Chapter 11

Modernism and Theatre

In the previous chapter you have seen how modernism grew as an art and influenced literature. In this chapter we will understand the ways in which the movement impacted theatre practices across the world.

Background

A major feature of modernism is avant-garde art which expressed dissatisfaction with the mainstream theatre of their time and sought to provide a significant alternative to it. This phenomenon, the Independent Theatre movement, is essentially associated with the years before the WW I, but an Alternative theatre tradition has remained an important part of the international theatre ever since.

As we have already discussed in the earlier chapters, Modernism is a term applied to various aspects in all of the arts in the late 19th and early 20th century, many of these developments had an anti-realistic slant. Some scholars have also found echoes of the romantic spirit of the early nineteenth century, especially the preoccupation with internal reality. We also know that Modernism was closely associated with the idea of the avant-garde, a term applied to artists involved in introducing original and experimental ideas, forms and techniques, usually with an implication that these ideas anticipated significant directions in the development of modern art.

Henrik Ibsen is referred to as the "father of modern drama" and is one of the founders of Modernism in the theatre.

Modernist art was iconoclastic, often aiming at clearing away the debris of the past to make way for a new art of the future. In theatre, there are few playwrights apart from Brecht, who became representative of these tendencies.

Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956)

Brecht’s theatre was influenced by Karl Marx and his idea of dialectics. He was ideologically against representation of realism on stage and aimed to provide the audience with ways of
looking at bourgeois reality as unnatural. What Brecht desired was to alienate or estrange the audience, question the world created by Capitalism and the society it sustained, and encourage/force to think rather than feel. His plea was therefore to "cry tears from the brain."

Brecht’s “theatre of alienation” aimed to have his audience at an emotional distance from the action. Also called the "the V-effect", the idea was to make familiar strange, that is, to defamiliarize or to show everything in fresh unfamiliar light. Brecht achieved the alienation effect by the use of placards to reveal the events of each scene, and use of narration and songs during the course of the play. actors changed characters and costume on stage and simple props and scenery was used on stage (for example, a single tree would be used to convey a whole forest, or the stage flooded with bright white light whether it's a winter's night or a summer's day).

Brecht’s epic stage was a place for discussion, where audience was presented with a social/political topic of relevance and asked to think. A distinct quality of this usually left bare stage was that it exposed stage machinery and exposed lighting grid above stage.

_The Threepenny Opera_ (1928) was a revolutionary piece of musical theatre adapted from an 18th-century English ballad opera, _The Beggar's Opera_ by John Gay. Brecht wrote it in collaboration with the translator Elisabeth Hauptmann and the composer Kurt Weill in 1928 as a socialist critique of the capitalist world. Brecht also used the historical figure of the Renaissance inventor/scientist Galileo (1564-1642) in his play _Galileo_ (1938) where he used Marxist ideology to illustrate the dichotomy between science and religion.

**Andre Antoine and the Theatre Libre**

Modern theatre is often seen to commence in 1887 with the founding of Theatre Libre in Paris by Andre Antoine.

Theatre Libre championed the works of Zola and the naturalists and also of the first major modern dramatists, such as Ibsen, August Strindberg and Gerhart Hauptmann. Antoine's theatre served as a model for other experimental theatres across Europe and eventually in America.
One significant product of Modernism was Futurism, a movement that celebrated radicalism, change, technology and revolutionary upheaval in art and politics. Introversion, technical display, mannerism, skepticism and a consciousness and display of a sense of crisis and rapid movement in culture, in perceptions of reality, in the sense of community, were all features commonly found in modernism.

Still, the first major modernist movement in the theatre was Symbolism (earlier precursors were Maeterlinck and the later Ibsen.

**Surrealism**

- Explores subjective dream–states & was concerned with subverting the logic of representation.
- Satirizing rational categories, the surrealists desired for direct contact with the hidden, unconscious forces that might revolutionize a dry, ordered and bourgeois life.
- Surrealism is maybe more anarchism than aestheticism, always exempt, as Andre Breton writes, "from any moral or aesthetic concern."

One of the most important figures of this movement was Salvador Dali, who collaborated with filmmaker Luis Bunuel on "Un Chien Andalou," and created some very controversial imagery for the film.

In the earlier chapters we have noticed that one major modernist concern was the depiction of interiority, where art is a depiction of “stream of consciousness.” In drama, the equivalent is expressionism which attempts to portray the subconscious.

The non-realistic dramas of Strindberg and the plays of Frank Wedekind provided the major inspiration for expressionism in the theatre, a movement which often emphasized subjective perceptions of reality through such devices as elliptical and exaggerated speech, and abstract and
distorted movement, costume and scenic elements. Anticipating Joyce and Eliot, Strindberg uses myth as a controlling pattern that makes the chaotic modern conditions more meaningful.

