A Quick (and by no means extensive) Overview
Of Western Theatre History up to Realism

The Speculative Beginnings
The history of the drama is closely related to the history of humanity. When the first hunters recounted their adventures by means of vivid pantomime, when the first storytellers told their tales in rhythmic chants, and when the first organized groups of people found expression in the acting out of hunting, war, and love dances, the dramatic impulse was showing itself. These performances then became part of ritualistic ceremonies which were probably the core of the prehistoric society.

Leading those ritualistic ceremonies was the tribal Shaman, the wise religious leader presumed to have extraordinary, even, supernatural, powers. Although we credit Thespis as being the first actor it could be argued that the earlier shaman deserves that honor. Through the use of masks, gesture and other devises he would create a God or animal through impersonation. There has always been, and will be, a desire to imitate.

Then as civilizations developed, drama took a more definite and recorded form in the worship of heavenly gods and the glorification of earthly rulers. Tales were told of noble characters engaged in mighty conflicts and humorous types bumbling along through their comic paces. And, at last, the tales produced dramatic presentations, ultimately to be written and acted in a concrete form.

First Thing on the Record
The earliest record of an “organized” theatrical performance comes from Egypt. Carved on a stone tablet some 4,000 years ago, this account tells how l-Kher-Wofret of Abydos arranged and played the leading role in a three-day pageant made up of actual battles, boat processions, and elaborate ceremonies that told the story of the murder, dismemberment, and resurrection of the great god Osiris.

Greeks
Precursors to Early Greek Drama
Greek theatrical celebrations grew out of tribal ritualistic ceremonies around the 13th century BC years before the beginnings of the formal Greek drama (the foundation of today’s western theatre.) Many leaders in those early ceremonies were solo performers, like the Shaman. One significant soloist was the rhapsodist (also called a rhapsode), or oral reader, who wrote and performed epic poetry about legends, history, and important individuals. The term comes from “rhapsody” or “stitch song” because part of the rhapsodist’s material was memorized and improvised, making him a poet who “stitched together” old and new songs. The rhapsodists served as a transitional bridge from primitive tribal rituals to the growth of formal Greek drama.

Formal Greek Drama
Greek Drama as we know it began in Greece in the sixth century BC, as part of the worship of Dionysus, the god of wine and fertility. To commemorate the god’s death, a group of chanters, called the chorus, danced around an altar upon which a goat was sacrificed. This chorus was called the “goat-singers,” and their ritualistic chant was called the tragos, or goat-song. From this term the word tragedy came. These ceremonies evolved into dramatic contests, the first of which was won by Thespis. In 534 B.C, he stepped from the chorus and engaged in a dialog between the chorus and himself, thus becoming the first actor. The term thespian has been given to actors ever since. This actor-playwright is also credited with introducing masks into the Greek plays.

These dramatic contests were part of a festival that lasted five or six days. On each of the last three days a different playwright would present four plays. The first three plays were tragedies, performed as a trilogy related in theme, myth, or characters. The fourth play mixed both tragic and comic elements. We call such plays tragically comic plays. Playwrights competed fiercely for the honor of winning the laurel wreath at the contests.
Production in the Greek theater was a highly complex art form that used many clever mechanical devices. The performances were at first held in the open hillsides surrounding a circular area called the orchestra, in translation it is known as the dancing place. The audience watched the proceedings from a hillside know as the theatron, in translation known as the seeing place. Wooden and then stone seats were eventually for more comfort. Originally the theater was only for men, both as performers and spectators. Women did not attend the theater until the fourth century BC. It is believed that some theaters seated over 17,000 patrons.

Originally, at the rear of the acting area, was a small hut called the skene, where the actors changed masks and costumes. In front of the skene was a raised stage, or proskenion, and here this area was also used by the actors as a playing space. After a time, the skene was enlarged into a stone building. A second story and off stage areas (wings) were added, and scenery was painted on the front. On the roof was the god-walk, from which the gods delivered their monologues.

Another device used in Greek plays was the machina, a crane like hoist that permitted actors to appear above the stage as if flying. The machina could also lower actors from the roof of the skene to the orchestra. The machina was heavy enough to carry a chariot and horses or several persons. Most frequently the character lowered represented a god from Mount Olympus who came to Earth to settle the affairs of human beings and the problems of a playwright who could not resolve the conflict satisfactorily. From the use of this contrivance came the term- deus ex machina (god from the machine), which is still used today to indicate some device an author introduces late in a play to resolve plot difficulties. Examples are the unknown relative who leaves a legacy, a long-lost letter, or the discovery of a relative given up for dead. Usually such a plot resolution weakens a play and only works out acceptably in farce, melodrama, or fantasy.

Greek tragic actors wore masks, padded costumes, and boots with thick soles called cothurni, or buskins, in Latin. Comic actors wore rather grotesque masks, costumes with exaggerated padding, and a type of sandal called a sock.

The chorus, however, was an integral part of the early Greek theater. It served to explain the situation, to bring the audience up-to-date, to make a commentary on the action from the point of view of established ideas. Although, with time, the responsibilities of the chorus diminished as the actors took over key roles, vestiges of the Greek chorus are found in theater even today: Stage Manager in Our Town, and El Gailo in The Fantasticks are two well-known examples of a modern chorus.

**Greek Tragedy**

The main conflicts of the Greek tragedies evolved from the clash between the will of the gods and the ambitions and desires of humanity. The plays showed how useless human efforts were to change the predestined fate. The greatest writers of Greek tragedy were Aeschylus (525-456 B.C.), Sophocles (497-405 BC), and Euripides (485-406 BC).

Aeschylus was a warrior-playwright who held firmly to the Greek religion of his day. He added the second actor and reduced the chorus to twelve. He is noted for the elevation and majesty of his language. Many critics refer to him as the “father of tragedy.” Of his seventy to ninety plays, only seven remain.

The greatest of the Greek tragedians was Sophocles. This writer of perfectly crafted plays added the third actor and introduced dramatic action leading to a definite plot structure of unity and beauty. He achieved balance between the power of the gods and the importance of humanity, believing that human beings have a little of the divinity in them that elevates their struggles against fate. Questioning, yet reverent, Sophocles allowed his characters to ask “Why?” within the framework of their acceptance of the will of the gods and fate. As a result, his characters are among the strongest ever to walk upon the stage. He wrote at least 110 plays, of which only seven have survived. However, we do know he won the first prize eighteen times.
Sophocles’ Oedipus stands as one of the world’s first powerful plays of dramatic irony. Aristotle described it as the ideal tragedy. It is the story of a man in search of Truth. His fate, to unwittingly kill his own father and marry his mother, has been preordained by the gods. It is not until he gouges out his eyes that Oedipus perceives the Truth he could not see.

Sophocles’ Antigone is also one of the world’s first great tragedies. Antigone is Oedipus’s daughter. Her two brothers, Eteocles and Polynices, disagreeing about who should rule, slay each other. Their uncle, Creon, takes over the throne and decrees that Polynices was wrong and, consequently, must remain unburied. The Greeks believed that desecration of the dead was offensive to the gods. The soul of a body not given proper burial was doomed to wander eternally. Antigone defies Creon’s decree in order to fulfill her higher loyalties to family and gods. She attempts to bury Polynices, is caught, and is placed in a cave to die. It is not until his own world crumbles about him that Creon realizes that human laws cannot supplant the laws of the gods. A modern version of Antigone by Jean Anouilh has been widely produced in colleges and high schools.

