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Realism in theatre history

Theatrical realism emerged in 19th-century theatre between 1870-1960, focusing on authenticity and fidelity to real life. It was part of a broader artistic movement that shared similarities with naturalism, emphasizing everyday drama, ordinary speech, and settings. However, realism diverged from naturalism by giving characters more agency over their choices. In Russia, Aleksey Pisemsky and Leo Tolstoy pioneered psychological realism, prompting the need for new acting techniques to convey domestic situations. Constantin Stanislavski's innovations at the Moscow Art Theatre revolutionized the industry with his focus on expressing truth in feeling and experience. His productions of Chekhov's plays and influence on Maxim Gorky and Mikhail Bulgakov solidified the movement's impact. Theatrical realism laid the groundwork for modern drama, starting with Henrik Ibsen's influential work in the early 1870s. Commedia Dell'arte, a precursor to realistic theatre, was a comedic practice originating in Italy that spread throughout Europe in the 14th century, incorporating influences from everyday life and societal issues like lust, drinking, and hedonism. Its basic plot structure and character divisions into classes added depth to performances. During this time period, those with wealth were portrayed as authority figures, while those without money were depicted as servants known as the Zanni. The Zannis consisted of Arlecchino, Pulcinella, Brighella, and Columbina. In contrast, the wealthy masters included Pantalone (an aging miser), Dottore (a 'doctor' with dubious credentials), and Capitano (who appeared brave but was actually a coward). To differentiate between characters, actors wore masks, which were also worn by both masters and Zannis. The lovers, typically referred to as Isabella and Lelio, were supposed to represent beauty and did not wear masks. They would often use makeup to enhance their appearance and display intense emotions towards each other without ever physically touching. This era coincided with the 'Elizabethan' period, during which time Shakespeare flourished from 1570 AD to 1620 AD. Theaters experienced a surge in popularity, transitioning from renovated inn-yards to large outdoor amphitheatres like the famous Globe. Indoor theaters known as playhouses were used during the winter months. However, by 1648, these structures were ordered to be demolished and those associated with them faced punishment due to the Bubonic plague and subsequent closure of all theaters in 1603. The Civil War and Parliament's restrictions on stage plays further contributed to the decline of theater popularity. The 'Globe' was eventually demolished by Puritan forces in 1648, marking a significant downturn in theatrical activities that persisted until all plays were banned. Despite this, Shakespeare's works continue to be widely studied, read, and appreciated today. The Globe Theatre, one of the largest and most renowned theaters, was involved in the construction process with William Shakespeare himself. Before its demolition, it stood as an impressive structure featuring designs inspired by ancient Roman amphitheatres. The theater hosted various performances, including those of famous playwrights and well-known actors, making it a significant source of entertainment. In contrast to outdoor amphitheatres like the Globe, playhouses were indoor theaters accommodating up to 500 people and offered more luxury and comfort for noble patrons. These private enclosed spaces allowed for year-round performances and provided an alternative to outdoor venues. Shakespeare's repertoire consisted of three main categories: Tragedies, Comedies, and Histories. His most famous works include Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, Henry V, Midsummer Night's Dream, and Macbeth. Among these, Hamlet stands out as one of his most popular and enduring creations, often regarded as the greatest drama ever written. Henry V is the final installment of a tetralogy consisting of Richard II, Henry IV Part I, and Henry IV Part 2, which explores the transformation of Prince Hal into King Hal. This play differs from its predecessor in that it presents a mature Prince Hal, who was previously portrayed as wild and undisciplined. Shakespeare's Midsummer Night's Dream, written around the 1590s, is a romantic comedy that tells the story of four young Athenian lovers and their interactions with the Duke and Duchess of Athens. This play remains one of Shakespeare's most widely performed works across the globe. Macbeth, believed to have been penned between 1603 and 1606, is a tragic tale about the dangers of ambition and betrayal. The play draws from the history of "King Macbeth of Scotland" by Raphael Holinshed and Hector Boece. This narrative has captivated audiences for centuries, with many productions incorporating elements such as opera, film, books, stage, and screen. The Elizabethan theatre was characterized by several key elements that influenced the portrayal of Macbeth. The intimate setting, where actors stood on a raised platform surrounded by the audience, created an immersive experience for both performers and spectators. Audience participation was also encouraged through shouts, encouragement, and even rotten fruit thrown at unsatisfactory performances. Costumes played a pivotal role in distinguishing characters, with elaborate attire used to convey social status or profession. The use of costumes was particularly significant in this play, as it highlighted the theme of disguise prevalent in Elizabethan theatre. Furthermore, the employment of sound effects, music, and devices like thunder and cannon blasts created an immersive atmosphere. The legacy of ancient Greek theatre can be seen in many aspects of modern theatre. The development of acting as a profession emerged during this period, with innovations such as mask work, lighting, gesture, and