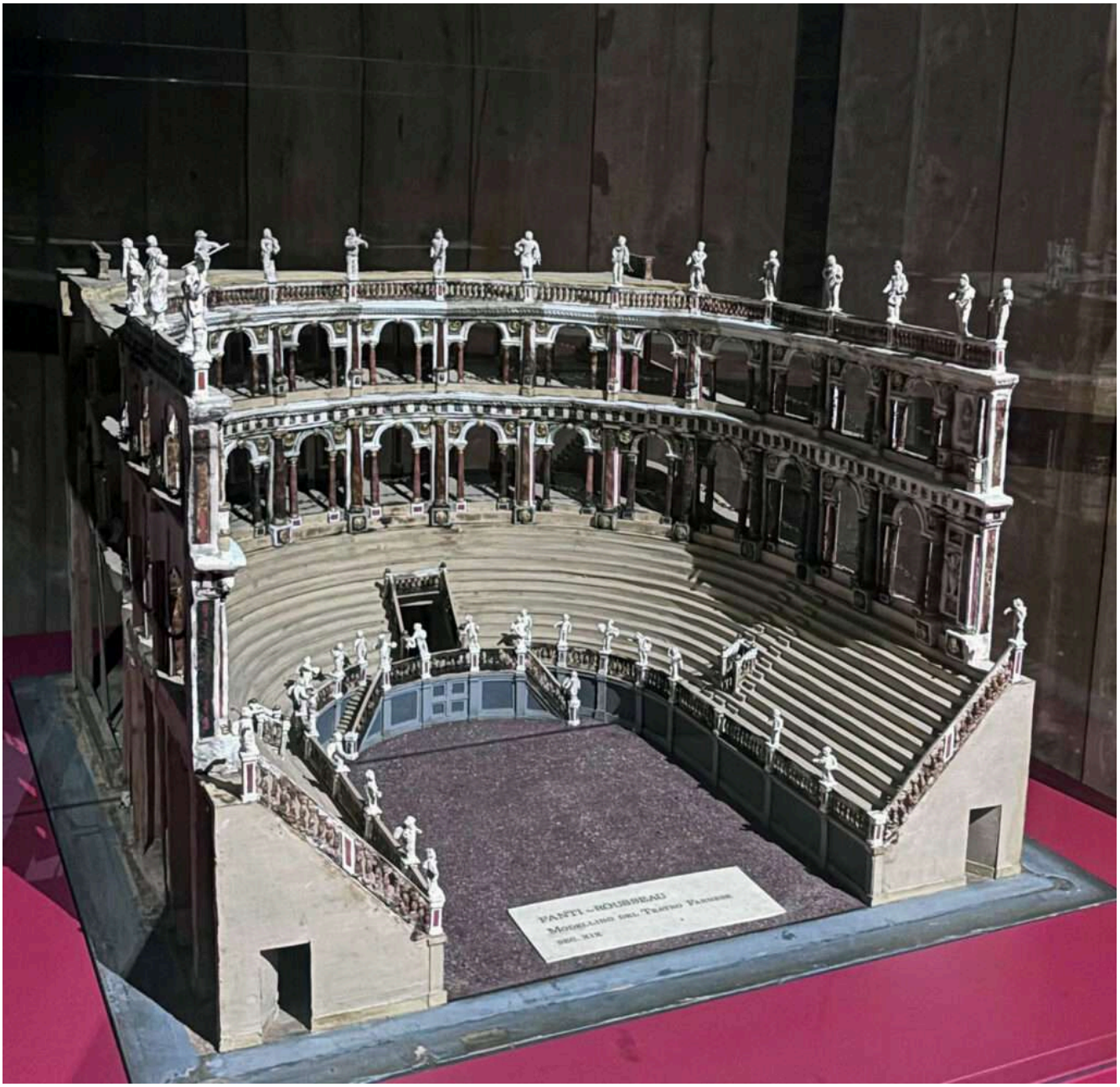


3D model of the Theatre in Sabbioneta. Photo courtesy of Francesco Franchin.



Image of the seating of the theatre in Sabbioneta. Photo courtesy of Francesco Franchin.

Another theatre that must be mentioned is the **Teatro Farnese**, in Parma, which was completed in 1618 and is the oldest surviving theatre featuring a permanent proscenium arch. The proscenium arch will become a standard feature of most theatres in the 17th Century, because it allows to "frame" the stage in a way that, combined with a careful arrangements of flat wings, allows to cover the audience's site lines, hiding all the technical elements that would interfere with the "magic" of the production happening on stage.



Model of the Teatro Farnese. Photo courtesy of Francesco Franchin.



Interior of the Teatro Farnese, by Giovanni Contini (XIX Century). Photo courtesy of Francesco Franchin.



Detail of the interior of the Teatro Farnese. Photo courtesy of Francesco Franchin.



Detail of the seating area of the Teatro Farnese. Photo courtesy of Francesco Franchin.

The Farnese Theatre was designed by **Giovan Battista Aleotti** (1546-1636) and it was enclosed in the Great Hall of the Palazzo della Pilotta, which was the home of the Duke of Parma, Ranuccio I Farnese. Aleotti took inspiration from the other two existing theatres: the Olympic Theatre and the Teatro all'Antica in Sabbioneta.

Surprisingly, it didn't get used much in the first ten years of its existence, as it was inaugurated only in 1628 for the wedding of the Duke's son, Odoardo, with Margherita de Medici.

The theatre has the usual horseshoe seating configuration surrounding the orchestra. It has been determined that the theatre could seat 3,500 people. The entire building is in wood, although the decorations and the architectural details – including the two orders of semi-columns— are covered in thick and levigated stucco to provide the illusion of marble.

The theatre was badly damaged during the Second World War, but a 1962 careful and patient reconstruction based on the original drawings has returned it to its original appearance, making it a popular tourist attraction in the city of Parma. While it is not used for theatrical performances any longer, it still occasionally hosts concerts and recitals.

The Olympic Theatre, the **Teatro all'Antica di Sabbioneta,** and the Farnese Theatre were all private theatres: they were not used for public performances. Moreover, they were almost exclusively used to stage classically inspired plays – either tragedies or comedies.

In other words, the regular theatre goer would not have been able to "buy a ticket" to attend a performance in any of those three theatres. Instead, the general audience would attend less ornate and elaborate public theatres, which started to be built all around Italy more or less at the same time. Those venues would mostly produce operas.

These theatres borrowed some of the characteristics of the Farnese Theatre, mainly concerning the stage, the off-stage area, and the proscenium arch, but they developed a new and more structured space for the audience. The drawings for the Venetian SS. Giovanni and Paolo Theatre show the area surrounding the pit being divided into five tiers of balconies, featuring twenty-nine boxes each. The cost of the ticket would decrease from the lower to the upper tier. Boxes became popular because they could accommodate families and small groups of people. The pit area was the overall cheapest and could accommodate standing audience members. The **S.S. Giovanni and Paolo Theatre** was built in 1639 and had a very short life, as it was closed in 1715 and then demolished in 1748.

As theatrical performances moved more permanently into indoor spaces, lighting acquired greater importance. For the most part, theatres used oil lamps and candles for both the auditorium area and the stage. Candles were preferred, as they carried less smell and produced less smoke. They were usually mounted on chandeliers and wall sconces in the auditorium.

The stage was lit by footlights, placed downstage close to the edge of the stage, and masked by a small parapet. Oil lamps were also hung above the stage and mounted on poles, to be concealed by masking pieces. Rudimentary ways to increase the light and to give it some direction included placing a reflecting surface directly behind the light source. For light changes or blackouts, the lamps could be extinguished altogether– which was the most effective way to obtain a black out, although this method made it quite difficult to go back to a lit scene – or a metal cylinder could be lowered to conceal the flame, or – if the lamps were mounted on poles – the pole could rotate upstage.

Clearly, the use of live flames in theatres could have dreadful consequences; several fires broke out and damaged the theatres, at times, quite severely.

When it comes to scenic design, opera houses made great use of painted panels mounted on tracks that would slide in from the wings. Otherwise, the panels could be rigged above the stage to be lowered and lifted up when needed. Painted canvases were also popular. These could also be rigged above the stage and made to collapse with a series of ropes and pulleys. Last but not least, the use of trap doors allowed for a sudden apparition/disappearance of a character.

If the production required sound effects, the off-stage crew had to get creative and find ways to reproduce a sound live, utilizing whatever was available. Basically, they achieved what much later was called the Foley Table. For example, in order to reproduce the sound of thunder, big stones would be run inside a metal channel.

TAKEAWAYS

The Renaissance started way earlier in Italy than in other European countries.

The rediscovery of Classic material led Academies and scholars to try to emulate the Greek and Roman style in plays (tragedies and comedies) and architecture.

The Neoclassic Ideal heavily influenced the writing of plays.

Theatrical performances included tragedies, comedies, pastoral plays, and *intermezzi*.

Opera started to gain popularity.

Theatres were built according to the classic ideals. The Olympic Theatre in Vicenza, the Teatro all'Antica in Sabbioneta, and the Farnese Theatre in Parma are the only three theatres of the Italian Renaissance still in existence and still functioning.

The use of perspective provided a new approach to scenic design, while mechanisms to rapidly change scenery were developed and implemented in Italy and beyond.

The proscenium arch is introduced – the oldest one still in existence being in the Farnese Theatre.

Commedia dell'Arte troupes became very popular and traveled extensively throughout Italy and beyond.

Vocabulary

Dante Alighieri

Divine Comedy

Manuel Chrysolares

Petrarch

Fall of the Byzantine Empire

Sacre Rappresentazioni

Commedia Erudita

Commedia dell'Arte

Pastorals

Intermezzi

Opera

Ludovico Ariosto

Lena

Niccolo' Macchiavelli

The Mandrake

The Prince

Giambattista Cinthio

Giangiorgio Trissino

Torquato Tasso

Aminta

Alessandro Scarlatti

Jacopo Peri

Dafne

Claudio Monteverdi

Scenarios

Lazzi

Slapstick

Zibaldoni

Characters of Commedia dell'Arte

Zanni

Grammelot

I Gelosi

Isabella Andreini

Neoclassical Ideal

Decorum

Verisimilitude

Unities of time, space and action

Vitruvius

Sebastiano Serlio

Perspective

Giacomo Torelli

The chariot-and-pole system

The groove system

Giovan Battista Aleotti

Olympic Theatre – Vicenza

Teatro all'Antica – Sabbioneta

Farnese Theatre -Parma

Baldassarre Peruzzi,

Andrea Palladio

Vincenzo Scamozzi

ACTIVITY FOR THE CLASSROOM

Let's write a lazzo!

The instructor should divide the class into small groups – no more than 4 students per group.

Students should be familiar with the characters/masks of Commedia dell'Arte and with the concept of grammelot (emotional babble speech).

Students should work in class on devising a 3-minute scene (*lazzo*). The scene should have a clear beginning, a development, and an end, and it should feature at least one of the old Commedia characters and one of the young ones. Students should come up with a situation and a basic plot, and then they should improvise the scene.

First, they should use modern-day English. When they have the dialogue down, they should "translate" it into grammelot, making sure to ground it with a few English words here and there to make it easier to follow the story.

The students should focus on the themes of Commedia and on the nature of the characters, rather than on the specific physical qualities of each character.

Historical Timeline by Jennifer King.

Time Period	Event	Significance
1308–1321	Dante Alighieri wrote *The Divine Comedy*	Landmark literary work that blends Christian theology with classical influence; marks the beginning of Renaissance humanism.
1304–1374	Life of Petrarch	Considered the "Father of Humanism," his revival of classical texts laid the foundation for Renaissance culture.
1397	Manuel Chrysoloras begins teaching Greek in Florence	Reintroduces Greek literature and philosophy to Western Europe, spurring Renaissance humanism.
1453	Fall of the Byzantine Empire	Greek scholars flee to Italy, bringing classical knowledge that fuels the Renaissance.
Late 1400s–1500s	Sacre Rappresentazioni flourish	Religious drama was performed in vernacular Italian, precursors to secular drama.
1518	Niccolò Machiavelli wrote *The Mandrake* (*La Mandragola*)	Satirical Commedia Erudita that critiques corruption; an example of secular humanist theater.
1520s	Machiavelli's *The Prince* circulates	A political treatise that defines pragmatic rule; it influences themes of power and politics in Renaissance drama.
1531	Ludovico Ariosto writes *Lena*	An important example of Commedia Erudita, using classical models and contemporary Florentine dialect.
1550s–1600s	Rise of Pastoral Drama	Idealized rural settings and mythological themes; precursor to opera.
1580	Torquato Tasso wrote *Aminta*	A landmark pastoral play blending poetry and music.
1550–1600s	Popularity of Intermezzi	Lavish, allegorical performances between acts of plays; merge music, dance, and visual spectacle.
1580s–1700s	Development of Opera	The first operas combine music and drama; Jacopo Peri composed *Dafne* (1598), considered the first opera.
1607	Claudio Monteverdi composed *Orfeo*	Establishes opera as a major art form.
1500s–1700s	Growth of Commedia dell'Arte	Improvised popular theater using stock characters like Zanni; performed lazzi, physical comedy, and grammelot; supported by Zibaldoni (notebooks of scenarios).
1568	I Gelosi commedia troupe was founded.	Famous traveling company; includes actress Isabella Andreini, who becomes an icon of female theatrical skill.
1500s	Rise of the Neoclassical Ideal	Based on Aristotle and Horace, emphasized decorum, verisimilitude, and unities of time, space, and action.
1st century B.C. (rediscovered c. 1486)	Vitruvius' *De Architectura* was published	Treatise inspires Renaissance stage design and theater architecture.
1440	Gutenberg's printing press was introduced in Italy	Roman and Greek works began to be published, and could circulate in the country.
1537	Sebastiano Serlio publishes *Architectura*	According to the date listed, Serlio's work focused on five architectural orders
1600s	Giacomo Torelli invents the chariot-and-pole system	Transforms scenic shifts; supports spectacle in opera and intermezzi.

6. The Spanish Renaissance

The Renaissance in Spain, also referred to as the Golden Age (*El Siglo de Oro*), covers about one hundred years at the end of the 16th Century. It coincides with the affirmation of the Spanish monarchy over the country, after the Moors, who had been ruling most of what is now Spain for over seven hundred years- were definitively defeated and Catholicism was established as the only religion of the country.

While Spain was under the Moor hegemony, theatrical activities were banned.

In 1469, King Fernando of Aragon married Queen Isabella of Castile and Leon, and this marriage assured them control over the whole country. In 1478, they instituted the **Inquisition**, a tribunal that was designed to persecute heresy and provide strong, absolute grounds for Catholicism. Anyone who didn't convert to the state religion would be banned, and that was the best-case scenario, as torture and executions were the Inquisition's common practice. By the end of the 16th Century, the Moors and the Jews were forced out of the country in a diaspora.

Spain gained an extraordinary political power with the new monarchs. In 1592, a Spanish expedition captained by Christopher Columbus led to the discovery of a new continent. After that, Spain slowly -and violently- established its hegemony in the Americas as a colonizer while affirming its political power in Europe as well, at least up until 1588, when the **Spanish Armada** was defeated at sea by the English navy.

When it comes to the arts, and theatre specifically, the Spanish Golden Age produced an incredibly high amount of plays, both religious and secular. It has been calculated that the number of plays written in Spain before the 18th Century is between 10,000 and 30,000!

Clearly, not all of those have survived, and only a fraction of those that have survived are still worth mentioning and producing today, but still, that is an incredible patrimony that by far exceeds what happened in other countries for the same period.

The early Spanish Renaissance, starting at the beginning of the 16th Century, marks the definition, development, and affirmation of the *autos sacramentales*, one-act (*autos*) religious plays that, while reminiscing the Medieval morality plays in some ways, also feature unique elements that speak to the Spanish cultural environment of the time.

These plays were performed for the **Corpus Christi** festival, first in Valladolid (the first capital of Spain) and then in Madrid.

The *autos* were extremely popular, and once they had been performed at the festival, they would tour the country. They focused on allegories, emphasizing morals and good Christian behavior. They had an almost fairy-tale-like structure, with characters that were not all necessarily "human" but would rather embody a vice, a virtue, death, justice, beauty, and so on. The ending established the triumph of good over evil and celebrated the birth of Jesus Christ.

The *autos* would be performed at the beginning of the festival, after the opening procession was over. The troupes had two very ornate wagons, called *carros*, that functioned as a sort of tiring house, providing scenery and allowing for costume changes. The *carros* could be up to two stories high, and they were made of wood. Some of the most sophisticated ones had machinery that allowed for "special effects", such as flying an actor on and off the stage. A third *carro* was utilized as the stage, and typically "bridged" the other two wagons.

To add to the spectacle, actors wore impressive costumes, although those costumes were not "period", but rather reflected the fashion of the time.

Autos sacramentales were controlled and produced by the City Council, who would then appoint and pay a professional

theatre company to stage them. The demand for *autos sacramentales* was so high that virtually every Spanish dramatist had written several. All of the most well-known playwrights, such as Lope de Vega, Cervantes, and Calderon de la Barca, made a good living out of these plays.

When it comes to non-religious (secular) drama, it has to be said that there was a strong influence coming from Italian Commedia dell'Arte touring troupes, which were extremely popular all over continental Europe in the first half of the 16th Century and onward. In a way, those troupes set the tone for a non-religious style of performance.

Secular plays were called *comedias*. While it is true that the most successful ones were on the lighter side with happy endings, the term also applies to tragedies.

Comedias usually had three acts, did not follow the Aristotelian unities, and could be divided into "**cape and sword**" plays—with chivalric characters and a romantic underlying tone— **pastoral** plays, **mythological** plays, and **machine** plays, plays that need a *deus-ex-machina* effect to achieve their resolution.

The most popular themes for secular plays were love, honor, historical storytelling, and patriotism. Playwrights often shifted the tone within each play, so that there was always some form of comedic relief for the audience.

Plays were written in verse, although the Spanish language doesn't have an English Blank verse equivalent when it comes to meter. The ability of each playwright determined the elegance of the verse, with Lope de Vega being considered one of the best writers ever to use verse.

As a general rule, plays were very respectful of the Church, although taking liberties was not completely out of the question, and were not always persecuted, although censorship existed and was widely exercised.

Until 1587, female roles were played by men. However, soon after it became possible for women to act on stage, provided that their husbands were in the theatre troupe and that there was no cross-dressing.

1631 marks the birth of the Spanish professional acting guild, the **Confadia de la Novena**, which is still in existence today and has come to include all theatre artists.

