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Theatre Traditions: East and West



THEATRE, WHICH CONSISTS OF LIVE ACTORS who perform in real time before live audiences, is a unique art form because it exists “in the present.” Theatre, however, is also deeply rooted in its past; plays seen today are often revivals, adaptations, or parodies of earlier ones. Even when they’re wholly original, new plays will inevitably be compared to earlier works. Likewise, contemporary actors—like contemporary baseball players—will also be compared to their predecessors. Theatre is a living art but also a living tradition.

Some plays travel through time effortlessly, reappearing in new guises at dozens of points throughout history. A fourth-century-B.C. Greek comedy named *The Lot Drawers*, by Diphilis, concerning an old man foolishly in love with a young girl, was revised more than a hundred years later by the Roman comic dramatist Plautus under the title of *Sorientes*; another Roman dramatist revised it some years later into a play called *Casina*; and more than a thousand years later this play became the basis for a fifteenth-century Italian comedy by Niccolò Machiavelli titled *Clizia*. Thereafter, major elements of the plot appeared in early-sixteenth-century Italian *commedia dell’arte* farces, in the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century plays of Shakespeare and Molière, and more recently in American comedies on stage, film, and television.

Indeed, many of the world’s greatest plays—in both the East and the West—are closely based on preceding ones. Dozens of eighteenth-century Japanese *kabuki* dramas are based on fourteenth-century Japanese *nō* scripts (often bearing the same titles), and most traditional Indian and Chinese plays are based on dramas from prior millennia. French neoclassic tragedies of

the seventeenth century, as well as French comedies of the twentieth century, were often based on Greek and Roman models more than two thousand years old. At least three of William Shakespeare's best-known plays—*King Lear*, *Hamlet*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*—were revisions of earlier English plays of virtually the same names by other authors. And Shakespeare's plays, in turn, have been a source for literally hundreds of modern dramas, including Tom Stoppard's *Rosencrantz and Guildenstern Are Dead*, Lee Blessing's *Fortinbras*, Paul Rudnik's *I Hate Hamlet*, Richard Nelson's *Two Shakespearean Actors*, Ann-Marie McDonald's *Goodnight Desdemona (Good Morning Juliet)*, Amy Freed's *The Beard of Avon*, Stephen Sondheim's *West Side Story*, and Neil Simon's *The Goodbye Girl* and *Laughter on the 23rd Floor*, all of which parody or creatively extend portions of Shakespeare's plays. Indeed, the theatre continually resurrects its past traditions, just as it always seeks to extend and surpass them.

Therefore it is helpful, in looking at the theatre of today, to look to the traditions of the theatre in the past, from both the West (Europe and the Americas) and the East (Asia and the subcontinent). What follows is a capsule history of eleven important theatre traditions, from both East and West, that together outline the major world developments prior to the start of the modern theatre in the nineteenth century.*

The Origins of Theatre

How did drama begin?

No one knows for sure, but the theatre, along with human civilization itself, almost

*Readers searching for expanded information on the theatre's past should consult the long edition of this book or, for a detailed accounting of the theatre's history, surveys and guides such as those by Martin Banham and Oscar Brockett (see the Selected Bibliography at the back of this book).

certainly began in Africa. The first known dramatic presentations occurred in northern Africa alongside the Nile River in ancient Egypt, as much as five thousand years ago, possibly as early as 3300 B.C.

But African theatre is far older than that. Indications of ritual performances can be seen in the activities of literally hundreds of African tribal groups dating as far back as 6000 B.C. And while we know very little about such performances—which, unlike the arts of painting and sculpture, left behind no permanent records—it is very likely they resembled tribal performances widely seen in rural Africa today. And from such present-day performances, we can see the two foundations of the theatre as it has been known and enjoyed throughout the course of human civilization. These two foundations of theatre are *ritual* and *storytelling*. Both have existed since ancient times, and both can be seen—though in different forms—wherever theatre is performed today.

Ritual

A ritual is a collective ceremony performed by members of a society, normally for religious or cultural reasons. The most ancient rituals were primarily intended to summon gods and influence nature, as with rain dances and healing ceremonies. But tribal rituals also arose to worship important life events, such as the changing of the seasons, and to provide public witness to life passages, such as birth, death, marriage, and the coming of age. Contemporary rituals of Christian baptism and Jewish bar mitzvah (coming of age) and funeral rites in virtually all cultures are descendants of these ancient tribal rites-of-passage ceremonies. Other rituals reenact defining moments of a culture's religious history—such as the birth, death, or resurrection of divine beings—allowing adherents to directly experience the passion of their culture's sacred heritage.

The early tribal rituals soon grew to involve elements we now consider theatrical crafts, in-



DNA studies have shown that the San bushmen, seen here in a ritual trance-dance in their native Botswana, are direct descendants of the first evolved *Homo sapiens* from more than 100,000 years ago. The San remain hunter-gatherers; after a kill, the whole group chants and dances in a prehistoric desert ritual, summoning spiritual powers into their stomachs so as to heal both physical and psychological illnesses.

cluding staging, costuming, makeup, music, dance, formalized speech, chanting, and singing, as well as specific physical “props” (objects such as staffs, spears, skulls, and so on), often with totemic or spiritual properties that would prove crucial to the staged event. And while initially performed solely for the collective worship of the participants themselves, such theatricalized rituals played a role in impressing, educating, and evangelizing observers, including the children of the tribe and tribal visitors.

Not all rituals are based in religion. Secular rituals exist in Western culture today to give a spiritual or larger-than-life dimension to more worldly events. Such secular rituals may be seen in the black robes of courtroom judges, the precisely choreographed changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, the daily recitation of the formal Pledge of Al-

legiance in certain American classrooms, and even the lowering of the ball in New York’s Times Square on New Year’s Eve. Perhaps the most common collective ritual in Western culture is the wedding ceremony, with its formal costumes (tuxedo or tie-dyed), elevated language (psalms or sonnets), symbolic gift exchanges (ring or rings), and traditional music (Mendelssohn or McCartney). And the gravely cadenced march down the aisle transmits the ancient symbolism of bride handed from father to groom, even though such symbolism has lost much (if not all) of its original meaning over the years.

