December 2016

FINAL Review (TH 105A) Theatre Appreciation

Chapter 7—Theatre Traditions: East and West

Since a theatrical event takes place in real time, theatre exists in the present moment. But through its revivals, adaptations, parodies, continued traditions, and the inevitable comparisons made between new and earlier plays, theatre is also deeply rooted in the past. Although the exact origins of theatre are lost in the mists of prehistory, existing evidence suggests that it grew out of a combination of ritual and storytelling.

The first extant, recorded drama is the ancient Egyptian Abydos Passion Play (at least 2500 B.C.)

In the West, the ancient Greeks produced a vigorous theatre.

The Romans would copy and adapt the Greek creations.

Medieval drama began as part of church liturgy, but would grow into community festivals.

With the Renaissance, professional theatres emerged.

Writers like William Shakespeare advanced dramatic writing.

The royal theatre of the Enlightenment consolidated and refined prior achievements.

Neoclassical theatre attempted to regularize writing and production to a defined set of rules.

Theatre in Asia contains many rich traditions that differ greatly from those in the West and from each other.

Sanskrit dance-drama began before 200 B.C. and remained popular for 1000 years.

A more recent creation, Kathakali, is the most popular dance-drama form in India today.

Japanese Noh theatre, the oldest continuously performed drama in the world, is highly revered.

Japan’s Kabuki theatre began as and continues to be a popular form.

In China, Xiqu ("tuneful theatre"), known as Chinese Opera, would branch, over hundreds of years, into approximately 360 different variations, the best known of which is Beijing Opera.

Many of these traditions of the East and West continue today, and those that do not still exert an influence on modern theatre.

Dionysus | Plautus | Royal Theatre | Sanskrit
Aeschylus | Terence | Calderon | Kathakali
Sophocles | Seneca | Pierre Corneille | Noh (No)
Euripides | Quem Queritas | Jean Racine | Kabuki
Orchestra | Mystery plays | Moliere | Xiqu (Chinese Opera)
Theatron | mansions | Neoclassicism | Bunraku
Skene | Corpus Christi | Romanticism
Tragedy | William Shakespeare | J.W. von Goethe
Comedy | Globe Theatre | Friedrich Schiller

Chapter 8—The Modern Theatre

The modern period and its drama were shaped by world-changing forces, such as industrial-technological revolution, democratic revolutions, and an intellectual revolution that would disrupt earlier conceptions of time, space, the divine, human psychology, and social order. As a result, a theatre of challenge and experimentation emerged. Important documents of the era included The Origin of the Species by Charles Darwin and Das Kapital by Karl Marx. Freudian psychology also illuminated the literary output of the age.

Realism was conceived as a laboratory in which the ills of society, familial problems, and the nature of relationships could be "objectively" presented for the judgment of impartial observers. The playwright Henrik Ibsen initiated the realistic period. While realist plays would address well-defined social issues, naturalist plays offered a simple "slice of life" free from dramatic convention. A counterforce to realism, initiated by symbolism, began in the late nineteenth century. The movement spread quickly and affected every aspect of theatrical
production. It gave rise to an era of "isms." Such antirealistic theatre does not discard reality but enhances it with symbol and metaphor.

Briefly examining eleven of these movements makes the diverse qualities and perspectives within antirealistic theatre apparent. From the emotional and "irrational" perspectives of Theatre of Cruelty to the rational and thought-provoking nature of Intellectual Comedy, pre-World War II antirealistic approaches such as Expressionism, Theatricalism, and the French Avant-Garde challenged and extended the limits of theatrical art. Following World War II, Theatre of Alienation would introduce new theatre practices and reawaken theatre's sense of social responsibility, while the Theatre of the Absurd would express the futility of all action and pointlessness of all direction.

Philosophical Melodrama accepted the Absurd's premise that humans are alone in a silent universe, but takes it as a challenge to creating an effective life. The Comedy of Contemporary Manners would unmask the ridiculousness of social convention, while Political Satire ruthlessly reveals the hypocrisies and exploitations of political and economic systems within a comedic and often highly stylized framework. The Case Study uses, most often, medical problems as a perspective for philosophical investigations, frequently taking the audience into and back out of the "patient's" experience. By contrast, the ostensible realism of Suprarealism is actually suffused with a menacing obscurity and mythic symbolism that seeks out patterns below surfaces.