By the mid 1650s theatre companies would have up to twenty actors on roster, along with a healthy crew working backstage, including apprentices, wardrobe crew, stage hands, money collector and, of course, a prompter – as the number of plays that each company had to keep in repertoire was such that made it challenging for actors to be fully memorized. A glimpse into the actors' daily life is provided by a published work of the early 1600s, titled *Entertaining Journey*, and written by a contemporary actor of the time, Rojas Villandrando. It states that actors had an extremely tiring and full day, starting as early as 2 am for line memorization, and then would go into rehearsals at around noon for a 2 pm performance. Sometimes an afternoon performance followed, and then yet another early-evening show would go well into the night!

Professional theatre troupes needed to obtain a license from the **Royal Council** to be allowed to perform or to commission work.

There were two kinds of professional theatre companies. Some were very similar to the Elizabethan cooperatives, with actors being shareholders, managers, producers, and playwrights who occasionally hired other actors for lesser roles. Then, there were companies that were directed by a manager, who was in charge of hiring the actors along with everyone else, usually under two to three-year contracts.

By the first half of the 17th Century, there were twelve licensed companies in Spain, and all of them could operate in theatres (*corrales*) or the Corpus Christi festival.

Along with the professional companies, there were several Italian Commedia dell'Arte touring companies.

Initially, all theatrical activities had to take place on Sundays or major holidays, but that changed after 1580, allowing for daily performances and more structured theatrical seasons. During Lent, no theatrical activity was allowed.

FUN FACT

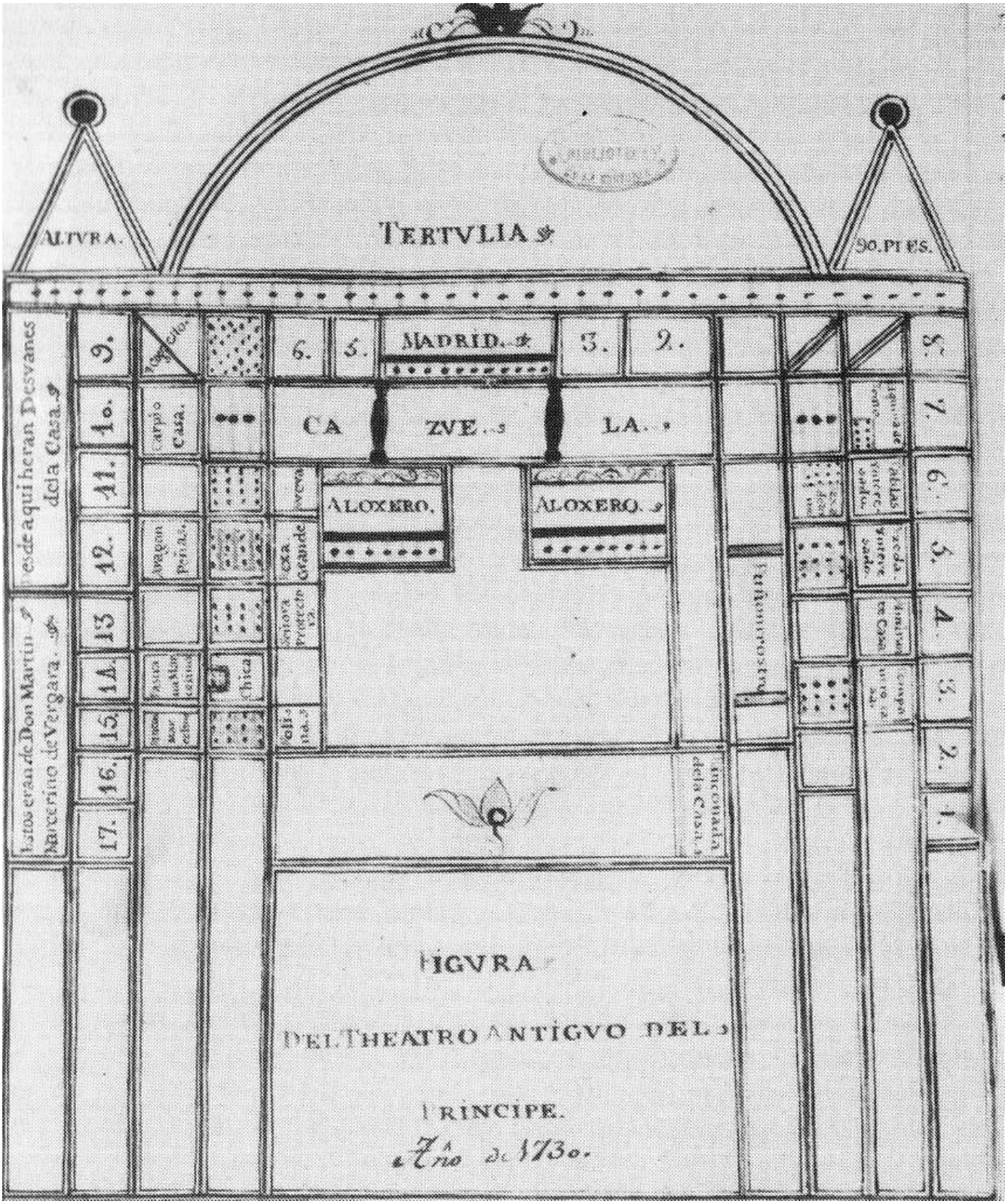
The Spanish equivalent of the Elizabethan groundlings were the *mosqueteros*, who usually attended performances in the patio. It has been recorded that *mosqueteros* could use whistles, rattles, and other noise-making devices to manifest their distaste for the production. Similarly, women were known to throw fruit and vegetables at the actors!

Theatrical Spaces

We mentioned how *autos sacramentales* were performed on wagons, and how that allowed the companies to tour and be part of the procession for the Corpus Christi. This was vastly different from secular plays, as a more structured theatrical space was needed.

The typical space for professional production would be a *corrales* (a theatre), which in many ways resembled the Elizabethan public playhouse.

These buildings featured a combination of outdoor and indoor spaces, and were built around a square or rectangular courtyard. They featured an open-air (unroofed) pit (a *patio*), as well as several roofed seating areas in the galleries on the side. Boxes were also available. While the first known theatre was built in the city of Seville, the two most important ones were (of course) in Madrid, the **Corral de la Cruz**, built in 1579, and the **Corral del Principe**, which was built slightly later, in 1583.



Corral Del Principe, José Antonio de Armona, 1730.

The stage (*encenario*) was an elevated wooden platform, opposite to the entrance of the theatre, that featured several trapdoors and a multi-floored tiring house (*vestuario*) at its back.

Admission to the patio was quite inexpensive, and that is where the loudest of the audience would be. Closer to the stage, there were a couple of rows of benches – called *taburetes* – where the most notable citizens would sit. At the side of the patio, there would be wooden risers, called *gradas*, which provided roofed seating, above which you had two to three orders of galleries with boxes. The upper level was immediately underneath the roof, making for quite a claustrophobic space called *desvanes*.

The admission ticket price would change depending on the location in the house, the cheapest seats being in the *patio* and in the *desvanes*, followed by the *gradas*, and the boxes.

Opposite the stage, by the entrance of the theatre, there would be a concession booth (*alojeria*), above which there would be a gallery for unaccompanied women, called *cazuela*. Regulations strictly prohibited men from accessing the *cazuela* and solo women from walking into the *patio*. Of course, women could sit (or stand) in other areas of the theatre if they were accompanied by their spouses.

Above the *cazuelas* there could be an additional two orders of galleries with boxes for city officials and personalities.

The *Corrales* would seat between 1000 and 2000 people at the peak of their activity, around 1630.

The tiring house featured three different levels that were accessible to the actors from backstage through staircases. As for the Elizabethan theatre, scenic design elements were not much needed, as locations and scene descriptions were being embedded in the text or the actions of the actors.

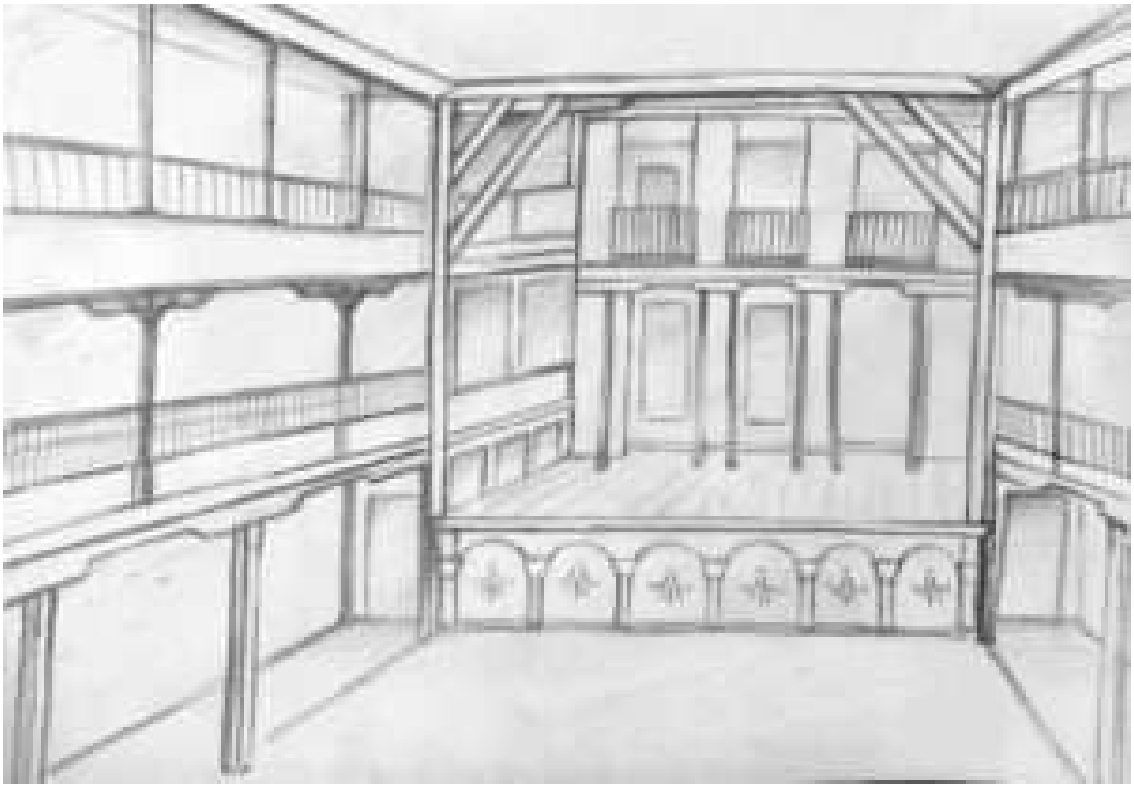
The tiring house would provide a backdrop for the entirety of the play, with the occasional addition of curtains to facilitate "surprises" of some sort. The ground floor of the tiring house had three doors, the central one being the biggest one.

The upper levels had windows overlooking the stage. Those could be used for specific needs in a scene, to drop a curtain, or for the actor to have "discoveries."

Some scripts required more complex backdrops and scenic pieces – potentially to showcase different locations. In that case, side structures were installed, functioning like the side wagons of a Medieval mansion.



Rendering of a Spanish corral. (Original illustration by Jessie Reed)



Rendering of the stage of a Spanish corral. (Original illustration by Jessie Reed)



Rendering of the interior of a Spanish corral. (Original illustration by Jessie Reed)

Playwrights

It is believed that the first Spanish theatre artist who could be considered a professional in the field was **Lope de Rueda** (1510-1565), who started off his career as an actor and gained almost instant success at court, which secured him several appointments at the Corpus Christi Festival in Madrid. He is also credited for authoring several full-length and short plays, including *Armelina*, *The Olives*, and *The Mask*. He was most successful at writing comedic scenes and dialogue, and used characters such as fools and scoundrels – characters he also usually played himself.

Miguel Cervantes (1547-1616) is also an active playwright of this time, although he is mostly remembered for his novel, *Don Quixote*. He wrote several *comedias*, only a few of which have survived. His style was more learned and tended to a more aristocratic audience.

The two most important playwrights of this time, by a long shot, are Lope de Vega and Calderon de la Barca.

Lope Felix de Vega Carpio (1652-1635) wrote compulsively on top of an otherwise very active and adventurous life. He bragged about writing over 1500 plays in his lifetime. More realistically, he wrote about 800, and a little more than half of them survived.

He was from a middle-class family and was set to become a priest, until he left the Jesuit University to join the Spanish Armada. He worked for several noblemen, had several love affairs, married twice, and finally was ordained as a priest.

Aside from plays, he also wrote poems and other forms of literature.

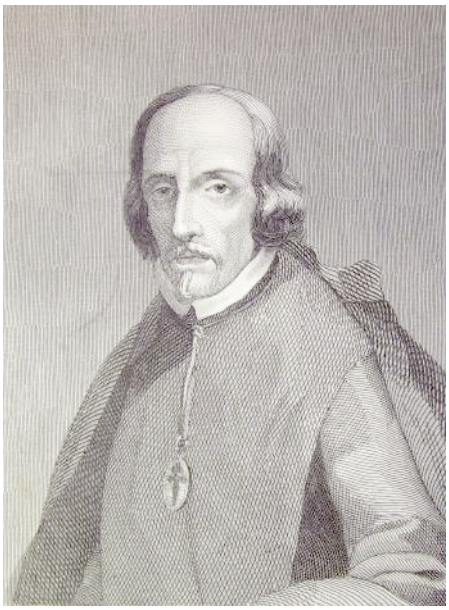
Stylistically, his plays are written in elegant verse, using compelling and natural dialogue.

He was mostly famous for his comedies, although he wrote tragedies as well. He sourced his plots from almost anything: from Italian novellas and mythology to pastorals and chronicles. He is praised for his strong defining action that determines a tense rising action, as well as his female characters. Most of his plays had large casts of characters, quite similar to what happened in the English Elizabethan theatre.

Amongst his plays, it is worth mentioning *The Sheep Well*, a pastoral play, *The Dog in the Manger*, a "cape and sword" play, and *The Foolish Lady*, a romantic comedy with a few twists.

He was the most revered playwright of his time, in Spain and beyond. Felipe III appointed him as the director of the Court Theatre in Madrid, a position he held until his death. His plays were translated into several languages and had a profound impact on German Romantic writers of the 19th Century.

Pedro Calderon de La Barca (1600-1681) lived in the shadow of Lope de Vega's popularity until his death, when he then rose as Spain's most popular playwright.



Portrait of Calderon de La Barca.

He became a priest and he first authored autos for the Corpus Christi Festival in Madrid, gaining popularity at court. He started writing secular plays after 1622, and it is believed that he wrote about two hundred plays, out of which about half survived (mostly autos). His secular plays revolve around love and honor, "cape and sword" style.

Titles include *The Phantom Lady*, a romantic play based on misunderstandings, *The Physician of His Own Honor*, revolving around a physician who kills his wife because he suspects of her cheating on him, and his masterpiece: *Life is a Dream*, which is one of the most popular Spanish plays of all time, scoring several productions each year all around the world.

In *Life is a Dream*, the prince Sigismundo is locked up in a tower to prevent the prophecy that would see him committing terrible crimes. His father, King Basilio, feels remorse and sets him free, hoping to prove the prophecy wrong. Yet, Sigismundo does indeed commit several violent crimes, forcing King Basilio to sedate him and lock him back up. When he wakes, Sigismundo wonders if all that had happened was real or just a dream. As political turmoil sets in and turns into a civil war, Sigismundo is set free by the rebels. When the rebels get the upper hand in battle, he faces his father one more time. King Basilio is prepared to die, but Sigismundo spares him, which leads Basilio to abdicate in his favor. From that moment on, Sigismundo swears to act "God to God", meaning that he will only strive for goodness.

Below you can read Sigismundo's monologue at the end of Act 2, where he muses about life, the human condition, and reality. It is one of the most famous monologues of all time.

"I must control this savagery,

This wild ambition, this ferocity

Of mine in case I dream again.
For surely I'll dream again
When this world seems so a strange place
That all our life is but a dream,
And what I have seen so far tells me
That any man who lives dreams what
He is, until, at last, he wakes.
The King dreams he is king, and so
Believing rules, administers,
Rejoices in the exercise of power;
He does not seem to know his fame
Is written on the wind and death
Will turn to ashes all his splendour.
O who would want to be a king
And have his power, when the dream
Of death must soon awaken him?
The rich man dreams in all his wealth,
Though riches cause him endless care.
The pauper dreams his suffering,
Complaining that the world's not fair.
The man who has success dreams too,
And so does he who strives for more.
He dreams whose heart is full of spite,
Who, hurting others, claims he's right.
The world, in short, is where men dream
The different parts that they are playing,
And no one stops to know their meaning.
I dream that I am here, a prisoner,
I dream that I am bound by chains,
When once I dreamt of palaces
Where I was king, where once I reigned.
What is this life? A fantasy?
A prize we seek so eagerly
That proves to be illusory?
I think that life is but a dream,

And even dreams not what they seem.

It's important to mention the other two playwrights of the time: Guillen de Castro and Tirso de Molina.

Guillen de Castro (1569-1631) is remembered for his play *The Youthful Adventures of the Cid*, which will greatly influence Corneille's *Le Cid*.

Tirso de Molina (1584-1648) was very prolific, writing over 400 comedias of a variety of subjects and genres. He did not shy away from discussing political matters in his plays, which stirred some controversy and led him to be exiled from Madrid. He wrote some of the most compelling female characters of his time. His most famous play, *The Trickster of Seville*, was the first ever play to deal with the character of Don Juan.

TAKEAWAYS

EL Siglo de Oro (The Spanish Golden Age) produced the greatest number of plays of the Renaissance.

Plays were either an evolution of Medieval morality plays, with a religious intent (the *autos sacramentales*), or were secular (*comedias*).

Plays were written in verse, although meter was not defined.

Aristotelian unities were not followed.

Women were allowed to act.

Italian Commedia dell'Arte traveling troupes were very popular in Spain and influenced Spanish secular plays in terms of themes and style.

All playwrights wrote both kinds of plays.

Autos sacramentales were performed as part of the **Corpus Christi** festival.

Theatre troupes would travel and needed to be licensed.

Professional theatre troupes worked under a shareholding system or were managed by a director.

The Spanish professional theatre guild was called **Confadia de la Novena,** and was instituted in 1630.

The most important playwrights of the time were **Lope de Vega** and **Calderon de la Barca**.

Autos sacramentales would be performed on *carros* (wagons), while *comedias* were performed in *corrales*, theatrical spaces that had similar features to the Elizabethan public playhouse.

ACTIVITY FOR THE CLASSROOM

The instructor should assign the class to read Tirso de Molina's *The Trickster of Seville*, and then students should be divided into small groups – 4 students per group max.

Each group will research the evolution of the character of Don Juan and prepare a short (10 minutes) presentation on a later version of the story and of the character.

Students should provide a historical comparison and a style comparison.

All forms of media could be included in the research. Actually, the more the merrier!

Examples could include novels, other plays (modern or contemporary), adaptations, movies, TV shows/series, comic books, etc.