Whether sacred or secular, rituals dignify the events they represent, giving them enhanced meaning and authority. Most brides, for example, would feel shortchanged if their intended husband were to respond “uh-huh”



The mudmen of Papua New Guinea in the South Pacific, isolated from the rest of the world until the twentieth century, still cover their bodies in mud and wear home-made clay masks for their ancient hunting ritual, performed in their villages and also, as shown here, at a biannual September gathering of tribes in the town of Goroka.

instead of “I do,” for while the literal meaning of “uh-huh” is perfectly clear, its everyday casualness implies a lack of public—and hence permanent—commitment.

Ritual is at the very origin of theatre. It is the act of performers re-creating, intensifying, and making meaningful the myths, beliefs, legends, and traditions common to their collective lives.



Dogon performers of the *dana* ritual, dancing on six-foot stilts, represent larger-than-life forces in the most literal way: by being double human size.

Storytelling

Coming almost immediately after ritual, however, and quickly blended into it, is the art of storytelling. Since humans developed coherent speech, they have sought to recount their (and others’) daily adventures, including stories of the hunt and histories of the tribe. Indeed, such storytelling surely went hand in glove with the development of speech itself, for why invent words like *glorious* and *brave* and *beautiful* if not to augment a story being told?

Such storytelling is more personal and individual than collective ritual performance, since it generally relies on a single voice—and there-



Storytelling, an art more ancient than theatre, is still practiced as a public performance form, nowhere more successfully than at the annual Jonesborough, Tennessee, storytelling festival.

fore a single point of view. And while rituals may attract an audience, storytelling *requires* an audience: “hearer-spectators” who either don’t know the story being told or are eager to hear it again with new details or fresh expression. Storytelling thus generates elements of character impersonation—the creation of voices, gestures, and facial expressions that reflect the personalities of the individuals portrayed—and seeks means to convey character emotions to the hearer-spectators. It also seeks to entertain, and thus it provides a structured *story*—rather than a random series of observations—which makes the narrative flow so as to compel audience engagement through suspense, varied graphic details, and a calculated momentum of escalating events that, in theatre, will be called a *plot*. We can see all of these

features in great storytelling today, both in surviving tribal cultures and in modern storytelling performances.

If ritual makes an event larger than life, storytelling makes it personal and affecting. While wedding rituals give wedlock a halo of dignity, marrying couples today generally humanize their own ceremony through their personal decisions about dress, language, music, setting, and staging, so that the resulting event combines collective ritual formality with the marrying partners’ “telling their story” of their own uniqueness—as individuals and as a couple.

Shamanism, Trance, and Magic

Ancient dramas, or, more commonly, dance-dramas, began in the combination of ritual and

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storytelling, first on the African continent and afterward in tribal cultures around the world; they continue to be performed in, among other places, Siberia, South America, Southeast Asia, Australia, and Native American enclaves. Storytelling provided these performances with an audience-attracting narrative, a link to events in daily human life, the freshness of detail, and the individuality of each performer's special creativity. But ritual provided the intensity of the celebrants who could commit, body and soul, to the impersonation of divine spirits and the reenactment of what they believed to be real—if otherworldly—events. Belief in the power of such spirits to animate objects has been called *animism*, a catchall term describing the basic religious impulse of tribal culture in the world's prehistory. Humans who assume an animist role, mediating between spirit and earthly realities, are—in a similarly general way—called *shamans* (the word is originally Siberian), or go-betweeners to the spirit world.

Shamans have been identified in tribal cultures since at least 13,000 B.C. In the eyes of his community, the shaman (almost always male in the ancient world) can cure the sick, aid the hunter, make the rain come and the crops grow. Shamans may also appear as mediums, taking the forms of otherworldly spirits, often animal and/or demonic. In most shamanic practices, the shaman performs his mastery—his travel between the human and spirit worlds and his incarnation of spiritual presences—in a state of trance.

Since the shaman's trance leads him to otherworldly presences, his performance takes on a magical appearance. Ecstatic dancing and rapturous chanting are often primary features of shamanism, usually climaxing in violent shaking at astounding speeds. Astonishing acrobatics are common: in the *pegele* dance of Nigeria, shamans leap high in the air, spin around horizontally, and then come down far from where they left the ground. Sleight of hand may be involved in this "magic," as when the Formosan shaman "stabs" himself

but really only pierces a blood-filled animal bladder hidden beneath his clothes. But genuine transformation, both physical and psychological, apparently takes place as well, permitting normally inhuman feats. The San bushmen of Namibia and Botswana eat live snakes and scorpions during hunting rituals. The Indian fakir (Arabic for "poor man"; the word is not related to fakery) hangs suspended from a hook through his flesh, and the Muslim dervish places glowing coals in his mouth, seemingly anesthetized from pain.

Costumes, body paint, headdresses, and—above all—masks disguise the shaman-performer, sometimes completely, transforming him (often to himself as well as to observers) into a spirit presence. The mask, common in virtually all tribal cultures, was initially derived from the ecstatic contortion of the shaman's face during trance and subsequently served to represent the particular spirit that the trance-liberated shaman inhabited. But the mask has outlived the rituals that spawned it and remains today as the primary symbol of drama around the world.

The Beginnings of Traditional Drama

When spoken dialogue comes into shamanistic rites, true traditional drama begins. The Ceylon *sanniyakuma*, a traditional all-night curing ceremony of drumming and "devil dancing," portrays a suffering patient who seeks exorcism of the devil and includes this exchange:

YAKKA (*demon*): What is going on here? What does this noise mean?

DRUMMER: Somebody has fallen ill.

YAKKA: What are you going to do about it?

DRUMMER: We will give him a medicine.

YAKKA: That will not be of any use! Give me twelve presents and I will cure him."^{*}

^{*}The source for this dialogue and other information in this section is largely E. T. Kirby, *Ur-Drama: The Origins of Theatre* (New York: NYU Press, 1975).

