

Theatre

By Erin McCann-Sabo



If you ask most people in the modern-day world, theatre was created by the Greeks during the 4th century BCE as a part of the festivals honoring Dionysus in Athens. According to Aristotle in *Poetics*, Greek theatre consisted of three types of drama: tragedy (its earliest form), comedy, and the satyr plays. From there, the Romans, French, Spanish, Germans, Russians, Elizabethan British, and Americans each had a hand in honing and perfecting the art of live performance into what we now know as theater. While these roots are documented and have a direct lineage and major impact on what we know as modern-day theatre, the origins of theatre are as diverse as the people who participated in it. Most theatre historians now agree that theatre can be traced back across separate cultures as early rituals and storytelling. Depending upon the culture; they could have involved masks, costumes, makeup and dance or singing.

The earliest recorded theatrical event was in Ancient Egypt 2000 BCE where they performed an origin story of the god Osiris. Chinese theatre can be seen evolving as early as 1500 BCE during the Shang Dynasty. Surviving documents also support Indian Sanskrit theatre evolving as early as 2 BCE. In Africa, they never developed a singular term to identify “theatre” however evidence suggests that artistic expression was a large part of all areas of their society from the beginnings. Other non-European nations adapted theatre as early as the 14th and 15th centuries (around the same time that late medieval morality plays and pageant wagons were sprouting up all over Europe).

The Renaissance era brought new life to theatre across the world and gave breath to such areas of theatre as Commedia Dell’arte in Italy, The Spanish Golden Age, Masques in France, Egungun masquerades in Yoruba, and Bunraku in Japan: all leading to the creation of the Elizabethan stage in London.

Perhaps one of the more well-known theatre eras was the Elizabethan in England, when the creation of theater buildings such as the Swan gave rise to the most well-known playwright in history: William Shakespeare. Shakespeare and his troupe made the playwright/director/actor/designer relationship more formalized and gave birth to the notion of an “entertainment star.” He was followed closely by the likes of Moliere, Oscar Wilde, Anton Chekhov, Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw, in their own respective countries during the 18th and 19th centuries.

In the late 19th and 20th century, wars, political change and modernization led to the roots of various theatre movements, including Dadaism, Agitprop, Theatre of the Absurd, Epic Theatre, Naturalism, Poor Theatre and the Happenings of the postmodern era. Happenings continue to be popular to this day, although now you may know them as Flash Mobs or Pop-ups. This was also the era in which modern day musical theatre was born. Rodgers and Hammerstein, Cole Porter and the Gershwin brothers used popular stories fused with jazz, ballads and dancing to create large productions that wowed audiences. Many of these were then popularized during the Golden Age of Hollywood on film. Unfortunately, this era also gave rise to Coon Plays, black face, Minstrel shows, and Burlesque, where less than savory producers took advantage of performers, bringing about the birth of artistic labor unions.

Modern-day theatre is as diverse and unique as its origins. Even on Broadway, from theatre to theatre, shows can range from three-hour epic dramas, to large scale upbeat kid-friendly musicals. Experimental theatre and new work are still rampant and from small community theatres to large professional touring artists-- theatre is still one of the most popular forms of entertainment throughout the world.

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