Each presentation should provide an examination of the similarities with the original material and character, a historical and artistic background, and an excerpt from the "new" material.

Vocabulary

El Siglo De Oro

Inquisition

Spanish Armada

Autos sacramentales

Corpus Christi

Carros

Comedias

"cape and sword"

Pastoral plays

Mythological plays

Machine plays

Confadia de la Novena

Royal Council

Corrales

Mosqueteros

Patio

Corral de la Cruz

Corral del Principe

Encenario

Vestuario

Taburetes

Gradas

Desvanes

Alojeria

Cazuela

Lope de Rueda

Miguel Cervantes

Lope de Vega

Calderon de la Barca

Life is a Dream

Guillen de Castro

Tirso de Molina

Historical Timeline by Jennifer King.

Time Period	Event	Significance
1478	Establishment of the Spanish Inquisition	Political and religious control deeply impacts themes in Spanish art and theatre.
1492	Expulsion of Jews and Muslims from Spain	Marks the beginning of a highly Catholic, centralized Spanish monarchy.
1500s	Early development of religious drama (Autos sacramentales)	These allegorical plays tied to Catholic doctrine were performed during Corpus Christi festivals.
1558-1561	Lope de Rueda tours Spain	Often seen as the founder of Spanish professional theatre, he wrote and performed simple farces and pasos.
1579	Opening of the Corral de la Cruz in Madrid	One of the first permanent theatres (corrales), an open-air courtyard theatre.
1583	Corral del Príncipe opens	Another major corral in Madrid advances the urban theatre scene.
1588	Defeat of the Spanish Armada	Marks the decline of Spanish naval dominance but not its cultural influence.
1590s	Emergence of comedias and capa y espada ("cape and sword") plays	Popular three-act plays blend honor, love, and action.
1598	The reign of Philip III begins	Court support for the arts increases during this period.
1600s	Tirso de Molina writes 'The Trickster of Seville'	Introduces Don Juan, a legendary figure in Western drama.
1605	Miguel de Cervantes publishes Part I of 'Don Quixote'	A landmark literary work that also critiques theatre and chivalric ideals.
1610s	Rise of Lope de Vega	Called the 'Phoenix of Wits', he wrote over 1,000 comedias and helped shape the three-act structure.
1605-1615	Guillen de Castro writes 'Las Mocedades del Cid'	Source material for Corneille's famous French adaptation.

7. The French Renaissance

Historical Introduction

The end of the 15th Century and the entire 16th Century saw France almost continuously engaged in internal turmoil and war, mostly due to the religious controversies between the Catholics and the Protestants, called Huguenots, in France. The peak of the persecution happened in 1572, when thousands of Huguenots were killed in what is now known as the Saint Bartholomew's Day Massacre.

The situation somewhat stabilized in 1594, when the recently ascended king, Henry IV, originally a Protestant, converted to Catholicism but enforced the Edict of Nantes, which stipulated that while Catholicism was to be the state religion, Protestants were to be granted equal rights and tolerance under the law.

With new stabilized peace in the country and with the rise of even more political power and wealth coming from colonization, France colonized some regions of Canada, and the area including and around the current American state of Louisiana, the arts and literature could start flourishing again.

Another main factor in this trend was the growing exposure to Italian culture and its new aesthetic models, due to the influence of the **Medici family** and both **Cardinal Richelieu** (1586-1642) and his successor, **Cardinal Mazarin** (1602-1661).

The Italian noblewoman **Caterina de Médici** had married King **Henry II** in 1533, establishing a strong connection between the Médici family and the House of Orléans. Three of Caterina's sons became kings: Frances II, Charles IX (both of whom had very short reigns due to their early deaths), and Henry III, thus solidifying the Italian influence over the court and the nation.

In 1610, **Louis XIII** became king, but since he was still a young child, his mother, Marie de Medici, ruled in his place with the supervision of Cardinal Richelieu.

Richelieu had a strong liking for Italian culture and wanted to establish it in the French arts, particularly in literature and in the performing arts. In 1637, he promoted the establishment of the **French Academy** by providing it with a royal charter. The Academy was created to support the diffusion of Neoclassical ideals, along the lines of the activity pursued by Italian academies. The French Academy was formed by forty intellectuals, and it is still in existence today. Its primary role was to codify genres, styles, and the French language itself.

Richelieu's actions were furthered by his successor, Cardinal Mazarin, who basically ruled France for a good part of Louis XIV's reign, as this monarch as well was crowned at a very young age (he was five).

This trend will go on basically until the French Revolution of 1789.

The Early Stages

Theatre practices before the Edict of Nantes (1594) were still very rooted in a medieval aesthetic. There was a taste for forms of entertainment for the court, which often included music and dance as well as a revived interest in the Greek and Latin classics as they had been finally translated and circulated within the upper, more learned classes. A big push in the classic revival is to be attributed to a group of scholars, called La Pléiade, led by Pièrre de Ronsard. The group aimed at introducing classic principles in literature, and by extension, in theatre.

A couple of playwrights of this time applied these principles to their plays. They are **Etiénne de Jodelle** and **Jean de la Taille**. Their works attempted to conform to the Neoclassic unities, although they took some liberties. For example, the unity of space and time was not often respected.

Caterina de Médici loved entertainment, and she promoted court festivals, which revolved around a variety of sketches that included pageant shows, some singing, some dancing, and some form of spectacle.

Another form of theatre from this period was still connected to religious themes, and was closer to the Medieval aesthetics of the mysteries and morality plays… touring on wagons and mansions. Yet, over the 16th Century, the **Confrérie de la Passion** (instituted back in 1402) was given the monopoly to perform religious plays in Paris and in 1548 was allowed to build their theatre, the **Hotel de Bourgogne,** which incidentally is considered the first theatrical building ever built in continental Europe since the fall of the Roman empire.

When religious plays got banned, the Confrérie tried to come up with secular plays, but had little success. Instead, they started renting the space to other companies to make ends meet. Eventually, in 1677, the Confrérie ceased to exist.

At this point, it is important to mention **Alexandre Hardy** (1572-1632) as he is often referred to as France's first professional playwright. He was quite popular during his time and extremely prolific in his writing. It is believed that he wrote hundreds of plays, although fewer than forty have survived. His works included tragedies, tragicomedies, and pastorals. He stuck to some of the Neoclassic devices, such as the use of the messenger and the chorus and the five-act structure, but he does not always respect the units of time, action, and space. He was compelled to write interesting stories, frequently using supernatural characters, and he didn't shy away from having violent scenes happen on stage rather than off stage.

His work was likely staged at the Hotel the Bourgogne by the **Royal Company**, featuring some of the most well-known actors of the time, including Robert Guérin, Hugues Guéry, and Henri LeGrand.

When Hardy retired, his position as the "resident" playwright at the Hotel de Bourgogne was taken by **Jean Rotrou** (1609-1650), whose work focused on the dichotomy between love and honor and who was heavily inspired by Spanish drama. Yet, his plays weren't particularly popular, in part due to the lack of psychological insight for his characters.

It was really over the 17th Century that French theatre flourished, being greatly inspired by the Neoclassical ideals and by the Italian new approach to design and theatrical architecture.

Theatrical Spaces

In 16th-century France, medieval practices in theatre were still very popular, and troupes would travel the provinces with their wagons and mansions. Italian Commedia dell'Arte troupes and French professional companies also toured extensively, performing in a variety of non-dedicated spaces that could be private halls, town halls, outdoor spaces, and tennis courts.

There were a great number of tennis courts all over Europe in the 16th and 17th Centuries as the sport grew incredibly popular. Paris alone is believed to have over 250 active tennis courts within its city limits!

Because of their structure, these buildings provided an indoor space that could be easily converted into a theatrical venue. First, they were rectangular, allowing for a temporary wooden stage to be installed on one side, facing the court. Then, tennis courts already had the right disposition of seating, with up to three levels of galleries along the sides of the court, and the court itself could be used as the "pit" or *parterre* for the audience to stand.

Before the completion of the **Hotel de Bourgogne** (1548), the first public theatre, theatrical performances in Paris were

held in private halls and, of course, in tennis courts. Most of the buildings that will become dedicated theatrical spaces were originally tennis courts.

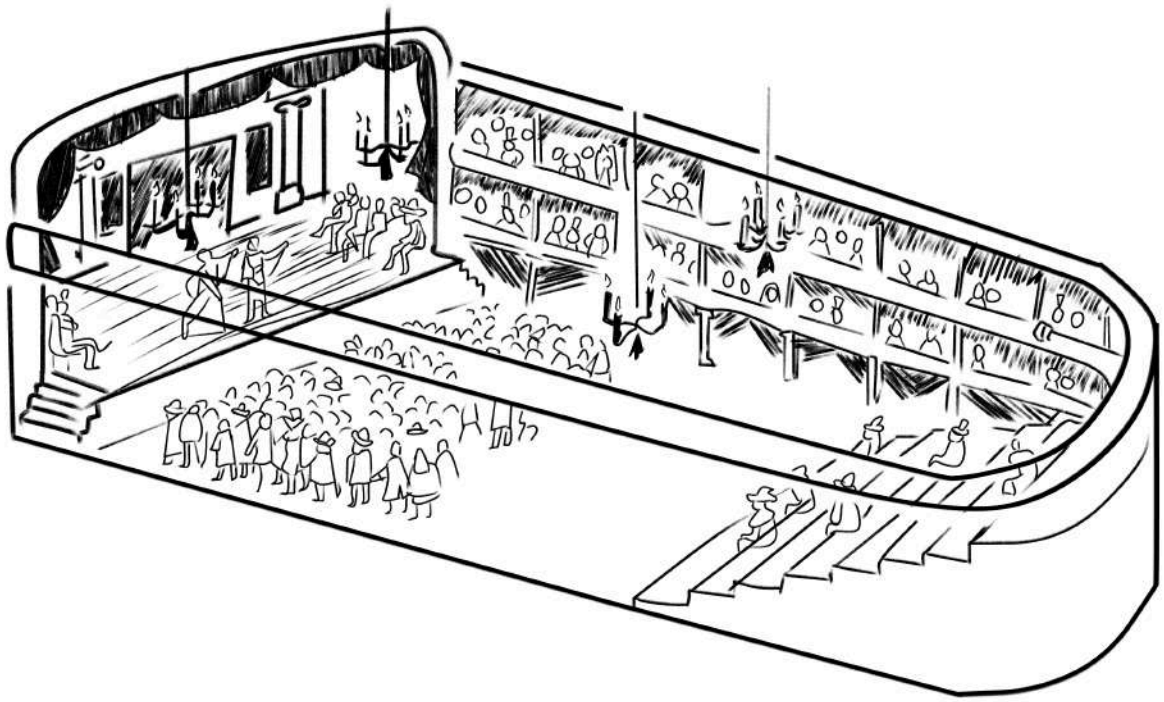
The Hotel de Bourgogne was a long, narrow building with a rectangular ground plan – quite like a tennis court! The stage occupied one end of the building and faced an empty court – the parterre, for standing audiences only. There was no proscenium arch. It has been calculated that the theatre could hold a maximum of 1600 audience members.

On the remaining three sides of the building and directly facing the court were up to three levels of galleries, some of them with boxes (*loges*). The upper gallery would provide somewhat of a cramped space and was ironically called *paradis* (heavens).

Across the parterre and opposite to the stage, there was a bench seating area arranged in an arch, looking like an amphitheater.

A tiring house backed the stage and looked similar to tiring houses in Spain and, to some extent, in England. The tiring house facilitated entrances and exits and the apparition of some scenic element of "surprise". Yet, when it comes to design elements, there wasn't much that helped provide a visual support for the performance, other than potentially some painted panels – there are records of the existence of some of those at the Hotel de Bourgogne — and the use of curtains. When needed to illustrate a change of location, old-fashioned (medieval style) mansions would be positioned on stage, usually stage left and right.

The Hotel de Bourgogne had a long life, hosting performances on and off until 1783, when it was briefly converted into a market, only to be demolished shortly after. It used to be in the Parisian second arrondissement, which is a very central area in Paris.



Rendering of the Hotel de Bourgogne, 1647. (Original illustration by Arlee Peterson).

There are records of a second public theatre, the **Théâtre du Marais**. Originally a tennis court, it was converted into a theatre in 1634, but it burned to the ground shortly after (1643), leading to the construction of a bigger and more modern venue that could seat about 1500 people and even featured a "second stage". The reconstruction allowed for the implementation of more modern (Italian) elements, such as the proscenium arch.

The Théâtre du Marais has later been remodeled, closed, and relocated several times over the following centuries, and today a "new" Théâtre du Marais stands and operates in Rue Volta, in the 3rd *arrondisséme*nt in Paris.

In 1641, Cardinal Richelieu promoted the construction of a court theatre, specifically inspired by the new Italian style. The theatre was originally named Théâtre Cardinal and then became the **Palais Royal** after the Cardinal's death. One of the first new elements that was introduced in the theatre was the proscenium arch. In addition, it featured an Italian-style scene-shifting type of machinery, which allowed for a more complex approach to the implementation of scenic design in productions. The theatre had a more "intimate" configuration and seating arrangement, with a small pit and

side galleries, due to it not being open to the general public but to guests only. The most prestigious seats of the house were immediately to the side of the stage and were usually occupied by nobles.

The Palais Royal underwent a full remodel in 1646 in order to bring it up to speed with the modern technology for scene changing.

After Richelieu's death, Cardinal Mazarin summoned to Paris a famous Italian architect and designer, **Giacomo Torelli** (1606-1678), to work on a second court theatre, **The Petit Bourbon**, which was part of the Tuiliéries Palace. This proscenium theatre became the epitome of the Italian style of theatrical architecture, featuring Torelli's most famous devices, such as the chariot-and-pole system to shift scenes. It mostly produced ballets, operas, and "plays with machines", such as Corneille's *Andromède*, all performances that allowed a greater amount of spectacle.

The Petit Bourbon had a short life, being replaced in 1660 by the new and bigger **Salle des Machines**, designed by another Italian architect, **Gaspare Vergani**. While this newly built theatre showcased some of the best features when it comes to machinery, it had some structural flaws, including really bad acoustics. It had been conceived to be big to accommodate the celebrations following Louis XIV's marriage, but its size also worked against it, being too big for the "regular" court entertainment.

Court theatres were popular among the nobles and the royals, who loved the implementation of the spectacle. The most popular forms of court entertainment included ballets, comedy ballets, and operas. In short, the combination of dance and music proved to be a favorite of the time. Choreography tended to be simple, which often allowed the audience, including the king himself, to participate. The most appreciated composer of the time was **Jean Baptiste Lully (**1632-1687), and he worked intensively on court music, at times with Molière (for comedy ballets) and later on his own.

Paris court theatres experienced a setback after 1660, when Louis XIV moved the court to the palace of Versailles, outside Paris. He forced all the nobles to move there so that he could better control their activities. As a result, most court entertainment was moved to Versailles. Yet, in 1680, Louis XIV inaugurated the **Comédie Française**, which is to become the very first National Theatre in existence. This theatre also resulted in a conversion from a Tennis court. This theatre would become the home of the very first resident national theatre company, which resulted in the merging of the companies originally residing at the Théâtre de Bourgogne and the Théâtre du Marais.

Theatre troupes

There were a great deal of theatre companies operating in France all throughout the 17th Century – some have estimated that number to be around 400! – yet performing in Paris required a special permission, only originally granted only to the Confrérie de la Passion, who also had exclusive access to the Hotel de Bourgogne. That ended in 1629, when another company, the Royal Company, was granted performance rights in Paris, and that space became its permanent residence.

In 1634, a second company was allowed to perform within the city limits. This company was managed by the famous actor **Montdory** (born Guillaume de Gilliberts) and was given sole access to the Théâtre du Marais.

Theatre troupes worked on a "share system", similar to what happened elsewhere in Europe. The shareholders, or *sociétaries*, would split the profits after every performance, after taking off all of the expenses. The troupe would hire actors to fill minor roles when needed. These hired actors were called *pensionnaires*. Theatre troupes originally only had up to twelve shareholders, although that number increased in the later part of the 17th Century.

Theatre companies could include women! Regardless, the actors' reputation suffered greatly due to the social and religious stigma attached to their profession.

Sociétaries were responsible for their own costumes, although the company might have some stock. Costumes were a prized possession and usually reflected the fashion of the time rather than adhering to the specific style and period of the play.

Theatre companies granted *sociétaries* a twenty-two-year tenure and a small pension after that, when they retired. *Pensionnaires* were promoted to *sociétaries* when someone retired or resigned.

Each company would usually have a "resident" playwright, who had the greatest say in casting the play within the troupe. Actors in the troupe could not turn down the role. It wasn't unusual for a company to have anywhere between forty and seventy plays in their repertoire.

Rehearsals would happen daily in the morning, while performances would usually start in the early/middle of the afternoon, to allow the audience to safely go home before dark.

When it comes to performers, a few names need to be remembered, aside from the above-mentioned Montdory, who became famous for his interpretation of Corneille's Cid.

Michel Baron (1653-1729) was one of the most respected tragic actors of the time. He was in Molière's company and then joined the Comédie Française. He had started as a child actor, impressing Molière to the point of becoming his protégé. He is remembered for more "realistic" and less stylized performances.

Everyone in the Béjart family had a successful career in the theatre business, first in Molière's company, which they co-founded, and later in the Comédie Française. Specifically, the two leading women in Molière's company, **Madeleine Béjart** first and later **Armande Béjart**, became incredibly popular. Other family members include Louis Béjart, Joseph Béjart, and Geneviève Béjart.

FUN FACT

In 1641, King Louis XIII issued a royal decree attempting to minimize the social stigma attached to acting. It stated that acting was "not to be considered worthy of blame nor prejudicial to their reputation [of the actors] in society."

The decree was somewhat helpful, but it didn't completely resolve the issue. Actors were still marginalized, denied religious rights, and at times access to specific public places.

Genres

When it comes to genres, comedies and tragedies were equally popular, although comedies provided a greater variety in terms of style, topics, and formats.

Companies would perform either for the court (in private theatres and spaces) or for the general audience (in public playhouses, such as the Hotel de Brougogne or the Hotel du Marais), which made a huge difference in the length and style of the theatrical pieces. In particular, when it comes to comedies, as tragedies tended to have a more learned audience anyway.

Court comedies usually featured a combination of scenes, music, and ballet.

Comedies to be performed for the general audience tended to be slightly longer and rely on stock characters and other comedic devices coming from either the Classics (Plauto) or Commedia dell'Arte. They also included dance and music, as in the court comedies.

Later in the 17th Century, ballet became more popular, mostly relying on the physical storytelling of allegories. Proficiency in dance was not a requirement, and audience participation – especially at court — was highly encouraged.

Eventually, a combination of ballet, music, and theatrical dialogue started to establish what would become the French opera, particularly thanks to the work of Jean Baptiste Lully.