The playwright Euripides seriously questioned life. He became more interested in human lives than in the religious views of his day. He emphasized human relationships and became a master of pathos, human sorrow and compassion. One of his plays, The Trojan Women, is a strong indictment against war. His play Medea is the tragedy of a woman who seeks revenge on her husband, even by killing her own sons.

Greek Comedy
The outstanding author of Greek comedy was Aristophanes (450-380 BC), who contributed forty plays, eleven of which still remain. Aristophanes was a skilled satirist and a keen observer of humanity. He considered nothing sacred. His barbed wit mocked the leaders of Athens and the gods themselves. Three of his best-known plays are The Frogs, a writer’s contest between Aeschylus and Euripides in Hades judged by Dionysus himself; The Clouds, a travesty on Socrates and Greek education; and Lysistrata, a scathing attack on war.

Aristophanes was the chief writer of “Old Comedy.” Many of the Roman and Renaissance writers were influenced by the ‘New Comedy,” whose best-known author was Menander (342-291 BC). Only one complete script, The Curmudgeon, is known, and only three fragments remain of his other plays.

Menander’s comedies seem gentle compared to those of Aristophanes. The satire of Aristophanes gave way to sentimental comedy based on a love story. By this time, the chorus had disappeared and stock characters had made their appearance upon the stage.

Aristotle Poetics
After the fifth century BC, with the defeat of Athens in the Peloponnesian War, the golden age of the Greek tragedy faded. In writing on fifth century in his Poetics, considered the most important tract on western drama ever written, Aristotle (384-322BC) defined the elements of drama. He introduced the term catharsis (the purging of audience emotions through experiencing a play.) He also introduced the concept of the unities of time, place and action- that the action of a play should take place within no more that 24 hours, have but one location and have only one plot point. And of course let's not forget his six elements of drama which are: spectacle, plot, character, sound/music, theme/thought, language/diction.

ROMANS
Roman theatre spaces and production techniques also built on the Greeks, but the results were very different. Instead of using hillsides, the Romans erected freestanding theatres that surrounded the audience and performers while remaining open to the sky for light. These were the first theatres to focus the audience’s attention strictly on the stage without distractions from the surrounding environment. Roman architects exploited the arch to extend their structures high into the air. They also used a heightened skene elaborately decorated with arches and statues of varying sizes. Gradually the theater was extended into a circular arena surrounded by towering tiers of seats. Because some of these imposing theatres have survived remarkably
intact throughout Europe and North Africa, we can reconstruct the Roman structures more authoritatively than we can the Greek ones. Romans also introduced many devices that continue in modern usage such as stage traps (openings in the stage floor for ascents and descents) and vomitories (stadium-like entrances for the audience) as well as a front curtain. Roman Latin also contributed many words permanently to our theatre vocabulary such as actor, auditorium, and histrionics.

The actual productions of Roman Theater at first resembled the Greek, however, eventually became a decadent imitation of Greek drama spiraling into a deterioration of just sensual interpretative dances called pantomimes, vulgar farces called mimes, and colossal gladiatorial contests in which the slaughter of human beings and beasts became the emotional delight of the audience.

Strangely enough, when Rome had no theaters, two writers of comedy stood out — Plautus and Terence. These two created rollicking situation comedies focused on domestic trivialities, pratfalls, misunderstandings, and mistaken identities. Two hundred years later, when Rome had constructed huge amphitheaters, only Seneca, a writer of bombastic tragedies, attempted anything like a play. Seneca’s plays are usually referred to as closet dramas plays meant to be read rather than acted. Although these three playwrights offered little compared to their Greek predecessors, their plays did influence later writers, including Shakespeare.

As the Roman Empire grew, the cultural life of Rome began to decay. The emperors amused the citizens with spectacles in the amphitheatres such as chariot races and battles among gladiators. So as such Romans would only watch the most vulgar sorts of plays. Humungous, awe inspiring events was the trend in entertainment-the Vegas of Ancient times. The Circus Maximus had a chariot racetrack 2,200 feet long and 700 feet wide in a stadium that could hold 180,000 spectators. The Coliseum, which could hold 50,000 spectators, had an arena 287 feet by 180 feet and in its 100 day dedication in 80 BC, 9000 animals and 2,000 people were slaughtered for sport. Then in 476 A.D., Rome finally fell to invading Germanic tribes. In Europe, the centuries that followed are called the Middle Ages. In the early Middle Ages, few people could read or write. Much Greek and Roman literature was lost completely or ignored for centuries.

MIDDLE AGES
Early Middle Ages
Despite its artistic and social contributions, western theatre activities virtually disappeared as Christianity took hold over Europe and then finally struggling back to some sort of life in 925 A.D. This hiatus was caused by several factors - the decline of the Roman Empire from within, the invasion of barbarian tribes from the outside, the decrease of state support of theatre, and theater's own excesses which led to artistic decay. However, the primary cause was the increasing strength of Christianity and the church's objection to theatre.

Greek and Roman religions found strength and meaning in theatre, using various forms of dramatic productions to celebrate their gods and special religious occasions, much as primitive tribes had found theatrical rituals were an effective means to connect human with god. Early Christianity, in contrast, took special exception to the theatre. The Christian church saw theatre as a continuation of unacceptable pagan festivals. Especially dismaying to church leaders was what they perceived as an earthly licentiousness that characterized both performances and audiences.

No doubt some theatrical excesses earned the church's disapproval. For example, Heliogabulus, emperor of Rome (218-222 AD) is on record for the ordering live performances that by today's movie guide listings would be rated XXX. Perhaps too, the Church, like most institutional bodies, disliked being the butt of jokes and was offended by performances that satirized Christian rituals such as the sacrament of bread and wine.

The church took various stands against theatre, but its decisive action came in 389 A.D. when the Council of Carthage issued a decree forbidding theatre. The ruling cited that anyone who went to the theatre on a holy day, instead of to church, would be excommunicated; and officials of the Christian church denied actors, the sacraments of the church. Such actions were effective. Theatre activities became feeble, its once robust health
dissipating, and it substantially disappeared— but not completely thanks to the solo performer and traveling troupes of players “rogues and vagabonds”.

Despite antitheatrical pressures, the art form, though not in a high level organizational form, kept on through the early Middle Ages and well into the Italian Renaissance. In the papers of medieval clerical scribes’ descriptions of nomadic storytellers, singers and solo entertainers are often mentioned traveling alone or in a troupe mixed with jugglers, acrobats, fortune tellers, singers, magicians and independent merchants (traveling medicine show anyone?). Of course, these troupes, or Gypsy like groups (sometimes actual families), were largely regarded with suspicion but found performing opportunities in villages, medieval fairs or being patronized by a monastery. In a way the essence of theatre and live performance was kept afloat through these traveling performers who really were dependent on their own resources and often lived dangerously close to the margin of existence.

However, for a lucky few, full employment could be secured under feudal lord and these positions were generally more comfortable. In addition, some minstrels (whose identity and skills evolved into just music in the 15th century), or troubadours (young literate gentlemen whose poems and songs dealt with courtly love), could find a higher social status. Some were even nobles.

Another version of a medieval solo performer was the scop, who in the early middle ages preserved oral traditions of the time by reciting sagas. The title comes from old English “for jester, or one who scoffs.” Popular during the fifth through the twelfth century, the scop was a singer and poetic storyteller. Other names of solo performers during the middle ages were the Gleeman, Golliard, Jongleur, Touveres, Guslari and Pevaci.