formalised chorus. The use of costume to depict characters, the orchestra, and even the basis of theatrical language all originated in ancient Greece, reflecting its profound impact on contemporary theatre practices. Gods - Dionysus - god of grape harvest, winemaking, and wine. Festival rituals involved planned insanity, where theatre was a means of worshipping and appeasing the 'party' god. Large festivals featured long days with music, debate, boozy evenings, and epic portrayals of antics and gods. Ancient Greek tragedies often had recurring characters and chapters, exploring themes like suffering, death, deceit, betrayal, and loss. Theaters also produced comedies, including satires, buffoonery, and stock characters. Satyr was a combination of comedy and tragedy, with a focus on storylines based on Greek mythology. Theatre performed to inform, control, educate, and entertain the audience. Costumes were traditional, using earthy colors and symbolically colored sashes. Masks and animal hides added to the theatrical experience. Chorus played a significant role, representing the audience's emotional position and offering advice to the main character. Echo, rippling synchronisation, mask, and gesture were essential elements of Greek theatre. The mid-19th century was marked by significant political upheaval in Europe, including failed attempts at reform that left most governments unscathed. Revolutions such as the 1848 European uprisings revealed a growing desire for change, but these demands were often met with empty promises rather than actual reforms. This created an environment where people began to question the effectiveness of romantic ideals and turned towards pragmatism instead. As workers struggled to secure basic rights, unionization and strikes became increasingly common, often leading to costly work stoppages and violence. The emergence of realism as a literary and theatrical movement was influenced by several key developments. These included the understanding that human behavior is shaped by both heredity and environment, making it impossible for individuals to control their actions entirely. Additionally, people began to see themselves as part of nature rather than above it. These ideas paved the way for a new kind of theatre that diverged from traditional forms. Even figures like Richard Wagner, who rejected contemporary trends towards realism, contributed to its development. Wagner sought to create an immersive experience through music and complete illusionism, aiming for a "gesamtkunstwerk" or "master art work." His emphasis on historical accuracy in scenery and costumes helped pave the way for realism's eventual acceptance. The realist movement itself began in France by 1860, driven in part by a response to changing social and artistic conditions. Key tenets of this movement included a focus on truth derived from natural objects perceived through all five senses, the application of scientific method to solve human problems, and the use of art to better mankind. Realist theatre sought to observe and depict everyday life and its challenges in a direct manner, often incorporating contemporary settings and time periods into productions. Partly due to romantic ideals, the acceptance of realism in theatre was a slow process. The Duke of Saxe-Meiningen played a crucial role in unifying productions, while Richard Wagner aimed to fuse emotion and intellect through his operas, although they were often mythical and fantastic. (Top of Page) Writers like Alexandre Dumas fils and Emile Augier popularized realism in France by exploring contemporary life and social issues. In Norway, Henrik Ibsen is considered the father of modern realistic drama, as his plays tackled societal values and unconventional subjects. Ibsen perfected the well-made play formula, using a familiar structure to make his shocking subject matter more palatable. He abandoned soliloquies and asides, emphasizing inner psychological motivation, environmental influences on character personalities, and socio-economic milieus. His plays addressed topics like euthanasia, women's roles, war, business, and syphilis, becoming a model for later realistic writers. Some of Ibsen's notable plays include Ghosts (1881), Pillars of Society (1877), Hedda Gabbler (1890), and A Doll's House (1879). Later in life, Ibsen turned to more symbolic and abstract dramas, but his realism paved the way for a genre that has become the dominant form of theatre today. (Top of Page) Other notable writers of realism include George Bernard Shaw, who used witty humor to critique societal norms in plays like Arms and the Man (1894), Mrs. Warren's Profession (1902), Major Barbara (1905), and Pygmalion (1913). Chekhov is known for his poetic and symbolic works that explore people trapped in social situations, often finding hope in hopeless circumstances. Realism and Naturalism Movements Chekhov's realism influenced other playwrights, while Darwinism shaped the development of naturalism in France. The development of naturalistic theatre was a gradual process, with André Antoine playing a pivotal role in its acceptance. Initially, the genre was met with resistance, but Antoine's Théâtre Libre, founded in 1887, helped pave the way for greater freedom in established theatres. Antoine's innovative production techniques, including the use of realism and natural lighting, influenced many artists. His high standards, however, led to financial struggles, and he eventually left the Théâtre Libre to open the Théâtre Antoine in 1897. This theatre became a hub for modernized state-subsidized theatre, with Antoine's influence extending beyond France. The Workers Theatre Movement in Germany and Austria flourished from the early 20th century, offering censored plays and later becoming a significant force in shaping theatrical productions. The Freie Volksbühne was established by socialist workers in 1890, producing plays on Sundays that catered to working-class audiences. This theatre