Playwrights

The two most important playwrights of the time, focusing on tragedies, were Pierre Corneille and Jean Racine. Their work fully embodied the new, adjusted French theatrical aesthetics, and their plays are still widely produced today all around the world.

While Corneille is remembered for the complex dynamics of his plots and for his relatively simple characters, Racine is acknowledged as focusing primarily on building strong characters, whose psychological and emotional journey drives the action.

Pierre Corneille (1606-1684) came from a wealthy family and became a lawyer. He started writing almost as a hobby, and he focused exclusively on comedies. His first known play is titled *Mélite* (1629), which was followed by many others. His plots revolved around pastorals and love affairs. Cardinal Richelieu took a liking to Corneille's work and started commissioning his plays.



Pierre Corneille, after Charles Le Brun, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

One of Corneille's most successful plays is ***Le Cid***, which is based on a Spanish play by Guillen de Castro and takes place in Seville (Spain). The main theme of the piece is honor versus love. The play follows Rodrigue and Chimène, who fall in love with each other but can't be together because of a feud between their two families. After a long series of setbacks, the couple can finally marry.

While the play was a crowd pleaser, many scholars criticized its distance from the Neoclassic principles. For example, the action seemed cramped to fit the unity of time, thus losing believability, and, more importantly, it blended genres with the addition of moments of comedic relief and, of course, the happy ending. Lastly, **decorum** was in question too, since Chimène agreed to marry Rodrigue hours away from him killing her father.

Intrigued by the dispute, Richelieu demanded that the French Academy examine the case, and so in 1638, Jean Chapélain – the leader of the Academy – wrote *The Judgement of the Academy on The Cid*, where it was stated that while the play had outstanding features, it did break from the Neoclassic principles. The verdict didn't sit well with Corneille, who stopped writing for several years out of spite. Eventually, after 1640, he started writing again, and this time he adhered strictly to the unities and mainly stuck to tragedies, including *Horace*, *Cinna*, *Polyceute*, and *The Death of Pompey*. He became a member of the French Academy and was active in it until his retirement.

Like Corneille, **Jean Racine** (1639-1699) was part of the French upper class. He had a very strict and religious upbringing, as he became an orphan at an early age and was raised by his grandparents and his aunt. After convent school, he studied law and became a lawyer. Yet, he was greatly interested in literature and spent most of his time in literary circles, determined to become a successful playwright. He went to great lengths to secure the support of the royals, as well as the support of anyone who could potentially be helpful. His demeanor sparked controversy among the other theatre artists, and he ended up making a lot of enemies as well.



Jean Racine, by Johann Heinrich Schawberg, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons

When it comes to style, Racine truly embraced the Neoclassic aesthetic while establishing unprecedented dramatic tension and character development. All of his tragedies are based on Greek myths or plays, including his first play, *La Thébaide*, which was produced in 1664 by Molière. Racine's plays include: *Andromaque*, *Bérénice*, *Mithridate*, *Iphigénie*, and *Phèdre*, of which *Phèdre* is undoubtedly his masterpiece.

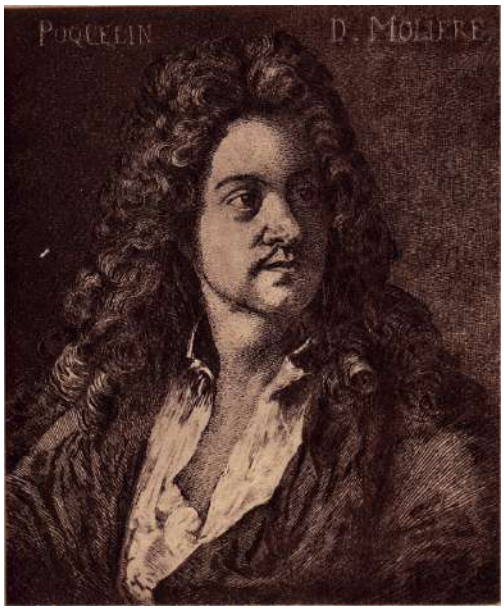
Phèdre is based on Euripides' Hippolytus and tells the story of King Théseus' wife, Phèdre, who falls in love with her stepson Hippolytus. Being rejected by him and learning that her husband is coming back to the Palace after having been gone for several years and believed dead, she instructs her maid to spread the rumor that it was indeed Hippolytus who made an obscene advance to her. When Théseus learns this, he is enraged and asks Neptune to punish Hippolytus, who is then drowned by the god. Being ashamed of her shameful conduct, Phèdre confesses the truth to Théseus and commits suicide by drinking poison.

The five-act play perfectly showcases the Neoclassic unities, as everything happens in one day, in the same location (the palace), and it is verisimilar as the action is more contained than in Corneille's works. Decorum is respected, too.

Last but not least, Racine's use of language established a new standard for generations to come, with a masterful use of the *alexandrine verse*.

When it comes to comedies, one name tops everyone else: **Molière** (1622-1673).

Jean Baptiste Poquélin, later known as Molière, came from what can be considered a "middle-class" family of wealthy artisans, his father being in the furniture-making business.



Molière in 1664. Drawing by Charles Courtry (1846-1897), in a now-lost painting by Michel Corneille the Younger (1642-1708). Charles Courtry, CC BY-SA 4.0

He received a solid education, which would have allowed him to acquire a position in court as a lawyer, or, if he were so inclined, he could have pursued his father's business. However, he was more interested in the arts, specifically in theatre. He was greatly influenced by the Italian Commedia dell'Arte troupes that were so popular at the time, and in 1643 he founded the **Théâtre Illustre**, his theatre company, teaming up with a famous family of actors of the time, the **Béjarts**. The company's first successes happened in the provinces, and he only got to perform successfully in Paris in 1658 when he obtained permission to use the **Petit Bourbon** theatre, where his play *Les Précieuses Ridicules*, a satirical take on contemporary mannerisms, became an instant success the following year.

Shortly after that, the company moved to the **Palais Royal**, a theatre built by Richelieu and recently remodeled after the Italian standards by Giacomo Torelli. In 1665, Théâtre Illustre was granted the title of *La Troupe du Roi* (The King's Troupe) and provided with an annual financial installment.

As we have mentioned, Molière's genius shone in comedies, and he wrote several kinds of them. His most successful ones are the so-called comedies of characters and comedies of manners. The first ones revolve around the adventures of the main character, while the second ones focus on ridiculing some aspects of his contemporary society.

To start, Molière wrote Commedia dell'Arte-inspired farces. Those were very fast-paced pieces relying on the stock characters that were made popular by the Italian troupes. Examples include *The Imaginary Cuckold*, where a series of misunderstandings creates chaos between a married couple and two young lovers, and *The Tricks of Scapin*, where the title character functions as the facilitator for the marriages between two young couples, whose parents wouldn't want them to be together.

Molière's court comedies were specifically written to satisfy the needs of the court for various festivities. These plays tended to be shorter and frequently featured some form of musical accompaniment, usually provided by the French rising star **Jean-Baptiste Lully**, Molière's favorite collaborator. Examples of court plays include *The Bores* and *The Forced Marriage*. In other instances, the focus was on spectacle, like, for example, in *Amphitryon*, a comedy in three acts based on Plautus' play by the same title. In it, King Amphitryon leaves home and his beautiful wife Alcmene to go fight a war. During his absence, the god Jupiter falls in love with Alcmène, but he only succeeds at seducing her by acquiring her real husband's appearance. Upon the return of the real Amphitryon, confusion ensues and is only resolved when Jupiter reveals his true identity and assures Amphitryon that his wife was faithful, because she would only yield to the looks of her husband.

Great examples of comedies of character are *The Miser*, *Tartuffe* and *The Misanthrope*.

Molière's ability to truthfully depict the most deplorable vices, while framing them in an extraordinarily comedic setting, is what makes a lot of his work still compelling today, although at the time, his popularity was marred with just as much controversy.

The Miser centers around the character of Harpagon, a wealthy man who wishes to marry off his daughter to an old man so that he could avoid providing her with a dowry. Yet, his daughter is in love with a young, penniless man. Harpagon

himself is hoping to marry a poor young woman, who is also loved by Harpagon's son. As you can see, the vices that Moliere exposes here are greed and stinginess. The play is resolved by Deus-Ex-Machina, like many of his plays, so that the vice itself is not resolved, but rather remediated. In this case, Anselme, the old man who was supposed to marry Harpagon's daughter, is revealed to be the long-lost father of both the penniless young man Elise (Harpagon's daughter) loves and the poor young woman Harpagon looked at marrying. This new information allows Elise to marry her true beau, and Cleante (Harpagon's son) to marry Marianne (Anselme's daughter).

Amongst all of his plays, ***Tartuffe*** is probably the one that sparked the greatest controversy when first produced. The play focuses on the duplicity and lies of the title character, a man who claims to be poor and pious to be granted access to Orgon's house, food…. And wife. Orgon's family tries its best to expose Tartuffe's lies to save the family's patrimony, but all seems lost when Orgon signs off his house in Tartuffe's name. The play is resolved, once again, *by Deus-Ex-Machina*, with the intervention of the King himself, who arrests Tartuffe and re-establishes Orgon's possessions.

Because of Tartuffe showing off his (fake) religious "piousness", the play was not well received by the French catholic audience, who considered it insulting to their religion. Molière had to do two rewrites to get it even approved and licensed to be produced. Yet, it became popular and ran for a record of thirty-three times.

The Misanthrope's protagonist, Alceste, is not fond of mankind in general and considers everyone to be dishonest and corrupt. He distances himself from all sorts of public displays of societal politeness, a fact that makes him very unpopular. When he finally falls in love, he finds his match in Celimène, a beautiful young woman who is a notorious flirt and actually represents everything Alceste protests about. A legal dispute ensues when Alceste insults the work of an influential nobleman. As he is summoned to court to pay a penalty, Alceste refuses to oblige, declaring that he would rather self-exile and live like a hermit, far away from "civilization". He asks Celimène to go with him and marry him, but she refuses.

As you can see, this play has some quite serious undertones that made it not his most popular comedy at the time. Yet, as of today, it is one of his most produced plays, due to the complexity of the characters and the interesting take on society.

Moving to Molière's comedy of manners, it is worth mentioning ***The Learned Ladies***, in which the playwright makes fun of the newly rich, who aspire to showcase their intellectualism and appreciation of the arts, but don't have the actual intellectual means or the education to do it.

Molière's writing style was witty and multifaceted. He adapted it to better serve the characters and the pace of the piece, using verse and prose alike.

It is important to say that within his theatre company, he wore many hats: he was the main producer, somewhat of director, and, most importantly, he often acted in leading roles.

His life had several ups and downs, both financially and personally; he was even imprisoned for bankruptcy once. He married Armande **Béjart**, who was the daughter of his company's co-founders. Armande was trained as an actor since her childhood, eventually making the first steps of what would be a stellar career within Molière's company, where she played most of the leading young female roles. They married, but it wasn't smooth sailing. She was much younger than he, and he was much admired, which made Molière jealous. They separated after the birth of their children, but they later reunited until his sudden death in 1673, when he collapsed on stage during a production of *The Imaginary Invalid*. Because actors were not allowed to have public religious rituals, his funeral was held late at night, privately.

After his death, Armande became responsible for the theatre company, along with Charles Varlet, known as LaGrange, another famous actor of the time, who later published Molière's first biography in 1682.

TAKEAWAYS

Italian Commedia dell'Arte had a strong influence on French theatre

The Neoclassic principles played a significant role in the work of tragedist of the time.

Italian theatrical architecture and design determined the evolution of French theatrical spaces.

Corneille and Racine can be considered the epitome of dramatic writing for this period.

Molière's comedic genius was unparalleled, and so was his popularity.

Comedies often featured a combination of dialogue, music, and dance.

Companies would perform for the court and the general audience.

Court theatre and public performances had dedicated theatrical spaces.

The monarchy – and the Church- had a lot of influence and power in determining the success or failure of a theatre company.

Theatre companies had a strong and regulated internal structure that allowed actors to have a stipend and a pension.

Women could act!

Vocabulary

Ballet

Armande Béjart

Michel Baron

Caterina de Médici

Cardinal Richelieu

Cardinal Mazarin

Comédie Française

Commedia dell'Arte

Confrérie de la Passion

Corneille

Decorum

Etienne de Jodelle

French Academy

Gaspare Vergani

Giacomo Torelli

Alexandre Hardy

Hotel the Bourgogne

Hotel du Marais

Huguenots

Jean de la Taille

Jean Rotrou

Luois XII

Louis XIII

Louix XIV

Louis XV

Jean Baptiste Lully

Molière

Montdory

Palais Royal

Petit Bourbon

Racine

Salle des Machine

Théâtre Illustre

Versailles

ACTIVITY FOR THE CLASSROOM

The students need to be familiar with the Neoclassical Principles (for an overview, please refer to Chapter 5).

The instructor should divide the class into small groups (4 people per group) and assign the reading of Racine's *Phaedra*, so that the students would be familiar with how the Neoclassical Principles could be applied to a play.

Students should work in class on rewriting a contemporary story using the Neoclassic Principles (unity of time, space, and action, *decorum*, verisimilitude). Models and narratives for this exercise could include Sci-fi movies, contemporary plays, contemporary TV series, video games, novels, and short stories.

The piece should feature elevated language and "noble" characters (contemporary super-heroes qualify as noble characters).

If the plot is too complicated, it is okay to simplify it, as each group should produce a 5 to 10-minute play.

Each group should present their play to the class, either reading it or even performing it.

A discussion should follow on how easy/difficult it was to abide by the Neoclassical Principles.

Historical Timeline by Jennifer King.

Time Period	Event	Significance
1498–1515	Reign of Louis XII	His rule saw growing French interest in Italian art and Renaissance humanism.
1515–1547	Reign of Francis I	Francis I invites Italian artists to France and promotes humanism and the arts, laying the groundwork for the French Renaissance.
1530	Founding of the French Academy	An institution for regulating the French language and promoting classical learning and literary form.
1548	Confrérie de la Passion loses its monopoly on religious plays	Allows secular and classical drama to flourish.
1550s	Rise of Etienne de Jodelle and Jean de la Taille	Introduce classical tragedies in France; emphasize decorum and neoclassical unities.
Late 1500s	Caterina de Médici introduces Italian court entertainments to France	Brings Ballet and Italian staging traditions, including early influences of Commedia dell'Arte.
1590s	French Wars of Religion end; persecution of Huguenots ceases	Stability returns, allowing the theater to flourish in Paris.
1600s	Commedia dell'Arte troupes gain popularity	Their influence can be seen in Molière's comic characters and improvisational techniques.
1610–1643	Reign of Louis XIII	Supported the establishment of major theaters; era of playwrights like Corneille and Hardy.
1624–1642	Cardinal Richelieu as chief minister	Promotes classical drama, founded the Académie Française, and centralized cultural institutions.
1630s	Montdory and others found the Théâtre du Marais	Rival to Hôtel de Bourgogne, it launches the career of Pierre Corneille.
1636	*Le Cid* by Corneille	Sparks the "Querelle du Cid" and debate about decorum and classical form; pivotal in French drama.
1643–1715	Reign of Louis XIV, the Sun King	Absolute monarch who transformed French theater and built Versailles as a center of cultural life.
1643–1661	Cardinal Mazarin introduces Italian artists	Brings Gaspare Vergani and Giacomo Torelli to France, revolutionizing scenic design and machine plays.
1650s–1660s	Salle des Machines constructed	A marvel of stage machinery used for elaborate court spectacles.
1660s	Jean-Baptiste Lully collaborates with Molière	They create comédie-ballets, merging dance, music, and spoken word.
1662	Molière marries Armande Béjart	Solidifies connection to the Béjart theatrical family; she becomes a leading actress in his troupe.
1665–1673	Peak of Molière's career	Writes and performs famous comedies; challenges hypocrisy and social norms.
1670s	Michel Baron becomes the leading actor in Molière's troupe	Later joined Comédie-Française, influencing future acting styles.
1680	Founding of the Comédie-Française	The first national theater: it merges several troupes, including Molière's, and institutionalizes French classical drama.
Late 1600s	Works by Racine dominate tragedy during that time	Refine classical French tragedy with psychological complexity and poetic form.
1715–1774	Reign of Louis XV	Continuation of court patronage; theater becomes increasingly ornate and stylized.

PART III

THEATRE IN THE 18TH CENTURY

8. English Restoration and 18 Century England

Introduction

Brief historical background

After Queen Elizabeth died with no direct heirs in 1603, the throne was passed on to King James VI, who was the king of Scotland and the first king of the House of Stuart. He governed until he died in 1625, and was followed by his son, King Charles I.

King Charles I was not a popular king, and many scholars and historians believe he was the cause of his own demise. He didn't accept and sided with the political power of the English Parliament and claimed he had the "divine right of kings" to rule the country according to his fancy, which basically made him an absolute monarch. His deliberations about taxes and his dubious religious views particularly angered the Parliament and the people, and eventually, the resentment culminated in the **First English Civil War** in 1642. The king's army was defeated in 1645 by the **New Model Army**, which had been formed by the Parliament, which had recruited army veterans and soldiers with strong religious beliefs, such as the Puritans, and anti-royalists. King Charles I was imprisoned as he refused to abide by a constitutional monarchy (big mistake!). He briefly escaped his captivity, but eventually was imprisoned again on the inescapable Isle of Wight. After being tried and found guilty of high treason, King Charles I was executed in 1649. At that point, Charles I's son, Charles II, was proclaimed king by the Scottish Parliament in a desperate attempt to save the monarchy. Yet the new king's army was also defeated by the New Model Army, leading him to escape to France and leave both England and Scotland to be ruled by the English Parliament, who established a republican government under the name of the **English Commonwealth**. **Oliver Cromwell** (1599-1658) was appointed **Lord Protector** (Head of State) and governed the country under an iron fist and very restrictive religious and social rules until his death. During this time, all theatrical activities were banned, theatres were closed, and actors were outlawed and persecuted. Theatre didn't disappear altogether, but it surely kept a very low (and secretive) profile. Some artists managed to escape the Puritans' regulations by advertising their productions as concerts and musical events, as music was not completely prohibited. Others, like William Davenant, used their own homes as the venue for their performances.

Oliver Cromwell died in 1658 as a result of malaria and a kidney-related disease. He had refused to use quinine, the only treatment for malaria known at the time, because it had been discovered by Jesuit missionaries. Cromwell's son, Richard, came to power, but he didn't last long since he had no support from either the people or the Parliament. Besides, the English people had grown weary of all the restrictions of this new form of government, which eventually led to the restoration of the monarchy in 1660 with the return from exile of **King Charles II**. As the new King of England and Scotland, Charles II immediately took it upon himself to limit the power of the Parliament, to avoid what had happened to his father. He was successful in his reign until his death, when the throne passed on to his brother, James II. Yet, James II converted to Catholicism and baptized his only son, which was perceived as a threat to the English Protestant Church by the English Parliament. The Parliament then reached out to James II's protestant daughter Mary, who was married to William of Orange, and with the so-called Glorious Revolution, James II was deposed and William and Mary rose as the new monarchs of England in 1688.

