Chapter 3

Beginnings of the Twentieth Century Drama

So far we have been learning about the ancient and medieval theatre and stage. In this chapter we will understand the major trends and developments in the twentieth century drama. However, before moving on to that, let us see how theatre progressed between 15th and early 20th centuries.

Renaissance Drama

By the advent of the Renaissance in the 15th and 16th cent., most European countries had established native traditions of religious drama and farce that contended with the impact of the newly discovered Greek and Roman plays.

Not much is known of classical drama during the Middle Ages, and evidently the only classical imitations during that period were the Christian imitations of Terence by the Saxon nun Hrotswitha in the 10th cent.

*Can you name the major playwrights of the Elizabethan period?*
Drama: 1750-1800

This is the Restoration Age, where the major playwrights were Congreve, Wycherley and Farquhar. (For more details, see Allardyce Nicoll’s British Drama).

Drama: 19th Century

In England, the great Romantic poets did not produce important drama, although Byron and P.B. Shelley wrote closet drama. Burlesque was another form that became popular and remained so for a long time.

Melodrama was aimed solely at producing superficial excitement, but its development resulted in more serious drama. Initially, the melodrama dealt in exciting materials as the gothic castle with its mysterious lord for a villain and a damsel in distress (still a clichéd but popular form), but gradually the characters and settings moved closer to the realities of contemporary life.

Ibsen and the realistic theatre: The Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) spearheaded the realistic movement of the 19th century and also served as a bridge to 20th-century symbolism. His realistic dramas of ideas surpass other such works because they blend a complex plot, a detailed setting, and middle-class yet extraordinary characters in an organic whole. Ibsen explores profound issues does not in itself make him a major European dramatist. A quality that makes him one of the most performed dramatists after Shakespeare is that he makes these issues concrete and specific in the human dramas which he unfolds before our eyes. With A Doll’s House (1879) and Ghosts (1881), Ibsen leapt into the position of the leading European dramatist. He is the first playwright to make the theatre the site for the serious consideration of contemporary issues and to show that high drama could take place within the confines of the domestic sitting room. Furthermore, his characters were not types, but ordinary yet complex individuals questioning the rules under which society made them live.

His questions may be unanswerable and his characters inexhaustible but as actors and directors take up the challenge and engage in the exploration and questioning we too become involved as readers and theatre goers.
Ibsen’s later plays, such as *The Master Builder* (1892), are symbolic, interestingly dealing with the concepts of megalomania, marking a trend away from realism that was continued by August Strindberg's dream plays, with their emphasis on the spiritual and the surreal, and by the plays of the Belgian Maurice Maeterlinck, who incorporated into drama the theories of the symbolist poets.

**Case study**

*Read the following exchange from Henrik Ibsen’s *An Enemy of the People:*

Dr. Stockmann. And the Baths--we have called them the “main artery of the town's life-blood,” the “nerve-centre of our town,” and the devil knows what else--

Billing. “The town’s pulsating heart” was the expression I once used on an important occasion.

Dr. Stockmann. Quite so. Well, do you know what they really are, these great, splendid, much praised Baths, that have cost so much money--do you know what they are?

Hovstad. No, what are they?

Mrs. Stockmann. Yes, what are they?

Dr. Stockmann. The whole place is a pest-house!

Petra. The Baths, father?

Mrs. Stockmann (at the same time), Our Baths?

Hovstad. But, Doctor--

Billing. Absolutely incredible!

Dr. Stockmann. The whole Bath establishment is a whited, poisoned
sepulchre, I tell you--the gravest possible danger to the public health! All the nastiness up at Molledal, all that stinking filth, is infecting the water in the conduit-pipes leading to the reservoir; and the same cursed, filthy poison oozes out on the shore too--

Horster. Where the bathing-place is?

Dr. Stockmann. Just there.

Hovstad. How do you come to be so certain of all this, Doctor?

Dr. Stockmann. I have investigated the matter most conscientiously. For a long time past I have suspected something of the kind. Last year we had some very strange cases of illness among the visitors--typhoid cases, and cases of gastric fever--

**Commentary**

Notice the realistic dialogue, use of common idiomatic expressions and the matter-of-fact manner in which Dr Stockmann, the protagonist, discusses his findings about the baths. The language, though rather bombastic, fits the characters and is in an everyday mode. Ibsen’s plays are also remarkable for the vividly realistic sets and designs, suited to their plots and characters.

August Strindberg’s (1849-1912) father was an impoverished aristocrat who became a shipping agent and married his housekeeper after she had borne him three sons, hence the title of Strindberg's autobiography, *The Son of a servant* (1913). In this he rages against his miserable upbringing: “Family!... the home of all social evil... a hell for children.”

Out of his tense, aggressive childhood emerged works such as *The Father* (1887) and *Miss Julie* (1888), the latter incorporating all Strindberg's neuroses about women and class. These plays combine naturalistic dialogue with a concentration on pathological states of mind. Strindberg's later plays,
such as *A Dream Play* (1901) and *Ghost Sonata* (1907) replace realism with phantasmagoria and a quest for salvation. While these antirealistic developments took place on the Continent, two playwrights were making unique contributions to the English theater. Oscar Wilde (1854-1900) produced comedies of manners (*The Importance of Being Earnest*---- punning on the word “earnest”----, being the most popular) and George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) made the play of ideas fashionable with the intellectuals of that period.