The dialogue creates suspense, conflict, danger, and action.

African Traditional Drama

But it is in sub-Saharan Africa where we can see—even today—the vast variety of traditional drama, where ritual and storytelling continually interweave. More than eight hundred languages are spoken in sub-Saharan Africa, and each represents a culture with roots in the past and social community in the present. Many have long-standing traditions of dance-dramas. The Dogon performers of Mali are celebrated for their stilt walking and brightly colored masks. The Senufo of the Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso have animal masks—with the tusks of wild boars, the teeth of alligators, and the

horns of antelopes—to frighten witches—and brightly colored masks for women characters (played by men). In the Yacouba country of the Ivory Coast, traditional performers may wear elaborate beaded headdresses and full-face makeup instead of masks or, as in the panther dance-drama, cover their entire heads in painted cloth with panther ears. Acrobatics are a feature of Burundi performers, while rain dance rituals are common in Botswana.

Egyptian Drama

While theatrical performances almost certainly began in sub-Saharan Africa, they soon drifted northward, up the Nile River to what we now know as Egypt. From there they spread to Mesopotamia, Canaan, and eventually throughout



The antiwitchcraft *kponiugo* mask of the Poro secret society of the Senufo tribe in West Africa's Ivory Coast is believed to protect the community from sorcerers and soul-stealers. Groups of Poro maskers seem to spit fire between the alligator teeth of their open jaws. Wild boar tusks and antelope horns represent ferocity and gentleness.

the Middle East. The first written records we have of this activity are in Egypt, dating at least as far back as 2500 B.C. and perhaps as much as 800 years before that. Known as the *Abydos Passion Play*, this drama was apparently staged each spring in a boat procession along the Nile, with performances taking place at several temples along the way. The play tells the story of the murder of the wheat god, Osiris, by his enemy Set (death). Scenes of lamentation by the priestesses Isis and Neptys, the tearing asunder of Osiris's body (which is then thrown into the Nile), Osiris's resurrection in the person of the god Horus, and a combat between Horus and Set are the ingredients of this drama, portrayed through dialogue, dance, animal sacrifices, mimed violence, a coronation ceremony, and the performance of sacred fertility rites. Bold effects complement the symbolic actions: beads of carnelian (a translucent red stone) represent the great Eye of Horus, which is bloodied when Set plucks it out in the combat between the two demigods. Two maces represent Set's testicles, which Horus tears off and engrafts upon his own body to become stronger. The lowering and raising of ceremonial pillars into the Nile represent the burial and resurrection of Osiris.

Modern anthropology has made clear that this Egyptian springtime resurrection drama—and other similar Middle Eastern texts of that time that employed the same plot elements, such as the Babylonian play *Baal* (in which the god Baal dies, goes to Purgatory, and rises again on the third day) and the Hittite play *Snaring of the Dragon*—derives from even more ancient ritualized reenactments of the coming of spring that celebrated the rebirth of vegetation in the fields. The death of Osiris, like the death of the wheat sheaf he represents, is not permanent; when his body is torn apart and thrown into the river, Osiris is resurrected, as is the wheat sheaf when its seeds are scattered by the wind and irrigated by the annual springtime flooding of the Nile. The tragedy of death, therefore, yields life, and the tears of

tragic lamentation become nourishment for the seeds of life's renewal. Such tragedy, therefore, however painful, brings with it rejuvenation and hope. To emphasize the connection between the drama and nature's annual process of renewal, the *Abydos Passion Play* was performed at temples oriented so that their doorways faced the sun's rising on the vernal equinox, the first day of spring.

Theatre in the West

Drama did not continue to flourish in the Middle East, however; much of the ancient theatre tradition there had disappeared by the third century B.C., and the religion of Islam, which originated early in the seventh century A.D., viewed depictions of humans—in both the visual and performing arts—as irreligious. But dramatic art was not stifled: from its Middle Eastern origins, it spread rapidly both east and west. In both India and Attica (now Greece), cultic rituals took place well before the first millennium B.C. And by the middle of that millennium, in the West, there arose a spectacular theatre in the city-state of Athens, which over the course of 150 years produced four of the greatest playwrights and the most important dramatic theorist of the theatre's long history. Greek drama ushered in the Western strain of theatre, establishing its major modes of tragedy and comedy and characters and plot lines that underlie much of Western drama as we know it today.

Greek Drama

The drama of Athens in the fifth century B.C. still stands as one of the greatest—some would say *the* greatest—bodies of theatrical creation of all time. A magnificent and vigorous blend of myth, legend, philosophy, social commentary, poetry, dance, music, public participation, and visual splendor, Athenian drama created the forms of both tragedy and comedy, peopling



Euripides' *The Trojan Women*, shown here in Matthias Langhoff's 1998 production at the French National Theatre of Rennes, Brittany, is the all-time masterpiece of war's horror and ruin. Hecuba, here played by Évelyne Didi, cries out against her country's destruction from an ancient Trojan theatre laid to waste by Greek armies. Thus, Langhoff employs a "stage theatre" to face the real one in which the audience sits. Certainly, no one in the French audience will fail to grasp the parallels to contemporary struggles elsewhere in Europe.

them with characters that have become cultural archetypes in successive eras and laying thereby the foundation not only of future Western drama but also of continuing debates as to how—and to what purposes—life should be lived.

Aristotle and later scholars tell us that Greek tragedy derived from ancient, orgiastic rites, filled with wine drinking, phallus worshipping, and the chanting of ancient poems, called *dithyrambs*, in honor of the Greek demigod Dionysus (the Greek god of fertility and wine and, eventually, the god of theatre as well). Thought to have come to Greece by way of the Middle East, Dionysus was the counter-

part of Egypt's Osiris and, like the Egyptian wheat god, was believed to have been dismembered in the winter and resurrected in the spring, proving a demi-divine analogue to the rebirth of vegetation on the Attic peninsula. And when classic Greek dramas came to be staged on the Athenian acropolis by the latter part of the sixth century B.C., it was at the Great Theatre of Dionysus, during the annual springtime festival known as the City Dionysia (or Great Dionysia), that the demigod's apparent rebirth was celebrated. Dionysus has, ever since, been considered the founding deity of Western drama.