Most historians and scholars believe this marks the end of the Restoration in the arts, while for theatre, it could potentially extend into the early 18th Century.

King Charles II was a strong supporter of the arts and theatre, so very early into his monarchy, all theatrical activities

resumed and grew stronger than ever before… although the field was quite strongly regulated by the monarchy. First, companies could only perform legally if they received a license (or patent) from the king, who directly issued them, but only to two theatre companies. The first company was directed by **William Davenant** (1606-1668) and the second one by **Thomas Killigrew** (1612-1683). This patent provided Davenant, who was allegedly Shakespeare's godson, and Killigrew with the monopoly of theatrical activities in London. Killigrew's company was named The King's Company because of his loyalty to the crown, even during the king's exile, while Davenant's sponsor was appointed to be the Duke of York, the king's brother.

As the position of the Elizabethan Master of Revel was reinstated, the king allowed Henry Herbert to regain the position, as he was the last Master of Revel before the Commonwealth. Yet, he was only allowed to issue licenses to companies outside London, and when he died (1673), his position was taken by the same Thomas Killigrew.

In short, Davenant and Killigrew had complete control and monopoly of all theatrical activities within the city limits of London.

Killigrew's The King's Company was populated by the most famous and navigated actors, most of whom had been popular before the Civil War. Davenant's company, on the other hand, mostly relied on younger actors and somewhat invested in training. Both companies were very prolific, but Killigrew didn't have a good eye for the business itself, and his company struggled financially until the only way to survive was to merge with Daventat's company.

A big change introduced by King Charles II was to allow women to act. He did it through a warrant dated 1662. Quite likely during his nine years in exile in France, Spain, and Holland, the king had seen several productions featuring women acting on stage, as most countries in continental Europe allowed that, and thought that England should do the same.

Up until then, female roles had been played by young boys who underwent specific training and used stylized movement patterns that represented shared conventions with the audience. Clearly, with women playing female roles, productions became more realistic, yet the reputation of actresses often still suffered from social prejudice. In short, actresses were considered a little more than courtesans and a little less than prostitutes. For example, it was common practice to allow male patrons into the actresses' dressing rooms for an extra fee so that they could see them changing…. And possibly for some other attention.

Coincidentally, the rise of actresses caused many of the "boy players" (the male actors who previously played female roles) to fall out of fortune, as most of them could not adjust to playing male parts. One notable exception is **Edward Kynaston** (1640-1706), who became famous in the upper circles of society for his ambiguous sexuality and stunning representations of female characters (on and off stage) to the point that Samuel Pepys (1633-1703), a British writer and politician who documented most of the social life of the time through his personal diary, described him as "the loveliest lady that I have ever seen in my life" as well as "the handsomest man."

Kynaston was able to pursue his career playing male roles, and he retired in 1699.

Generally speaking, the acting style of both the Restoration and of the whole 18th Century was still far from realism. Actors relied more on rhetorical delivery, spoke directly to the audience, and utilized wide and over-the-top gestures to emphasize emotions and punctuate their lines, creating patterns in the staging that mirrored well-established conventions.

Theatre companies during the Restoration and the 18th Century featured more company members than had previously happened in the Elizabethan time, and instead of reprising the sharing plan, they opted for contracts that would specifically apply to each production and each actor. On several occasions and for some of the better-known actors, contracts were supplemented by the so-called "**benefit performances**". A benefit performance would give all the box office money to the actors, thus increasing their earnings.

This shift in the management of the theatre would slowly but inevitably deprive the actors of exercising some control over the company. Theatre managers, like **Christopher Rich** (1657-1714), who managed both the **Drury Lane** and the **Lincoln's Inn** (later the **Covent Garden**) theatre, became more businessmen than theatre artists, in a way resembling a modern-day producer. This trend would continue all throughout the century.

Playwrights were not usually part of the company. Instead, they were commissioned to write plays and paid a flat fee by theatre companies. Once the play was in performance, it fully belonged to the theatre company. At times, playwrights were included in the "benefit system" as a way to increase their earnings, but that wasn't the norm, and, most importantly, there was little to no protection of the playwrights' intellectual property. The **Statute of Anne**, also known as the Copyright Act of 1709, provided playwrights (and authors in general) with some leverage on their work, although it mostly addressed the rights over the manuscripts between the authors and the publishers.

An interesting evolution in the dynamics of theatrical companies happened in the second part of the 1700, when **David Garrick** (1716-1779) rose to prominence not only as a well known and respected actor but also as someone who would be involved in all aspects of a theatrical production – in a way resembling what would later become the role of the director.

Garrick starred in a multitude of roles, including several of Shakespeare's plays. He became a company member at the Drury Lane theatre, where he also functioned as a manager and occasionally as a playwright, as he adapted many of Shakespeare's plays for his contemporary audience. He would stay with the Drury Lane, on and off, for his entire career.

He came from a middle-class family of French origins. He grew up in Lichfield, where he attended the local Grammar School. Later, he enrolled in the esteemed Edial Hall School, directed by Samuel Johnson, where he learned Greek and Latin and discovered his passion for the theatre. He soon moved to London with his younger brother George and started a wine business, which didn't flourish. Instead, his acting career took off, and he quickly became one of the most sought-after actors of the time. He "specialized" in Shakespeare, as he deeply admired him: his portrayal of Richard III is allegedly what got him into the Drury Lane. Garrick had several affairs but only really loved one woman, Eva Marie Veigel, whom he married in 1749. The couple lived a happy life, and Garrick acquired great wealth along with his popularity, which allowed him and his wife to have a high-end lifestyle.

FUN FACT

Throughout the Restoration and then into the 18th Century, actors would "own" the part, meaning once they played the role for the first time, they would be playing it until their retirement (or death). The best actors would own dozens and dozens of roles. For example, **Charles Macklin** (1699-1797) is believed to have owned around ninety roles!

He had an incredible acting career and he is remembered for having introduced a more realistic approach to acting, in particular, his interpretation of Shakespeare's Shylock in Merchant of Venice set a new example for generations to come, as he dropped the widespread comedic/ caricatural approach to the Jewish character in favor of a more honest depiction of the internal tragedy of the character.

He died possibly because of the consequences of a "bad cold" in 1779 at the age of 62. His wife would outlive him for another 43 years. Garrick was buried in the Poet's Corner in Westminster Abbey, a demonstration of the fame and respect he had gained in his life.

Garrick is remembered for attempting to introduce a more realistic style of acting, which came from his consistent observation of human nature and society.

He advocated for more character and time-appropriate costuming and stated the importance of research to support the

arc of the characters. As a manager and a "director", Garrick introduced a more rigorous rehearsal process. Actors were asked to arrive on time, know their lines, and engage in rehearsals for several weeks. If they didn't abide by these rules, they would be fined.

Aside from costumes, it is believed that Garrick also contributed to other aspects of theatrical design. For example, he introduced the use of masking to hide the lights (candles), and he completely banished the audience from the stage.

Finally, Garrick is responsible for really celebrating the works of William Shakespeare. In 1769, he organized the Shakespeare Jubilee in Stratford-upon-Avon, celebrating the 200th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth. The event will become a milestone in the process of officially proclaiming the Bard as the English national poet.

NELL GWYN



Portrait of Nell Gwyn (1650-1687). Engraving. Thomas Wright, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Nell Gwyn (1642 or 1650- 1687) was an English actress who is remembered for her beauty, her wit, and her "Cinderella story". She rose in popularity for her comedic roles, eventually notably becoming King Charles II's mistress, bearing him two sons, whom the king recognized and endowed with dukedoms.

Her early days and career are somewhat surrounded by mystery because of the lack of records and factual data, as opposed to a myriad of unverifiable sources. She is believed to have come from a poor family and to have lived in London all of her life, specifically in the slums of the Drury Lane area. In her younger years, it has been reported that she experimented with cross-dressing, picking up the name of William Nell. It has been speculated that her mother ran a brothel, although it has not been proved that Nell worked in it as a sex worker. According to some anonymous and unverified sources, she was a street vendor. She was in a brief and tumultuous relationship with a man named Duncan, who accommodated her in a modest room over a tavern.

Apparently, she was exposed to the theatre because at some point she sold oranges to the audience at the Theatre Royal, in Drury Lane, which was home to the King's Men, the company led by Thomas Killigrew, who eventually hired her to act in his company.

During her first years in the company, Gwen – who was illiterate – learned the craft.

Her first official appearance on stage was in John Dryden's The Indian Emperor, where she played the role of Cydaria, the daughter of the emperor. Yet, her fame came from playing comedic roles in the very popular comedies of the time alongside her partner, fellow actor Charles Hart.

In 1667, she charmed Earl Charles Sackville, who maintained her for a few years lavishly. The affair with King Charles II started a year later, after he had seen her act and invited her for supper. The story goes that the dinner turned "sour" as the king had forgotten his purse at home and Gwen had to pay the bill. Despite

starting on the wrong foot, the king and Gwen became lovers, and she used to call him "Charles III" as he was the third "Charles" in her life (after Charles Hart and Charles Sackville).

She stopped acting around 1670, probably because she was taking care of her children and because she didn't need it anymore: the king had granted her a stipend and a townhouse in Pall Mall, which stayed in her family until the end of her century. The king also gave her a house in Windsor, so that she could be there when the king was at Windsor Castle.

Her relationship with King Charles II lasted until his death, and the king's successor and brother, James II, obeyed his brother's wish not to let "poor Nelly starve." She was assigned a yearly allowance of 1500 pounds.

In the last years of her life, despite the wealth and the notoriety, Neil Gwyn suffered several misfortunes. She had two strokes, the first one leaving her half paralyzed, and the second one a few months afterwards, confining her to bed. She died a few months later in November 1667 at the age of 37. The cause of death was apoplexy due to syphilis.

Nell Gwyn's life has inspired countless plays, novels, short stories, documentaries, and movies.

RESTORATION DRAMA

The name "Restoration Drama" applies to all the theatre that was written and produced from the re-establishment of the monarchy in 1660 until the very beginning of 1700.

Due to the Civil War and the Commonwealth period that had seen theatrical activities reduced to the minimum, when theatres reopened, the first issue that they had to face was the lack of new plays being produced and staged. Clearly, there was plenty of previous material – including Shakespeare's plays and subsequent re-arrangements – but there was nothing that spoke to the new sentiment of the time.

This led many authors and scholars to start writing almost compulsively, and for the first time, that included quite a few female playwrights. Some of these women include **Katherine Philips** (1632-1664) who is credited to be the very first to have a play, *Pompey*, being produced by a professional company (in Dublin); Frances Boothby (died 1669) who was the first woman to have her play *Marcelia* produced in London (by the King's Company), Elizabeth Polwhele (1651-1691) and later and most notably, **Aphra Behn** (1640-.1689). Of course, there were also quite a few men writing plays, among whom the most prolific and successful was **John Dryden** (1631-1700), who excelled in writing all sorts of literature. Other playwrights of the time are **Sir George Etherege** (1634-1691), **William Wycherley** (1641- 1715), and **William Congreve (**1670-1729).

When it comes to serious drama, in the latter part of the 1600s, we have "heroic tragedies", also known as "heroic drama." Those plays were heavily influenced by Spanish and French Renaissance drama and focused on conflicted love stories and honor. They were often set in exotic environments and featured heightened language and verse. Characters were borderline stereotypical, with a hero (or heroine) who needs to overcome some tragic flaw that would otherwise bring dishonor to themselves and their legacy.



A portrait from the Welsh Portrait Collection at the National Library of Wales. Circa 1700.
Michael Vandergucht, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

John Dryden wrote several heroic tragedies, like *The Indian Queen* and the *Indian Emperor*, yet this genre's fortune declined quite fast in favor of more approachable plots and language. The Neoclassic principles were brought to the table again, although English writers didn't abide by them in the strictest way possible – the way it was happening in France, for example. Dryden penned some of these new styles of tragedies, the most famous one being *All For Love* (1677), which is inspired by Shakespeare's *Anthony and Cleopatra*.

Yet, what the English Restoration Theatre is really remembered for is the evolution of comedies, in all of their varieties. We have comedies of "humours" that followed and further developed Ben Johnson's theories, comedy of manners, farces, and comedies of intrigue. All of these style of comedies have common elements, such as a more contemporary use of language, witty – but somewhat stereotypical – characters, fast pace, a widespread use of (sexual) innuendos, subterfuges and bawdiness, and, of course, a happy ending – which doesn't necessarily re-establish the former social hierarchy. An interesting aspect of theatrical activities and audiences of the time was that this new and bold approach was mostly enjoyed by the same social classes that were the target of the theatrical satire, particularly at the beginning. Later, when the excitement for the end of Commonwealth restrictions cooled off, restoration comedies faced a moral backlash which would eventually lead to tamer and more "socially correct" comedies in the 18th Century.

John Dryden, once again, authored several comedies, mostly focusing on comedies of manners, where he targeted the vices and habits of the upper classes and viciously made fun of them. Some of his famous titles include *The Marriage à la Mode* and *The Mock Astrologer*. Another writer focusing on comedies of manners is Sir George Etherege (1634-1691), whose *The Man of Mode* (1676) represents the peak of this genre.



Engraving of Aphra Behn after a lost portrait by John Riley (1646-1691), CC0, via Wikimedia Commons

Aphra Behn wrote at least seventeen plays, alongside other forms of literature. She is mostly known for her comedies of intrigue, specifically for *The Rover* (parts 1 and 2), which is still popular to this day and which many consider to carry a feminist agenda.

The play features three very strong female characters who, unlike the trend of the time, take their future into their own hands in order to achieve their happiness.

The action is set in Naples, where two wealthy Spanish sisters, Hellena and Florinda, arrive with their families to participate in the local Carnival. Florinda is being married off by her father to a much older man. Alternatively, she could marry her brother's friend. Yet, none of those options fancied her, so through her own actions, she succeeds at marrying her true love, Colonel Belville. Being the second daughter, Hellena was supposed to retire in a convent and become a nun again, which was not exactly her first choice. Instead, she manages to seduce the rover and gets him to marry her.

The third character represents the lower class: Angelica Bianca, a courtesan. A strong woman, Angelica picks her own customers and sets her own price, becoming her own manager. When threatened, she doesn't hesitate to pull out a gun to "set things straight."

The two plays that probably best represent this period and that are still frequently produced today are William Wycherley's *The Country Wife* and William Congreve's *The Way of the World*.

William Wycherley (1641-1716) was an officer who enjoyed writing plays and poetry, both activities he considered hobbies. He was from a middle-class family and was educated, first at home, and then sent to France to finish his military education. He served in the Royal army as a captain lieutenant, later promoted to full captain, and later resigned in 1674, going back to London. He engaged in the social life of the time, also gaining the favor of King Charles II, who hired him to tutor one of his illegitimate sons.

Wycherley's most famous play is *The Country Wife*. The play was written between 1672 and 1673 and was published the year after that. It is a harsh satire of the lasciviousness and the hypocrisy of the British aristocracy, featuring very explicit sexual content. The most notorious "scandalous" scene being the "china scene": where Horner and Lady Fidget are in the next room (off stage) supposedly admiring Horner's china collection –code language for having very loud sex–, while the clueless Lady Fidget's husband innocently waits outside their door (on stage) for his wife to come back.

The play is centered around Harry Horner (take notice of the last name….), who pretends to be impotent to be admitted into the private circles of Lady Fidget (another interesting last name), a married woman. Horner's goal is to seduce as many "respectable" women as possible by cuckolding as many husbands as possible. His plan works quite well, also because of the "support" he receives from the women themselves, who are eager for a sex life outside their frequently unhappy and arranged marriages. In the end, Horner is almost called out by Lord Pinchwife. Yet, Horner explains to him that if he embraced the belief that Horner was not impotent, then he would be forced to consider the fact that his wife could have been cheating on him. So, to preserve his reputation, Horner advised Lord Pinchwife to go along with the lie. As you can see, the ending exposes the hypocrisy of Wycherley's society about reputation and social norms.

Take note that most of the characters in the play have names that hint at the characters' hidden (or not so hidden) desires and behaviors: Horner, Pinchwife, Lady Fidget, Lady Squeamish….



William Congreve, by Sir Godfrey Kneller, Bt (died 1723).
Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

William Congreve (1670-1729) belonged to the British upper class and served in Parliament, alongside being a respected playwright, poet, and satirist. His writings criticize the vices of his social class, although he distances himself from previous writers, such as Wycherley, for a more elevated style of writing and a tamer approach. Congreve's work is often considered the "bridge" to what would become the style of the 18th Century, when comedy settles into more moral dramatic circumstances, more defined characters, and stylized language.

Congreve's masterpiece is *The Way of the World*, which was written and produced in 1700, originally with little success. While the play still explores some of the more popular aspects of the Restoration – such as adulterous relationships and misunderstandings – it does provide a happy ending that restores the "greater good", with evil characters being punished and the young lovers enjoying their earned happy ending.

Drama of the 18th Century

With the reign of William and Mary, the English society started to move away from the "explosion of liberalism" that had been a reaction to the Commonwealth, with this trend being reflected in the theatre as well.

The 18th Century saw the succession of several monarchs. After the co-reign of William and Mary, Queen Anne took the throne and reigned from 1702 until 1714, during which time Parliament gained more power. The following king would be a German prince, crowned as George I. He was the first of the house of Hanover… and spoke no English, which meant he left most of the ruling to the Parliament and specifically to **Sir Robert Walpole (1676-1745).** George I reigned until 1727 and was followed by his son, George II, who ruled in the same way until 1760. George III reigned for the rest of the century, witnessing and playing a significant part in some of the most important events of the century, such as the addition of Canada and Australia to the British colonies, the American Revolution, and the French Revolution.

When it comes to theatre, one of the most influential political actions of the time was the **Licensing Act of 1734**, which was enforced by the Parliament and that in many ways determined the fortunes and misfortunes of both theatre companies and playwrights by defining the tone and subject that could be developed into plays and by reiterating that only licensed companies could legally stay in business. Considering that there were only two companies that were granted the license (the Drury Lane and the Covent Garden), the number of plays that was needed decreased significantly.

The Licensing Act of 1734

The Licensing Act of 1734 was instituted by the British Parliament under the direct supervision of the prime minister, Sir Robert Walpole.

It basically established government censorship over any theatrical piece, as it appointed an Examiner who was to read and evaluate all the plays seeking to receive a license. The examiner would then proceed to present the plays with his recommendation for licensing to the Lord Chamberlain, who ultimately would grant or deny the license. All licensed plays would be included in the Lord Chamberlain's collection, which is now available at the British Library.

