

Topic- 001: “History of Drama”

Expansion of Drama Culture

The word drama comes from the Greek meaning “to act, do or perform”, and it is in the several subtle and diverse meanings of “to perform” that drama can be said to have begun.

All communities accept that their later drama has roots in pre-history. Anthropologists have shown that primitive societies used (and in certain cases still use) role-playing in teaching the codes and behaviour required to live and survive in that society; for example, to teach the skills needed in knowing what and how to hunt, the making and use of weapons and the rules of warfare. Performance could be involved in oral repetition to teach the laws and social customs, while enactment of mythical or historical episodes perpetuates and transmits what is thought important to maintain in the race-memory of the tribe.

Most early societies lived by a seasonal cycle, a regular pattern allied to the movements of the sun or moon, and perhaps related to the movement of prey, or to seedtime and harvest, and drama was especially important in devising rituals to deal with the inexplicable, the changing seasons, the natural phenomena of night and day, or the waxing and waning of the moon. Without propitiation with certain symbolic ceremonial safeguards or sacrifices, the sun might not rise again, the crops might fail.

All humankind has, and had, concerns with life and death and has evolved ceremonies and rituals to help deal with the perennial questions of “where did I come from?” and “where do I go after death?” These were usually answered by some kind of belief in an outside power, an almighty being or beings, to give the hope of an after-life, to avoid extinction at death. Thus the invention of gods happened to provide a liaison between this world and the next and societal rituals would encompass joy, hope, and renewal, or death, despair and foreboding. Omens became important and had to be interpreted by wise men, perhaps involving impersonation, and disguise, in punctiliously performed ceremonies to appease or placate the gods.

Rules for communal living would gradually be agreed: incest might be banned, but witchcraft allowed within given limits; murder be condoned for some offences but avenged for others. Most societies would include rituals of purification, perhaps for menstruating women or after childbirth, and ordeals for children to undergo in order to attain adulthood and acceptance into full membership of the community. And all this would be taught and learnt through oral tradition, through story-telling and through performances and enactments passed down from generation to generation.

All societies seem to have had these ritual traditions in one form or another from which spoken drama often, but not always, emerged. It is these ritual and community roots that later dramatists

have drawn on in trying to express humanity's concern with life and death in both tragedy and comedy. In the early communities everyone was involved in the drama of a ceremonial ritual, perhaps with impersonation and identification with priestly roles, or as characters depicted in enactments, or simply as celebrants but it was not theatre. Theatre requires a separate audience of spectators which happened when the occasion became a performance by some in front of others as an entertainment. However since the sixteenth century, the two terms have become synonymous with both words loosely understood as meaning the representation of a story enacted by actors in front of an audience.

Most communities have some mention of folk drama derived from oral storytelling becoming a narrative in dialogue, but by its nature oral storytelling is mostly unrecorded, and histories are sparse and fragmentary. It is thought that music and dance associated with death and rejuvenation is represented in ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs from around 2500BCE but little more is known about Egyptian practices. Although Herodotus wrote about an Egyptian temple ceremony involving a mock battle, and implies this was an annual event, nothing is known about any spoken drama. In China music is believed to have existed in 5400BCE, scribes wrote of rituals and religious worship accompanied by music and dance from 2200BCE, and of emperors who were reproved for enjoying theatrical performances by actors. However, written classical Chinese poetic drama is only recorded from the 700s BCE. In India the beginnings of spoken drama are uncertain but it is also thought to have derived from earlier dramatic dances and mimes related to ancient rituals and seasonal celebrations, and to have appeared about the same time as the Greeks began writing their plays. Some authorities suggest Indian dramatic writings were influenced by the influx of Greek culture after the invasion by Alexander the Great in 327BCE. For Greece, and in particular Athens, is credited with the beginnings of performing plays in front of an audience as we understand them today.

Greek Drama

We have many of the texts of actual plays performed in Greece from around 400BCE. Knowledge of them became widespread because European culture was founded on the classical authors of Greece and Rome. From the Renaissance until the twentieth century a formal education in a European school was based on, or at least included, Latin authors such as Virgil and Cicero, and plays by Seneca and Terence. The Greek texts used included stories from The Illiad and The Odyssey by Homer; and many of the plays first performed centuries before by Aeschylus and Aristophanes, Sophocles and Menander, as well as the writings of philosophers like Plato and Aristotle.