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Although the transition from orgiastic celebrations to tragic drama is decidedly obscure, we do know that by the end of the fifth century three great tragedians—Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides—had written and produced close to three hundred plays, of which thirty-three have come down to us, most of which are on every theatre scholar's list of the world's greatest dramatic masterpieces. Furthermore, there was a brilliant author of comic dramas—Aristophanes—from whom eleven plays survive, one of which (*The Frogs*) is a biting and vastly informative satire about the three great tragedians who shared his times. Other authors of Greek comedy, including Menander, and literary theorists, including Aristotle (with his *Poet-*

ics, a treatise on tragedy), plied their trades in the century that followed, making for one of the richest bodies of dramatic work ever created.

Greek tragedies explored the social, psychological, and religious meanings of the ancient gods and heroes of Greek history and myth, as well as current events; the comedies presented contemporary issues affecting all Athenians. Both types of drama were first staged in a simple wheat-threshing circle on the ground (the *orchestra*), with a dressing hut (*skene*) behind it; the audience was seated on an adjacent hillside (the *theatron*). As Greek culture expanded, however, huge amphitheaters—the largest of which sat upward of 15,000 people—were built in Athens and subsequently throughout the grow-



The Greek theatre of Priene, in modern-day Turkey, dates from about 300 B.C. Unlike most Greek theatres, Priene was never rebuilt by the Romans and thus remains one of the best examples of a hillside Greek *theatron*. The standing row of columns and connecting lintel once made up the front of the stone *skene*, or stagehouse.



In the dithyrambs that preceded ancient Greek tragedy, there was a chorus of fifty performers. Romanian director Silviu Purcărete, at the National Theatre of Craiova, actually employed a chorus of double that number – with fifty men and fifty women – in his innovative production of *Les Danaïdes*, adapted from Aeschylus's war tetralogy, *The Suppliants*. Purcărete's highly stylized production, performed (in French) in Manhattan's Damrosch Park as part of the Lincoln Center Festival in 1997, had clear overtones of current problems in eastern Europe and the Balkans and a strong emphasis on political terrorism, sexual assault, and the ambiguity of gender and cultural identity.

ing Greek empire. Many of those later theatres remain today, in various stages of ruin and renovation, in parts of Greece, Italy, and Turkey; and of course the terms *orchestra*, *scene*, and *theatre* remained to define the theatre of future eras.

Ancient Greek actors were all male. They performed in masks, partly to indicate the age, gender, personality, and social standing of the characters they were playing and partly to amplify their voices. (The word *person*, which derives from the Latin *per son*, or “for sound,” originally referred to the amplification pro-

vided by an actor's mask, as used in the phrase *dramatis personae*, or “cast of characters.”) Each tragic actor wore elevated shoes (*kothurnoi*), an elaborate headdress (*onkos*), and a long, usually colorful gown (*himation*) with a tunic over it (*chlamys*) to enhance the larger-than-life struggles between royal heroes, gods, and demigods. Plays were performed with only two (later three) principal actors, who, by changing masks, could play several parts each during the course of a play. The actors were supported by a Greek invention, a chorus of twelve or fifteen singer-dancers (usually representing

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the local populace) who chanted their lines in unison or through a single chorus leader. When the skene became an elevated stage for the principal actors, the chorus members remained in the orchestra below, separating them from the main interactions of the principals.

Greek tragedy was chanted and/or sung, not spoken; unfortunately, the music has not survived. And the chorus danced, as it did in the dithyrambic ceremonies, sometimes formally, sometimes with wild abandon. Greek tragedy, therefore, is the foundation not merely of Western drama but of Western musical theatre, including opera, as well. Greek comedy, in contrast, is the foundation of burlesque, satire, and television sitcoms. The plays of Aristophanes, referred to as Old Comedy, are filled with

broad physical humor, gross sexual gags and innuendos, and brilliant wordplay and repartee, often at the expense of contemporary politicians and celebrities. The later plays of Menander, known as New Comedy, gave rise to “stock characters” (such as the bumbling suitor and the timid warrior) and comic plot devices (such as mistaken identity), both of which are recurrent elements of thirty-minute network television.

The City Dionysia was a weeklong festival of celebrations and dramatic competitions. On the first day, introductory ceremonies were held; at these ceremonies, each playwright (selected in advance by civic authorities) introduced his cast and announced the theme of his work. The second day featured processions,



The most ancient theatre is often the most modern. This 1996 English production of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos*, with Gregg Hicks shown here as Tiresias, premiered at the ancient Greek theatre of Epidaurus before reopening at the National Theatre in London. Packed houses greeted it with rousing acclaim in both locations.



Kate Whoriskey's 2004 production of Sophocles' *Antigone* at the South Coast Repertory Theatre included imagery of the September 11, 2001, attacks and resulting war on terror.

sacrifices, and the presentation of ten dithyrambs; and on the third day, five comedies were played. On the fourth, fifth, and sixth days, the three competing playwrights presented—each on a separate day—three related tragedies (a *trilogy*), followed by a comic variation or parody (a *satyr play*) on the same theme. The authors served as the directors of their works. On the seventh, and final, day, judging took place, and prizes for the best play and best leading actor were awarded. It appears that the entire population of freeborn males, and perhaps of freeborn females (we don't know this for certain), attended these performances and rooted for their favorites; judging by later commentaries, outstanding dramatists and actors

were as famous then as are today's best-known film directors and movie stars. Clearly the City Dionysia of fifth-century Athens was a monumental and glorious undertaking, which led to some of the most thrilling dramas and theatrical spectacles in history.