model merged with another similar group before World War I, eventually combining to form a broad-based audience of over 70,000 members. The rise of realism as a dramatic genre can be attributed to the growing social unrest in 19th-century Europe, including the Industrial Revolution and its effects on workers. Realism in literature often depicts believable stories with everyday characters, focusing on relatable protagonists struggling through their daily lives. Examples include The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn and Middlemarch. The aftermath of the French Revolution also contributed to an atmosphere of protest across Europe, leading to the emergence of realism as a theatrical genre. Ordinary people attended the theatre to see themselves represented, with realistic plays using down-to-earth dialogue and ordinary set designs to convey everyday struggles. Theatrical Realism: Characteristics Realistic plot - The story must be believable and relatable to the audience. Believable characters - Characters should be ordinary people from everyday life, not fantastical or extravagant. Simple dialogue - Characters speak in a natural way, using colloquial language and avoiding complex or flowery language. Everyday occurrences - Plays focus on real people's challenges and struggles, with no supernatural or fantastical elements. Discussion of prescient social issues - Realist plays often address pressing social concerns, such as injustice, and perpetuate certain societal norms. Realistic sets - Set design is simple, accurate, and focuses on the actors' performances. Realist plays remain a dominant force in drama today due to their ability to create a believable world for the audience. However, it is essential to differentiate between realism and naturalism, another similar dramatic genre that emerged in the late 19th century. While both genres strive for authenticity, naturalism delves deeper into dissecting societal conditions and the reasons behind them, often adopting a scientific approach. Naturalist plays typically focus on portraying a realistic world, with relatable characters and plot lines that are grounded in reality. This genre developed as an offshoot of realism and can be seen in numerous examples throughout history. Some notable realist plays include Henrik Ibsen's A Doll's House and Anton Chekhov's The Seagull. A Doll's House, written by Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen, is a foundational play in the genre of theatrical realism. The play tells the story of Nora Helmer, a married woman living in 19th-century Norway, who forges her father's signature to borrow money and keep it from her husband, Torvald. As a result of societal norms at that time, women were not allowed control over finances, leading to Nora feeling trapped in her marriage. The Seagull, written by Anton Chekhov, is another key text in the tradition of Russian theatrical realism. The play revolves around complicated familial relationships and unrequited loves that ultimately lead to tragedy. Konstantin Treplev, a struggling playwright, seeks to impress his mother and her lover with his writing, but his efforts are met with mockery. These realist plays showcase the struggles faced by individuals in their respective societies, often highlighting the need for change. By examining these themes and using relatable dialogue, realist plays continue to captivate audiences today. Nina becomes entangled with Trigorin, who charms her with his intriguing nature. Their affair leads to Irina's pleas for him to end it, and at times, he navigates relationships with both women simultaneously. Meanwhile, Treplev remains alone, yearning for Nina but ultimately unable to express his feelings. Two years pass, and Trigorin leaves Nina for Irina, taking their child with him. The child dies soon after, leaving Nina without success as an actress or fulfillment in her life. Treplev's unrequited love also leads to devastation, culminating in his offstage suicide. The Seagull's realism stems from the unsaid and unseen events that people commonly struggle with, like family problems and unrequited love. The theatrical realism genre explores these struggles, often focusing on everyday experiences of believable characters. Costumes and sets accurately depicting a particular world are common techniques used to achieve this realism. Notable examples include A Doll's House by Henrik Ibsen and The Seagull by Anton Chekhov. Theatrical realism has had a lasting impact on the theatrical landscape, with its influence still evident today. Characteristics of theatrical realism include believable plots, characters, language, and set design. Techniques used to achieve this realism include using costumes and sets that accurately capture a particular world. The genre's pioneers are difficult to identify, but Henrik Ibsen is considered a foundational figure in the development of theatrical realism. Lily Hulatt is a Digital Content Specialist with expertise in content strategy and curriculum design. She holds a PhD in English Literature from Durham University and has taught at Durham University's English Studies Department. Her areas of specialization include English Literature, English Language, History, and Philosophy. Gabriel has a strong foundation in software engineering, with experience working on projects that combine computer vision, embedded AI, and large language model applications. Gabriel's expertise is at your fingertips as part of StudySmarter - an international leader in educational tech. Our all-encompassing learning platform caters to students across the globe, regardless of age or academic level. We offer robust support for a broad spectrum of subjects: STEM fields, Social Sciences, and Languages are just a few examples. Moreover, our platform prepares students to excel in various high-stakes exams worldwide - think GCSE, A Level, SAT, ACT, Abitur, and more. 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