

Drama and Theatre

*All the world's a stage,
And all the men and women merely players:
They have their exits and their entrances;
And one man in his time plays many parts,*
William Shakespeare

Introduction

Drama is the specific mode of fiction represented in performance. Unlike other forms of literature, the enactment of drama in theatre, performed by actors on a stage before an audience, or even the very structure of dramatic texts, is directly influenced by some collaborative modes of production and a collective form of reception. The early modern tragedy *Hamlet* (1601) by Shakespeare and the classical Athenian tragedy *Oedipus the King* (c. 429 BCE) by Sophocles are among the supreme masterpieces of the art of drama.

What is Drama?

As the adjective dramatic usually indicates, the ideas of conflict, tension, contrast, and emotion are usually associated with drama.

The word drama comes from a Greek word meaning "to do," and thus drama is usually associated with the idea of action. It is a form of literature, either prose or verse, usually in dialogue form, intended for performance; the dramatic arts are the components necessary for writing and producing the drama, such as playwriting, acting, and costume and scenic design.

The two masks associated with drama represent the traditional generic division between comedy and tragedy. They are symbols of the ancient Greek Muses, Thalia (the laughing face, the Muse of comedy), and Melpomene (the weeping face, Muse of tragedy).

Considered as a genre of poetry in general, the dramatic mode has been contrasted with the epic and the lyrical modes ever since Aristotle's *Poetics* (c. 335 BCE)—the earliest work of dramatic theory. Drama is often combined with music and dance: the drama in opera is sung throughout; musicals include spoken dialogue and songs; and some forms of drama have regular musical accompaniment. In certain periods of history (the ancient Roman and modern Romantic) dramas have been written to be read rather than performed. In improvisation, the drama does not pre-exist the moment of performance; performers devise a dramatic script spontaneously before an audience.

Theatres and plays

Through much of history, theatre has existed on three levels simultaneously:

1. As loosely organized popular entertainment, consisting of individuals or small groups, usually working outside established theatrical channels performing anything from circus skills to farcical plays for a mass audience. This form predates the oldest known plays and is exemplified today by commercial television.
2. As a mainstream public activity, which is most commonly literary drama performed at public theatres; it is usually commercial or else state supported for accessibility to the general public. Greek tragedy, medieval morality plays, and contemporary Broadway theatre fall into this category.

3. As an elitist art form, most simply defined by its intended audience, a limited group with specialized tastes. This form ranges from the court performances of the Renaissance to modern avant-garde theatre.

Elements of Theatrical Performance

A performance has only two essential elements: a performer and an audience. The performance may be pantomimed or may use language. The performer need not even be human: puppet drama has been popular throughout history; and mechanical or machine plays have been presented.

A performance may be enhanced by costume, makeup, scenery, props, lighting, music, and special effects. These are needed, however, only to help create the illusion of a different character, place, and time or to enhance the special quality of the performance and differentiate it from everyday experience.

Special Forms of Drama

a. Opera

Western opera is a dramatic art form, which arose during the Renaissance in an attempt to revive the classical Greek drama tradition in which both music and theatre were combined. Being strongly intertwined with western classical music, the opera has undergone enormous changes in the past four centuries and it is an important form of theatre until this day. Noteworthy is the huge influence of the German 19th century composer Richard Wagner on the opera tradition. In his view, there was no proper balance between music and theatre in the operas of his time, because the music seemed to be more important than the dramatic aspects in these works. To restore the connection with the traditional Greek drama, he entirely renewed the operatic format, and to emphasize the equal importance of music and drama in these new works, he called them "music dramas".

b. Pantomime

These stories follow in the tradition of fables and folk tales, usually there is a lesson learned, and with some help from the audience the hero/heroine saves the day. This kind of play uses stock characters seen in masque and again *commedia del arte*, these characters include the villain, the clown/servant, the lovers *etc.* These plays usually have an emphasis on moral dilemmas, and good always triumphs over evil, this kind of play is also very entertaining making it a very effective way of reaching many people. These plays usually have an emphasis on moral dilemmas, and good always triumphs over evil.

c. Melodrama: It is a chanted play that arouses pity and fear through simple means. Good and evil are clearly depicted in white and black motifs. Plot is emphasized over character development.

d. Farce: aimed at arousing explosive laughter using crude means. Conflicts are violent, practical jokes are common, and the wit is coarse. Psychologically farce may boost the reader's spirit and purge hostility and aggression. Farce is a funny play provoking mirth of the simplest and most basic kind: roars of laughter rather than smiles. It is a matter, therefore, of humour rather than wit.