Roman Drama

Greek civilization, battered by internal wars, had lost its leading edge by the end of the fifth century B.C., and the power balance in the Mediterranean shifted, in succeeding centuries, to the growing Roman Empire. Excelling in architecture and engineering, more than in dramatic creativity, the Romans created some astonishing stage buildings, of which more than two hundred (most dating from the first centuries A.D.) survive to the present day. Roman architects dispensed with the Greek hillside theatron and threshing-circle orchestra and designed a theatre that was an entirely integrated structure set on a level plain. They also cut the orchestra in half and created tunnel entrances to it (*vomitoria*) on both sides. The simple Greek skene had become a very elaborate three-story wall (the *frons scaenae*), which was decorated by dozens of statues.

Roman dramatists, however, were rarely as impressive as Roman architects and almost always drew upon Greek sources for their work; indeed, most Roman plays are about Greek characters and Greek struggles. The Roman comic playwrights Plautus and Terence were quite popular in their time, however, and many of their works survive and are performed occasionally today, as are (albeit more rarely) the chamber tragedies of Seneca, a protégé (and victim) of Emperor Nero. All three of these Roman dramatists, in fact, were very popular and much admired by writers and audiences during the European Renaissance. Roman theatre, however, degenerated into sheer spectacle and decadence by the end of the empire, as many theatres were converted into arenas for gladiatorial combat, pitched sea battles, and gruesome public

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massacres. Together, Greek and Roman drama form a “classical theatre” tradition that has been referenced over and over in Western drama since the Renaissance and right up to the present day.

Medieval Drama

The Fall of Rome (around the middle of the first millennium A.D.) brought to an end the classical era of theatre, and both the early Christian and new-founded Islamic religions of those times banned theatrical representation altogether, partly in reaction to the excesses of

late Roman theatre. And when Western drama reappeared, as it did in Europe shortly before the year 1000, it was an altogether different product, sponsored by the same Christian Church that had once banned it. The earliest known dramatization of that period was not a play in the ordinary sense but rather a brief moment in the church’s Easter service, when officiating monks reenacted the biblical story of the Virgin Mary and her two companions (also named Mary) as they visit the tomb of Jesus. “Whom seek ye?” (*Quem queritis?*) an angel asks. “Jesus of Nazareth,” reply the Marys, whereupon they are told, “He is not here, He



Adam and Eve (Alessandro Mastrobuono and Erin Jellison) take their instructions from God (Tom Fitzpatrick) in Brian Kulick's 2003 *The Mysteries* in Los Angeles. The actors would probably have worn flesh-colored body stockings in medieval times, but contemporary theatre is able, on this occasion, to express their innocence before the Fall more literally.



Bill Buell and Jennifer Roszell battle the floodwaters as Noah and his Wife in Kulick's *The Mysteries*.

has risen." They then break into a chorus of hallelujahs. It is fascinating, of course, that European drama of the Christian era, like the drama of ancient Egypt and ancient Greece, began with the springtime celebration of a divine resurrection. This simple liturgical playlet, now known as the *Quem Queritis*, became the first of literally hundreds of church-sponsored dramatizations depicting and celebrating the Judeo-Christian story of humankind—from the Creation of the Universe and Adam and Eve to Doomsday and the Harrowing of Hell.

Medieval drama remained in church liturgy for nearly two centuries, but by about 1250, Bible-based drama had moved outdoors into the churchyards and then into the public streets of every country in Europe. By this time the medieval "mystery plays," as they were then called, were performed in the emerging

modern languages of French, English, Spanish, German, and Italian rather than Latin and included scenes that were more secular than purely religious, often with contemporary political overtones. The actors were no longer monks but ordinary citizens, some of whom—those who had mastered the leading parts—were well paid for their efforts. The authors, though anonymous to us, were highly prized by their communities, as they converted the formal prose of the Bible to comic interplay, jesting repartee, swashbuckling bluster, and intricate versification.

Entire festivals of such plays, numbering in the dozens, were presented in hundreds of European towns every spring, dominating city life where and when they were played and attracting rural audiences from all around. On the European continent, such drama festivals lasted for many days or even weeks, with huge casts performing on a series of stages (known as *mansions*) set up next to each other in the town plaza or marketplace; audiences could stroll from one play to the next, as the plays were performed in sequence. In England, however, the plays were performed on wagon-mounted stages, one for each playlet, that wheeled from one audience site to another during a daylong springtime festival known as Corpus Christi.

At first glance, these mystery plays may appear stylistically primitive (see box), at least in contrast to the splendor of the classic Greek tragedies, but twentieth-century productions have demonstrated their tremendous dramatic impact, even to a religiously diverse contemporary audience. And the scale of medieval theatre production—with its mansions, rolling stages, and casts of hundreds—was simply astonishing. Like the great Gothic cathedrals—also created anonymously and at roughly the same time—the Bible-based medieval theatre was a monumental enterprise that affected the lives of the entire culture that created and experienced it.

MEDIEVAL VERSE — AND A SHAKESPEAREAN PARODY

Medieval English drama was written in verse employing irregular line lengths, an extensive use of alliteration (neighboring words that begin with the same consonant), and rhymes that were seemingly forced into place. This excerpt (with archaic words but modernized spellings) is from the anonymous *Fall of Lucifer* play, written and performed in York, England, in the fourteenth century. It exemplifies early English dramatic verse:

LUCIFER: (*in Heaven*) Oh, certain, how I am worthily wrought with worship, iwis!
For in glorious glee, my glittering gleams!
I am so mightily made, my mirth may not miss —
E'er shall I bide in this bliss through brightness of beams!
Me needs no annoyance to neven,
All wealth in my world I am wielding!
Above yet shall I make by building
Oh high in the highest of heaven!
(*Lucifer falls into Hell.*)
Ow! Deuce! All goes down!
My might and my main all is marring.
Help, fellows! In faith, I am falling!
Out! Out! Harrow! Helpless, such heat is there here

This is a dungeon of dole in which I can't delight!
What has my kind become, so comely and clear?
Now I am loathsome, alas who was light.
My brightness is blackest and blue now,
My bale is e'er beating and burning.
I hie me a-howling and churning.
Out! Ay, welaway! I wallow in woe now!

