

18th Century Drama

New Theaters

- The 'patent' theatres were the only two venues in the city that were allowed to perform spoken drama in the beginning of the 18th century by virtue of Royal Patents belonging to the Restoration era.
- One was the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane; the other was located at Lincoln's Inn Fields.
- Drury Lane Theatre was built by the theatre manager Thomas Killigrew in 1663.
- It suffered a major fire breakout and was rebuilt and opened in 1674.
- The successor of Killigrew was Colley Cibber.

- **Lincoln's Inn Fields, was being run by Cibber's great rival John Rich.**
- **With the immense success of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* in 1728 it became one of the greatest theatrical successes of the age.**
- **In 1732, the Royal Opera House was opened at the Covent Garden, inaugurated in grand style with a production of William Congreve's *The Way of the World*.**
- **Covent Garden Theatre accommodated over 1,000 spectators, ranged between boxes (the most expensive seats), gallery (middle-range) and the pit (cheapest).**
- **It was sumptuously decorated, featuring the latest stage and scenic technology and boasting pitch-perfect acoustics, music systems, etc.**

- **Other theaters also sprang up following the success of Royal Opera House.**
- **Little Theatre in the Haymarket (1720)**
- **Two theatres in Goodman's Fields in east London (1729 and 1732), Sadler's Wells in Islington (1733)**
- **Several in Richmond towards the west of London.**
- **There also used to happen performances at fairs and newly created 'pleasure gardens' such as those at Vauxhall and Chelsea.**

Licensing Act, 1737

- Robert Walpole's government attempted to put a halt to the expansion of theaters by passing the Licensing Act, because he was particularly offended by an anonymous satirical farce of that year called *The Golden Rump*, which mocked both him and the royal family.
- The Act renewed the monopoly of the patent theatres and also insisted that every script had to be approved before performance by the Lord Chamberlain, who was also given the powers to close down shows entirely.

- **The Act referred to actors as ‘rogues and vagabonds’.**
- **When it came to avoiding “spoken drama: as the law dictated, managers were able to find legal loopholes, keeping their theatres open by offering melodrama, pantomime, ballet, opera and music instead of ‘serious’ drama.**
- **Furthermore, rather than taking the risk of staging new plays that might under censorship, many producers brought classics back in – chiefly works from the Restoration era and most of all Shakespeare.**

Note

- In 1794, Drury Lane became the first British theatre to turn the curtain into a safety feature, using an fireproof 'iron' barrier to prevent fires onstage from destroying the rest of the building – an ever-present risk in the era of candlelight.

Actors

- **The first great star was David Garrick.**
- **His 1741 appearance in Richard III at Goodman's Fields rocketed him to overnight success.**
- **By 1747, he was running the building.**
- **For the next three decades, Garrick remained the most important figure in London theatre, not only as an actor but one of the first 'actor managers' – producer, playwright/adapter.**

- Margaret 'Peg' Woffington- a famous comedian
- Charles Macklin- Garrick's rival at Shakespearean plays
- Spranger Barry- a famous leading man
- Colley Cibber
- Satirist playwright-actor Samuel Foote
- John Philip Kemble was acclaimed for his statuesque performances in *Coriolanus* and *Julius Caesar*, and separately managed both Drury Lane and Covent Garden, introducing to the London stage for the first time live animals and aquatic effects.
- Sarah Siddons was regarded as the greatest tragedienne of the age, at roles such as Lady Macbeth.

IMPORTANT PLAYS

The Beggar's Opera

- A ballad opera in three acts.
- Written in 1728 by John Gay; music by J.C. Pepusch.
- It satirized Italian Operas, which had become widely popular in London back in the day.
- Elisabeth Hauptmann (with Bertolt Brecht) and Kurt Weill adapted the opera into *Die Dreigroschenoper* or *The Threepenny Opera* in 1928.