The performances of plays in the Greek culture were as part of a religious festival not in the sense of a ritual offering of an art in the form of drama but as a celebration with and for the god. Slowly the drama was becoming theatre with the God as the most important spectator. Usually,

but not exclusively the performance was for the god Dionysus, and it is believed the theatre developed from the Dionysiac cult-festivals and the seasonal celebrations and rituals for crop sowing and harvesting. Some of the earliest representations of theatrical performance from the 6th century BCE show actors dressed as animals or birds.

We know a little of how Dionysus may have been worshipped from Aristophanes' play *Acharnians* in which he mocks a peasant family's Dionysiac feast. They recite a prayer and then the family walks in procession, the daughter as the maiden (the *canephorus*) carrying the basket with the sacrifice, a slave carrying a phallus, the father singing a bawdy phallic song, the wife watching from the house roof. This gives us prayer, a procession, the dithyramb (a certain kind of rough lyric verse) and the sacrifice, which may have originally been a man but later became a goat and then fruit or other foodstuff. Occasionally the procession was combined with the symbolic wedding of the wife of a leading citizen to Dionysus in the temple. Dionysus was represented in person at this time as a bearded long-haired mature man with two little horns on his forehead as a sign of unbounded energy. This later became a sign for adultery. The crown of ivy and the burgeoning thyrsus (a ritual staff of *narthex* or fennel twined with ivy and vine leaves and capped with a pine cone) showed he was not affected by seasonal changes. In procession he was preceded by virgins and followed by *Bacchantes* dressed as satyrs in goatskins, or in wine-stained garments and with faces smeared with wine dregs. Some of the *Bacchantes* represented the dead with horrifying death masks and grave clothes. The popular name for the satyrs was *tragos*, which means goat; they sang a tragic or goat song from which eventually came tragedy. Dithyrambic songs and dances were performed at the sacrificial site, the temple. In parallel with this solemn religious festival there grew up the comic phallic sports, with choruses of young men coming after the "official" procession, often in their chariots, singing improvised, witty, and probably bawdy, songs. The young men were called *komos* and their songs were called comedies.

It is believed that drama developed from narrative songs in the dithyramb verse, first given by a single person and later performed by a chorus. At first there was no identification of characters by separate voices but eventually a second voice was introduced and at least part of the sung narrative became dialogue. *Thespis* is credited with introducing this innovation and is by tradition considered the first actor. He was said to come from *Icaria*, which had links with the Dionysus legend. Dionysus is supposed to have been friends with *Icarius* the King. *Thespis* is thought to have started in the provinces with a chorus, traveling with a cart on which he stood to give a solo performance in spoken verse independently of the chorus. The actor could play the hero or the god and the chorus respond as the soldiers or the worshippers or whatever was required by the story. And from this came the style of Greek tragedy with its use of a chorus and first one then two and then three actors playing the single voice parts, and the development of dramatic action. All this came about not solely for entertainment but for a religious festival usually in honour of Dionysus, although it is believed the acting troupes would travel the country and present the plays for suitable occasions outside the actual festivals.

We know there were earlier dramatists whose works have not survived, although some names such as Phrynicus are known, but the first play texts we know of are by Aeschylus who was born in 525BCE. Only some seven of Aeschylus' plays have survived from what is believed to be a total of around seventy and it is not even certain which of his writings deserves the honour of having been shown first. There is scholarly debate as to whether it was *Suppliants* (*Supplices*) or *The Persians* (*Persea*), which was performed in or around 472BCE. However, the best known of his works is *The Oresteia* which is a complete trilogy presented at a festival for Dionysus in Athens in 458BCE

In the earliest plays the single voice is subordinated to the chorus and the story is told in the interchanges between him and the chorus, but Aeschylus added a second actor and then the two could address each other without the chorus. We know quite a lot about Aeschylus from an anonymous biography of uncertain date and uncertain sources. But some of the information is confirmed from comments by others. He was certainly honoured as a great writer in his lifetime; his plays won the City Dionysia thirteen times, and some of those victories were after his death in 456BCE. He said of himself that what he wrote were "slices from Homer". He retired to Sicily and was buried at Gela with an epitaph he had composed: "Here lies Aeschylus of Athens, son of Euphorion, who died in fertile Gela, and whose prowess the long-haired Medea experienced on the celebrated battle of Marathon."