**Later Middle Ages**

The hiatus of major group theatrical activity was slowly extinguished through—surprise, surprise— the Christian church. Gradually, liturgical chants became part of the mass to teach the many people who could not read about the great events in Biblical history and these soon developed in simple short plays.

Slowly these church plays evolved into more elaborate productions that had to move outdoors to accommodate the crowds. Latin was used, as in the mass, and the performers were priests, nuns, and choirboys.

Gradually church drama expanded. Plays were translated from the Latin, and little by little, lay members of the parishes took part in the performances. These Mystery plays and Miracle Plays were based on the lives of the saints and on stories in the Bible which in the eleventh century were performed with mansions, series of acting stations placed in a line. The mansions, or houses, were Biblical Localities such as Heaven, Pilate’s House, Jerusalem, and Hell’s Mouth. Hell’s Mouth was a strange contraption that delighted medieval audiences. It breathed fire and smoke, its jaws opened and closed, and as the wicked were pushed in, and their pitiful cries could be heard.

However, just for clarification! Mystery plays are now typically distinguished from Miracle plays, which were specifically re-enacted episodes from the lives of the saints rather than from the Bible; however, it is also to be noted that both of these terms are more commonly used by modern scholars than they were by medieval people, who used a wide variety of terminology to refer to their dramatic performances. The mystery play developed, in some places, into a series of plays dealing with all the major events in the Christian calendar, from the Creation to the Day of Judgment.

By the twelfth century, the medieval trade unions, or guilds, had taken over the presentation of most of the plays during a celebration called the festival of Corpus Christi. Each guild, according to the craft of its members, presented one part of the story. The bakers presented The Last Supper; the goldsmiths, The Three Wise Men, the shipwrights, The Construction of the Ark.

Each guild had its own pageant wagon, or stage on wheels. The pageant wagon was divided into two levels. The upper level was a platform stage, and the lower level, curtained off, sewed as a dressing room. The wagons traveled from town to town in a procession. The audience could remain in one spot while the pageant
wagons moved through town one by one. The entire sequence of plays was called a **cycle**. The guilds competed with one another to see which could stage the most elaborate production.

Gradually, an increasing amount of secular material, especially humorous incidents, crept into performances. For example, The Second Shepherd's Play is 90 percent secular burlesque focused upon a clever rogue named Mak, who steals a sheep, hides it in a crib, and passes it off as his son.

Groups of strolling players began presenting these plays, but they drew criticism from the Church and the number of their performances declined. These wandering troupes, however, were the first acting companies, which later came under the patronage of the nobility.

Two more types of dramatic productions should be mentioned during this time are the **Passion Play** and the **Morality Play**. The first is concerned with the last week in the life of Christ, is an excellent example of medieval church dramas. It still is given in Europe at Oberammergau, Germany, by the citizens of the Bavarian village where it was first performed in 1634. It has been produced every ten years since 1760.

The Morality play which follows the themes of the Mystery plays. But the Morality play was primarily ethical in purpose, dealing with the principles of right and wrong. The plays usually took the form of allegories dramatized by symbolic characters who represented abstract qualities. The most important surviving Morality play is Everyman.

And finally towards the end of the Latter Middle Ages (15th Century) other dramatic forms developed which included interludes, short humorous sketches performed between serious plays; chronicle plays, based on historical events; and **masques**, highly artistic spectacles written and performed for the glorification of the nobility. Usually staged in banquets halls, court masques were characterized by grand dances, extravagant costumes, lavish spectacle, poetry, and florid speeches all hung on a thin story line praising the monarch and demonstrating the need for loyalty. The backgrounds for the masques were designed by renowned artists like Leonardo da Vinci.

**RENAISSANCE**

The **Renaissance** (meaning “rebirth”) was the intellectual and artistic movement beginning in 14th century in Florence, Italy and extending throughout Europe by the 17th Century. Its theme of renewal of life was incited by scholars in the late Middle Ages rediscovering the classical (Greek) writings of ancient philosophers and scientists. This then contributed to a growing humanistic rejection of the medieval world power structure of the Church's control over all government and individual human decisions along with the use of scientific methods to gather information on the world. Martin Luther, King Henry the VIII, Francis Bacon and Niccolò Machiavelli were just some of the figures to prompt this cultural shift which, of course, had some major effects on the world of theatre.

**Italian Renaissance Theatre Architecture**

During the Italian Renaissance theatre developed along three lines: the courtly theatre in which the scenic arts flourished and for which news theatres were built; the literary genre of neoclassicism and the improvisational theatre of the commedia dell'arte.

Although there are few memorable plays from this period, the courtly plays and theatre architecture were modeled after the Roman cultural. The performers for these productions were often amateur performers who were usually courtiers.

The innovations were that made in terms of scenic design have influenced theatre throughout Europe for centuries to come. These include scenes painted on **backdrops** and the **proscenium arch**, a frame at the very front of the stage that hid the mechanisms for moving scenery which has remained in place in theaters through modern times. In addition with visual style of **force perspective**, **rigging** and **colored light** were
being experimented with too. Among Italy’s architectural contributions to theater were the Theatre Farnese at Parma and the famous Teatro Olimpico, still preserved at Vicenza.

The Teatro was modeled after the ancient Roman Theaters, solidly built and heavily decorated with elaborate niches, columns, and statues. Behind the entrances appeared streets in perspective from stucco and paintings. Buildings covered with statues of diminishing size lined the streets. The amazing effect is that of a city stretching into the distance.

**Neoclassicism**

One major literary idea contributed by the Italian renaissance was **Neoclassicism**; the system was developed by Italian playwrights and theorists. Neoclassicism, which had accumulated all of its principles and rules by 1570 in a treatise by Lodovico Castelvetro, was an attempt to justify secular literature (including plays) and to get official and church sanction for the creation of nonreligious plays. The new method was inspired by the classical writings and plays of Greece and Rome as well as the authoritative treatises on drama written by Aristotle in Greece and Horace in Rome.

Once established, neoclassicism no longer needed to justify its existence, but the standards became rather inflexible rules against which the romantics finally rebelled in the late 1700s. Three basic tenets were central to neoclassicism: **reality**, **morality**, and **universality**. Reality did not mean realism but what the Italians called verisimilitude, which established that theatrical events as written and staged should be reality-based (events that could really occur in life. Some aspects of verisimilitude were drawn from the classics, some were not, and what often seemed a tendency in Greek and Roman plays became rules for the neoclassicists.

The three unifies, for example, can be found in some of the classics but were by no means rules in Greece. These were the unity of time (the action of the play should take place in twenty-four hours or less), unity of place (action should occur in one location), and unity of action (no subplots unless fully integrated with the central conflict). The unities were meant to enhance believability of the action and scenic presentation while unifying the artistic integrity of the play. The pursuit of reality also led to avoiding onstage violence and supernatural events (no one would believe or accept them, it was thought).

Neoclassicism also demanded that plays should teach a **moral lesson**, at first to help justify secular subjects and receive the sanction of church and political authorities. Sometimes the moral lesson was clearly stated at the conclusion of the play, or it was clearly implied throughout. Typically, the conclusion states the importance of not foiling true love, the rewards of remaining virtuous, or the idea that peace and human understanding only come after significant suffering.

And lastly, another unifying device was standardizing dramatic form by insisting that all plays be written in **five acts**, mostly based on the idea that appeared in Horace and the five-act division of Roman plays as received in the Renaissance.