Shakespeare parodied this style of writing two centuries later in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, in which a group of village craftsmen write and produce a play called "Pyramus and Thisbe," which includes such lines as:

PYRAMUS: Sween moon, I thank thee for thy sunny beams.
I thank thee, moon, for shining now so bright;
For by thy gracious, golden, glittering gleams,
I trust to take of truest Thisbe sight.
But stay, O spite!
But mark, poor knight,
What dreadful dole is here!
Eyes, do you see?
How can it be?
O dainty duck! O dear!



An eighteenth-century illustration of Italian *commedia dell'arte*.



Like its predecessor, the modern Globe Theater replica in London schedules performances by daylight, come rain or shine. As in Shakespeare's day, a sizable portion of the audience (the "groundlings," as they were called in Elizabethan times) observes from a standing-room pit in front of the stage; everyone else sits on hard wooden benches in the surrounding galleries. Shown here, the concluding dance of the Globe's 1998 *As You Like It* enchants the audience on all sides of the stage, which is "thrust" into their midst.

Renaissance Drama

Medieval drama was created in ignorance of its classical predecessors, but when, in the High Middle Ages, Roman and then Greek texts began to be translated and published, their influence—on all arts and culture, not merely the theatre—proved overwhelming. We call this the Renaissance: the period when ancient culture was "reborn" and fused—sometimes uneasily—with the medieval and Gothic forms that had been dominant for centuries.

The Renaissance began, by most reckonings, in Italy, where the plays of Plautus and Seneca were first translated in the 1470s. Am-

ateur productions of these Italian translations soon became popular, giving rise to freer adaptations, which are now known as *commedia erudita*, or "learned comedies." By the 1520s, the Florentine diplomat and essayist Niccolò Machiavelli was famous throughout Italy for his learned comedies based on—and taking off from—Roman forebears, and by the middle of the sixteenth century a semi-improvised variation of that comedy, known as *commedia dell'arte*, was performed by itinerant professional actors throughout the Italian peninsula and even beyond. Soon both *commedia dell'arte* and scripted plays in modern European languages—based on classic or

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Above: All actors in Shakespeare's day were male, by law. The laws were overturned to permit women on the English stage in 1660, and by the nineteenth century some women – Sarah Bernhardt for example – had, on occasion, begun to play male roles. By the late twentieth century, men were often playing women's roles, both to make modern statements on the “performative” nature of gender (a belief that gender is a role, not a fixed identity) and also to return to the roots of Shakespearean acting. Here Mark Rylance (*left*), artistic director of the London Globe Theater, plays Queen Cleopatra in this gender-crossing 1999 production of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra* at that playhouse.

Right: Mark Rylance, in the title role of the history play *Richard II* at the Globe Theater, meditates upon the importance of gaining, or losing, his royal crown.





Matthew Rhys (*left*) as Romeo and Tam Mutu as Tybalt duel in this 2004 Royal Shakespeare Company production of *Romeo and Juliet*, directed by Peter Gill.



Romeo (Tom Burke) discovers Juliet (Kananu Kirimi) on her bier between wax-dripping candles in this production, featuring costumes of the play's period, at the reconstructed Globe Theatre in London in 2004.

DID SHAKESPEARE WRITE SHAKESPEARE?

Students occasionally wonder about the so-called “authorship question,” which challenges the commonly held belief that Shakespeare’s plays were written by Shakespeare. Yet while several books have argued against Shakespeare’s authorship, and some distinguished thinkers (among them Mark Twain and Sigmund Freud) have shared their doubts as well, there is simply no question to be posed: the evidence that Shakespeare wrote Shakespeare’s plays is absolutely overwhelming. Nor has a shred of evidence appeared thus far to indicate that anyone else wrote them. Not a single prominent Elizabethan scholar has accepted the “anti-Stratfordian” (as proponents of other authors are called) argument, which America’s most noted Shakespearean scholar, Harold Bloom, simply dismisses as “lunacy.”

How can there be a question? Shakespeare is named as author on the title page of seventeen separate publications during his lifetime and is cited as the author of eleven known plays in a book published when he was thirty-four. He is credited as the author of the First Folio in its title, *Mr. William Shakespeare’s Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies*, published just seven years after his death; the Folio’s editors were his acting colleagues, who describe Shakespeare as fellow actor, author, and friend, and their preface also includes four poems – one by dramatist Ben Jonson – each unequivocally referring to Shakespeare as the author of plays. Surviving

records show him performing in his plays at the courts of both Queen Elizabeth and King James, and he was buried, along with his wife, daughter, and son-in-law (and no one else), in the place of greatest honor in his hometown church. An inscribed funeral monument, mentioned in the Folio and showing him with pen in hand, looks down on Shakespeare’s grave and was regularly visited in the coming years by persons wishing to see, as one wrote, the last resting place of “the wittiest poet in the world.” Birth, marriage, death, heraldic, and other legal records, plus dozens of citations during and shortly after his life tell us more about dramatist William Shakespeare than we have collected for all but a few common-born citizens of his era.

So, what is left to argue? Anti-Stratfordians maintain that the evidence doesn’t paint the picture we should expect of such a magnificent playwright: He apparently didn’t go to college; his name was spelled in several different ways and sometimes hyphenated; his signatures indicate poor handwriting; his wife and daughters were probably illiterate; he didn’t leave any books in his will; no ceremony marked his death; he never traveled to Italy, where many of his plays were set; and an early engraving of the Stratford monument looks different – lacking its pen – than the monument does now.

Little of this is provable, however, and none of it is remotely convincing even if true. Aeschylus,

current themes, not biblical ones — were common throughout Europe.

