



Chapter 7

The History of Drama

This is closely related to the history of humanity!

Anytime a story teller gets involved in the story and acts out what happened, it is drama.

Western Drama

Greek Drama

- 6th century BCE – was worship of the Greek god Dionysus
 - Dionysus – God of wine (pleasure god)
 - Had two sides to him good and bad (comedy and tragedy)



- Chorus – group of chanters – danced around an altar to commemorate his death
- Song they sang was called the goat-song or tragos (the Greek word for tragedy)

- These performances evolved into dramatic contests
 - Lasted 5-6 days.
 - Last three days four plays were performed
 - 3 tragedies (trilogy) and a comedy (satyr)
 - Thespis (the first actor) won the first competition by stepping out from the chorus and engaging in dialogue
 - Thespian – the name given to actors ever since



Greek Theatre

- Held in the open on hillsides surrounding a circular area called the orchestra
- Wooden seats were added, then stone
- Some theaters seated more than 17,000 people!!



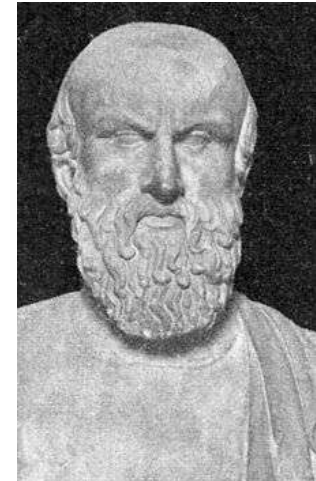
The Role of the Chorus

- Explain the situation
 - Bring the audience up-to-date
 - Make a commentary on the action
 - Engage in dialogue with the actors
- ★ Eventually role diminished as actors' roles expanded.
The chorus is still used to increase realism of scenes and to engage in scenes with the main characters.

Authors of Greek Drama

- Aeschylus

- Expanded number of actors, reduced the size of the chorus
- Only surviving trilogy – the *Oresteia*



- Sophocles

- Ranked with Shakespeare as one of the best playwrights of all time.
- Refined plot structure to create unified works
- Author of *Oedipus* and *Antigone*



• Euripides

- o Emphasized human relationships
- o Master of pathos – human sorrow and compassion
- o Author of *The Trojan Women* and *Medea*



• Aristophanes

- o Author of Greek comedy
- o Considered nothing sacred
- o Skilled satirist and observer of humanity
- o Author of *The Frogs*, *The Clouds*, and *Lysistrata*



Roman Drama

- Most were just copies of Greek Drama
- Andronicus – first “Roman” playwright, an author from a Greek colony
 - First Roman tragedy was a translation from a Greek play
- Roman Theater
 - Amphitheaters – large circular arenas surrounded by tiers of seats.



Medieval Drama

- Battle between Christian religions (Catholicism mostly) and Pagan religions. Trying to “reform” the world. Any play that was not approved by the church was considered blasphemous.
- Liturgical drama – question-answer song performed by monks on Easter
- Saint plays – based on legends of saints
- Mystery plays – based on biblical history
- Passion plays – address the last week of Christ’s life
- Morality plays – taught the difference between right and wrong (context of devil and God battling for souls).

- Performed on platforms called mansions.
 - Three mansions represented Heaven, Hell and the Sea of Galilee
- Medieval craft guilds took over the presentation of drama
 - Pageant wagons – stages on wheels
 - Divided into two levels (upper = stage, lower = dressing area)

- Folk Drama – secular drama (non-religious)
 - Discouraged by the church
 - Took place around planting and harvest time and presented outdoors
 - Most pagan religions gave thanks to an earth goddess, hence celebration around planting and harvest.
 - Example: *Robin Hood*

The Renaissance

Italy

- Weak imitations of classical plays
- Opera – an attempt to revive Greek Drama
- Commedia Dell'arte – “comedy of the profession”
 - Professional improvised comedy
 - Plot outlines posted before performance
 - No scripts
 - Stock characters which represented two classes



Harlequin (Arlecchino in [Italian](#)) is the most popular of the [zanni](#) or comic servant characters from the [Italian Commedia dell'Arte](#).



Pantalone (French: Pantaloon) is a stock character that is classified as one of the [vecchi](#) (old men) in [Commedia dell'arte](#). He is a miserly and often lustful character who is portrayed as a [Venetian](#) and often speaks in the [Venetian dialect](#).