**Commedia dell’arte**

However, with the Italian playwrights only offering imitations of classical plays through neoclassicism **commedia del’ arte** provided much of the new interest in the performance side of Italian theater. The commedia was professional improvised comedy. These **street theatre troupes** had mastered the art of playing out their comic scenarios, plot outlines posted backstage before each performance. Inspirational roots of today’s farce, circuses, cartoons, sit-coms and animated features can be found in this genre. There were no fully composed play scripts as we know them. Instead, the scenarios were quite detailed plot outlines that included Lazzi and certain memorized speeches, **concettis**.

The **lazzi** were special humorous bits of stage business, usually set apart from the main action. A well-known lazzi was one in which the stage action continued while a comic actor laboriously caught a fly. The concettis were wide ranging in their topics such as declarations of love, hate, and madness. The troupes also learned
comments on extraneous matters that could be used wherever convenient, and stock jokes, proverbs, songs, and exit speeches.

A manager who usually was the company's author led each troupe. The plots were almost always comic intrigue involving fathers who put obstacles in the way of their children's romances. Servants were very important characters, often successfully completing the matchmaking.

All the characters of the commedia were stock types identified by their costumes and their masks. There were usually two young male lovers, the innamorate, and their female counterparts, the innamorata. All four were beautifully dressed and spoke in refined language but did not wear masks.

The only other character to perform unmasked was the fontesca, a serving maid. She appears in many plays as Columbina, a clever and high-spirited flirt. The fontesca was the forerunner of the witty soubrette of musical comedy, such as Ado Annie in Oklahoma! “I'm just a girl who can't say no!”

The zanni were clever male servants, excellent at ad-libbing and acrobatics. Most zanni belong to the same character-type of the rogue or clever rascal. It is difficult to categorize them by name, but there were basically two kinds of zanni; the clever prankster, agile in mind and body; and the dullard, blundering in thought and action. Of the first type, Arlecchino was probably the most popular. He is more commonly known to us by his French name, Harlequin. Little pantomimes and playlets based on the style of the commedia are often called Harlequinades. However, the diamond-patterned costume people associate with Harlequin came late in the history of the commedia.

Opposite Arlecchino was Brighella — slow, dishonest, cruel, and vulgar. Another name used for a servant was Pulcinello. This malicious character with his hooked nose and high-peaked hat was the ancestor of Punch of the Punch and Judy shows. Still another of the male servants was Pedrolino, who later became known as Pierrot, the moonstruck eternal lover — melancholy and gentle, but always too romantic and too sad. Later, a sincerely devoted sweetheart, Pierrette, was paired with him, and they became the eternal lovers. To this duo, the temptress Columbina was added to form the eternal triangle. One other variation of the zanni must be mentioned — Pagliacci, the man who must make others laugh while his own heart breaks.

Pantalone was an old man the father competing romantically against his own son, the husband deceived by a young wife, or an overly protective father zealously guarding his young daughter from suitors. His costume consisted of a black coat with flowing sleeves, a red vest, and the breeches from which we have taken the words pantaloon and pants. The Pantalone is a common character in later drama. For example, we see him as Polonius in Hamlet.

The last character important to recognize was the Capitano, a mustached, boastful, but cowardly Spaniard who quaked at his own shadow. He is often considered the ancestor of the villain of the Victorian melodramas. The great 'save-your-own-skin” death speech is typical of the “brave” Capitano.

The Renaissance in England
The climax of the dramatic renaissance came during the Elizabethan age in England. This was a period in which the drama was the expression of the soul of a nation, and the theater became a vital force in the lives of the people.

The first English comedy was Ralph Roister Doister produced in 1553, which the author, Nicholas Udall (1504-1556), modeled on Plautus's plays. The first true English tragedy was Gorboduc, which was performed in 1561. Among the many writers in this period were John Webster (1580-1625) (The Duchess of Malfi), Thomas Heywood (1570-1641) (A Woman Killed with Kindness), Thomas Kyd (1557-1594) (The Spanish Tragedy.), and Francis Beaumont (1584-1616) and John Fletcher (1579-1625) (The Knight of the Burning Pestle and The Maid’s Tragedy).
Elizabethan & Jacobean

Towering above all the other brilliant actor-playwrights responsible for the glory of this period, three men — Marlowe, Jonson, and Shakespeare produced plays that have never lost their appeal.

Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593) through his writing brought about the first important use of blank verse, “the mighty line” of English poetic drama. Combining extraordinary use of language and the excitement of melodramatic plots, he wrote Tamburlaine the Great, The Jew of Malta, and Edward II. These plays present the glory and the horror of the age. However, it is Doctor Faustus, the story of a man who sells his soul for 24 hours of damning knowledge that brilliantly bridges the gap between the medieval age and the Renaissance.

William Shakespeare (1564-1616) was the greatest of Elizabethan dramatists. His characterizations, beautiful poetry, and never-to-be-forgotten lines echo a majesty best expressed by his friendly rival, Ben Jonson, who said that Shakespeare ‘was not of an age but for all time.”

Of course, it should be noted that some people believe Shakespeare not to be a real person but a pseudonym of another Elizabethan author. One theory is that the plays are so brilliant that they cannot possibly be all the work of just one man. They bear the mark of many writers. Another theory is that the famous philosopher Francis Bacon, a philosopher from this era had the adequate cultural knowledge to create as Shakespeare did. What we know of Shakespeare's background leads us to believe that he did not. However, one of the more final enduring theories is that Christopher Marlow is the real Shakespeare. History has him in his prime dying via a knifing in a bar fight and many think this was merrily a scam to escape debts and other pressing problems to create under a new pen name.

The third playwright of this period worth noting is Ben Jonson (1573-1637) who is considered the first master of English comedy. He wrote Volpone, The Alchemist, and Every Man in His Humour. Volpone is considered one of his best in which he creates a comic villain surrounded by fools. He is so masterful manipulator that he cannot be overthrown except by himself. Of course he does ridiculously overreach his situation to be overwhelmed by the wheel of fortune (an idea that fortunes change if we wait long enough).

And in reference to the title of Jonson’s Every man in His Humour, to the Elizabethan, the word humour, as used in the phrase “He’s in a good humour,” did not refer to an attitude of amusement. The Renaissance was a period in which anatomical study, as well as the arts, developed. Physicians were amazed by the amounts of fluids (humour) found in the human body. Scholars believed that all matter was made up of four elements- air, earth, fire, and water. It was also assumed that the human body was composed of these same four elements, each having its own effect on the personality. Air was identified with blood and caused the sanguine humour light-hearted, airy, happy-go-lucky. Fire was associated with bile and brought about the choleric humour- angry, hot-tempered, and impetuous. Water was identified with phlegm and caused the phlegmatic humour- dull, listless, and lethargic.

The humour of most interest in Elizabethan plays is that of black bile, identified with earth, which resulted in the melancholy humour. The melancholy character fell into three main types: the lover, the malcontent, and the intellectual. Hamlet is an excellent example of the intellectual melancholy humour. Although most stage figures have a predominating humour, a balanced personality was the most desirable. This is evidenced by Antony’s tribute to Brutus in Julius Caesar- “… the elements were so mixed in him that Nature might stand up and say to all the world, this was a man.”

Jonson widened the scope of the humours to include more strong personality traits, especially in a weakness, foible, or folly that could make a character a cause of laughter.