The Examiner was also tasked to visit the licensed theatres in order to make sure that the material was produced as it had been approved by the Lord Chamberlain.

While some form of government supervision had been in place previously during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, the Licensing Act of 1734 exercised a stronger grip on theatre, mostly to shush political criticism and political satire.

The Licensing Act of 1734 was repealed by the Theatre Act of 1843.

The first half of the 1700s saw genres following more conventional and socially accepted themes. For comedies, there is a significant shift towards sentimentalism and the re-establishment of morals. Two playwrights who championed this trend were **George Farquhar** (1678-1707) and **Colley Cibber** (1671-1757). Farquhar's style is a direct evolution of Congreve's, with the attention being on the characters' moral journey. Cibber instead focused on complex plots that generated a variety of obstacles to the characters and that culminated with a somewhat unearned resolution and happy ending. A slight shift in the genre is provided by Sir Richard Steele (1672-1729). While still heavily relying on sentimentalism, Steele moves the action to his contemporary days and locations and gives voice to middle-class or lower-class characters, who, because of their virtuosity, after going through a series of adversities, are socially and economically rewarded.

Later in the century, the sentimentalist trend fades away and playwrights embrace a more immediate style of comedy, often referred to as the "laughing comedy". Masters of this style are **Richard Brinsley Sheridan** (1751-1816) and **Oliver Goldsmith** (1730-2794).

Goldsmith is remembered for the play *She Stoops to Conquer*, which is still very popular today. The comedy banks on all possible comedic devices, including mistaken identities, misunderstandings, violation of social hierarchy, trickery, and bawdy, everyday language. Sheridan tended to abide by more uplifting and morally satisfying plots and characters, his strengths being a great use of wit through the characters' dialogue, language in general, and an outstanding portrayal of the English society of the time.

Tragedies and other forms of theatre

Other forms of theatre didn't disappear during the 18th Century, although comedies still won the popularity contest.

For the entire century, tragedies also rode the sentimentalist vibe, mostly relying on "underdog" characters or pathetic heroes/heroines. Characters more and more represented the middle and working classes rather than the upper class

and the nobles, in an attempt to make the plays more relatable for the audience. Tragedies were still tasked to carry an educational message; therefore, some playwrights – most notably **George Lillo** (1693-1739)- believed that it was imperative to craft stories that were closer to the audience.

Because of the Licensing Act of 1734, genres that didn't (or wouldn't) fall directly under the category of "theatrical performances" gained popularity, as they could be performed by unlicensed companies in unlicensed spaces. This determined the rise of the popularity of pantomimes and the Ballad Opera.

English **pantomime** is an evolution of Commedia dell'Arte as experienced by the English through the work of the Italian touring troupes. A good representation of it is given by the work of John Rich (1692- 1761), whose pantomimes often revolved around typical commedia stock characters, such as Arlequin.

Ballad Opera echoed the popularity and the style of the Italian Opera Buffa. The most famous ballad opera is certainly John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* – which will later become the inspiration for Bertolt Brecht's *The Threepenny Opera* (1928). The greatest difference between the Italian Opera Buffa and Gay's Ballad Opera is the greater use of dialogue between popular melodies and the depiction of middle and lower class characters rather than upper class ones.

The end of the 18th Century will mostly see English theatre steer towards melodrama, which will constitute a major player in the following century.

Theatrical Spaces

During the Restoration, theatrical buildings in England, and specifically in London, blended some of the elements of the Elizabethan theatre with those of the Italian style theatre.

The most famous theatres of the time were the Drury Lane, Lincoln's Inn (which was a converted tennis court), and the Dorset Garden.

The biggest difference between these theaters and those used during Elizabethan times was that open-air theatres gradually disappeared in favor of indoor spaces. The proscenium arch was consistently implemented, perspective painting was applied to the scenery, and the stage and the house floors were raked to allow better sightlines for the audience. The stage was divided into two parts by the proscenium arch, a downstage one (towards the audience) called the apron, and an upstage one that was used almost exclusively for the scenic design. The apron was the area where the actors would be performing, and it was very deep. On its sides, two to four doors opened (one or two doors on each side) to the stage, and at times, there would be balconies above the doors. The doors were used for the entrances and exits of the actors, while the balconies added options for levels and "special appearances".

The upstage area was also very deep to accommodate the scenery. Differently from what was happening in continental Europe, England did not implement Torelli's pole-and-chariot system and preferred to use the "grove system", where the painted flats were stacked in front of one another. Stagehands and crew would operate them so that when a scene change needed to happen, the flats would be pulled into the wings, revealing new ones on stage.

Because the scenic needs of the theatrical pieces of the time were quite similar, all the painted wings, flats, and shutters represented standard places, such as the garden and the drawing room, and were utilized for all plays according to need.

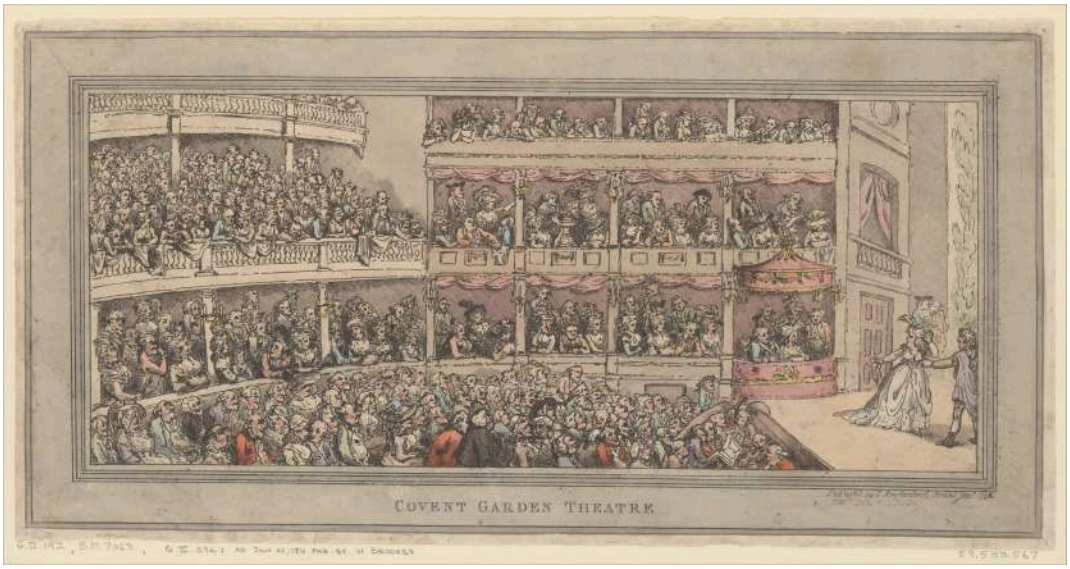
As for the seating area, there were three distinct areas: the pit, close to the stage, boxes, and galleries. The pit was now furnished with wooden benches, so the audience was able to sit.

Over the 18th Century, English theatres found a more balanced compromise between the depth of the apron and the upstage area of the stage: the apron became narrower while the area behind the proscenium arch started to become a

shared space for scenery and acting. This new arrangement of the space implies that the side doors to the apron have been reduced from four to two, one on each side.

Because the Drury Lane and the Lincoln's Inn were the only two official/legitimate (aka, licensed) theatres in London, they underwent several renovations to accommodate a wider audience, as originally they were both fairly small, seating around 600 people.

For example, as the Covent Garden theatre replaced Lincoln's Inn in 1732, it was designed to seat around 1,400 people. Later in 1784, it underwent a renovation that brought the house to seat 2,500 people, and finally, in 1792, the theatre was completely redesigned and built to accommodate 3,000 people.



Covent Garden Theatre, print, Thomas Rowlandson, 1792 (MET, 59.533.567) CC0, via Wikimedia Commons

TAKEAWAYS

Charles II restored the monarchy and reopened theatres.

Both theatres and theatre companies needed to receive the royal license to legally be allowed to work.

The only two legal companies were William Davenant's and Thomas Killigrew's ones and they resided in the Drury Lane and the Lincoln's Inn Theatres.

Women were allowed to act.

The acting style was still non-realistic, although some attempts at greater realism were pursued by a few actors, such as Nell Gwyn, Charles Mackin, and David Garrick.

Theatre companies abandoned the sharing plan in favor of a contract system.

The most popular genre of the Restoration and the 18th Century was comedy.

Restoration comedies set themselves apart for their bawdiness and explicit sexual content.

The most popular playwrights of the Restoration are Wycherley and Congreve.

During the second half of the 18th Century, both comedies and tragedies tended to become more sentimental, up until the works of Sheridan and Goldsmith at the very end of the century.

Tragedies were not exceedingly popular.

Pantomime and Ballad Operas reflected the influence of Italian touring troupes.

The Licensing Act of 1734 marked a significant shift in the trajectory of plays and the theatre in general.

Theatrical spaces became exclusively indoor and somewhat merged features of the Elizabethan theatres and of the Italian style theatres.

While perspective drawing was introduced in scenery, English Theatres still relied on the grove system rather than on Torelli's chariot-and-pole system for scene changes.

Actor and theatre manager David Garrick could be considered one of the early fathers of modern theatre directing.

Vocabulary

King Charles I

Oliver Cromwell

First English Civil War

The New Model Army

Commonwealth

King Charles II

Restoration

William Davenant

Thomas Killigrew

Drury Lane Theatre

Lincoln's Inn Theatre

Covent Garden Theatre

Boy players

Edward Kynaston

Benefit performances

Charles Macklin

Pantomime

Ballad Opera

Statute of Anne

Nell Gwyn

David Garrick

Aphra Behn

John Dryden

Sir George Etherege

William Congreve

William Wycherley

The Country Wife

The Way of the World

The Rover

The Licensing Act of 1734

Sir Robert Walpole

Richard Brinsley Sheridan

Oliver Goldsmith

She Stoops to Conquer

John Gay – The Beggar's Opera

Apron

Grove system

ACTIVITY FOR THE CLASSROOM

This activity focuses on better understanding the topics and the themes of Restoration theatre in England, and it should be done after the instructor has introduced the period.

The instructor should divide the students into small groups (3 to 4 students per group).

Each group should be assigned a theme to research and further develop.

Examples include: a playwright, the advent of female actors, the changes in theatre design and architecture, the changes in costume design, the political and social satire embedded in the plays, and the nature of the audience.

Groups should be given access to the internet to do some in-class research and should prepare a 5-minute presentation about their assigned topic, which should include a grounding in history, such as some historical facts that might have influenced (and how) that particular topic/development in theatre.

Each group should also reference some source material OTHER than the textbook (or Wikipedia). The instructor should be available for consultation about possible sources.

Finally, each group should investigate and provide a supported opinion on whether and what still resonates in modern platforms that might be similar or derived from the Restoration style.

Each group should present its work to the class.

Historical Timeline by Jennifer King.

Time Period	Event	Significance
1603	Death of Queen Elizabeth I	Ends the Tudor dynasty; James VI of Scotland becomes James I of England, beginning the Stuart reign.
1625	King Charles I* becomes King*	Advocates of divine right monarchy; his reign led to tensions with Parliament, eventually impacting the theatre.
1642	*Start of *First English Civil War	Conflict between Royalists and Parliament's New Model Army; all public theaters are officially closed.
1649	*Execution of Charles I; establishment of the *Commonwealth	Theatre is outlawed under Oliver Cromwell's Puritan rule; underground performances begin.
1650s	William Davenant stages musical dramas secretly	Uses his home for performances; he evades restrictions by framing plays as concerts.
1658	Death of Cromwell; brief rule of son Richard	Political instability leads to calls for monarchy restoration.
1660	Restoration of the monarchy under Charles II	Theatres re-open; royal support rejuvenates theatrical culture.
1660s	William Davenant and Thomas Killigrew granted patents	Exclusive legal control over the theater in London; establish Drury Lane Theatre and Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre.
1662	Women are allowed on stage	A milestone; boy players begin to phase out; Edward Kynaston is a notable exception who adapts.
1660s–1670s	Nell Gwyn becomes a celebrated actress	Former orange seller becomes stage star and mistress to Charles II.
1660s–1680s	Growth of satire and audience interaction	Restoration theatres reflect class divides (pit, boxes, galleries); social satire aimed at the aristocracy resonates with audiences.
1660s–1690s	Rise of Comedy of Manners	Witty, satirical comedies emerge that mock aristocratic behaviors and social norms; key playwrights include Wycherley, Etherege, and later Congreve.
1670s	Rise of benefit performances	Actors receive proceeds from designated shows; introduced contractual compensation.
1675	Premiere of *The Country Wife* by William Wycherley	Exemplifies bawdy, satirical Restoration comedy.
1677	*All for Love* by John Dryden	Signals the emergence of neoclassical tragedy influenced by Shakespeare.
1679–1689	The work of Aphra Behn gains prominence	One of the first professional female playwrights, author of The Rover, known for strong female leads.
1688	Glorious Revolution: William and Mary ascend	Ends the Restoration era politically; begins a shift in theatrical themes.
1700	*The Way of the World* by William Congreve	Peak of Restoration comedy; signals transition to sentimental drama.
1702–1714	Reign of Queen Anne	Parliament's power expands; theater licensing becomes stricter.
1709	Passage of the Statute of Anne	First law protecting authors' rights; impacts playwright ownership.
1714	Accession of George I (Hanoverian dynasty)	The theater was influenced by Parliament; Sir Robert Walpole became de facto ruler.
1734 (enforced 1737)	Licensing Act enforced	Censorship of plays begins; only Drury Lane and Covent Garden Theatre are licensed to perform.
1730s–1760s	Sentimental comedy dominates	Writers like Colley Cibber, George Farquhar, and Sir Richard Steele focus on moral themes and virtue.

1740s–1770s	The career of David Garrick flourishes	Reforms acting and rehearsal processes; promotes historical costuming and realism; revitalizes Drury Lane Theatre.
1760s–1770s	Charles Macklin innovates realistic acting	Especially known for portraying Shylock in Merchant of Venice without caricature.
1769	Shakespeare Jubilee hosted by Garrick	Celebrates Shakespeare's legacy; solidifies him as the national poet.
1773	*She Stoops to Conquer* by Oliver Goldsmith	Embraces "laughing comedy," contrasting sentimentalism.
1777	*The School for Scandal* by Richard Brinsley Sheridan	Classic example of wit and social satire in late 18th-century theatre.
1728	*The Beggar's Opera* by John Gay premieres	Launches the Ballad Opera genre; critiques society using popular tunes and dialogue.
Mid–late 1700s	Pantomime and Ballad Opera gained popularity	Unlicensed genres thrive under the restrictions of the Licensing Act.
Mid–late 1700s	Rise of the middle class	Theater content begins to reflect middle-class values, especially in comedy and sentimental tragedy.
Late 1700s	Enlightenment ideals influence theatre	Focus on reason, character development, and individual agency shapes dramatic storytelling.
Late 1700s	Expansion of printed texts	Increased access to plays and actor memoirs builds celebrity culture and spreads theatrical tastes.
18th century	Shift to indoor theaters; architectural change	Use of apron stages, grove system for scenery; larger auditoriums, e.g., Covent Garden Theatre, rebuilt multiple times to expand capacity.

9. The 18th Century in Continental Europe

ITALY

Drama

For almost all of the 18th Century, Italian theatre was dominated by opera and performances focusing on music and dance. Straight plays and dramas did not get a lot of attention, with playwrights tending to write librettos for operas rather than investing in writing self-standing plays. Tragedies suffered the most, as we will have to wait until the very end of the century to see them flourish again under the hand of Vittorio Alfieri (1749-1803). The only tragedy of the early 1700s worth mentioning is Francesco Scipione di Maffei's Merope, which recounts a classical story.

Between 1700 and 1750, the popularity of the *Intermezzi* grew significantly, leading them to become their own standalone genre: the *opera buffa*, or comedic opera (as opposed to the more traditional *opera seria*). Opera Buffa developed primarily in the south of Italy and then spread to up north to Milan and Venice.

These theatrical pieces could be one or two-act plays, featuring everyday characters (commoners) dealing with extravagant and comedic situations. Most of the operas were sung, but unlike opera seria, dialogue also had a significant role. The use of dialect instead of "Italian" was frequent, to appeal to the less learned audience.



Italian composer Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (1710-1736), by Vincenzo Roscioni, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Giovanni Battista Pergolesi (1710–1736), a Neapolitan, became a very popular writer of this genre, despite his very short life. His most famous opera is *La Serva Padrona* (*The Maid Turned Mistress*), which is one of the few opera buffas still performed today. It is a short, forty-minute-long piece, divided into parts. The plot sees Serpina, the servant in the house of Uberto, becoming more and more arrogant and domineering with his master to the point that Uberto asks his friend Vespone to find him a wife, so that he could get rid of Serpina. Yet, Serpina convinces Vespone to trick Uberto into marrying her. The happy ending sees Serpina and Uberto happily married, as Uberto had realized he had loved her all along.

Aside from Pergolesi, another famous opera buffa author is **Alessandro Scarlatti** (1660-1725), who is also from Naples. Differently from Pergolesi, Scarlatti didn't just focus on opera buffa, and his name is associated with most genres of the time, including opera seria, sonatas, cantatas, concerto grosso, and mass.

Comedies had a better following than tragedies, although the popularity of Commedia dell'Arte generated a myriad of plays that did not necessarily excel in quality. Plot lines started to be repetitive, characters became predictable (and therefore, less comedic) while greater attention was devoted to spectacle

and adding music whenever possible. Happy endings weren't always truly earned, and plays started to really delve into sentimentalism.

Yet, two playwrights must be acknowledged: Carlo Goldoni (1707-1793) and Carlo Gozzi (1720-1806), who both lived and worked mostly in Venice.



Alessandro Longhi – Ritratto di Carlo Goldoni (c 1757) Ca Goldoni Venezia.
CC BY-SA 4.0

Carlo Goldoni wrote almost compulsively, penning over 150 comedies, a few tragedies, and over 80 musical dramas. The child of a middle-class family, he was originally from Venice but traveled extensively with Commedia dell'Arte troupes both nationally and internationally. He wrote in Italian, in Venetian, and because he was very much appreciated in France, he also wrote in French. He held a law degree and, at times, practiced as a lawyer in Venice. Interestingly, his first play to be produced was a tragedy, titled *Amalasunta*, which was staged in Milan in 1733.

He profoundly admired Molière and continued working on comedies, trying to combine the French playwright's style with the strongest elements of Commedia dell'Arte.

His "comedic reform" intended to give comedy a higher status among genres by widening its intended audience and introducing a more relatable set of circumstances and characters. He advocated for writing a full script, rather than just a plot line, as previously customary in Commedia dell'Arte, with fully developed and scripted characters. This would mark the end of improvisation. While not completely abandoning some of the conventions of Commedia dell'Arte, he significantly reduced the use of masks. Most of his plays don't make any use of the masks, while others only leave them on servants. Goldoni's characters are less stereotypical than those we find in Commedia dell'Arte, and they speak truer to their environment, their social status, and their specific given circumstances. Plays provided an insight into relatable situations and institutionalized social hierarchies, leaving the audience guessing about the similarities with their everyday reality.

