

Theatre

Theatre is a craft that has been around almost since the beginnings of human history. At its core, it is live storytelling, where the characters in the story (also called a play) are acted out by the people, called actors, who are bringing the story to its audience. The settings of the story are presented by constructions that are usually made of wood, paint, and canvas, called setpieces. Sound and light are also used to create the world of the story, and a director is hired to show the actors how to tell that particular story.

A Little Bit of History...

It is thought that theatre began with ancient humans, who would act out tales from their lives around the evening cave-fire. These early 'plays' would have incorporated speech, music, dance, painting, indeed any skills or tools at hand that could be used to get the story across. Shamans used similar techniques when communicating the mythology of a culture to its people, as well as to invoke that mythology by calling upon its gods or powers in prayer. Along the way, fiction sprang from the forehead of mythology. The ancient Greeks wrote down their stories, fact, fiction, or otherwise, in what are the first recorded plays.

It is from ancient Greece that we get the term 'thespian'. Thespis was one of the first known playwrights, and was the equivalent in his age of a William Shakespeare, or Samuel Beckett¹. He was also one of the first theatre teachers, passing the craft down to another generation. Hence actors, directors, set builders, all storytellers in this craft were known as Disciples of Thespis, or Thespians. Additionally, it is thought that there initially was no distinction between actors, director, and technical crew: all Thespians would have had knowledge of these things, a tradition that lasted until comparatively modern times.

It was also the beginning of painted sets and constructed scene props, and the *Deus Ex Machina* - machinery that would move objects and cause actors to seem to fly, trap doors in the stage, etc. Performances were on stages in natural amphitheatres. The stories were huge, and included both heaven and earth in their scope.

When the Romans conquered Greece, they admired the theatre there. However, being Romans, they also thought they could improve upon it. This marked the advent of 'spectacle theatre'. In actuality, it really wasn't theatre at all: this was the start of the Gladiatorial contests and public executions, chariot races, and bloody gore that we associate with Roman amphitheatres, and movies such as *Ben-Hur* and *Spartacus*. Theatre would have died, if not for the formation of travelling player troupes. These troupes, performing theatre that was considered too small, too unworthy for the higher people of society, travelled from town to town playing to the lower classes, to whom they owed their livelihood.

These troupes spread across the known world and are the reason theatre still exists today. This was the state of theatre for hundreds of years. Thespians were simultaneously loved and hated by many. The Catholic Church in particular took a keen interest in the workings of the stage. Seeing such passion aroused in the audiences attending these plays, the church denounced all Thespians as Disciples of Satan, while at the same time commissioning their own players to bring Bible stories to the people. For about three hundred years, the Catholics held a monopoly on the stage. The end of this period coincided with the Renaissance, when permanent playhouses were erected. In the new spirit of learning, these playhouses were open to the public, and privately owned.

Initially they showed the old Greek tales, and other stories that had been written for travelling player troupes, but then a new breed of playwright came forth, one that wrote to this new audience in this permanent playhouse setting. A revival of the Greek style of theatre was born. From here, the writing progressed to more human issues, and the theatre became a place where, even though they still didn't sit together, you would see nobles and peasants in the same building, watching the same stories unfold.

Enter the likes of William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, and all their peers in the Elizabethan Age. This was the point where actors became actors, directors became directors, playwrights did their thing, and producers generally muddled it all up. This was the birth of what would eventually be known as 'modern theatre'. Every play you see today is put up using techniques and processes that originated with Shakespeare and his contemporaries. They've been revised and renewed on the macroscopic level several times over, but those people laid the foundation for all you see in the theatre today.

Theatre Today

Modern productions range from the grandiose musicals, which incorporate song, dance, and orchestra to help tell the story to the pared down Black Box Theatre, which follows the 'less is more' approach to telling a story. Though those involved rarely share jobs in the manner of old, theatre is still a highly collaborative process. It's not about the director, or the actors, or the playwright, or the producer - it's about a story that is being brought to life.