Types of Drama

Drama has one characteristic peculiar to itself - it is written primarily to be performed through actors on a stage before an audience, not read. According to Aristotle, dramatic poets "represent people in action," and so as opposed to a third-person narrative or the mixture of narrative and direct speech as done by Homer, the dramatist is limited to only one point of view- the objective or dramatic. The playwright cannot directly comment on the action or the character and cannot directly enter the minds of characters and tell us what is going on there. But there are ways to get around this limitation: through the

use of the soliloquy (a character speaking directly to the audience), or the chorus (a group on stage commenting on characters and actions), one character can comment on another, too.

1. The Tragedy: (Gk 'goat song') In the first place it almost certainly denoted a form of ritual sacrifice accompanied by a choral song in honour of Dionysus, the god of the fields and the vineyards. Out of this ritual developed Greek dramatic tragedy.

According to Aristotle, a tragedy is:

The imitation in dramatic form of an action that is serious and complete, with incidents arousing pity and fear wherewith it effects a catharsis of such emotions. The language used is pleasurable and throughout appropriate to the situation in which it is used. [with] The action, proceeding in the way defined, as one continuous whole. (*Poetics*, Aristotle)

The chief characters are noble personages (“better than ourselves,” says Aristotle) and the actions they perform are noble actions.

The Tragic Hero

A man not pre-eminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice and depravity but by some error of judgement. The perfect Plot, accordingly, must have a single, and not a double issue; and the change in the hero's fortunes must be not from misery to happiness, but on the contrary from happiness to misery. (*Poetics*, Aristotle)

Human Greatness

Tragedy has tended to be a form of drama concerned with the fortunes and misfortunes, and, ultimately, the disasters that befall human beings of title, power and position. What makes them tragic figures is that they have qualities of excellence, of nobleness, of passion; they have virtues and gifts that lift them above the ordinary run of mortal men and women. In tragedy these attributes are seen to be insufficient to save them either from self-destruction or from destruction brought upon them. And there is no hope for them. There is hope, perhaps, after the tragedy, but not during it.

Catharsis: Crying and Laughing

By participating vicariously in the grief, pain and fear of the tragic hero or heroine, the spectator, in Aristotle's words, experiences pity and fear and is purged. Or, he has a good cry and feels better. Comedy purges, too – through laughter. And laughter and tears are so closely associated physically and physiologically that often we do not know whether to laugh or to cry. And comic relief in tragedy serves many purposes, not least preventing the spectator from being overcharged with tragic emotion.

Tragic Flaw, *Hamartia*, *Hubris*

The tragic Flaw is that defect in a tragic hero or heroine which leads to their downfall. *Hamartia* (Gk 'error'): Aristotle points out that the tragic hero ought to be a man whose misfortune comes to him, not through vice or depravity, but by some error. *Hubris* is that excessive pride or passion manifest in the tragic hero. For example, Oedipus kills his father from impulse; and Antigone resists the law of the state from stubbornness and defiance.