The dramatists had to rehearse their own plays and usually took a part themselves so they had to be proficient not so much as actors but in singing and dancing, for this is how the plays were presented. Aristophanes, when he mocked Aeschylus in *The Frogs*, had him say that it was he who gave new poses to the chorus, and he is reported as being innovative in making the *Eumenides* (the *Furies*) in *The Oresteia* rush disheveled into the orchestra. Sophocles, (c470-406BCE) for his part, was also reported to have been a fine singer and dancer. He added a third actor and limited the size of the chorus to fifteen, which increased the possibilities of conversational exchange. He was said to have introduced scenic decoration and dressed his actors in long-sleeved formal robes. There are seven surviving texts of his plays. These are more about characters such as Oedipus or Medea in an overwhelmingly tragic situations than the explorations of wider moral dilemmas that Aeschylus wrote. There are nineteen plays by Euripides (c480- 406BCE), which are different again from either of the others in his dramatic use of language but the themes of his plays are less powerful and at times almost incomprehensible. The best known are probably *The Bacchae* and *The Trojan Women*.

We know less about the Greek comedies because few have survived but scholars have differentiated three kinds. Firstly the Old Comedy encompassed Aristophanes, and whilst it is certain there were others writing in the same style, only his works have survived. The characters in the Old Comedy are grotesques in bawdy, vulgar satire intermixed with buffoonery, but it is a genre especially distinguished by the use of the chorus who speak directly to the audience, a style called the parabasis. In the Middle Comedy c400-330BC there was more direct political

reference, no parabasis and more colloquial language. Only fragments of these texts remain but they seem to have been more realistic and more domestic. Then around the time of Alexander, 330BCE, the New Comedy appeared, as seen in the fragments of plays by Menander. The grotesques have gone, mythology has gone, the gods appear very rarely, and the masks, if they were still used, were more realistic. About 4000 lines survive from Menander. His plays are realistic in that there are familiar characters from everyday life with more emphasis on their human behaviour and on the correction of social manners.

Roman Drama

Where the Greek dramatists were writing for festival presentation and the kudos that would ensue, the Roman theatre was commercial and the dramatists wrote for money or patronage. Plautus and Terence adapted Greek originals. It is known that they used the plays of Menander, and others whose work has not survived, from the Greek New Comedy. The Roman writers kept the same kinds of metrical pattern for the dialogue, gave longer lines for chanting and lyric forms for the songs. They kept the Greek costume and masks and the basic types of conventional young men in love, a clever, tricky or sly slave, a pimp, a parasite a dirty old man, etc. At the same time in both Greek and Roman societies there was unliterary comedy. Burlesque farces from Megara in Greece, and influences from Southern Italy and Sicily, in Rome, which seem to have included music, comic songs, mime and dance. This genre was known as Fabula Atellana after the town Atella. It is believed that the separate art of mime originated with this genre, but it also influenced the taste of the Roman audiences for grotesques and farce. So that there was reversion back to the Old Comedy in the adaptations Plautus and others made of the New Comedy to suit the taste of the Roman public.

Plautus (c254-184BCE) certainly wrote for money. He went by the name of Titus Macius (which meant Buffoon) Plautus (which meant flat-footed) but his original name is unknown. It is thought he was born in Umbria from where he went to Rome and worked as a stage hand and then as an actor, and eventually gained Roman citizenship. He wrote many popular plays, which are the earliest complete Latin literature that we have, and which are more or less in the form in which they were written. His plays were different from run-of-the-mill farces, although he had to broaden the Greek original and added elements from the Atellan farces and in a way ranged back to the style of Aristophanes. It is thought too that masks were used more than they had been in Menander's works. He adds scenes to his sources to allow for more tricks and deceptions, and often has many loose ends, but he has a verbal dexterity and plays with the language, using witty alliteration, assonance and bombast. He gave his audience sentimental realism and farcical burlesque and often mixes spoken colloquial dialogue with the lyrical. His characters have little development and rely upon usual stock types: the comic slave - intriguing, blustering, impertinent, - irascible old men and available women. There are no surprises; the audience knows what to expect, but Plautus extends theatrical technique by using comic irony more fully than Menander or Aristophanes. He lets his audience in on all the secrets from the beginning and

then delights them with the mistakes the characters make because of facts not known to them but known to the audience. His play *Miles Gloriosus*, about Pyrgopolynices “the Swaggering Soldier”, has two plots and many loose ends. Money is usually important in his plays and he often mixes Roman attitudes, events or elements into a play nominally set in Athens, or, as this one, in Ephesus. But Plautus wrote for the masses, and the masses liked it.