- **Peachum, a thief catcher, criticizes the fact that his daughter Polly is marrying the famous highwayman, Macheath.**
- **He arranges for Macheath to be arrested and imprisoned at the prison run by the corrupt warden, Lockit at the New Gate Prison by his implants Jenny Diver and Suky Tawdry.**
- **Macheath tries to escape by gaining the help of Lockit's daughter Lucy and promising to marry her.**
- **His plan is complicated when Polly tries to save him.**
- **Thus, Lucy and Polly end up in an inevitable rivalry.**

- Lockit and Peachum, both realizing their daughters' relationships with Macheath make a compromise.
- They discover Macheath's hiding place and decide to split his fortune.
- Meanwhile, Polly visits Lucy to try to also reach an agreement, but Lucy tries to poison her.
- Polly narrowly avoids the poisoned drink, and the two girls find out that Macheath has been recaptured. They plead with their fathers for Macheath's life.
- However, Macheath now finds that four more pregnant women each claim him as their husband. Hence, he declares that he is ready to be hanged.

- **The narrator (the Beggar), notes that although in a properly moral ending Macheath and the other villains would be hanged, the audience demands a happy ending, and so Macheath is reprieved, and all are invited to a dance of celebration, to celebrate his wedding to Polly.**

She Stoops to Conquer

- Written by Oliver Goldsmith in 1771.
- First time performed in 1773.
- The play centers around the desire of Hardcastle, a wealthy landowner in the country, for his daughter, Kate Hardcastle, to marry the well-educated Charles Marlow.
- Together with Marlow's father, Sir Charles Marlow, they arrange for the younger Marlow to visit the Hardcastle's house and court Kate.

- **However Kate is less than impressed when she finds out that, despite his otherwise strong, respectable character, Charles is extremely shy and reserved around ladies. She therefore vows to herself that she could never marry him.**
- **Before Charles and his friend, George Hastings, can arrive at the house, they are intercepted by Mr. Hardcastle's stepson at the local alehouse.**
- **A mischievous joker, Tony Lumpkin persuades them that the Hardcastle's house is, in fact, the local inn. Thus, when Marlow and Hastings arrive, Marlow treats the Hardcastle family with impudence and disrespect, falsely believing them to be servants there.**

- In order to get to the bottom of his true character, Kate disguises herself as a maid and comedy ensues as Marlow makes love to the “maid” and disregards her father.
- Meanwhile, George Hastings is thrilled to find his true love, Constance Neville, neice of Mrs. Hardcastle, living at the Hardcastle’s house.
- Through the scheming of Mrs. Hardcastle, she is due to marry Tony, despite their mutual dislike of each other.
- Finding a way to get out of his marriage, Tony helps Constance to retrieve her inheritance and gets his mother out of the way, dumping her in a local horsepond!

- **Finally, as Marlow's father arrives, all is put to right and Charles Marlow is mortified by his behavior.**
- **Forgiven by all, the two couples find happiness with each other.**
- **Tony successfully gains his rightful inheritance without an unwanted engagement.**

The School for Scandal

- Written by Richard Brinsley Sheridan.
- First performed in 1777.
- Published in 1780.
- The play centers around the gossip and scandal, usually concerning sexual intrigue, which dominated the wealthy social circles of eighteenth-century England.

- **Lady Sneerwell sets herself the target of ruining the lives and reputations of others for her own gain.**
- **She has set her cap at a young, rebellious man named Charles Surface. However, Charles is in love with Sir Peter Teazle's ward Maria, as is his scheming brother Joseph.**
- **Maria is faithful to Charles, but Lady Sneerwell and Joseph plot to ruin their relationship by creating rumors of Charles' infidelity.**
- **This complicated relationship plot is thickened when Sir Peter Teazle's young wife, Lady Teazle, wonders whether to embark on an affair with Joseph Scarface to relieve the frustration and petty arguments she must deal with in her new marriage.**

- **Hearing the rumors of his nephew's questionable behavior, Sir Oliver Surface comes to town to determine whether he is right to believe that Joseph is the honorable, deserving brother, whilst Charles has fallen into social ruin.**
- **Disguised as a money-lender, Sir Oliver does find that Charles has lavish tendencies that are pushing the family further into debt, but he realizes that his nephew is honorable, loyal and kind despite his faults.**
- **Meanwhile Joseph reveals his true nature when he refuses to help Sir Oliver, who has disguised himself as a family relation in need of financial help and support.**

- **Sir Oliver reveals his plot to his nephews and, when Lady Teazle is revealed hiding in the chambers of Joseph Surface, the group realize that the rumor about Charles' bad behavior were orchestrated by the malicious Lady Sneerwell.**

Note:

- Read-
 - *The Good-Natur'd Man* by Goldsmith.
 - *The Rivals* by Sheridan.