I. REALISM  Ibsen – Shaw - Théâtre Libre - Andre Antoine
Anton Chekhov - Moscow Art Theatre

II. NATURALISM  “Slice-of-life” - Emile Zola - August Strindberg - Miss Julie

III. ANTIREALISM  The Symbolist Rebellion (1880s) - Paul Fort - Théâtre d'Art
Maeterlinck – The Intruder (1890) - Peter Pan (J.M. Barrie)

IV. Era of "Isms"  theatricalism - futurism - Dadaism – idealism
impressionism - expressionism - surrealism

V. Stylized  The French Avant-Garde (Surrealism): Ubu Roi (1896) by Alfred Jarry
Expressionism: The Hairy Ape by Eugene O'Neill (1921)
Metatheatre: Six Characters in Search of an Author (1921) by Luigi Pirandello
Theatre of Cruelty: Jet of Blood (1925) by Antonin Artaud
Philosophical Melodrama (Existentialism): No Exit (1944) by Jean Paul Sartre
Theatre of the Absurd: Waiting for Godot (1953) by Samuel Beckett
Theatre of Alienation: Good Person of Szechuan (1943) by Bertolt Brecht
Comedy of Contemporary Manners: Bedroom Farce (1975) by Alan Ayckbourn
Political Satire: Serious Money (1987) by Caryl Churchill

Chapter 10—The Theatre Today
The twentieth century was particularly violent and the theatre reflected and responded to its tensions with a dramaturgical violence and abandons that brought the age of "modernism" to a crisis and perhaps conclusion. As the twenty-first century begins, a new era appears to be emerging. Three major movements characterize theatre today:

1) Postmodern theatre tends to recycle and "quote" from cultural forms and intellectual movements from the past. It is self-referential and contains its own critique, parody, or deconstruction. It stems from antirealist movements and most significantly from the phenomenon known as Dada. Such works also often reject chronological linearity, so that flashbacks, scenes in reverse chronological order, and quick shuttling between times are common. Postmodern experiments have emphasized the senses
through the reality of nudity in tension with the dramatic fiction, or scene, lighting, and sound designs that may be spectacular, semi-autonomous from the play’s action, blatantly technologically enhanced.

2) Today’s theatre is also an open theatre, open and opening to voices unheard or muffled in the white, Western, male-dominated theatre of yesterday. A theatre by and about women now features women as leading, internationally acclaimed directors and prize-winning playwrights, while feminist theatre ensembles have brought women forward as agents of change, in dramas and society. A theatre of ethnic diversity features, most visibly, a strong and growing presence of African-Americans, Latino-Americans, and Asian-Americans both in interracial theatrical production and ethnically identified theatres. Since the 1960s, sexual preference issues have become primary or secondary topics of a number of plays and have emerged as a defining issue for many theatre groups, festivals, and publications. Lastly, theatre has become open in the level of risk attempted and accepted in the realms of dangerous politics, language, and sexual relations, although external attempts at regulation and censorship, successful and failed, are still a recurring fact of life for the theatre.

3) A theatre of revival, meaning remounting the plays of the past, includes postmodern productions that seek to bring fresh life to previously written works. Such a theatre has broad and legitimate appeal and constitutes most theatrical activity in the world. Theatre today can be found in a more places and more types of places than ever before. Broadway, Off-Broadway, Off-Off-Broadway, and nonprofit theatre in America offer most of the professional theatre’s revivals, stagings of new works, and experimentation. Amateur theatre in academic and community settings in many ways reflects professional practices, but offers a financially safer environment for experimentation. The theatre is vital internationally, with England, France, and Germany providing particularly rich mixes of traditional and original work.

Chapter 11—The Critic

1) What are the critical perspectives that help viewers focus on their response?
2) What are the characteristics of newspaper, scholarly and student criticism?
3) What are the qualities of an effective critic?

Professional criticism usually takes one of two forms.

Production reviews generally appear in newspapers and are an immediate response to the play. Scholarly criticism often appears in journals by persons more knowledgeable about theatre. Student criticism usually adopts one of these perspectives, but different standards apply.

We are the critics. Theatre demands mutual and active participation; therefore, we are all critics. We can use our role to hold theatre to high standards, by developing our awareness of qualities of the theatre. We need to be observant, informed, sensitive, demanding and articulate. The best critics are knowledgeable, fair and open-minded.

Terms:  
dramatic criticism  
aesthetic judgment  
entertainment  
production reviews  
scholarly criticism  
student criticism

Additional material from this semester

REPRESENTATIONAL and PRESENTATIONAL form
THEATRE CONFIGURATIONS – Arena – Thrust – Proscenium – Other
BIG RIVER by William Hauptman and Roger Miller (from the book by Mark Twain)
THE 39 STEPS Adapted by Patrick Barlow from a concept by Simon Corble and Nobby Dimon