Jonson’s popularity probably grew in the void of Shakespeare’s retirement and into the latter part of Jacobean period, so named for the ascension of James the First (1566-1625) to the throne. This followed the reign of the “Virgin Queen” Elizabeth the First (1558-1603) who of course, just like James the First, was an ardent supporter of theatre.
It is generally considered that the work of the Jacobean playwrights such as John Ford, John Flethcher, John Webster and others were highly polished but lacked the profundity of the work during the Elizabethan time. However, Shakespeare was still producing during the early part of the Jacobean period with such plays as Macbeth, King Lear, The Tempest, Othello and others. In fact, it is believe that Macbeth was written especially for James the First due to the King's preoccupation with witchcraft, his Scottish background and the political paranoid from the Gunpowder Plot with Guy Fawkes.

**Shakespeare’s Plays**

The ideal way to become acquainted with Shakespeare is to see his plays, not merely to read them or read about them. The plays were written by a practical man of the theater who wrote them to be seen — not read by a loud, boisterous audience accustomed to shouting its approval or hissing its displeasure. The sounds of the language were very important to communicating and playwrights were known as poets (bards) in their day. A play had to be exciting, moving, and violent, filled with fury, humor, and truth, in order to keep such an audience interested. Shakespeare’s characters felt emotions — love, jealousy, ambition, joy, and grief — that are as universal today as they were 400 years ago.

The character forms the center of the interest in Shakespeare’s plays. Note exactly how each is introduced and how well defined the personality becomes immediately. Shakespeare used the soliloquy and accurate descriptions by other actors to delineate his characters, for there were no programs to provide any explanations.

**Elizabethan Playhouse**

The first English public playhouse, the *Theatre*, was built across the Thames River from London in 1576 by James Burbage (carpenter by trade). He was the manager of the company later housed in the famous *Globe Theatre*, with which Shakespeare was associated as actor-playwright. The theaters were modeled after medieval inn yards and bear batting pits, which were circular arenas where bears, ponies and even monkeys were tormented through the use of dogs as blood sport entertainment. The inns had open courtyards where the audience could stand around a platform stage or sit in the galleries surrounding the courtyard.

The playhouses were round or octagonal in shape and had two to three tiers of galleries. The stage was basically “unlocalized” because this 5- to 6-foot high acting area used little scenery to indicate locale. A sign or an actor’s line was usually enough to inform the audience of geographical locations. The area surrounding the stage was called the *pit*, and the playgoers who paid a modest fee to stand there, were called groundings. The *groundlings* were, for the most part, apprentices, soldiers, sailors, and country folk. In some of his plays, Shakespeare commented sharply on the lack of discernment in the fickle mob that reeked of garlic and body odor, ate and drank during the performances, and reacted loudly to what they liked or disliked. The more refined audience occupied the *gallery seats*, for which an additional fee was charged. The most expensive seats were on the stage itself.

Over the stage were the *Heavens*, a roof supported by two 2- or 3-story columns. The underneath side of the Heavens was painted blue, with a golden sun in the center surrounded by stars and the signs of the zodiac. An actor, who spoke of the heavens and earth, had only to point to the roof overhead and the stage floor beneath to create the illusion of a microcosmic universe. The “back wall” of the stage looked like the outside of a multistoried building.

The area backstage was called the *tiring house*. In the center rear was a curtained recess called the inner below, or study. This area could be used for “reveal” scenes, such as a bedroom or the tent of Antony. There were second- floor acting areas also: a central area consisting of the shallow balcony; the tarras, separated by a curtain into a recess called the chamber. On either side of the chamber were the window boxes, probably used for such settings as the balcony scene of Romeo and Juliet. A third level could be used for acting when
necessary, but seems to have sewed primarily as the musicians’ gallery. In all these acting levels, there were trapdoors, some mechanically operated. They were used in scenes like that of the grave diggers in Hamlet.

Over the third level was what appeared to be a small house, which was appropriately called the scenery hut. This structure housed stage machinery and a cannon. From the peak of the roof a flag was flown to inform the when a play was to be given. Since there was no artificial lighting, plays were presented in the afternoon, which accounts for the description of the Globe as a “wooden O” - a circular building open to the sky.

It is also interesting to note that for costuming patrons would donated castoff clothes for costumes. Of course, this meant that although costumes were often quite luxurious, little attempt was made at historical accuracy. Roman citizens in Julius Caesar appeared in the gorgeous satins, velvets, and plumes of the sixteenth century. The audiences loved color, sound, and pageantry. A march of armies garbed in royal colors, the ringing of the alarm bell, and the firing of cannon heightened the action on the stage.

Elizabethan Theatre Companies
Although Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre companies cooperated under the patronage of noble or wealthy gentlemen, most still relied on the public for support. These companies, like the Italian commedia dell'arte troupes, generally operated according to a profit sharing system. Most company members had multiple responsibilities with the company, such as playwriting, business management, costuming, or acting. Some companies owned their own theater buildings. Women were not allowed to perform; female roles were played by young male actors. Also, a very high level of competition existed among the various companies, making it necessary to perform often and maintain a large repertory of plays. Commissioned plays became the property of the company once the playwright’s fee was paid. Plays were tightly guarded and rarely published. Rather, the actors would be given the lines for their individual parts alone, and the play would come together as a whole only during its presentation.

Meanwhile in France
France developed the professional theater under the patronage of the state with such great plays as The Cid by Corneille (1606-1684) and Phaedra by Racine (1639-1699). However, the superstar of this French era was Moliere.

Moliere (1622-73), like Shakespeare, is an artist all to his own world. Jean-Bapitiste Poquelin, who took the name Moliere, was an actor, manager and dramatist who combined the exuberance of the touring acting companies with the ideas of the neoclassics which encouraged imitation of the values to be found Greek theatre a la Aristotle. He is considered to be one of the greatest comic minds of all time and came from a highly educated background with a promising career in the court. He abandoned this in 1643 to join an acting company. He eventually became the head of this company and began to write his own plays. Tartuffe, School for Wives, The Miser and the Imaginary Invalid are just some of his controversial works that both reflected and commented on the social and religious hypocrisies of his day. He worked to his death, directing and often performing the leading roles in his plays himself.

THE RESTORATION
Following the Elizabethan era, England plunged into the political upheaval of the Puritan Rebellion (1642—1660). For eighteen years the theater was banned. It was not until Charles II returned to the throne in the period known as the Restoration that the theater became legal again.

Important innovations were made in drama during the Restoration. With the English Royal Patent of 1662, women appeared as players for the first time. The patent said that “all women parts should be performed by women” and said also that plays and acting should be considered “not only harmless delights but useful and instructive representations of human life.” Only two playhouses had official sanction during this period according to the English Licensing laws with covered only nonmusical shows. Hence, because these two theatres were Legitimate their names are still famous: the Drury Lane Theater and the Covent Garden. Today
this “legitimate” term has become known in slang as “legit” when talking about types of work an actor does in the professional entertainment world. *Legit* is the category term for stage work and not film and television.

During the Restoration theater buildings closed to the sky were built. Audiences were seated on level floors. So they could see the stage, the stage floor was **raked**, that is, sloped upwards away from the viewers. This was also due to a more preoccupation with aesthetic of force perspective in set design introduced in Italian Renaissance. The actors, therefore, moved “up” and “down” the stage. This is where we received the terms upstage and downstage which we use today. During the Restoration elaborate scenery and mechanical equipment came into use.