Goldoni considered writing for the theatre his main career, and therefore, he paid attention and tried to fulfill the audience's expectations as much as possible. This caused some stir among scholars, who considered him to be too "commercial". This resulted in a literary feud between him and two other writers, Carlo Gozzi and Pietro Chiari.

Considering the number of great comedies written by Goldoni, it is hard to select those that could be considered his best. For this chapter, the following should be mentioned: *Servant of Two Masters*, originally written in 1746 and then revised in its final form in 1789, *The Two Venetian Twins* (1747), *The Mistress of the Inn* (1751) and *The Boors* (1760).

Servants of Two Masters, also known as *Arlequin Servant of Two Masters*, was originally written for the famous actor Antonio Sacchi, who excelled in the role of Arlequin. The protagonist of the play is the servant, Truffaldino, who decides to serve two different masters to earn more money (and food). This will lead to confusion, mistakes, and ultimately chaos.

The Two Venetian Twins is based on Roman playwright Plautus's *Menaechmi* and sees two twins who had been separated

at birth ending up in Verona at the same time, one there to marry his fiancée and the other to meet his runaway girlfriend. Mistaken identities and slapstick comedy make this piece of theatre still popular to this day.

The Mistress of the Inn is centered around Mirandolina, a very clever and beautiful young woman who runs an Inn in Florence. She is set to marry her devoted servant and waiter at the inn, Fabrizio, but she hopes to marry up as three noble suitors constantly show up at her inn. In the end, she will relent and marry poor Fabrizio, although she admits not to love him and to marry him only because he won't be an obstacle to her freedom.

The Boors follows the adventures of four very conservative Venetian merchants, who "fight" the frivolous new trends that are coming to town. This piece is relevant for its social satire and direct and honest depiction of the patriarchal Venetian middle class of the time. The four merchants, Lunardo, Maurizio, Simon, and Canciano, all try to suffocate their wives' desires for some freedom and a modern lifestyle. This comedy is entirely written in Venetian dialect.

Contemporary Italian productions of Goldoni's play respect their original language, so if they are written in Venetian dialect, that's how they are performed. Yet, the use of subtitles is often introduced, in particular for productions outside of Venice.

In 1753, Goldoni left Italy to become the main playwright of the Comédie Italienne in Paris, where he eventually died in 1793. His departure was partially due to financial difficulties and to the feud with Petro Chiari, which culminated in the two playwrights "fighting" through plays. Chiari wrote several parodies of Goldoni's plays to criticize Goldoni's new approach to the comedic genre and his ultimate disrespect for its original form.

Pietro Chiari (1712–1785) lived his entire life in Venice, although he was born (and would later die) in Brescia. He was a Jesuit, but he left the order in 1747 to become the court poet of the Duke Francesco III d'Este. He published articles, scholarly essays, poems, and satirical pieces, along with several comedies. His aesthetic and social views were generally very conservative, and it all surfaced in his writings. His comedies were a direct response, or a parody even, to Goldoni's new comedic style, which Chiari overtly disliked and criticized.

Eventually, time will resolve the *quan drum*: while Goldoni's works are still widely produced today all over the world, Chiari's plays receive little to no attention.

Carlo Gozzi (1720-1806) was another Venetian playwright and scholar who didn't quite agree with Goldoni's new comedic style and re-definition of the genre. His main mission was to preserve and perpetuate the principles of Commedia dell'Arte, so when Goldoni claimed the need to modernize the style, he fiercely opposed it by writing plays in the "original" style of Commedia dell'Arte. His plots revolved around fairy tales and mythical elements. His first play, *L' L'Amore delle Tre Melarance* (*The Love for the Three Oranges*), dated 1761, is his manifesto against both Goldoni's and Chiari's concept of comedy. The play was very successful and prompted him to keep writing, resulting in a series of theatrical fables, some of which are still very popular, including *Turandot* and *La Donna Serpente* (*The Serpent Woman*). His success transcended the confines of Italy, and many of his works were well-received and produced in Austria and Germany. Moreover, Gozzi's *Turandot* inspired Puccini's opera by the same title.

Yet again, today, Goldoni is still the most popular Italian playwright of the time when it comes to plays in production.



Portrait of Carlo Gozzi (1720-1806). Unknown engraver, CC BY 1.0

Architectural spaces and theatrical design

The end of the 17th Century and the whole 18th Century saw Italy building bigger and more "technologically" advanced theatres. The proscenium arch, the chariot-and-pole system, the painted scenery, and the perspective became staples, allowing productions to be more and more spectacular.

As a general trend, some of the neoclassic features of the Renaissance – such as the use of symmetry in the design, the homage to classic elements and the use of rectangular shapes – tended to be abandoned in favor of the new predicaments of the up-and-coming Baroque style, which aimed at achieving more extravagant designs and theatrical spaces through the use of lavish decoration, curvilinear shapes and asymmetrical spaces. The goal was to provide an idea of grandeur, splendor, and monumentality. In this regard, columns, friezes, arches, and pediments were still very much employed, yet they became more ornate and detailed.

Scenic design, along with theatre design, remained for the most part a "family business." The Bibiena family, in particular, specialized in theatrical design and built several theatres in Italy and all over Europe. **Ferdinando Bibiena** (1657-1743) is credited for introducing the "*angle perspective*" (scena ad angolo), which would significantly change the perception of the scenery by providing two vanishing points (instead of just one) on the upstage panels of the setting. In this manner, the scenery could be arranged on the stage in a way that didn't exclusively rely on central sightlines.

Ferdinando Bibiena also modified the scale of the sets and more clearly divided the stage into a lower part, which would be where the actors would perform, and an upper part that would be used as a background for the scene, providing a much greater illusion of space.

In the downstage area, there would be the usual sets of wings operated by the chariot-and-pole system.

Another important architect of the time was **Filippo Juvarra** (1678-1737). He worked in Naples and in Turin, which were to become the artistic "hubs" of the new style in Italy for the entire century. Juvarra's style fully embraces the Baroque aesthetic, with a systematic use of curvilinear lines, which would create complex concentric spaces.

When it comes to scenery, Juvarra added draperies and exotic elements to his designs to enhance spectacle.

Other theatre designers included the Mauro family, mostly active in Germany, and the Galliari family, who worked mostly in Turin and Milan.

In the second part of the 18th Century, there is a slight move back towards a leaner and less ornate design style. This came as one of the consequences of the rediscovery of several Roman archaeological sites, such as Pompei and Ercolano. As the sites were excavated, bringing the ruins back to fruition, many artists were able to have access to them and draw them. The circulation of these drawings and engravings made Pompei and Ercolano incredibly popular, steering designers to emulate some of their features. One of the most famous artists portraying the ruins is **Giovanni Battista Piranesi** (1720-1778), who is believed to be the author of more the one thousand engravings. He is credited for introducing the concept of "mood" in his drawings, a concept that will then also be applied to scenic design. "Mood" meant that designers started to consider how the light could influence the perception of the space. Atmospheric textures, qualities, and shadows were applied to scenic design to better render a time of day or a location.

TAKEAWAYS

Pergolesi's Opera Buffa became a very popular genre in Italy, combining original music with more compelling storytelling.

One of the most popular Italian playwrights of the time was Carlo Goldoni, who wrote mostly comedies. He moved forward from Commedia dell'Arte and theorized a new form of comedy.

Another famous playwright, mostly writing comedies, is Carlo Gozzi, who was more interested in the traditional aspect of Commedia.

Carlo Gozzi and Carlo Goldoni had opposite ideas about the genre of comedy and its connection with Commedia dell'Arte.

When it comes to architecture, the greatest innovation of the century was the introduction of the *angled perspective* ("scena ad angolo") by Bibiena. Another important name in scenic design and theatre architecture is Juvarra.

Many designers and architects of the time were mostly influenced by the rediscovery of the Roman archaeological sites as depicted, for example, by Piranesi.

FRANCE

The 18th Century will bring many changes in France, changes that will lead to a completely new social, political, and artistic scenario in the following century.

In the first few decades of the 1700s, France was at war against Spain, England, and Austria. In the meantime, they also lost several of their overseas colonies. All this significantly impacted the state finances and resulted in heavy taxation on the rising middle class.

Paris remained the center of all the cultural life of the country, and of Europe in general, despite all the turmoil.

There were only two "official" resident companies in Paris: the Comédie Française and the Opéra. The first one was only producing straight plays (both comedies and tragedies), while the second one focused on operas and plays with music. Both these companies received an allowance from the state and from the city of Paris, yet, because of the number of plays they put on, the increasing number of resident actors and artists in them, and the not-so-great audience attendance, they always struggled financially.

In terms of acting and actors' training, France was ahead of the game when, in 1786, the Royal Dramatic School was funded, within the premises and under the supervision of the Comédie Française. The school provided rigorous training and paired the students with company members, who functioned as mentors. Students would shadow (or understudy) said company members for at least a couple of years, and they would perform at least three times in front of an audience.

In 1716, an Italian Commedia dell'Arte troupe – the Comédie Italienne – led by Luigi Riccoboni was granted the use of the Hôtel de Bourgogne, thus becoming the third legal company to be able to work in Paris.

Unofficially, though, many other small theatres and theatre companies operated in and around town, producing a lot of new works that were more akin to the taste of the masses. These theater companies originally performed during fairs, specifically the St. Germain fair (from the beginning of February to Easter) and the St. Laurent fair (from the end of June through October). Later, these theatre companies found their own home in small venues and buildings around Boulevard du Temple, thus acquiring the name of "**boulevard theatres**". They were operated privately by managers, who were financially responsible for them. It could be said that boulevard theatres were more "commercial", as their fortunes – or misfortunes – entirely depended on the success of their production and the audience attendance.

Boulevard theatres mostly produced opéra comiques (comic opera), which evolved greatly during the century as they embraced a more sentimental trend in plots and characters, veering away from farcical situation comedies and from Commedia dell'Arte stock characters, added popular tunes first and original music later, and finally incorporated dance sequences. The addition of original music to the French opera comique is attributed to the popularity of Giovanni Battista Pergolesi's The Servant Mistress, which opened at the Comédie Italienne in 1752. Pergolesi's work triggered the so-called ***Querelle des Bouffons*** (The Fight of the Comic Actors), a feud between the supporters of the Italian style opera and the French one. The more "progressive" scholars, philosophers, and thinkers – mostly those involved in writing the Encyclopédie – favored the more spontaneous and original Italian opera, while the more conservative scholars would advocate for French composers, such as Lully. This dispute went on for a couple of years, was basically never "resolved", and produced about forty pamphlets.

Drama

French playwrights of this period stayed true to the artistic trend that had been originated by Racine in the previous decades. Plots still preferred mythological and classical themes, and tended to be complex and rather long. Tragedies also needed to have elevated language.

The French playwrights that contributed to French theatre and who are worth mentioning in the 18th Century are: Joseph de LaGrange-Chancel (1677-1758), Prosper Jolyot Crébillon (1674-1762), Voltaire (1694-1778), and Denis Diderot (1713-1784) for drama and tragedies; Florent-Carton Dancourt (1661-1725), Pierre Carlet de Chamblin de Marivaux (1688-1763), Alain René Le Sage (1668-1747), and Pierre Claude Nivelle de LaChaussée (1692-1754) for comedies. At the end of the century, the biggest name in French theatre was Pierre Augustin Caron, known as Beaumarchais (1732-1799).

Both LaGrange-Chancel and Crébillon really focused on forwarding the style and themes previously developed by Racine. Their tragedies were rooted in Classic myths, to which they provided their own spin. **LaGrange-Chancel** focused

on characters and on their development and provided his plays with several reversals and subplots, and at times he even settled for a happy ending: all elements that veered away from the Neoclassic principles. Some of his plays, like *Ino and Mélicerte*, for example, can almost be considered melodramas. Contrarily, **Crébillon** stayed true to the gruesome nature of the tragic genre. He even added his ideas to myths and classic plots in order to increase the horrifying experience for the audience. An example of this lies in his *Electra*, a play based on the Classic Greek Theban cycle as portrayed in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*. Crébillon gives Aegisthus two children, so that they could become a greater obstacle to his internal motivation.



Portrait of Voltaire by Nicolas de Largillière, 1724. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

François-Marie Arouet, known as **Voltaire**, is one of the most influential French scholars of the 18th Century, who also happened to write some very good plays (out of a total of fifty-three). Most of his work, regardless of the platform, reflects his philosophical and social ideas, which revolved around freedom of thought and religion. He was the son of a lawyer, who wanted his son to follow in his footsteps, and while he did study law and practice it for some time, he was most interested in becoming a writer. Young Voltaire also had very strong ideas about social justice and freedom of thought, which meant that he often criticized the government….which meant he got in trouble a few times and was imprisoned twice. Later, he went to England as a self-exile in order to avoid a third stint in jail. He stayed in England for two years, where he was exposed to British theatre and to Shakespeare in particular, which would leave quite an impression on him and eventually led him to advocate for the abandonment of the Neoclassic principles.

Voltaire traveled a lot, mostly spending time in Holland, Prussia, and Germany, following the invitations of local authorities. He finally returned to Paris at the age of 83 in 1778 to see the opening of his latest play, *Irene*. Yet, the journey took a toll on him, and he died a few months later.

Voltaire pleaded for a reform in theatre – amongst other things – specifically in the tragedies, as he claimed the Neoclassical principles were obsolete. While not completely rebelling against them, Voltaire advocated for widening the net of possible subjects to be developed and types of characters. He also reintroduced (some) violence on stage. Finally, his dislike for the common practice of having part of the audience on stage ultimately led to a final separation of the two spaces: the stage, for the exclusive use of the actors, and the house for the audience.

His most famous plays are *Zaire*, an ill-starred love story stained by false accusation and jealousy, and *Trancrède*, where the source of inspiration is a popular French tale of the Middle Ages. Both plays deal with subject matters and are set in time/locations that are somewhat "exotic," and these wouldn't have been considered suitable options in the previous century's theatrical aesthetic. *Zaire* is set in the Middle East and depicts the love between a Sultan and a slave, while *Trancrède starts* the trend of celebrating subjects of national heritage.

The idea of moving away from classic subject matter was furthermore championed by **Denis Diderot**, who can be credited for introducing a new genre, the "drame" (or domestic tragedy), which basically would include plays that didn't comply with the Neoclassic principles and definition of tragedy. Diderot claimed that it was important to provide an illusion of reality if the audience was expected to be moved by what they were seeing on stage; therefore, it was necessary to tell stories that were closer to the audience and featured characters they could potentially identify with. Everyday life situations could easily escalate through extraordinary circumstances, and ordinary characters could rise to the occasion as they would in real life. Diderot wasn't opposed to introducing elements of comedic relief as well, as such is life.

This ideology, which was common among several scholars, dramatists, and philosophers of the time, partially resulted from witnessing a shift in the demographic of French audiences, thanks to the rise of the middle class, the bourgeoisie.

Diderot's ideas can be found in the dialogue of a couple of his plays: *The Father of a Family* and *The Natural Son*, and most importantly in his essay *Discourse on Dramatic Poetry*.

In many ways, Diderot theorized what would become realism at the end of the 19th Century.



Denis Diderot
**oil on canvas*
**81 x 65 cm*
**signed: L. M. Van Loo / 1767*
Louis-Michel van Loo, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons.

In another significant essay, the *Paradox of Acting* (published after his death), Diderot claimed that actors needed to use technique to coax emotions rather than trying to emote those feelings themselves, and they went along. This would be the first time a similar concept would be brought forward regarding the technique of acting. In the following centuries, there will be much debate about this very concept that Diderot introduced.

Diderot's plays aren't very popular today, and he is mostly remembered for his work on the French *Encyclopédie*, a monumental endeavor that kept him writing and editing for over twenty years.

THE ENCYCLOPEDIE

Denis Diderot started working on the *Encyclopédie* in 1751, completing it in 1772.

The work was intended to be a comprehensive reference to learn about the sciences and the arts. It was to gather all the available knowledge and present it through the lenses of a critical and rational investigation so that it could be used for social advancement.

It became the vehicle of all the ideals and principles of the Enlightenment, a philosophical movement that advocated for a more secular and rational approach to politics, society, and the sciences. Because of its approach, the French government and the church condemned it and outlawed it in 1759. Yet, Diderot ignored the ban and kept working on it in secret with the other contributors, having the volumes published outside the borders of France, so that it wouldn't fall under the French jurisdiction.

The *Encyclopédie* comprised 28 volumes with contributions from 150 scholars, the most famous being Diderot himself, who wrote about 7000 articles in it, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Montesquieu. The most prolific contributor was Louis de Jancourt, who penned 17266 articles!

It became one of the first – and the most influential – works of the like, paving the way to all modern encyclopedias… Including Wikipedia!

When it comes to comedies, during the first part of the 18th Century, France was still very much following the lead and the preachings of Molière.

Comedies relied on plots involving the new up-and-coming middle class who aspired to live a social lifestyle that belonged to the upper classes.

Writers such as **Dancourt** and **Regnard** were very prolific and active in the theatrical scene in Paris, the first one primarily working at the Comédie-Française and the second one being a member of the Commedia troupe. One of Dancourt's most successful plays is *The Fashionable Gentleman*, whose protagonist is a gigolo who woos three wealthy women, hoping to socially (and economically) advance himself.

Regnard's work is more in the fashion of Commedia dell'Arte, with complex and fast-paced, farcical plots. This would also be the style of choice of **Marivaux**, who wrote about thirty-five plays and worked mostly with the Italian Commedia dell'Arte troupe in Paris. While Regnard's work is more plot-driven, Marivaux builds his plays more around characters and love stories, creating internal conflicts that the lover(s) need to overcome. In other words, Marivaux is more interested in exploring the psychology of the characters than his predecessors, thus allowing his characters to appear more well-rounded and realistic. It must be said that this is quite a novelty for the time, as usually lovers faced the opposition of external forces, such as their parents' different plans for them, and whatnot.

A French popular style of comedy in the first half of the XVIII century was the so-called ***comédie larmoyante*** (tearful comedy), which is best represented by **La Chaussée**'s plays, such as *Le Préjugé à la mode* or *La Fausse Antipathie*. In these plays, the audience empathizes with the protagonist as she/he go through a great deal of emotional turmoil and face obstacles to "earn" the happy ending.

Finally, the most successful and celebrated playwright of the end of the XVIII century would be Pierre Augustin Caron, known as **Beaumarchais**, an aristocratic name that he was able to adopt from one of his (three) wives. Beaumarchais' life was quite eventful for the times. He played the harp, wrote on several subjects, built clocks, and engaged in politics both nationally and internationally – even playing a part in the American Revolution. He trafficked in weapons, for which he was even arrested and imprisoned for a while.