It was in England that the Renaissance brought forth the greatest dramatic masterpieces of that (or perhaps any) era, in the works of William Shakespeare. Coming of age during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, Shakespeare began his career in a vibrant world of palatial court theatres, freestanding outdoor “public theatres” that dominated the London skyline, and companies of professional actors who entertained court and public at home and on tour. This “Elizabethan” theatre fea-

tured dozens of playwrights whose works remain popular today; Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, and John Webster are three of Shakespeare’s most prominent contemporaries, but none, however, was fully comparable to Shakespeare himself. Alone among the world’s great authors, Shakespeare was equally adept at producing exemplary postclassical masterpieces of both comedy and tragedy. Four centuries after they were written (approximately 1580–1610), his plays are the most-produced dramas in literally thousands of theatres around the world; they are, indeed, the primary reper-

Euripides, and George Bernard Shaw didn't go to college, either. Shakespeare's knowledge of Italy is nothing an intelligent person couldn't have picked up in an afternoon's conversation – and it wasn't that accurate, (Shakespeare writes of one who could “lose the tide” facilitating a trip from Verona to Milan – where no water route exists). Many people have unreadable signatures, and in Shakespeare's day neither spelling nor hyphenation was standardized, nor was literacy a norm among country women. That we don't know of a memorial ceremony doesn't mean there wasn't one, and evidence clearly indicates the engraving of a pen-less monument was simply one of many errors in a too-hastily-prepared book. And if Shakespeare maintained a library, he could simply have given it to his son-in-law (a doctor) before his death or left it to be passed on to his wife along with his house and furnishings, or perhaps he kept books in a private office at The Globe theatre in London, which burned to the ground three years before his death. And who actually knows that he didn't travel to Italy or even study at a university for that matter? We know absolutely nothing about Shakespeare between the ages of twenty-one and twenty-eight; he could have been anywhere and done anything.

But we do know he was a man of the theatre. And obviously a genius. What else need we know? Why must we insist that he have good handwriting? or literate

relatives? Because *we* do? But we're not Shakespeare, and Shakespeare doesn't have to be like us.

And absolutely no evidence exists that anyone *else* wrote any of the plays – which explains why there are nearly a half dozen claimants to this phantom position of the “real” Shakespeare.

It is impossible to represent the entirety of either argument in a few paragraphs (one of the books, proposing the Earl of Oxford, runs over 900 pages), but the entire anti-Stratfordian case, diverting as it may be, is painstakingly and effectively refuted in Irvin Leigh Matus's relentlessly straightforward *Shakespeare, IN FACT* (1994).

It is, of course, possible that all the evidence we now have – *all* of it – has somehow been fabricated. This would mean Shakespeare managed to fool – or buy off – virtually everyone in his town, everyone in his church, everyone in his theatre company, everyone at two royal courts, everyone in the London theatre world, most of the printers and booksellers in England, and everyone they talked to. We would be asked to believe that this gigantic lie (for which we have not a trace of evidence) *never* got out, not through the revival of his plays after his death and then later during the Restoration era. It would have been the most stupendous hoax in human history, incomparable to the insignificant hoax proffered to us by anti-Stratfordians today.

toire of over a hundred theatre companies named after him.

Shakespeare was not only an author; he was also an actor and part owner of his own theatre company, the King's Men, and of The Globe theatre in London, which his company built and operated; a new Globe, in fact, has been built near the original site and, since its 1997 opening, has been used for the presentation of Shakespearean-era (and occasionally other) plays. With its “thrust stage” and standing-room “pit” open to the sky and surrounded by thatched-roof seating galleries on three levels,

the modern Globe may not—because of fire regulations—seat the three thousand people accommodated by the original building, but its restoration helps us better understand the vigor of Shakespearean-era staging and the potential of the drama to electrify a large and diverse audience with profound intelligence and passion, as well as comically expressive hijinks. Shakespeare's plays are well known to literary scholars for their poetic brilliance, relentless investigation of the human condition, and deeply penetrating character portrayals, but they are also filled with music, dancing, ribaldry, puns, satire,



Priest and playwright Pedro Calderón de la Barca (1600–1681) was Spain's great court dramatist, whose philosophical and theological plays were deemed more elegant and refined than those of his Renaissance predecessors Lope de Vega and Miguel Cervantes. Calderón's masterpiece, *Life Is a Dream* (c. 1638), treats moral responsibility in a royal (courtly) context; this scene is from the Denver Theatre Center's 1998 production, staged as part of a summer festival of Spanish golden-age drama.

pageantry, and humor, which only performance brings to life. They are both great dramatic art and magnificent theatrical entertainment.

The Royal Theatre

If the Renaissance was the rebirth of classical civilization, the age that followed was a vast consolidation and refinement of what had come before; it was an era organized intellectually by the then-emerging empirical sciences and rational philosophies and politically by the increasing importance of European royalty. The seventeenth-century theatre of this so-called Royal era featured the dramas of Pedro Calderón de la Barca at the court of King Philip IV in Spain, the tragedies of Jean Racine and

Pierre Corneille and the comedies of Molière under King Louis XIV in France, and the Restoration comedies of William Wycherley and William Congreve under English king Charles II, who was crowned when the royal family was restored to the throne after eighteen years of English civil war and Puritan rule.

Plays of the Royal era were generally aimed more at the aristocracy than at the general populace and reflected the gentility of the seemingly refined taste of courtly patrons. Rational sensibility dominated the times: theories of drama, adapted from Aristotle and hence called "neoclassic," sought to regularize plays within "reasonable" frameworks of time and place, establish strictly measured structures for dramatic verse, unify styles around set genres,



The romantic spirit encompasses more than romance; it is also swashbuckling swordplay, picaresque characters, poetic elaborations, and period costumes – all of which come together in the famous dueling-rhyming scene between the long-nosed Gascon poet-soldier Cyrano and his aristocratic rival, the Comte de Guiche, in Edmond Rostand's *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1898), produced here by South Coast Repertory in 2004.

and eliminate onstage depictions of physical violence. Indoor theatres, lit by candles instead of sunlight, replaced the outdoor public theatres of earlier times, providing more intimate and comfortable surroundings for an increasingly well-dressed audience. Furthermore, protection from wind and weather permitted elaborately painted scenery and stage machinery. Several of these theatres are architectural gems that have remained in continuous use to the present day. Style, wit, grace, and class distinction became not merely the framework of drama but its chief subject, and the fan and the snuffbox became signature props. This was also the Western world's first era of extensive theatrical commentary and thus the first from which we have detailed commentaries and evidence—both textual and visual—of the era's

dramatic repertoires, acting styles, artists' lives, and manifestos and controversies that continue to define, in sum, the art of drama.

