THE HISTORY OF EUROPEAN THEATRE

By: Elizabeth Comtois

Ms. Munley's 2nd Period

EUROPEAN THEATRE IN THE MIDDLE AGES

❖ After the fall of the Roman Empire, small nomadic bands traveled around performing wherever there was an audience. They consisted of storytellers, jesters, jugglers and many other performers.

❖ Church dominance:

- In one type of church service, called *The Hours*, Bible stories were dramatized. Music was often incorporated into the dramatizations.

- The first written-down liturgical play was *Regularis Concordia* by Ethelwold, Bishop of Winchester.

- The majority of performances were held in monasteries at the beginning of the age. Small scenic structures called mansions were used as sets. Religious drama was performed exclusively in churches until around 1200 when they were performed outside on occasion.

- Costumes for liturgical drama were church clothing. Most of the lines of the drama were chanted in Latin rather than spoken.

MIDDLE AGES THEATRE (CONT'D)

❖ Between the years 1200 to 1350, vernacular plays took over liturgical plays.

❖ By the end of the 14th century, the church controlled less and less of the production of plays, but it always reserved the right to approve or disapprove the contents and presentation.

❖ Mystery Cycle plays:

- Composed of many short plays or episodes; represented secular theatre with a religious theme, whether from biblical or church writings.

- The length ranged from a few hours to 25 or more days.

- In England, trade guilds took responsibility for certain plays. (Example: Shipwrights staged the building of Noah's ark.)

- Performed on mansions or pageant wagons; the wagons gave the stage mobility to move from place to place.

- The plays abandoned the uniformity of Latin, allowing national differences and customs to emerge.
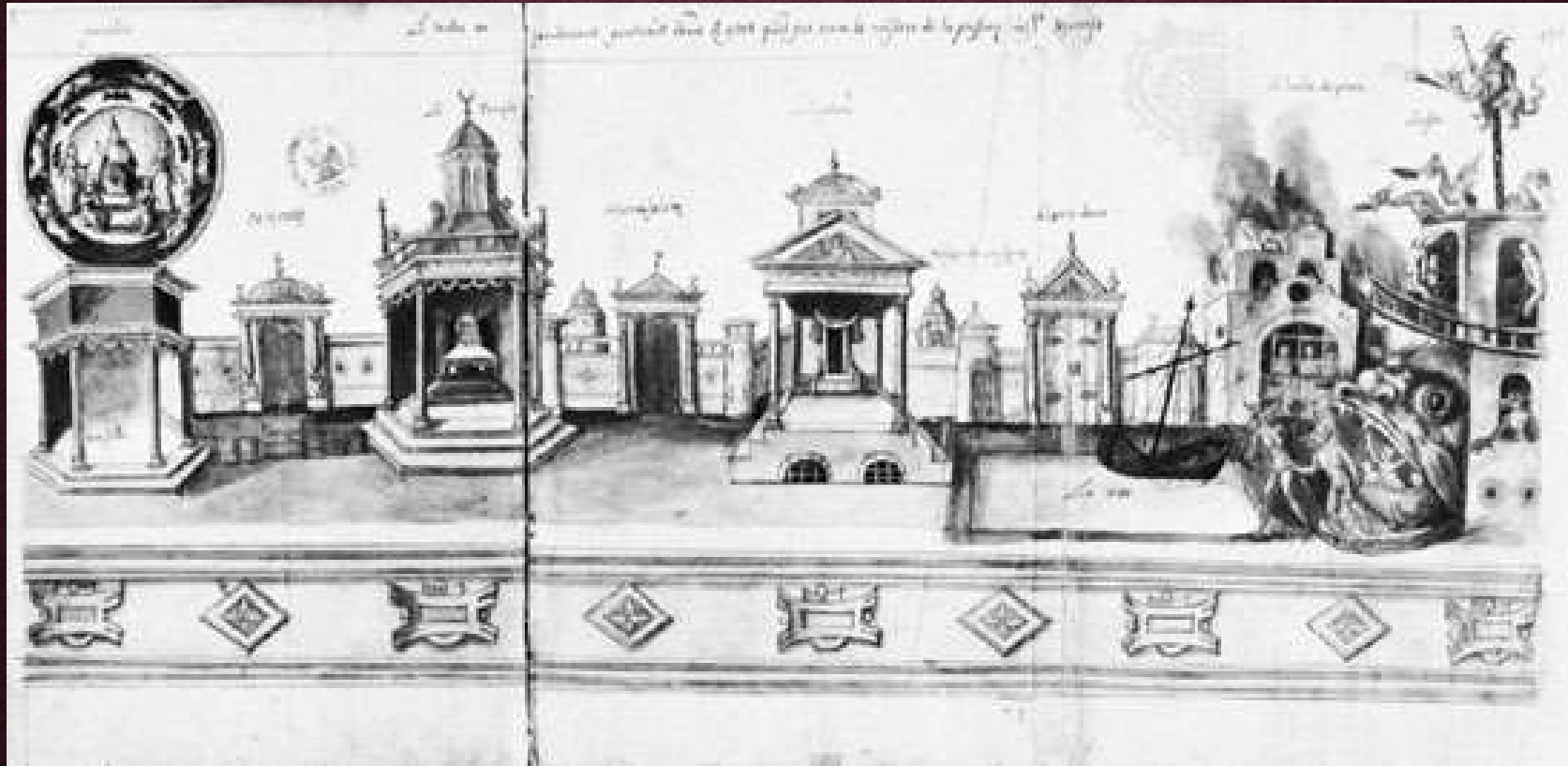
A setting for the *Valenciennes* mystery play by Hubert Cailleau, 1547; in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris.