Central features of the Aristotelian tragedy:

- a. The tragic hero is a character of noble stature and has greatness. If the hero's fall is to arouse the emotions of pity and fear, it must be a fall from a great height.
- b. Though the tragic hero is pre-eminently great, he/she is not perfect. Tragic flaw, hubris (excessive pride or passion), and hamartia (some error) lead to the hero's downfall.
- c. The hero's downfall, therefore, is partially her/his own fault, the result of one's own free choice, not the result of pure accident or villainy, or some overriding malignant fate.
- d. Nevertheless, the hero's misfortune is not wholly deserved. The punishment exceeds the crime. The hero remains admirable.
- e. Yet the tragic fall is not pure loss - though it may result in the hero's death, before it, there is some increase in awareness, some gain in self-knowledge or, as Aristotle puts it, some "discovery."
- f. Though it arouses solemn emotion - pity and fear, says Aristotle, but compassion and awe might be better terms - tragedy, when well performed, does not leave its audience in a state of depression. It produces a catharsis or an emotional release at the end, one shared as a common experience by the audience.

Dramatic Unities: Action, Time, Space (ATS)

In Poetics, Aristotle was the first to consider the problem of the dramatic unities of action, time, and space/place.

ACTION: 'The fable should be the imitation of one action, and of the whole of this and the parts of the transactions should be so arranged, that any one of them being transposed, or taken away the whole would become different and changed.'

TIME: 'Tragedy endeavours to confine itself to one revolution of the sun, or but slightly to exceed this limit.'

SPACE: that tragedy should be confined to a narrow compass.

The supporters of the Classical precepts required that a play should be a unified whole, that the time of action should be limited to twenty-four hours and that the scene should be unchanged (or at any rate confined to one town or city).

2. Comedy: Comedy lies between satire and romance. It deals in an amusing way with ordinary characters in rather everyday situations. Evanthius says that in comedy the men are of middle fortune, the dangers they run into are neither serious nor pressing and their actions conclude happily. Evanthius goes on to say that whereas in tragedy life is to be fled from, in comedy it is to be grasped. The essential difference between tragedy and is in the depiction of human nature: tragedy shows greatness in human nature and human whereas comedy shows human weakness and human limitation. Laughter expresses recognition of some absurdity in human behaviour.

Central features of the comedy:

- a. The norms of comedy are primarily social; the protagonist is always in a group or emphasizes commonness. A tragic hero possesses overpowering individuality - so that the play is often named after her/him (*Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, Macbeth*); the comic protagonist tends to be a type and the play is often named for the type (*The Misanthrope, The Alchemist, The Brute*).

- b. Comic plots do not exhibit the high degree of organic unity as tragic plots do. Plausibility is not usually the central characteristic (cause-effect progression) but coincidences, improbable disguises, mistaken identities make up the plot.
- c. The purpose of comedy is to make us laugh and at the same time, help to illuminate human nature and human weaknesses. Conventionally comedies have a happy ending. Accidental discovery, act of divine intervention, and sudden reform, are common comedic devices.

Important Terms Related to Drama

Stage Directions: They tell how actors move and speak on stage. They can also tell where action takes place (what's going on). They are notes added to the script of a play to indicate the moment of a character's appearance, character, manner; the style of delivery; the actor's movements; details of location, scenery and effects. (e.g. *Enter two servants; Music; Dies; Sings; Exit; Stabs him*). Most stage directions are in parentheses or in italics.

Dialogue: A verbal exchange between characters revealing their thoughts, responses and emotional states. We can infer a lot from characters' dialogue.

Soliloquy: In Latin: *soliloquium*, from *solus*, 'alone' and *loqui*, 'to speak'. It is a speech delivered by a character alone on stage revealing his state of mind and heart, his most intimate thoughts and feelings, his motives and intentions.

Aside: A speech directed to the audience understood to be unheard by other characters on stage, revealing the speaker's true opinion, desire or plan.

Dramatic Irony: When the audience knows sth. The character(s) does not.

Flashback: Any scene or episode in a play, novel, story or poem which is inserted to show events that happened at an earlier time. Flashbacks also have some psychological effects.

Conclusion

If theatre is viewed simply as a branch of literature or only as a form of narrative, then large segments of theatre history are inevitably slighted. Some periods or cultures have emphasized dramatic literature (plays) but others have stressed aspects of theatrical production. Some cultures see theatre's value as a means of storytelling; others see it as religion, spectacle, or entertainment.

References

Aristotle, *Poetics*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1961.

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