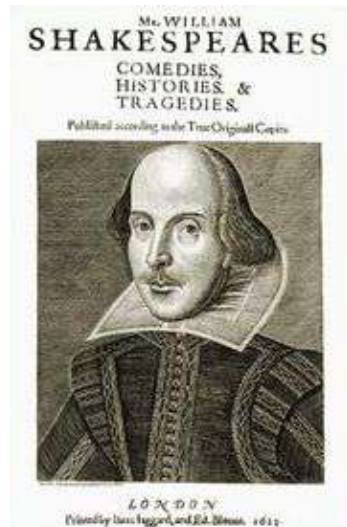
The Renaissance England

- Climax came during the Elizabethan Age
 - Queen Elizabeth supported the arts more than any other ruler of the time
 - Threats of closing the theatre due to the plague were often stopped because of her
 - Financially assisted some troupes and theaters

Dramatists

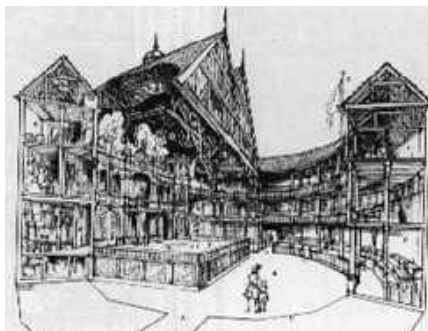
- Christopher Marlowe
 - Introduced important use of blank verse
 - Shakespeare's main competition
 - Author of *Doctor Faustus* (story of a man who sells his soul)
- Ben Johnson
 - Master of English comedy
 - Author of *Volpone*, *The Alchemist* and *Every Man in His Humour*

- William Shakespeare
 - The greatest dramatist of all time!!
 - The characters form the center of interest in Shakespeare's plays
 - Iambic pentameter/blank verse
 - Author of *Romeo and Juliet*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and 35 others!
 - Also wrote 154 sonnets!!



The Elizabethan Playhouse

- The Globe and The Rose two most famous
- Platform (thrust) stage with courtyard around on three sides
- Three tiers of seating – the higher the tier the more expensive the seat (opposite of today's theatre)
- Open air – if it rained, the groundlings got wet



Restoration Drama

- English Royal Patent of 1662 – women appeared as players for the first time
- Raked stages – sloped upward so audience could see the performance

Eighteenth Century

- Clever comic operas
 - Gilbert and Sullivan – *The Mikado, H.M.S. Pinafore, The Pirates of Penzance*
- Oscar Wilde – *The Importance of Being Earnest*
- Bernard Shaw – Ranked with Shakespeare
 - *Candida, Pygmalion*

Other Drama

- Goethe – Germany in 1770s to early 1800s – *Faust*
- Edmond Rostand – France – *Cyrano de Bergerac*
- Samuel Becket – France – *Waiting for Godot*
- Chekov – Russia – greatest Russian Dramatist

Drama in Asia

China

- Dates to 200 AD
- Rituals that combined song, dance, gestures and costumes
- Peking Opera
 - Developed in the nineteenth century (still performed today)
 - Five main types of drama in China
 - Historical drama
 - Spoken drama
 - Song drama
 - Dance drama
 - Ballet

Japan

- Three forms of drama – No, Bunraku and Kabuki

➤ No

- Suitable for the Japanese nobility
- Fourteenth century
- Used classical Japanese literature
- Combines words, dance and music



➤ Bunraku

- “Doll theater”
- Combination of puppets, chanting and music
- Four-foot tall marionettes
- Three puppeteers dressed in black hold the puppet close to their bodies as they move around the stage.



Avenue Q, a current Broadway musical, is an Americanized form of Bunraku.

- Kabuki

- Seventeenth century
- Meant for the general population
- Only male performers
- Combines aspects of many Japanese drama styles



The [Kabukiza](#) in Ginza is one of Tokyo's leading *kabuki* theaters



Kabuki founder [Izumo no Okuni](#), wearing a [Katana](#) and a [Christian cross](#).

Drama in the United States

The American Company

- The first professional company to produce in the colonies
- Managed by David Douglass
- *The Prince of Parthia* – performed April 24, 1767 in Philadelphia
- American theater eventually became more innovative and experimental
- Privacy of a darkened theatre helped to hide feelings
- Topics often controversial in society are easily covered in theatre

American Actors

- English professional troupes presented popular London plays
- Barrymores link early American stage with the modern (Drew Barrymore)

American Playwrights

- Eugene O'Neill
 - Issues range from interpersonal relationships to faith
 - *Long Day's Journey into Night*
- Clifford Odets
 - Social protest in 1930s
 - *Waiting for Lefty*
- Arthur Miller
 - Moral and political tragedies
 - *The Crucible* and *Death of a Salesman*
- Thornton Wilder
 - Life in a small town
 - *Our Town*