Cailleau, Hubert. *Valenciennes Mystery Play*. 1547. Miniature. Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris, France. N.p.: n.p., n.d. N. pag.

Britannica's Original Sources. Web. 15 Mar. 2014.

MIDDLE AGES THEATRE (CONT'D)

❖ In 1402, the first European acting company was given permission by Charles VI to occupy a permanent playhouse in Paris.

❖ Morality plays:

- Reflected a darker view of the world as Europeans experienced recurrent plagues and began to regard human destiny as "worm's meat."

- Centered around man's continuous struggle between good and evil, the spirit and the flesh.

- Involved abstract characters such as Mankind encountering Ignorance, Humility, and the Seven Deadly Sins.

- Intended for an educated, middle-class audience; they served as a large step toward the secularization of theatre.

- 1425: the earliest surviving full-length English play manuscript was *The Castell of Perseverance* which depicted mankind's progress from birth to death and showed the final judgment.

- One of the best known is *Everyman*, which follows this same theme.

Ulrike Folkerts (far right) as Death and Peter Simonischek (second from right) as Everyman performing in a dress rehearsal for Jedermann (1911), an adaptation by Hugo von Hofmannsthal of the 15th-century play Everyman.

Josch. *Jedermann*. 2006. Salzburg, Austria. N.p.: n.p., n.d. N. pag. *Britannica's Original Sources*. Web. 15 Mar.

2014.

THEATRE OF THE RENAISSANCE

I. In Italy:

❖ Between the 14th and 16th centuries, Renaissance drama developed in Italy, marking an end to medieval practices and a release of traditional Roman ways of presenting drama.

❖ Commedia dell'arte ("theatre of the professionals"):

- Emerged in Italy during the mid-16th century

- Improvisation: the creation of the actor's lines and actions on the spot without written instructions.

- Saw the appearance of professional Italian actresses, such as Isabella Andreini.

- Stock characters: actors wore leather half-masks to make their characters instantly recognizable to the audience.

  o Examples: Pantalone, the miserly Venetian merchant; Dottore Gratiano, the pedant from Bologna; and Arlecchino, the mischievous servant from Bergamo.

- Spread throughout Europe, largely in France, and influenced future playwrights like Molière and William Shakespeare.

Commedia dell'arte troupe, probably depicting Isabella Andreini and the Compagnia dei Gelosi.

Commedia Dell'arte. 1580. Oil painting. Musée Carnavalet, Paris, France. N.p.: n.p., n.d. N. pag. *Britannica's Original*

Sources. Web. 15 Mar. 2014.

RENAISSANCE THEATRE (CONT'D)

II. In Great Britain:

❖ 1558: Queen Elizabeth I forbade writing of religious drama due to the Catholic versus Protestant disputes.

❖ 1576: The Theatre was built in London by James Burbage and became the first playhouse; others followed, including the Curtain, the Rose, the Swan, and the Globe.

❖ During the 1580's a group of men formed a group called "The University Wits."