Not all expressionists focused upon inner reality, though. An important part of the movement applied the expressionist style and approach to social and political concerns, both in playwriting and in production.

During the 1920s Erwin Piscator worked towards a politically oriented theatre for working-class audiences by combining certain techniques and concerns from the expressionist theatre with experimental techniques from the recent post-revolutionary Soviet theatre. He developed a production form mixing traditional theatre with film, cartoons, projections, treadmills and a variety of non-representational devices, and published a book *The Political Theater* (1977). Piscator collaborated on an adaptation of Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy* (1925) under the title *The Case of Clyde Griffiths* (1932).

Bertolt Brecht drew both upon Piscator and upon expressionism to develop his non-realistic Epic Theater, one of the most influential of modern dramatic forms. This approach inevitably involved Brecht, as it did other non-realistic authors, in a conflict with the evolving doctrine of socialist realism in the Soviet Union.

One of the first and most famous of the American theatres was the Provincetown Player, whose leading dramatist, Eugene O’Neill, not only dominated the American theatre for decades, but was also instrumental in bringing to the American stage many of the themes and techniques of the European avant-garde theatre.

**Moscow Art Theatre**

Established in 1898, this has been most closely been associated with realism essentially due to the work of its director and leading actor Konstantin Stanislavsky. With emphasis on psychological realism in acting, the growing reputation of the symbolist dramatists at the beginning of the 20th century stimulated this theatre to establish a series of experimental studios to explore alternative approaches.

**Agitprop** was the Russian nomenclature, signifying a department of the Central Committee, or a local Committee of the Communist Party in the Soviet Union after the Bolshevik Revolution (1917). The Bolsheviks used art as a weapon in the revolutionary struggle and the agitprop
department disseminated culture and information across the country. In drama, the Blue Blouse movement (so called because of the colour of the workers’ uniforms) drew on visual forms, traditional/folk art and avant-garde techniques to develop their style of agitprop.

The term agitprop is a conflation of ‘agitation’ and ‘propaganda,’ and the Russian Marxist theorist Georgy Plekhanov originally developed the twin strategies. It influenced the development of epic theatre and didactic play and was practiced by people such as Brecht and Piscator.

By the 1930s the first wave of modernist experimentation in the Western theatre was clearly diminishing in strength and experimentation. Only a few dramatists, such as Luigi Pirandello (1867-1936) in Italy, Thornton Wilder (1897-1975) in America and Jean Cocteau (1889-1963) in France, gained recognition with innovative works. The major works of Brecht and the theoretical writings of Artaud can trace their growth from the 1930s.

Samuel Beckett (1906–1989)

Although you have already read much about Beckett in the chapter on Theatre of the Absurd, Beckett’s plays project the irrationalism, helplessness, and absurdity of life. His dramatic forms reject realistic settings, logical reasoning, or a coherently evolving plot. Waiting for Godot (1952) is a supreme example of this. Like most works in this mode, the play is “absurd” in the double sense that it is grotesquely comic and also irrational & non-consequential.

Look at the complete text of Beckett’s Breath (1969):

Curtain.

1. Faint light on stage littered with miscellaneous rubbish. Hold for about five seconds.

2. Faint brief cry and immediately inspiration and
slow increase of light together reaching maximum
together in about ten seconds. Silence and hold
about five seconds.

3. Expiration and slow decrease of light together
reaching minimum together (light as in I) in about
ten seconds and immediately cry as before.
Silence and hold for about five seconds.

Rubbish. No verticals, all scattered and lying.

Cry. Instant of recorded vagitus. Important that
two cries be identical, switching on and off strictly
synchronized light and breath.

Breath. Amplified recording.

Maximum light. Not bright. If 0 = dark and 10 =
bright, light should move from about 3 to 6 and
back.

Note that there are no actors on the stage. The ‘short play’ leads us to consider if this is one of
the earliest documents of postmodernism (which will be discussed in subsequent chapters).
Beckett’s influence---shocking the audience, minimalism, use of silence---was felt on the works
of Jean Genet, Edward Albee, Tom Stoppard, and Pinter.

Among the major novelists of absurd fiction are Joseph Heller, Thomas Pynchon Kurt Vonnegut,
Jr, John Barth and Gunter Grass----all of whom owe their art, to some degree, to modernists such
as Beckett.
Apart from Beckett and Fernando Arrabal, Eugene Ionesco was another important name in the canon of modernist theatre and was fascinated by Alfred Jarry’s *King Ubu*, one of the most revolutionary works presented at the symbolist Theatre de Oeuvre. The non-realistic characters and settings of plays of these dramatists posed a challenge to traditional approaches to acting and scenic design.

Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) published *The Theatre and Its Double* in 1938, where he put forth his theories on how theatre should disturb the spectators. *Les Cenci* (1935) was one attempt to put his theories, generally known as the theatre of cruelty, into practice. Artaud’s influence is found on the works of Genet, Adamov and Audiberti. During the 1960s Artaud became a key name for modernism in theatre. In England, director Peter Brook devoted a season to study the far-reaching influences of his writings, which led, among other things to one of his most acclaimed productions, Peter Weiss’s *Marat/ Sade*. Another major experimental organization influenced by Artaud was the Living Theater of the US, which left in 1964 to tour Europe, becoming the best-known avant-garde company of the period and a major voice for breaking down audience/actor barriers. Much of the modernist work in the 1960s, that very political decade, had a distinctly political flavor, and certain groups and individuals combined a central political interest with extremely modernist experimentation. Edward Bond’s plays, too, show a preoccupation with violence.

**Working Class Drama in Britain**

Post-war drama was a tirade against the British elitist practices. John Osborne’s *Look Back in Anger* (1956), Arnold Wesker’s *Chicken Soup and Barley* (1958), and Shelagh Delaney’s *A Taste of Honey* (1958) focused on the young, the poorly educated and the unemployed. Though the dramatic method was essentially traditional, these plays provided a new content to the international theatre.

Director-dominated work never gained much currency in America, where the avant-garde of the 1970s and 1980s went in rather different directions. A closely related concern is that of the
relationship between the ‘illusion’ of the stage and the ‘reality’ of both the actors and the audience, as seen in Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author* (1921).

Both the Wooster Group and the Mabou Mines experimented with modern technology, such as video and sound amplification. The continually expanding technical means of the theatre, especially in lighting, provided important tools for much experimental theatre production during the twentieth century. The widespread availability of such machinery as computers and video gave the technical element a much increased role after the 1960s.

During the 1970s and 1980s the term ‘theatre’ became more inclusive. Artists started experimenting with the very definition of the term and attempted to eschew the tradition that involved an established script, certain invariable presentation conditions and a particular type of narrative structure. The term *Performance* started including non-structured events, and there was a new interest of the avant-garde in circus, juggling and so on, as represented by the movement called in America the New Vaudeville, along with the increasing use of mixed media, especially film and video, in theatre. Many of these experiments fell within the field that became known as post-modernism, with its self-conscious and often parodic mix of elements of ‘high’ and ‘mass/popular’ culture. The multi-media spectacles of Laurie Anderson and John Cage are prominent names in this regard.

**Closer home!**

In Bombay (now Mumbai) Indian People’s Theatre Association (IPTA), a nationwide body of leftist intellectuals was founded in 1943 and became a major force to reckon with.

Post-Tagore in Bengal, amateur groups of the 1960s and 1970s came up, and were influenced by Brecht’s ideological theatre; their most original dramatist-director was Utpal Dutt (1929-93). The most substantial experimentation in India comes from Badal Sircar (1925-2011), who deliberately left the mainstream theatre in the 1970s and by the 1980s took his group to villages. His concept of socially committed theatre (without sets, lights or costumes), grew into a Street Theatre movement.

In the second half of the century, Marathi professional and amateur theatre coexisted, with naturalistic actor-directors like Shreeram Lagoo (b. 1927) and Vijaya Mehta (b. 1934). Among
dramatists, Vijay Tendulkar (1928-2008) is renowned for his psychological portrayals. Mahesh Elkunchwar (1939) and Satish Alekar (1949) are two other important names of Marathi theatre.

The tradition of psychological realism and of the realistic drama and realistic stage picture has remained through the 20th century the continued common enemy of the many modernist movements in theatre, and this common enemy has given the avant-garde, somewhat paradoxically, a rather consistent tradition to its own. That tradition, however, has steadily increased in the range of its experimentation, in its variety, in its technical means and in the complexity of its inter-relationships with other experimentation, with the traditional theatre, and with the cultural and social world in which it occurs.

In conclusion we must recognize that modernism is not really involved in anticipating the art works of the future, but rather in providing the maximum variety of artistic expression to the ever-changing present.

QUIZ

1. **Answer in brief:**
   i. What is the role played by Wooster Group and Mabou Mines in the development of theatre?
   ii. Who was Antonin Artaud? What is his place in international theatre?

2. **Match the following:**
   a. Alfred Jerry
   b. Peter Weiss
   c. Erwin Piscator
   d. Stanislavsky
   i. The Political Theater
   ii. Moscow Art Theater
   iii. Marat/Sade
   iv. King Ubu
3. Activity

Read and discuss John Cages 4’33” with particular reference to his idea of silence.

Answer key

2- a-iv ; b- iii; c-i ; d-ii

Suggested readings


Suggested websites

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/4%E2%80%B233%E2%80%B3