**Drama in the early and mid 20th century**

During the 20th century, especially after World War I, Western drama became more internationally unified and less the product of separate national literary traditions. Throughout the century realism, naturalism, and symbolism (and various combinations of these) continued to inform important plays.

Expressionism became one of the most widely prevalent device to portray the angst and alienation of the 20th century civilization. Expressionist playwrights tried to convey the dehumanizing aspects of 20th-century technological society through such devices as minimal scenery, telegraphic dialogue, talking machines, and characters portrayed as types rather than individuals. Notable playwrights who wrote expressionist dramas include Ernst Toller, Georg Kaiser, Karel Čapek, and Elmer Rice; and Eugene O'Neill, in America. Some poets tried to revive the genre of verse drama, but could attain limited success: William Butler Yeats (1865-1939), W. H. Auden (1907-1973), T. S. Eliot (1888-1965), Christopher Fry (1907-2005), and Maxwell Anderson (1888-1959). In Spain, the poetic dramas of Federico García Lorca (1898-1936) are placed among the great works of 20th century.
Expressionist Theatre

The term originally referred to painting. Used very occasionally during the nineteenth century, it was popularized in 1901 by the French painter J.A. Herve. The German art dealer and publicist Herwarth Walden took it up from 1910 onwards and applied it to the German revolt against academicism and naturalism in all the arts. But, unlike the parallel movements of Futurism and Surrealism, expressionism was never a single school guided by an intellectual leader. Hence the work of very different artists, including playwrights, has been called.

In many senses, expressionism was a specifically German phenomenon. Landmarks were productions in Prague and Dresden of Walter Hasenclever’s *The Son* (1916) and Reihardt’s memorable staging of Sorge’s *The Beggar* (1917) in Berlin. These and similar plays dramatized the conflict of the generations, violently rejecting the father figure and expressing a faith in youth in messianic terms.

Military defeat and the collapse of the old order in 1918 gave expressionist drama a more overtly political thrust, as in Fritz Von Unruh’s *A Family* and Ernst Toller’s *Transfiguration*, both first staged in 1919. Termed a *Denkspieler* or playwright of ideas, George Kaiser, who had satirized bourgeois life in *From Morn to Midnight* (1916), now forecast industrial society’s race to extinction in the *Gas* trilogy (written in 1912, published in 1916 and premiered in 1917).

Expressionist drama felt no commitment to the depiction of everyday reality; it was subjective and arbitrary. In the wake of Strindberg’s *A Dream Play* (1907), it often featured dream imagery. Action as well as language throbbed with nervous energy. The unities were discarded, the narrative line frequently being a series of ‘stations’ rather than a well-knit plot – an approach which, through the work of Piscator and Brecht, gave rise to Epic Theatre. Diction, too, became fragmented: grammar was violated and sentences collapsed; there were sudden lyrical outbursts; speech became a cry. These new demands called for a new acting style.

Such plays could not be staged by conventional methods. A new approach to
stage design revealed the close links between expressionism in drama and the visual arts. Sets became simplified, angled, distorted, fantasticated. The stage was conceived as a space, rather than a picture. Spotlights – as in Jurgen Fehling’s notable production 1921 of Toller’s Masses and Man, created the acting areas and shifted the focus from one spot to another; some expressionist lighting techniques had an impact on the films of the period.

By the mid-1920s inflation was over and stability returned. But expressionism in the wider sense of life – can be traced in other countries too. In the 1920s, American theatre was open to experimentation. Elmer Rice’s The Adding Machine (1922) mocked the depersonalized drudges of capitalism. John Howard Lawson used expressionism for radical purposes in Roger Bloomer (1922) and Processional (1925). A late example of agitational expressionism was Irwin Shaw’s anti-militarist Bury the Dead (1937).

The most notable American exponent of expressionism – in some of his work – was Eugene O’Neill. In The Emperor Jones (1920) he put subjective visions on the stage; in The Hairy Ape (1922) he turned both oppressors and oppressed in a class society into puppets; in All God’s Chillun Got Wings (1924) he portrayed racial conflict in bold imagery.

English playwrights failed to respond but some Irish writers took it more seriously. Denis Johnston’s The Old Lady Says ‘No!’ (1929) was expressionistic in style. Sean O’Casey made the third act of The Silver Tassie (1929) one of the peak achievements of expressionist writing. Within the Gates (1933) was still inspired by expressionism. Even some of his later plays – the third act of Red Roses for Me (1942), or Cock-a-Doodle Dandy (1949) – were touched by elements of expressionism.

QUIZ

1. State whether the following statements are true or false:

   a. Ibsen is known for anti-realistic plays.
   b. English playwrights extensively used expressionistic techniques in their plays.
c. Oscar Wilde and GB Shaw are known for bringing realism and satire to theater.

2. Fill in the blanks choosing the words given below:

| J.A. Herve | Denkspieler | Strindberg |

a. The term ……………….. literally means playwright of ideas.
b. *Son of a Servant* is a play by………………………… .
c. The French painter ………………. popularized the term expressionism.

**Assignment**

Explain the contribution of either Pirandello OR Brecht on the development of modern drama.

**Suggested readings**


**Suggested links**

2. [http://www.greencine.com/static/primers/expressionism1.jsp](http://www.greencine.com/static/primers/expressionism1.jsp)
SearchBox&ie=&oe=&redir_esc=&ei=lyToT4qsLMT3rQelyKTyCA

Answer key

1. a-False ; b.-False ; c.- True

2 a- Denkspieler ; b- ; c- J.A. Herve