- Thomas Kyd: wrote *The Spanish Tragedy*, the most popular play of the 16th century.
  - The play reflected England's conflict with the Catholic empire of Spain.
- Christopher Marlowe: Cambridge-educated, was important in the development of chronicle plays such as *Edward II*. He also wrote the well-known play *Doctor Faustus*.
- John Lyly: wrote primarily pastoral comedies in which he used mythology along with English subjects. *Campaspe*, *Endimion*, and *Love's Metamorphosis* are just a few examples of Lyly's work.
- Robert Greene: wrote pastoral and romantic comedies. Greene took many different aspects and combined them into a single play. Two of his adventurous works are *Friar Bacon* & *Friar Bungay and James IV*.

- ❖ William Shakespeare
  - Commonly known as the greatest playwright of all time, Shakespeare was involved in all aspects of theatre.
  - Is said to have written 38 plays (histories, tragedies, and comedies) including *Comedy of Errors*, *Taming of the Shrew*, *Richard II*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Julius Caesar*, and *Macbeth*.
  - His company, known as the Chamberlain's Men, gained royal approval from James I and was renamed the King's Men; the actors owned their playhouse, prompt books, costumes, and properties, and they shared in the profits.
  - His effective and powerful use of language incorporated emotions, pride, and attitudes.
  - In 1599, the Globe Theatre was built in London and became the venue for many of Shakespeare's plays.
- ❖ Ben Jonson
  - A popular playwright in England who some scholars consider the finest Elizabethan playwright (after Shakespeare, of course).
  - Jonson addressed classical principles and sought to bring back the practices of the ancients.
  - Of his 28 plays are *The Alchemist* and *Bartholomew Fair*. He was awarded the title of England's poet laureate in 1616.
- ❖ No women appeared on the Elizabethan stage; female roles were taken either by boy actors or, in the case of older women, by adult male comedians.

The original globe theatre, built in 1599 in London, England.

Globe Theatre. Image. ***Britannica's Original Sources****.* Web. 15

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"Alchemist, The": engraving from a scene from the play.

Photograph. ***Britannica's Original   Sources****.* Web.   15

Mar. 2014.

❖ The Interregnum, or period between kings (1642-1660):

- Very little theatrical activity in England as the Puritans worked to drive out "sinful" theatre.
- A law was passed in 1642 that suspended performances for five years. After the law expired, Oliver Cromwell's government passed another law declaring that all actors were to be considered rogues.

❖ The Restoration Period:

- In 1660, Charles II returned to England from his exile in France, restoring the monarchy.
- Charles II was a huge patron of theatre and helped breathe new life into British drama.
- Two new theatre companies
  - The Duke's Men: for younger performers, led by William Davenant.
  - The King's Company: for older, more experienced actors, led by Thomas Killigrew.
- Saw the first professional woman playwright, Aphra Behn.

❖ Satirical comedy prevailed in Restoration theatre and catered toward the cynical aristocracy.

❖ A theatre of note between 1642 and 1800 was The Haymarket Theatre, operated by Samuel Foote.

RENAISSANCE THEATRE (CONT'D)

III. In Spain:

❖ During the 16th and 17th centuries the Spanish theatre flourished, with religion as its primary source (through the Corpus Christi festival and autos sacramentales).

❖ Juan del Encina: The founder of Spanish drama. His first works were religious, but later he also wrote secular plays. The most noted of these is *The Ecologue of Placida* and *Victoriano*.

❖ Theatre popularity was on the rise in the 1570s, and Madrid and Seville became the theatrical centers.

- Cueva was the first playwright to use Spanish history in his play, *The Seven Children of Lara*.
- Cervantes, author of *Don Quixote*, also wrote about thirty plays during his career, such as *The Siege of Nurmanas* and *The Fortunate Ruffian.*

❖ Lope Felix de Vega: the most well-known Spanish playwright

- Wrote 800 comedies, 450 of which survived. His plays mostly dealt with love and honor.

Painting of Lope Felix de Vega.

Vega, Lope de. Image. *Britannica's Original Sources.*

Web. 15 Mar. 2014.

RENAISSANCE THEATRE (CONT'D)

IV. In France:

❖ 1597: skilled companies and playwrights began to appear in Paris. France's first professional dramatist was Alexandre Hardy. He used poetic dialogue and the chorus from early Greek and Roman times.

❖ Molière: famous playwright known for *Tartuffe* and other satires on the corruption of French nobility. Banned from performing his plays on stage, Moliere was called a "demon in human flesh" by the Church, and the State closed his theatre and tore down his posters. In 1667, church leaders threatened excommunication on all who might act in plays like *Tartuffe*. Finally, in 1669, permission was granted by King Louis XIV for Moliere to perform his plays in public.