It should be said that this theatre was not a theatre for the public like in the Elizabethan and Jacobean era. The traditions of those stages were destroyed by the Puritans when they closed the theaters in the Civil War. They, perhaps, stopped the greatest theatre culture since ancient Greece and arguably the greatest theatre culture ever. When the King returned at the Restoration and the theaters reopened, there was a fundamental change. Theatre had been a popular entertainment for all classes. It had been side by side with bear baiting when it was at the Globe, and yet it was a place for the citizen's wife, beggar, blacksmith or the elegant courtier. After the Restoration, it was for many centuries linked mainly the plush world of the Court and the emergent middle classes. They wanted to be “comfortable” in their places of entertainment.

Also, as previously stated, the restoration professional theatres introduced actresses to the English speaking stage. **Nell Gwyn** was among the first wave of women to do so. At first an orange wench (fruit vendor) in the theatre, Gwyn soon became a crowd favorite onstage and was most adept at comedy, often specializing in breeches roles (cross-dressing as young men and boys), Gwyn was also notorious as a mistress of **King Charles II**, who fathered one of her children.

This novelty of actresses soon became the standard, and the second generation of actresses included very talented performers such as Anne Bracegirdle and Elizabeth Barry, who inspired playwrights to create roles specifically for them. The new actresses were the first women to play Shakespeare’s famous female roles such as Juliet, Ophelia, and Desdemona, all of which had originally been played by boys or young men. Also the **tradition of actors performing certain Shakespearean roles** such as Hamlet, Macbeth, and King Lear as **benchmarks** (measuring sticks) to their skill level began during the restoration theatre culture and has continued on to this day. Many well known British thespians as John Gielgud (who defined an acting style for his generation), Laurence Olivier (who brought a new psychological realm to the British Theatre), and on to such other notables as Alec Guinness, Albert Finney, Michael Gambon, Richard Burton, Kenneth Branagh, Ian McKellen and now Jude Law have all followed this tradition and some American actors such as John Barrymore, Kevin Kline, Liev Schrieber and Denzel Washington have traveled down this road map of challenging classical roles. However, acting career creditable in the USA culture has been more based off film work with stage work being seen as not as important.

Among the Restoration dramatists are a few whose plays have survived until today. However, generally all of the scripts are comedies and this is where we find the reflection of the worldly-wise sensibilities of the period. These comedies of manners were set in London, not in the country and made allusions to the gossip of the day, so that to a large degree Restoration theatre was an insider's theatre. They often involved **sexual intrigue** among the characters who were members of the **upper class**. For the first time, characters spoke in a conversational style, displaying sparkling wit and jaded sensibilities. **William Wycherley** (1640-1716), in *The Country Wife*, started the fashionable trend in comedies. William Congreve (1670-1729) ranks as one of the great masters of comedy. His *Love for Love* and *The Way of the World* set a standard for later comedies of manners. George Farquhar (1678-1707), in his *The Beaux’ Stratagem*, brought a refreshing breath of the country into the dissolute city life depicted on the stage.
18th CENTURY & 19th CENTURY

The 18th Century produced two outstanding English playwrights. Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751-1816) wrote two social comedies: The School for Scandal and The Rivals, which features the immortal Mrs. Malaprop, the world’s greatest misuser of words. Oliver Goldsmith (1728-1774) was a dramatist whose fame rests on one play, She Stoops to Conquer.

The eighteenth century also had the identity of each of London’s theaters strongly shaped by the actor-managers which was mirrored in other theatre scenes and continued on into the next century. In fact, the 18th century actor surpassed the playwright as the major artist in theatre. Audiences in large part went to see a particular actor perform a particular role. Many scripts were tailor to actor’s strengths and much rewriting of standards like Shakespeare was done. In 1747 the actor David Garrick (1717-1779) became manager, with John Lacy of the Drury Lane Theatre. Garrick, considered the greatest actor of his day, was instrumental in bringing spectacle to the stage. His acting style, much admired throughout Europe, included the use of pauses in acting to heighten dramatic tension, and elaborate costumes (such as, famously, a trick wig with hair that stood on end at the moment when Hamlet sees his father’s ghost).

It should be said that in for the American Theatrical Activities the 18th Century was just the beginnings. The actual first theatre was built in Williamsburg in 1716 and all traces of if have disappeared by the time the city was restored in the 1920s. Much of the offerings in early America were English imports as were the actors too in the 1700s. In fact it could be said that American theatre continued to be just an imitation of European styles until the 1920s when Eugene O’Neil produced plays and the Group Theatre began to work with Clifford Odets. It was only then that the American Theater Scene had begun to find its own authentic voice.

Anyway, as the 19th century rolled into being the highly theatrical form of Melodrama saw its heyday rise to staggering heights. This was, particularly in America, the most popular theatrical production style of the day which was only to be overtaken in the commercial market by the rise of the Music Hall in England and its counter part of Vaudeville in America. But before we get into that let’s talk about Romanticism.

Romanticism

The artistic and social movement of romanticism, which is so strongly associated with the nineteenth century, actually began in the eighteenth. It became the dominant style in both acting and playwriting in the first half of the nineteenth century. The first strains of theatrical romanticism can be found in Germany among young, rebellious theorists and playwrights who were sick of the limitations—the strict form and moral teachings—of neoclassicism. The rebels sought to overturn this monolith of art and culture which had sort of a strangle hold on theatre scripts and productions. These “Pre-Romantic” playwrights who called themselves Sturm und Drang (“storm and stress”) deliberately breaking all the rules of neoclassicism. The Sturm und Drangers shocked their audiences with plays full of violence and forbidden topics such as teen pregnancy, rape, self-mutilation, and infanticide.

After this revolution the Romantic Movement became clearer in purpose. They wished to replace neoclassical structure with organic structure: Form should be dictated by subject matter, not classical precedent, they argued. The romantics were fascinated with the wild forces of nature, with the unexplainable, the gothic and mystical, and looked for correspondences between their beliefs and those of the Elizabethans, the Spanish Golden Age, and even the medieval world.

Romantics championed democratic principles and dramatized emotion triumphing over reason. They found beauty in disorder and pleasure in expressions of characters divided against themselves. Their chief model from the past was Shakespeare, and the play of choice was Hamlet. Through the efforts of the romantics, Shakespeare (dead for more than 180 years) first became an international phenomenon and rose to the top of most evaluations of dramatic literature.
France resisted the Romantic Movement for a time, remaining neoclassical under Napoleon and beyond while the rest of Europe succumbed to the intoxication of romanticism. It arrived amid great consternation in Paris when performances of Victor Hugo’s Hernani in 1830 resulted in vociferous argument and near-rioting in the audience, since the play deliberately violated every principle of neoclassicism. Hugo’s romantic theory, which adds the idea of the grotesque to the romantic vision, is more significant than his plays. The character Quasimodo from Hugo’s novel Notre Dame of Paris can stand as an image of the entire Romantic Movement: a beautiful spirit trapped in a grotesque body. Phantom of the Opera anyone?

Romanticism was very popular in the United States and found its stage stars focusing careers to fit these ideals. Actors such as the American Edwin Booth (1833—1893), one of the biggest stars of the entire century toured internationally with both melodrama and Shakespearean tragedy. It was soon evident that the test of any male actor of the romantic era was the role of Hamlet, although other tragic figures such as Othello, Macbeth, Lear, and Richard the Third were considered mandatory roles for most stars. This notion was so prevalent that even some famous actresses—Sarah Bernhardt (1844—1923) from France, for example, and Charlotte Cushman (1816—1876) from the United States—took on Hamlet. Although Cushman created the era’s definitive Lady Macbeth, she also frequently played male roles, including a very successful Romeo played to her sister Susan’s Juliet. The test role of the nineteenth century for actresses, however, turned out to be “Camille,” the protagonist (actually named Marguerite Gander) in Alexandre Dumasflhc5 The Lady of the Camellias (1852), a romantic tale of a courtesan (a high-priced prostitute) with a heart of gold who succumbs to tuberculosis and lost love.