Today, Beaumarchais is remembered for his character, Figaro, who appears in two of his plays: *The Barber of Seville* and its "sequel" *The Marriage of Figaro*. These two comedies were instant successes at the Comédie Française, banking and moving forward with all the most successful devices of Commedia dell'Arte. Both plays have been adapted into operas: *The Marriage of Figaro*, featuring a score from Mozart, and *The Barber of Seville*, a mere two years after the stage play premiered, featuring a score from Rossini.

Both plays' protagonist is Figaro, a witty servant and a barber who facilitates the marriage between his master – the

Count – and Rosina [*The Barber of Seville*] though a great deal of subterfuge and who, three years later [*The Marriage of Figaro*], is engaged to be married to Suzanne, another servant. Yet, the Count has grown bored with his wife and pretends to assert his right to the "act of primae noctis", which would allow him to sleep with Suzanne before her wedding with Figaro.

One of Beaumarchais' most important contributions to theatre came unexpectedly. In 1777, he founded the ***Bureau de Législation Dramatique*** – the first "union" representing playwrights and authors, which evolved into today's**Société des auteurs et compositeurs dramatiques.** The first task of the newly formed union was to establish a clear and enforced way authors were to be compensated, as at the time, companies took some liberties and ultimately took advantage of the work of their authors. Finally, the French National Assembly signed the first ever law on copyright and royalty payments in 1791. This law is seminal as it states that the authors (and their heirs) had complete ownership and control of their works, and companies should not alter the writing in any way.

Adrienne Lecouvreur

Adrienne Lecouvreur (1692-1730) is one of the most famous French actresses of the time. She mostly played tragic roles, queens, and princesses.



This picture depicts Adrienne Lecouvreur in the role of the tragic Cornelia in Pierre Corneille's play The Death of Pompey (1642). Charles-Antoine Coypel, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

She came from a family of artisans, her father being a hat maker who moved the family to Paris in order to improve the business. Adrienne didn't have a happy childhood: her mother died when she was still a child, and her father found solace in taverns and inns, leaving her and her sister mostly alone. That's when she secretly joined a young clandestine theatre troupe. Where she immediately showed her potential and was hired by a touring company and made her stage debut at 14 in Lille. She had several love affairs, had a child from an officer, and was engaged to be married to a baron who, unfortunately, died before their wedding. She eventually found a partner in the son of the city of Strasbourg's magistrate, the Count François de Klingklin, and they were engaged to be married. Yet, she got pregnant again, and the count's father managed to convince his son to call off the engagement to avoid the scandal.

In 1717, Adrienne left Strasbourg humiliated and in debt and moved back to Paris, where she was immediately invited to work with Comédie Française. Between 1717 and 1718, she performed 138 times, a record for a beginner.

Her greatest strength as an actor was her ability to portray characters more naturally, distancing herself from the overly stylized form of acting that had been a staple for decades. She also cared much about her wardrobe

and makeup, relying on simpler, less ornate gowns. In the Paris years, she had a romantic relationship with Maurice de Saxe, an officer and a famous military commander.

She died at the age of 37, under suspicious circumstances. Rumor had it that she had been poisoned by her rival in love, the Duchess of Bouillon, but no one has been able to confirm it.

Adrienne Lecouvreur's adventurous life has prompted many retellings of her story, including a 1849 play by Ernest Legouvé and Eugène Scribe and a 1902 opera by Francesco Cilea.

Theatrical Spaces and Costumes

French theatres didn't change much during the XVIII century in terms of innovations and design. Most "big" changes are, unfortunately, attributed to tragic events, such as fires burning venues to the ground. For example, the Opéra troupe had their theatre destroyed twice: the first time in 1763, when the Palais Royal burned down, and then again in 1781, when their new venue in the revised Salle Des Machines also succumbed to fire. The company eventually moved to a new theatre, the Porte-Saint-Martin, and stayed there until the end of the century.

The Comédie Française never moved from its converted tennis court until the end of the century, only changing a few minor things, most notably abolishing the presence of the audience on the stage and creating a more defined distinction between the stage and the house. In 1782, the company moved to a new theatre (the present-day Odéon), which was bigger and much better equipped. The theatre also only allowed the audience to be seated, thus eliminating the standing area in front of the stage (the pit).

Scenery greatly benefited from removing the audience from the stage, as it allowed for greater spectacle and more scenic effects to be implemented as the audience sight lines were now covered by masking and by some distance. Yet, most of the innovations in scenic design that were implemented in France actually came from Italy, such as, for example, the previously described "*scena ad angolo*" invented by Bibiena.

Costume design and practices also didn't change much from the previous century. Costumes either came from the actor's personal wardrobe or the company's stock. Famous actors would invest as much as they could in costumes, and often there was bitter rivalry about who had the best costumes.

A slight change in this direction happened with Adrienne Lecouvreur, one of the most well-known actresses of the time. As she became an advocate for a more realistic style of acting, she also applied that concept to her costumes, so for tragic roles she would wear a simple, classic-looking tunic, while for comedies she retained more fashionable attire, although much tamer than what the audience was used to seeing.

Germany

For most of the 17th Century and all throughout the 18th Century, theatre in Germany struggled to find and assert a national identity for a variety of reasons, some of which included language differences and political divisions. Most of the "established" theatre came from abroad –from Italy, France, and England– and was mostly for the

benefit of the upper classes, who had access to education. More popular forms of theatre, targeting less learned audiences, tended to still reflect Medieval practices and subjects or were presented by the church (mostly by the Jesuits) for educational purposes.

So towards the end of the 18th Century, German scholars, writers and philosophers, along with the Italians and the French ones, grew restless about this kind of indoctrination and about the Neoclassical principles and the previous century's interpretations of Aristotle's principles. Yet, the Germans veered towards a more emotional and somewhat irrational approach to life, which would translate into their artistic activity in all fields, theatre included. The biggest cultural movement pushing forward this neo-romantic agenda about individualism, freedom of speech, and of religion was called **Storm and Stress** (***Sturm und Drang***) and included people like Friedrich Schiller and Wolfgang Goethe. The movement was named after the title of a play by Friedrich Maximilian Klinger, who was also part of the group.

Storm and Stress advocated for a stronger emphasis on emotions, as they were considered the driving factor in human behavior. This would entail exploring and developing more intense dramatic structures and themes, as well as using more compelling and passionate language.

Individualism was also promoted, as it celebrated the uniqueness of each human being (in particular the rebels). Finally, artists felt a stronger attraction and connection to nature with all of its majestic power, and this deeply influenced all works of art.



Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, Oil painting by Joseph Karl Stieler, 1828. Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

An interesting feature of German theatre of this time is the rise of a more structured approach to theatrical activities, in particular with the work of **Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (**1749-1832). Goethe wrote all sorts of fiction and nonfiction, including the seminal novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, which many scholars consider the manifesto of German early Romanticism. As a playwright, he wrote several plays about classic myths and, notably, *Faust* (Parts 1 and 2), which is probably the most famous one to this day.

What sets Goethe apart from other playwrights and theatre artists of the time is his ongoing collaboration with fellow artist and playwright Friedrich Schiller at the Weimar theatre, which Goethe directed.

Many believe that Goethe's approach to staging Schiller's plays paved the way for what would become standard practice for directors. In particular, his rigorous approach to rehearsals and to the actors' need to be on time, know their lines, and work as an ensemble rather than as isolated units changed the German theatrical scenario of the time.

During his tenure as the director/manager of the Weimar theatre, Goethe wrote "Rules for Actors", a manual featuring more than 50 rules that actors needed to follow.

The Baroque Theater and the Castle complex in Český Krumlov (Czech Republic).

Český Krumlov is a small resort town in the Czech Republic, a couple of hours south of Prague and close to the Austrian border. The town and its monuments have been included in the UNESCO World Heritage Site. The most interesting sights include the Castle Complex and the Revolving Theatre.

The complex of the Castle included one of the only two fully operational baroque theatres in the world.

The Baroque theatre in Český Krumlov was built between 1680 and 1682 under the reign of Prince Johann Christian von Eggenberg. Prince Adam Zu Schwarzenberg renovated it in 1765, adding the new and modernized stage machinery to accommodate seamless scene changes and more special effects, and giving it a more Rococo vibe thanks to the design of Italian architect Andrea Altomonte.

During the 20th Century, the theatre was only used a few times, in 1902 and between 1958 and 1966 when it closed to the public. The preservation and renovation process took over thirty years, and in 1992, the theatre went under the management of the Foundation of the Baroque Theater in Český Krumlov. Scrupulous work from many experts over the years has allowed the theatre to regain all of its beauty and functionality, and it opened to the public again in 1997. While renovations are still ongoing, the theatre can operate tours and occasional productions of Baroque operas.

The Castle features another very interesting detail: a frescoed ballroom with some of the best preserved scenes of Commedia dell'Arte characters and masks.



View of the stage of the Baroque Theater in Český Krumlov. Photo courtesy of Kiara Pipino



Detailed view of the stage. Photo courtesy of Kiara Pipino.



A detail of the Chariot-and-Pole scene changes system housed below the stage of the Baroque Theater. Photo courtesy of Kiara Pipino.



Detail of the trap door – closed on the left and open to the stage on the right. Photo courtesy of Kiara Pipino.



Examples of the machinery used for special effects. At the back, close to the stage, a round spinning wooden wheel would generate rain sounds. Next to it, a vertical wooden plank with smaller dented wheels would be used to simulate thunder sounds. Finally, the wooden spinning barrel topped with fabric would be used to generate wind sounds. Photo courtesy of Kiara Pipino.



Fresco depicting Commedia dell'Arte Masks in the Ballroom of the Castle. Photo courtesy of Kiara Pipino.



Detail of one of the frescos in the Ballroom of the Castle. Note: Arlequin holding a slapstick. Photo courtesy of Kiara Pipino.



Another detail of the frescos in the Ballroom of the Castle. On the left, a nice depiction of Pantalone. Photo Courtesy of Kiara Pipino.

TAKEAWAYS

Paris was still the cultural center of France, despite the socio-political and economic turmoil the country was facing.

Opera comique became very popular, as it was introduced in Paris by the Italian theatre troupe. The Italian style comedic opera clashed with the French opera comique.

The three "official" theatre companies operating legally in Paris were the Opéra, the Comédie Française, and the Italian Company.

There were several smaller and private theatre companies that operated illegally, which were called Boulevard theatres. While the legal companies struggled financially, boulevard theatres were quite successful.

The most important writers of the time were Voltaire and Diderot, who were both involved in writing and editing the Encyclopédie.

Other important writers are: Dancourt, Regnard, La Chaussée, Marivaux, and Beaumarchais.

One of the most influential actresses of the time was Adrienne Lecouvreur.

In terms of theatrical design and architecture, France followed most innovations that were introduced by the Italians. Some new theatres opened as a result of old theatres burning down.

The greatest innovation was taking the audience off the stage and fully separating the performance space – the stage – from the auditorium. The standing space in front of the stage (the pit) was also abolished, so that the audience would only be seated.

Vocabulary

Giovanni Battista Pergolesi

Intermezzi

La Serva Padrona – The Maid Turned Mistress

Vittorio Alfieri

Alessandro Scarlatti

Carlo Goldoni

The Mistress of the Inn

Servants of Two Masters

The Boors

The Two Venetian Twins

Piero Chiari

Carlo Gozzi

L'Amore delle Tre Melarance – *The Love for the Three Oranges*

Turandot

Ferdinando Bibiena

Angle Perspective – scena ad angolo

Filippo Juvarra

Pompei and Ercolano

Giovanni Battista Piranesi

Comédie Française

Opéra

Boulevard Theatres

Querelle des Bouffons

LaGrange-Chancel

Prosper Jolyot Crébillon

Voltaire

Denis Diderot

Florent-Carton Dancourt

Pierre Carlet de Chamblin de Marivaux

Pierre Claude Nivelle de LaChaussée

Alain René Le Sage

Encyclopédie

Adrienne Lecouvreur

Bureau de Législation Dramatique

Exercises

Students should be researching the evolution of theatre in the 18th Century in other countries (including the U.S.A.).

The instructor should divide the class into groups, with up to 5 group members, and assign a country to each group.

Each group should then investigate the country they had been assigned and prepare a short 10-minute presentation on it.

The presentation should follow the format of the chapter of this book; therefore, it should include: a historical overview, the major playwrights (with their work), the evolution of theatrical spaces, the scenic design, costumes, and a brief investigation of the actors and theatre companies.

Each group should present its research to the class.

Historical Timeline by Jennifer King.

Time Period	Event	Significance
1701–1714	War of the Spanish Succession	Weakened France economically; rising middle-class taxation created social pressure that fueled Enlightenment and revolutionary ideals.
Early 1700s	Opera dominates Italian stages.	Straight plays and tragedies decline. Commedia dell'Arte becomes repetitive. Most playwrights write librettos instead of original plays.
1716	Comédie Italienne was established in Paris.	Italian troupe led by Luigi Riccoboni brings Commedia dell'Arte back to Paris, broadening theatrical diversity.
1724	*Merope* by Scipione Maffei was printed.	One of the only notable early 18thCentury Italian tragedies, rooted in classical themes.
1725–1750	Opera Buffa rises in southern Italy	Comedic operas in dialect became popular with common audiences; spread to Milan and Venice.
1733	Goldoni's first play, *Amalasunta*	A tragedy staged in Milan marks the beginning of Goldoni's prolific career.
1746	Goldoni writes *The Servant of Two Masters*	Blends scripted comedy with Commedia elements; signals move toward realism and away from improvisation.
1752	*La Serva Padrona* causes Querelle des Bouffons	Pergolesi's opera provokes public debate in Paris over Italian versus French musical theatre aesthetics.
1753	Goldoni moves to Paris	Leaves Venice to join Comédie Italienne due to artistic rivalry and financial instability.
1758	Diderot's Discourse on *Dramatic Poetry*	Advocates of the drama bourgeois—middle-class drama with realistic characters and moral situations.
1760	Goldoni writes *The Boors*	Written in Venetian dialect, satirizes conservative patriarchy and reflects growing middle-class voices.
1761	Gozzi writes *The Love of Three Oranges*	Launches a return to fairy-tale Commedia, opposing Goldoni's realism; gains popularity in Italy, Austria, and Germany.
1763	The Palais Royal burns down	The home of the Paris Opéra is destroyed by fire; theaters begin relocating and rebuilding.
1767	Hamburg National Theatre was founded	German theater reform mirrors Enlightenment ideals from France and Italy; national identity in the arts emerges.
1771–1772	Diderot's domestic dramas staged	*The Natural Son* and *The Father of a Family* promote realism and elevate the lives of ordinary people on stage.
1777	Beaumarchais founded the playwrights' union	Bureau de Législation Dramatique defends authors' rights, leading to early copyright legislation.
1782	Comédie Française moves to the Odéon	New theater architecture enforces physical separation between actors and audience; improves staging possibilities.
1784	*The Marriage of Figaro* premieres	Beaumarchais's revolutionary comedy critiques aristocratic privilege, long suppressed before its debut.
1789	The French Revolution begins	Theaters are nationalized; censorship intensifies, but revolutionary and class-conscious themes gain prominence.
1791	The first copyright law was passed in France	Ensures playwrights receive payment and creative control, a milestone for author rights in theater.
1793	Goldoni dies in Paris	He left behind over 150 comedies; his reforms shaped modern European comedy.
1830	Diderot's *Paradox of Acting* was published (he wrote it in 1773)	Posthumous essay sparks debates over acting theory: emotional truth vs. technical precision.

Book Credits

BOOK CREDITS

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Kiara is an Associate Professor of Theatre at SUNY Oneonta, where she teaches a variety of theatre classes along with directing productions. She is an Associate Artist at Prague Shakespeare Company (Prague, Czech Republic) and a Fulbright Awardee. She collaborates with several theatre companies and institutions nationally and internationally (including The National Theatre of Genoa, Italy, The Actor's Guild of the Philippines, PETA), directing productions, translating plays, and conducting workshops. She was awarded the Best Director of a Play Award twice and the Distinguished Dramaturg Award once by the Kennedy Center. She was also awarded Best Director of a Play by BroadwayWorld Philippines for the direction of the Asian premiere of Lauren Gunderson's *The Half Life of Marie Curie* (2024). She has published with Routledge (*Women Writing and Directing in the USA. A Stage of Our Own*), with the University of Trento (*Theatre and Pietas*), and with Kendall Hunt (*Conquering the Stage* and *Dead by Jack*). This is her second book for the Open Repository, her first one being *#TheatreAppreciation*, serving Theatre Appreciation/ Introduction to Theatre classes. Her research focuses on female voices in contemporary theatre, on Shakespeare and the Classics, along with Theatre for Social Change.

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Caterina Mordeglia is Professor of Roman Drama at the University of Trento. In 2024, she was a Short Visiting Professor at the University of Cincinnati (USA). She especially studies the works of Plautus, Seneca, and Terentius and their fortunes in the Middle Ages and Modern Age, both in a philological and literary perspective. About Roman drama, she published several essays in international peer-reviewed reviews and edited three collected volumes, "Gruppi, folle e popolo in scena. Persistenza del classico nel teatro europeo (Trento, 2012), "Animali parlanti. Letteratura, teatro, canzoni" (Florence, 2017), "Seneca. Il futuro della scena" (Pisa, 2023). In 2024, she translated Plautus' *Miles Gloriosus* for the stage of the Greek Theatre of Siracusa (Sicily, Italy). The translation, with an introduction and a commentary, will be published by Feltrinelli in 2026. She is co-editor of the international series "Fabula" (Sismel Publisher, Florence), and is a member of the editorial board of the classical reviews "Maia. Rivista di letterature classiche" and "Dioniso. Rivista di teatro antico dell'Istituto Nazionale del Dramma Antico" – INDA).

Jennifer King

Jennifer King is an award-winning Professor of Theater at Napa Valley College, where she heads the Theater Arts and Film Studies Department, and Shakespeare Napa Valley. A professional theater director, her regional and international credits include work with Prague Shakespeare Company (Associate Artist), Marin Shakespeare Company, California Shakespeare Theater, Dallas Theater Center, The 222, Capital Stage, SF PlayGround, Berkeley Playhouse, Cinnabar Theater, Symmetry Theatre, and Sonoma County Repertory Theater (where she served as Executive/Artistic Director).

She is also a champion of new work, having collaborated with Reduced Shakespeare Company co-artistic directors/playwrights Reed Martin and Austin Tichenor to develop five of their plays, and directed Laura Jane Bailey's award-winning solo show *The Paris Effect*. She has also directed at Nanjing University (China), Kingston University (London), Sonoma State University, and UC Davis, where she co-edited Reflections of Diversity, A Scene Book for Actors.

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