❖ 1680: Louis XIV formed Europe's first national theatre, the Comédie-Française.

The Comédie-Française theater in Paris.

Paris: Comédie-Française theater. Photograph.

Britannica's Original   Sources. Web. 15 Mar.

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POST-RENAISSANCE THEATRE (18TH CENTURY)

The middle class demanded something less artificial and formal than the theatre of the late 17th century; instead, something more realistic and genteel.

I. In Italy:

❖ The primary concern was the visual and the importance of the spectacle. *The Italian Piranesi* was herald for introducing mood which was achieved through different lighting.

❖ Italian comedy playwrights were Goldoni who wrote *The Servant of Two Masters* and Gozzi who wrote *King Stag* and *The Love of Three Oranges*.

❖ Vittorio Alfieri was an important Italian dramatist; inspired by the Greeks and immense passion, as seen in *Oreste.*

POST-RENAISSANCE (CONT'D)

II. In Great Britain:

- ❖ The growth of playhouses in London was discouraged by the Licensing Act of 1737, which gave the lord chamberlain extensive powers to censor all plays and to uphold the monopoly of the two patent theatres in London.

- ❖ David Garrick: known as the century's greatest actor. In both tragedy and comedy, Garrick developed a more convincing style of acting that became widely influential. As manager of the Drury Lane Theatre, he introduced concealed stage lighting and stopped the practice of spectators sitting on the stage.

- ❖ 1717: actor John Rich, under the stage name of Lun, played Harlequin in a new form he called pantomime. The entertainment began with a familiar story or Classical legend in verse, then the characters were transformed into commedia dell'arte figures for the harlequinade in which their tricks and adventures were mimed to music. Rich produced a pantomime annually until 1760.

The Drury Lane Theatre in London.

Dayes, Edward. *The Drury Lane Theatre, London*. 1795. Watercolor. Henry E. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San

Marino, California. N.p.: n.p., n.d. N. pag. *Britannica's Original Sources*. Web. 15 Mar. 2014.

POST-RENAISSANCE (CONT'D)

III. In Germany:

❖ Gotthold Lessing: known as Germany's first truly significant dramatist. He wrote *Miss Sarah Sampson*, *Minna von Barnhelm*, and other plays based on Biblical themes.

❖ Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: one of Germany's greatest playwrights and one of the country's greatest literary figures. His plays *Gotze von Berlichingen* and *Faust* were two of his most famous works. Goethe settled at Weimar and helped make it the cultural center of Germany. Goethe was also considered one of the first directors in the modern sense.

Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim. Image. *Britannica's*

Original Sources. Web. 15 Mar. 2014.

Goethe's *Faust.*
"Mephistopheles Offering His Help to Faust". Image.

Britannica's Original Sources. Web. 15 Mar.

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POST-RENAISSANCE (CONT'D)

IV. In France:

❖ At the beginning of the century, Paris had three theatres; by 1791 there were 51.

❖ Voltaire was the most important writer of tragedy, while Pierre Marivaux developed a more refined expression of the commedia dell'arte spirit.

❖ Denis Diderot theorized on playwriting and came up with the four-walled convention. He wrote *The Paradox of the Actor*, in which he discussed his belief that an actor needs to give the impression of intense feeling, but not actually feel anything.

❖ Another important comedic writer was Pierre-Augustine Beaumarchais who wrote the popular *The Barber of Seville* and *The Marriage of Figaro*.

EUROPEAN THEATRE IN THE 19ᵀᴴ CENTURY

❖ The theatre became an important means of arousing patriotic enthusiasm, consequently from the French and American revolutions.

❖ Romanticism

- Individualistic and passionate expression; emphasis on detail; many poets got involved.

- Began in Germany with August Wilhelm Schlegel and Ludwig Tieck who revived the works of Shakespeare. Christian Grabbe wrote *Don Juan.*

- In England, the Romantic movement was fueled by plays such as *Remorse* by Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Marino Fanceiro* by Henry James Byron, and *The Cinci* by Percy Bysshe Shelley.

- In France, the popular novelist Victor Hugo wrote the play *Hernani*.

THE 19TH CENTURY (CONT'D)

❖ Melodrama

  - Arose from the popularization of Romanticism and the evasion of restrictive licensing laws in England and France.

  - Involved sensational or terrifying effects, like floods, fires, and earthquakes, and live animals onstage.

