

In the study of dramatic literature and theatre history -- especially that which has a focus on the production of theatre in a given time and place -- there are six major questions to consider. Exploring these areas also helps us to understand the social context of that particular time period and culture, which is essential since theatre from its inception has provided a mirror for the issues, beliefs, expectations, standards, values, and dreams a society has for itself, as articulated and highlighted by its playwrights; interpreted by its actors, dancers, musicians, and designers; and accepted, adapted, or rejected by its audiences.

Reading plays, research and discussion form the basis of study for any period in theatre history for anyone interested in playwriting or theatrical production. The periods listed here are important because most of them were influenced by what came before them and influenced what came after them: all of these have in turn influenced 20th century and contemporary Western theatre.

- * Classical Greek and Roman theatre
- * Medieval theatre in Europe
- * Renaissance theatre in Italy and Spain
- * Elizabethan and Jacobean (Stuart) theatre in England
- * French Classical theatre, 1600-1700
- * English theatre after the Restoration, 1642-1800
- * European Romantic theatre, 1800-1850

The Six W's:

1) what roles did theatre play in this time and place?

- what influenced the development of theatre in this period, and how/why?
- what was the legal position of theatre and the social status of its participants?
- for what purposes was theatre performed?
- when were performances given--at special times of year or anytime?
- who paid for and sponsored performances, and why?

2) where and how were performances produced?

- were performances done indoors/outdoors/in what kinds of spaces/on what kinds of stages?
- what did the design of the stage /audience areas look like and why?
- what technical effects were used: costumes, masks, sets, props, music? sound? lighting?

3) what were the plays about?

- what were the plot sources: religious, historical, mythological, folk tales, original stories?
- what structural/stylistic elements were used: themes, characters, settings, use of unities?
- to what degree did plays utilise instrumental or vocal music, choral work, and dance?

4) who were the key playwrights of this period?

- what social class did they come from, and what education, skills and training did they have?
- who were the major playwrights of this period and which are their most famous plays?
- whose work influenced these playwrights, and whom, in turn, did they influence?

5) who were the actors/dancers/musicians?

- what gender and age were they, what social class were they from, what were they paid?
- how were they chosen and trained and what skills were required?
- did they operate in 'companies' or as individuals? was individual fame/wealth likely?

6) who were the audiences?

- what genders, ages, social classes came to the theatre, and why?
- was admission free or did it cost; if so, how was this managed?
- what background did they bring to the theatre / to the plays presented there?
- what kinds of reaction to the plays presented was typical? allowed?
- what effects did audience response have on the actors, plays, playwrights, sponsors?

Why Study Dramatic Literature and Theatrical History & Production?

by *Sue Daniel*

Historically, we understand that the roots for all of the arts lie in the rituals of early cultures: the paintings on cave walls, the fertility figurines sculpted rudely from clay, the re-enactments and dances and rhythms used around the fires, the stories told and passed down of heroes and goddesses, the chants, masks, and symbolic costuming of the temples, the appropriation for sacred use of everyday objects, the importance of seasonal cycles and the sun and moon's movements. In these myriad dramatic and artistic expressions lie earliest people's attempts to answer the unanswerable questions about who they were, from whence they came, what was expected of them, why the natural world was as it was, how they were to organize their lives, relationships, and society, and what would become of them after death. Today we explore these ideas and search for our answers in a wide range of interconnected disciplines and areas of study: myth, literature, poetry; religion, philosophy; history, anthropology, archaeology; science, sociology, psychology, politics. We tend to feel our methods are not only more modern, but more 'scientific' and 'logical'--but our questions and answers continue to be expressed by the same artforms used by peoples thousands of years ago--drama, dance, visual arts, music--via a wide range of traditional and modern technologies, including our overwhelming use of the electronic media, which is about the only thing the earliest theatre people didn't have!

Production, i.e., the translation of dramatic literature to the stage, is by its nature an interactive process: new plays are written which require current technologies and fit into whatever performance formats and spaces are generally available, but these technologies, formats and spaces are often in turn adapted to fit the changing requirements for the staging of new plays as they are written. The investigation of how performances were staged in earlier periods in history shows a great readiness by 'theatre people' to adapt and adopt styles and technical elements which appear in earlier periods, or in the theatre of other countries, when those seem useful and feasible.

Moreover, the influence of the drama written in one time and place on that of nearby cultures or successive generations is extraordinarily pervasive -- IF dramatists knew, from the explorations or wars or writings/oral reports of others in that society, what was being written about elsewhere, and in what kind of language/structure/format, it was likely to turn up eventually in their work. This is, of course, far easier now in a world where things written and performed elsewhere are available immediately via satellites, television, radio, computer and film to anyone, anywhere -- IF someone was interested enough in the original performance to capture it electronically, of course.

And in these 'IFS' lies a problem for those who study theatre, both historically and in the present: what DO people choose to transmit--in print or electronically or by live performances--from someone else's culture in ANY time period? It is hard to learn about, or benefit from, theatre about which we know little or nothing because of language, cultural, or religious barriers, or because the issues being written about are not germane to our own lives. And it is hard to understand theatre which is widely divergent from that with which we are most familiar because of the Western theatrical traditions from which it springs--i.e., theatre which is predominantly linear and chronological in structure, with an issues or character-based plotline relying heavily on words, and visual elements used mostly for set, costume, and lighting design, with vocal and instrumental music and dance used only sporadically in musicals, or to set moods or create soundscapes, and mask and puppetry used only rarely. Even a cursory study of Eastern and African non-text based theatre is a contrast in many ways: the widespread use of dance, mime, percussion, singing, puppetry, along with symbolic masks, costumes, and makeup, was often far more important than the words or the plotline. This is still true today in any culture in which the written word is, for whatever reasons, not the dominant method of communication among its people.