Staging and design in the romantic era introduced the box set, a scenic device that imitated the interior of a room with walls, furniture, and visual detail. This kind of scenery was very important to actors, moving their performances away from the apron and within the walls of the set. After a time actors were no longer playing just in front of the flat theatrical painted drops and scenery.

Also the introduction antiquarianism (the creation of historically accurate costumes and scenery) began in the 1820s. This idea of dressing characters and recreating locations as they would appear at the time indicated by the play was at first a novelty. For centuries actors had traditionally costumed themselves in clothes that were contemporary with their own time regardless of the age or time setting of the plays.

However, Romanticism notions remain central to even today’s modern mind, including an interest in the psychological and the expressive, in the childlike, the revolutionary, the nihilistic, and the pleasure principle. Did anyone say ID? It was a specific revolt against formality (doesn’t like that neoclassicism thing) as well as a focus on intuition, individualism and the organic process of society and nature which can be seen even in today’s culture.

Melodrama
The melodrama was an excellent example of a very structure and predictable plot along with the use of costume, sets, lighting and music to represent the character's emotional states and the plot's dramatic tensions. The term melodrama means a combination music and drama, and throughout the nineteenth century this type of play was accompanied by a musical score just like movies are today. However, fast moving plots full of violent and terrible events (murders, suicides, fires, train crashes, guilty secrets, and real estate scandals) took precedence over characterization with virtuous heroes and heroines beset by disasters and under attack by sinister villains which were all depicted through very emotional and presentational performance styles. Usually the typical heroine was placed in a ghastly predicament from which the hero, owing to entanglements from other evil scheme, was unable to rescue her. Yet, the audience could always take comfort that all would turn out well in the end because “Good always triumphs over evil!”

In addition, the audience did not sit in awe of theses horrors. The interaction between them and the performer was always apparent. So for in the dramatization of Dickens’s Oliver Twist the actor playing Bill
Sykes in dragging Nancy across the stage by her hair could readily turn to the galleries for a chorus of boos which he would then incite more with another swift kick to Nancy.

Also, it should be noted due to this audience interaction the larger than life acting style of the Melodrama was perhaps a necessity and doubly needed due to the cavernous gas lit theaters that the actors had to work in. These huge Cathedrals of melodrama where the actor was hardly visible and barely audible unless he tore that “passion to tatters” with histrionic gestures and vocal gymnastics of slow sonorous speeches would seem comical by today's standards. Yet, for their day those performers would regard themselves to be realistic and full of emotional truth in their performance style.

As the 19th century moved into its twilight melodrama saw big experimentation with stage technology spectacles which simulated gigantic natural disasters, massive ship wrecks, horse races and large scale destruction that would have struck a cord with our current culture of summer box office movie fair.

The Well Made Play
As a side note, playwrights of the nineteenth century perfected the use of causal plot structure in a type of drama called the “well-made play.” The term can be confusing, since, of course, any type of play can be written or constructed well. This particular theatrical term (pièce bienfaite in French) refers to a category of drama in which a meticulous and involved plot takes precedence over all other elements. As perfected by French playwright Eugene Scribe (1791—1861), the well-made play featured an intricate pattern of causality, carefully controlled suspense, and misunderstandings and reversals, leading to an emotionally satisfying climax followed by rapidly falling action. Its influence can be found in many genres because of its use of such dramatic devices (plot points) as a secret withheld until the climax; a reversal of fortune for the hero; mounting suspense depending on mislaid papers; misidentified characters; a battle of wits between hero and villain; an obligatory scene in which the secret is revealed; and a logical denouement that accounts for all the plot story threads.

If you use the standard plot structure (exposition, inciting incident, rising action, climax, falling action, conclusion sometimes known as Freytag's Pyramid) and apply the terms previously defined and create a graph reflecting its emotional rise and fall, you have a good start toward understanding how these types of plays works. Sometimes it is difficult to decide how to apply the terms; there might be debate, for example, on which moment is actually the climax of the play, and good arguments could be made for alternative choices. The identification of the climax then becomes a question of interpretation; the choice that you make will have an effect on how you view the play as a whole. Of course, in melodrama styles this is an obsession.

Music Hall and Vaudeville
The English Music Hall and the American Vaudeville House both developed in a similar fashion. The very beginning of the 19th century saw many “stylish” productions of Theatre only being done for the more economically well off segments of the population. However, the need to entertain the larger audiences of the middle to lower class clientele became apparent. Thus, both the Music Hall and Vaudeville House started to supply evenings of variety acts. An evening of performances would consist of perhaps jugglers, comics, small playlets, animal acts, monologists, dancers, acrobats, magicians, singers and off beat circus performances. These acts would tour from hall/house to hall/house... In America they were many times performing for audiences made up of frontier workers in the American West. On both sides of the Atlantic these productions rivaled and outdid theater in their popularity and commercial success toward the end of the 1800s. Upon reaching their height in the late 19th and early 20th century their decline was self evident with the advent of silent films and then the talkies.

It should also be noted to not let Melodrama, Music Halls/Vaudeville, Romanticism and the well made play overshadow that the 19th century also established several creative entities (whose original audiences were of the more well heeled nature) still performed today. Gilbert and Sullivan (1836-1911) created their clever comic operas, such as The Mikado, H.M.S. Pinafore, and The Pirates of Penzance and Oscar Wilde (1854-1900), with his genius for epigrams and brilliant dialog, wrote The Importance of Being Earnest.
REALISM
As the 19th Century began to end and the 20th century took root several idea driven styles sparked first by playwrights and then directors began to spur on a multi-faceted evolution in Theatre. The only one that will be look at here is the theatre genre of the individual human introspection into one’s societal and intrapersonal status. This was represented in the style of realism or sometimes known as psychological realism.

Around 1840, English physicist William Fox Talbot (1800—1877) invented the photographic negative. This improvement on the daguerreotype (an early type of photograph invented by French scene painter Louis Daguerre) allowed multiple copies of an image to be produced. Now, a boy in London could see an actual image of the battlefield of Bull Run in Virginia, not an artist’s depiction. A mother in Michigan who wanted to see the U.S. president’s face could study a photograph of him. Soon “real” was all the rage, especially in the theatre. There was a call for sets to be more “genuine,” acting to be more “honest,” and dialogue to be modeled after everyday speech. But this call for reality quickly became more than a desire to mirror the world; it became a hunger to uncover the basic forces of human nature and to show people as they really are. This was the birth of Realism.

Contributing to the rage for theatrical realism was Thomas Edison’s invention of the incandescent light bulb in 1879. By 1881, the world’s first electric power plant was up and running in New York City, and four years later the New Lyceum on Fourth Avenue was the first theatre in the world to be lit with electric lights. For the first time in the history of the theatre, every kind of lighting effect—from an eerie, stormy night to a warm summer day—could be realistically presented and controlled. Because of electric lights, the audience could now sit in total darkness for the first time, like peeping toms spying on the action of a play.

So realism became a rebellion against romanticism and melodrama, but at the same time it became a realization of what romanticism and melodrama had approached visually—a very detailed evocation of scenery and costume focused on historical and contemporary accuracy.

Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) is considered the first modern playwright and the father of realism. He and other realists were inspired by a scientific revolution that increasingly looked at the human being not as the center of the universe, but as another subject for scientific study.

One of these scientists, Charles Darwin (1809-1892), in his On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection (1859), created a firestorm with his version of evolutionary theory. Darwin’s ideas not only contradicted the biblical account of Creation, but they also, in many ways, contradicted the Newtonian idea of a logical universe set into motion by a great rational creator. Darwinism described a wasteful and irrational, or at least mistake-prone, world in which most species are failures. Darwin’s observations implied that from an evolutionary standpoint, humans are animals, not divine creations placed on earth to rule over animals. This theory had an enormous impact on the theatre. Now, in order to write or portray a realistic character; the playwright or actor had to understand the character’s environment and heredity.

Whereas Romantic Heroes had been like mystical forces to be reckoned with who were complete, if perhaps simple beings, who knew right from wrong. Realistic Protagonists were a product of their environment, upbringing, and psyche. For Darwin and other thinkers such as Herbert Spencer (1820-1903), the first sociologist to apply evolutionary theory to social development in the 1850s, the importance of heredity and environment was deemed critical to all animal life.

Playwrights such as Ibsen began to use heredity and environment in their plays as strong determinants of human behavior along with the influences of Viennese psychologist Sigmund Freud (1856—1939) who revolutionized ideas about how our animal minds worked. Freud said that the human unconscious plays a major role in shaping behavior. These unconscious motivations, he said, might be memories from early childhood or traumatic events blocked out of their conscious awareness. Freud theorized that people spend vast amounts of energy forming defense mechanisms to cope with such memories and that these often end in
neuroses. Basic instinct can only be controlled through socialization, yet socialization can cause to suppress the natural desires/urges and if they stay suppressed along enough they become part of our subconscious. So this was not just a biological evolution that fascinated artists, but cultural, social and philosophical evolution as well.

The importance of environment (as stated earlier) to character behavior extended to creating settings that were not just authentic in every detail, but also connected to the characters who worked or lived in them. Many of the physical trappings of realism had been developed earlier by the romantics through such things as antiquarianism and the box set, but the new realists labored to connect space to character and event both in production and in the written play texts.

The realists also insisted on creating conversational dialogue that avoided the poetic and included repetition, inane remarks, pauses, and imperfect responses to imitate the way people really speak and interact in everyday life.

In addition the idea of the fourth wall- audiences viewing action on stage as though a fourth wall had become invisible, thereby giving them a window onto the private action- was fully adopted. Therefore, because of the naturalistic dialog, the emotionally intimate content, the domestic settings, and the fourth wall actor could not longer rely on the presentational acting styles popular in the mainstream 18th & 19th century theatre which naturally ushered in an environment ready for Stanislavski.

However, the subject matter of realism often disturbed audiences and critics the most: frank discussions of prostitution, adultery, and divorce; and treatment of monumental social problems in marriage, rights for women, and the plight of the working class. With realism the theatre became a forum for current, volatile social issues that could polarize the audience. The human oppression was a central theme which mirrored the work of Karl Marx (1818-1883) who expressed a moral indignation over the encominic plight of the working class due to capitalism and the industrial revolution.

And, unlike the romantics, Ibsen did not try to change everything at once in his plays but utilized an easily recognized structure that remained popular throughout the romantic era (melodrama and the well-made play). Though, the conclusion of his plays did not provide an easy solution or a happy ending, thus throwing his audiences into a tailspin. When Nora walked out on her husband and children at the end of A Doll House, it was more than many audiences could stand; some even demonstrated and waited for Nora to return.

Other playwrights like Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) use the stage to explore the psychology of character too. His dialog was subtle and often understated. When first presented in the traditional 19th century acting style in St. Petersburg, his play The Seagull had met with failure. It was only when it was produced at the Moscow Art Theatre in 1898 under the direction of Stanislavsky whose method called upon actors to identify with the character they played in a search for emotional truth that it met with success.

And of course, this brings us up to the beginning of the 20th Century where theatre began to have a multitude of styles and permutations such as expressionism, absurdism, theatre of cruelty, epic theatre and more. But we will stop here. Are you not happy?

THE END
An Outline to a Quick (and by no means extensive) Overview of Western Theatre History up to Realism

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Questions on Study Guide for.....

A Quick (and by no means extensive) Overview of Western Theatre History up to Realism

Each time a part of this assignment is handed in these questions must be typed out on a separate sheet paper in order with the correct typed out answer following each question. The answers must be in the style of a complete sentence.

1. What did I-Kher-Wofret of Abydos do 4000 years ago in Egypt?
2. Why was Neoclassicism developed in the Italian renaissance?
3. What did Thespis do in 534 B.C.?
4. The circle that a Greek audience sat around and watched the production in was called what?
5. What is the skene?
6. These playwrights brought a renew fascination with nature’s wild forces, the unexplainable, the gothic and mystical?
7. In what era of theatre history was the stage floor raked and for what two reasons?
8. Where was the God Walk?
9. Explain the origin of deus ex machina?
10. What is Romanticism?
11. What are the three unities?
12. How was the Box Set developed during the Realism?
13. What group in Greek theatre made commentary on the action?
14. Give two reasons why theater disappeared during the early middle ages?
15. What disturbed audiences and critics the most in the beginnings of Realism?
16. Who is perhaps the first actor ever even though there is no record of it?
17. Sophocles’ characters are among the strongest to walk upon the stage in Greek Theatre. Why?
18. What did the term legitimate originally mean and what does it mean today?
19. Please give a 50 word essay on the plot of Lysistrata?
20. What eventually happen to Roman Drama?
21. Why is Hamlet important to the Romantic Movement in theatre?
22. Who kept the theatre alive in a very simplified form in the early middle ages?
23. Explain what a well made play is?
24. What were the Mystery Plays about?
25. What is a scop and what is its significance in theatre history?
26. Who had taken over the Mystery plays by the 12th century?
27. What is a cycle?
28. What is significant about the Second Shepherd’s play?
29. Which is the most important morality play?
30. What is Lazzi?
31. Which group in Theatre History is really the impetus for the proscenium stage that is so prevalent today?
32. How was the economical make-up of the Restoration Theatre Audiences different from Elizabethan audiences?
33. How were the scenarios used in Commedia del arte?
34. Who was Moliere?
35. Which three characters in the Commedia did not wear masks?
36. Name some of the different types of Zanni and what their characters were about?
37. Describe the characters of the Pantaloon and the Capitano?
38. Which Elizabethan play bridges the gap between the medieval age and the renaissance?
39. How did electricity change the convention of watching theatre?
40. Elizabethan playhouses were modeled after what?
41. Who were the groundings?
42. In the 1800s the need to entertain the larger audiences of the middle to lower class clientele was provided by?
43. In Shakespeare plays female roles were originally played by and after that when were women allowed back on to the stage?
44. In 75 words describe what the modern theatrical style of Realism is about?
45. What entertainment venue was selling its entertainment product to the middle to lower class in 19 Century?
46. What is the Gunpowder plot and what play did it probably provoke by the Bard?
47. Who is considered the first modern playwright?
48. In realism set design the box set took on what new artistic aim to help within the story of the play?
49. Why was the The Seagull unsuccessful in it first production?
50. In 50 words please give a definition for the 19th Century Theatrical Style of Melodrama?

Due Dates:

• 1 through 25 due_________________

• 25 through 50 due_________________