Terence, who wrote c195BCE, was a much more literary writer. He came to Rome as a slave from Carthage and became the protégée of a literary circle for whom he wrote. His master freed him and gave him his name, Terentius Afer. He aimed for the smile rather than the guffaw and his characters were usually the elegant men about Rome, conscious of their manners and annoyed by their elders old fashioned ideas. Although the setting might be elsewhere. For his plays differed from his Greek sources in that the manners and behaviour were Roman with Roman attitudes to women and slaves, with lots of sentimental posturing. He used the same repertoire as Menander and the same stylistic conventions but he aims for greater realism and has less flamboyance than Plautus, with what we see as psychological analysis. His prologues also show him more at home with his master's friends, or at least with a more literate and thoughtful audience than Plautus. Perhaps not surprisingly his plays were not very popular with the general public in his lifetime but they have since become most influential in the development of European drama.

Seneca was the other Roman dramatist whose work has come down to us. He was born around 4BCE in Spain and lived under both Tiberius and Caligula. He offended Claudius and then later became tutor and adviser to Nero. He shows some inconsistencies in his writings and seems to have swayed with the current political wind. His plots are taken from Greek sources but there is no balance in his treatments, they are sensational and rhetorical rather than poetic, bathetic rather than pathetic, with little motivation or development of character. Nevertheless, some academics refuse to dismiss his work out of hand and suggest that he was deliberately writing grotesque parodies even travesties of the Greek models in a philosophical commentary on the sordid world in which he lived. It is thought his plays were not written to be performed but read and perhaps thus able to be more thoughtfully considered than would be the case in performance. Like Terence he has helped to form later European drama and was particularly influential on the Renaissance dramatists.

The term Renaissance is usually attributed to the nineteenth century Swiss art writer Jakob Burckhardt in his book *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy* of 1860 and people have accepted his definition in hindsight. He set out the idea that there was an almost spontaneous re-birth in interest about the classics, in classical art and literature. But an earlier writer, in the sixteenth century, Giorgio Vasari, often seen as the Medici PR man for artistic affairs, wrote in his *The Lives of the Painters, Sculptors and Architects* around 1550:- about “the rise of the arts to perfection, their decline and their restoration or renaissance.”

Historians are not agreed that one can set any specific dates for the Renaissance but it is usually agreed that a rural Medieval feudal society gradually changed to an urban mercantile society with more centralised political institutions, a commercial economy and growing lay patronage of the arts and music, sometime around the 14th century in Italy and this spread to rest of Europe through 16th and 17th centuries, and that this was a period of renewed interest in the arts of the classical past.

There had been drama before this. There are records of popular comic theatre presented by traveling troupes, and of religious plays and theatrical celebrations at Christian festivals, although many clergy thought plays as such sinful. But much of the Latin literature survived in the monasteries and in education, and some of the plays written as a religious didactic tool used Roman forms. The Gandersheim nun, Hrotswitha c960 AD, modeled her plays on Terence, while other religious plays have recognizable language from Latin writers. There were also theatrical representations or kinds of tableaux on a feast day or other special occasion. In Italy these were known as *sacre rappresentazioni* and were often given by a confraternity. These used very elaborate staging effects of all kinds long before such settings were used in staging secular entertainments.

However the start of an academic classical interest in theatre seems to have begun with the find of a manuscript copy in 1427 of some of the comedies of Terence and Plautus which led to attempts to present these and other classical plays in what was thought to be the original manner. An Academy was formed in Rome by the scholar Julius Pomponius Laetus (1425-1498) a leading humanist, specifically to study and present ancient Latin plays, mainly those of Plautus. Oddly the most irreverent and bawdy of the Roman dramatists. Laetus was fanatically devoted to what he understood by the customs of ancient Rome and even was said to refuse to learn Greek in case it spoilt his Latin. The Academy was suppressed by Pope Paul II in 1468 for its political aims and pagan spirit and Laetus and his companions were imprisoned and tortured. But the interest in classical arts and literature continued and the translations into English of many Latin texts in the sixteenth century brought the plays to England, where the Elizabethan dramatists such as Marston plundered the plots of Seneca., or like Jonson tried to emulate his style.

T.S Eliot wrote about Seneca's influence on Elizabethan thought and said "Seneca's influence upon dramatic form, upon versification, and language, upon sensibility and thought, must in the end be all estimated together." And asserted that "when an Elizabethan hero or villain dies, he usually dies in the odor of Seneca" by which he seems to mean that, like Seneca, the Elizabethan heroes do not often have an honourable death but include disgrace, violation even dismemberment whether deserved or not. Aristotle taught that tragedy should purge humankind through pity for the protagonist and fear of our own weaknesses, but Seneca and his heirs showed that we are all guilty and we live in a world of cruelty and suffering. The gods could no longer be placated by dramatic ritual and ceremonies as in the origins of drama.

“Script Writing” MCD502