  - Lively action was the goal; music accompanied the play.

❖ Joseph Grimaldi created the much loved clown character in the harlequinade section of the English pantomime, and Jean-Gaspard Deburau rekindled interest in the art of mime through his portrayals of the white-faced Pierrot at the Théâtre des Funambules in Paris.

❖ With the rapid growth of urban areas, the number of theatres increased, each catering toward a specific class and their interests.

Joseph Grimaldi as the clown in Harlequin Padmanada; or, The Golden Fish, a Christmas pantomime produced at Covent Garden.

Joseph Grimaldi. 1811. Print. Victoria and Albert Museum, London, England. N.p.: n.p., n.d. N. pag. *Britannica's Original Sources*.

Web. 15 Mar. 2014.

THE 19TH CENTURY (CONT'D)

➢ **Realism**

- Rejected the complex and artificial plotting of the well-made play and instead valued themes of real, contemporary society.

- Incorporated everyday language, actions, and behavior.

❖ Heinrich Ibsen: A prolific and controversial playwright who wrote 25 plays during the late 19th century, including *A Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabler*. Ibsen is known as the father of modern realism. His plays were very symbolic, and some of his subject matters were thought scandalous for their time.

❖ George Bernard Shaw: One of the most prominent writers of late 19th and early 20th century England. He wrote satiric plays facing social issues such as *Pygmalion* and *Arms and the Man*. His *Mrs. Warren's Profession* addressed prostitution.

❖ Anton Chekhov: Russian realist playwright; author of *Three Sisters*.

❖ Alexandre Dumas: Wrote *The Demi-Monde* and *The Lady of the Camellias*, now usually referred to as *Camille*, a realistic story about a "prostitute with a heart of gold." He also wrote about contemporary problems.

❖ With the invention of electricity, audiences demanded more detailed sets. This caused a push for a new stage design known as the box set. Auditoriums darkened during shows and curtains closed for set changes.

THE 19TH CENTURY (CONT'D)

- **Naturalism**
  - Extended the tradition of realism, aiming at an even more faithful, unselective representation of reality.
  - A "slice of life" presented without moral judgment.
  - Naturalism differed from realism in its assumption of scientific determinism; more emphasis on man's accidental, physiological nature rather than his moral or rational qualities.
  - Humans had little will or responsibility for their fates, and the forecast for their "cases" was pessimistic at the outset.

- ❖ Emile Zola: French naturalist who wrote about scientific findings and things recorded about natural life. He became famous for his novel *Naturalism in the Theatre* and play *Thérèse Raquin.*

- ❖ Konstantin Stanislavsky: founded the Moscow Art Theatre in Russia and emerged as a pioneer for a new system in theatre (called the Stanislavsky method). It's fundamental belief was "You <u>are</u> what you act."

- ❖ Other theatres promoting naturalism were the Théâtre-Libre in Paris and the Independent Theatre in England.

Performance of Shaw's *Pygmalion*.

Goodstein, Gerry. *Pygmalion*. 2004. Jean Cocteau Repertory Theatre,

New York City, New York. N.p.: n.p., n.d. N. pag. *Britannica's*

Original Sources. Web. 15 Mar. 2014.

Stanislavsky as Vershinin in Anton Chekhov's *Three Sisters*.

Stanislavsky, Konstantin Sergeyevich. 1901. Moscow Art Theatre Museum,

Moscow, Russia. N.p.: n.p., n.d. N. pag. *Britannica's Original Sources*. Web.

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EARLY TO MID-20TH CENTURY THEATRE

❖ Between 1915 and 1940, concepts such as Dadaism and surrealism played on the belief that nothing in the world makes sense.

❖ Expressionism:

- Short scenes took the place of longer acts.

- Characters and scenery served as symbols.

- A popular theme was the struggle among the middle class and government.

❖ Georg Kaiser: The leading figure of early expressionism in Germany, he wrote on the struggle of the individual to find fulfillment in a hostile civilization.

❖ Ernst Toller: Expressionist known for *The Machine Wreckers*.

Photo of Georg Kaiser

"Georg Kaiser." *Britannica School.*

Encyclopædia Britannica, Inc., 2014. Web. 15

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POST- WORLD WAR II THEATRE

❖ Live theatre competed with movies, television, and radio by searching for a "popular" theatre and experimenting with new ideas to challenge the audience.

❖ Epic Theatre

- Led by Bertolt Brecht, the movement directly opposed the Stanislavsky-oriented realism.

- Theatre should appeal not to the spectators' feelings, but to their reason. While still providing entertainment, it should be strongly didactic and capable of provoking social change.

- His "alienation effect" reminded the audience they were in a theatre watching an enactment of reality instead of reality itself.

  o Examples: flooding the stage with harsh white light, regardless of where the action was taking place, and intentionally interrupting the action at key moments with songs in order to drive home an important point or message.

- Wrote *Mother Courage and Her Children*, *The Life of Galileo, and The Good Woman of Szechwan*

POST- WWII THEATRE (CONT'D)

❖ Theatre of the Absurd

- Reflected the postwar mood of disillusionment and skepticism; everything in life is meaningless.
- Bizarre events occurred in plays for no logical reason.
  - Examples: Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* and Eugène Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano*

❖ Theatre of Cruelty

- Based on ritual and fantasy, it forced people to view themselves and their natures without the shield of civilization; reaction to the violence of World War II.
- Graphically portrayed the extremes of human nature (often madness and perversion)
  - Example: Peter Weiss's *Marat/Sade*

❖The creation of shows with great spectacles and high-tech sets or lighting like *Les Miserables* and Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Phantom of the Opera* could justify a higher ticket price. For the first time, corporations, called Angels, would put up money to back shows. This allowed producers and designers to have the freedom to create new and innovative theatre productions.

Mother Courage and Her Children. 1949.

Mordecai Gorelik Collection. N.p.: n.p., n.d.

  N. pag. *Britannica's Original Sources*. Web.

  15 Mar. 2014.

Ramin Karimloo (left) and Sierra Boggess share a scene in Love Never Dies, Andrew Lloyd Webber's sequel to his celebrated musical The Phantom of the Opera (1986), which opened in London in March 2010.

Ryan, Joel. *Performing Arts*. 2010. London,

England. N.p.: n.p., n.d. N. pag.

Britannica's Original Sources. Web. 15   Mar.

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Roger Blin (right) and Jean Martin in Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot.*

Lipnitzki, Roger-Viollet. *Waiting for Godot*. 1953.

Théâtre De Babylone, Paris, France. N.p.: n.p.,   n.d.

N. pag.   *Britannica's Original Sources*. Web.   15

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THE THEATRICAL SCENE TODAY

I. In Great Britain:

- London is home to some of the most renowned musical and theatrical venues in the world. The Royal Opera House (ROH), in the Covent Garden district, is home to the Royal Opera, Royal Ballet, Royal Opera Chorus, and the ROH Orchestra.

- The Royal Shakespeare Company (RSC) is the world's largest Shakespearean theatrical group. Striving to keep the works of Shakespeare alive in modern culture, the RSC performs around the United Kingdom and the world. Improvisational theater is also reemerging as a popular form in the United Kingdom.

The Royal Opera House in London.

Russ. *De Valois, Dame Ninette: Statue outside the Royal Opera*

House. 2007. London, England. N.p.: n.p., n.d. N. pag.

Britannica's Original Sources. Web. 15 Mar. 2014.

THE THEATRICAL SCENE TODAY

II. In France:

- Across France there are also several temporary performance centers, and many French music and theater festivals are renowned throughout Europe. Theatrical performances range from the classics to modern pieces and regional, folk-oriented works.

III. In Italy:

- Italians are fond of classical music and theater. Opera, a theater genre that emerged in the 17th century in Italy and spread throughout the world, is especially popular. Giuseppe Verdi's (Aida) and Giacomo Puccini's (Madame Butterfly) operas are considered masterpieces. The late Luciano Pavarotti was perhaps Italy's most popular figure of contemporary classical genre and opera in recent times.

IV. In Germany:

- Germans of every rank attend theater events and music concerts with the same regularity that most Europeans go to the movies. Serious drama is only one part of theatrical offerings that include satire and comedy as well.

THE THEATRICAL SCENE TODAY

❖ The Europe Theater Prize is a theater festival celebrating the best of European theater. The Prize was founded by the European Commission in 1986 to create a platform for culture exchange between different nations of the continent and to promote European theater.

❖ Another theater fair, the Europe Prize New Theatrical Realities, is held in conjunction with the Europe Theater Prize. While the Prize chooses its honorees based on their entire body of work, the New Theatrical Realities (now in its 12th edition) focuses primarily on new trends, daring experimentations and originality.

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