The Romantic Theatre

Every era in theatre is, to some extent, a rebellion against the previous one, and the romantic theatre of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was, in the main, a bold rejection of the rational decorum of the preceding Royal era and its spirit of ordered, elegant, and enlightened debate. Romanticism, in contrast, was florid, exotic, grotesque, sprawling, and imbued with the free-flowing spirit of the individual rather than the social organization of class, court, or scientific or aesthetic academy. Compassion, rather than style and wit, was

central to the romantic creed, and authors, such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Friedrich von Schiller in Germany and Victor Hugo in France, intrigued audiences with their deep humanitarian concerns in plays that dealt with devils and monsters, robbers and priests, hunchbacks and heroes.

Romanticism gave rise to melodrama and grand opera and much of the anarchic passion and sprawling sentiment of modern realism as well. Moreover, the romantic quest for the foreign and exotic represented Western drama's first serious reengagement with the theatre of the East. This, then, is a good point at which to return to drama's earlier years—to the Eastern strain of theatre that sprang from Egyptian and Canaanite beginnings and soon resurfaced on the Indian subcontinent and thereafter throughout Asia.

Theatre in the East

It is misleading to refer to *an* “Asian theatre,” for drama in Asia is as rich and diverse as—if not more so than—theatre in the West. Asia, after all—with three-fifths of the world's population—comprises dozens of countries, hundreds of languages, and thousands of identified theatre forms. Nevertheless, although Asian dramatic forms differ markedly from each other, they generally adhere to many fundamental principles, mostly in strong contrast to Western traditions:

- Asian drama is almost never just “spoken”; rather, it is danced, chanted, mimed, and very often sung. Mere spoken drama, when it does occur in the East, is generally recognized as Western in origin or influence.
- Asian dramatic language is invariably rhythmic and melodic; it is appreciated for its sound as much as (or more than) for its meaning. Alliteration, imagery, rhyme, and verbal juxtaposition are often as important in Asian dramatic dialogue as logic, persuasive rhetoric, and realism are in Western drama; and the sonic value of words is as valued by an Asian audience as their semantic value is by a Western audience.
- Asian theatre is ordinarily more visual and sensual than literary or intellectual. Although some Asian dramatists are known for their literary gifts (and several are mentioned in the following discussion), few Asian plays have been widely circulated for general reading or academic study. Most Asians would consider the act of reading a play—separate from seeing it in performance—a rather odd pastime. Rather, Asian drama is inextricable from the arts of performance that bring it to life: dance, song, mime, gesture, acrobatics, puppetry, music, sound, costume, and makeup.
- Asian theatre has a strong emphasis on storytelling and myth, yet it is not tightly plotted, as Western drama is, and rarely leads to escalating incidents, stunning reversals, crescendoing climaxes, or elaborate plot closures. Asian theatre, whose metaphysical roots lie in those timeless meditations on human existence that are at the very heart of Hindu and Buddhist cultures, instead may seem, to Western tastes, leisurely and almost wandering. Certainly, Asian theatre's dramatic appeal is more continuous and rapturous than cathartic or arresting.
- Asian theatre is broadly stylized. As one might expect of a dramatic form imbued with music and dance, slice-of-life realism is virtually unknown. Brilliantly colored costumes and makeup, long and obviously artificial beards, elegantly danced battle scenes, and live instrumental accompaniment are virtually standard in traditional Asian theatre.
- Actors train in traditional Asian dramatic forms through an intense apprentice system beginning in early childhood and lasting into early middle age. Most Asian

actors, indeed, are born or adopted into their trade.

- The Asian theatre is deeply traditional. Although there are modern and avant-garde theatre movements in most Asian countries—and some Western influence is evident in many of them—what is most remarkable about Eastern theatre is its near-universal consonance with folk history, ancient religions, and cultural myths.

Indian Sanskrit Drama

Asian drama began in India, where it sprang from the same Middle Eastern roots as its Western counterpart; some scholars even believe that the Greek Dionysus had an Indian heritage. Indeed, there are tantalizing connections between ancient India and Greece, which, one scholar argues, suggests an “Indo-Greek theatre” of the first millennium B.C.; these include fragments of Indian archeological remains that seem to be based on Greek dramatic texts and intriguing anecdotes of Greek theatre productions mounted by officers of Alexander the Great during his Indian invasion in 326 B.C.

Despite its connections to Greek theatre, Indian theatre is very much an independent Asiatic creation, which was first known to us in the form of a native Sanskrit dance theatre that achieved a solid foothold on the subcontinent somewhere around 200 B.C. and remained popular for more than a thousand years thereafter.* Sanskrit plays survive from about A.D. 100, and a comprehensive book of dramatic theory, the *Natyasastra*, or “treatise on theatre,” ascribed to Bharata Muni, dates from somewhere between 200 B.C. and A.D. 200. The *Natyasastra*, the most comprehensive study of theatre surviving from the ancient world, contains detailed analyses of Sanskrit dramatic texts, theatre buildings, acting, staging, music, gesture, dance, and even theatre-company orga-

nization. The treatise describes ten major genres of Sanskrit drama, including two primary ones: the *nataka*, which was based on well-known heroic stories of kings or sages, and the *prakarana*, based on the theme of love. The greatest Sanskrit poet, Kalidasa, wrote his masterpiece, *Shakuntala and the Ring of Recognition*, in the *nataka* style somewhere around the fifth century A.D. *The Little Clay Cart*, attributed to Sudraka, is the best known of two surviving examples of *prakarana*.

Sanskrit theatre, as far as we can tell (no ruins or drawings survive), was performed indoors, within a roofed building. Rectangular in structure and fitted with a stage of about forty-eight by twenty-four feet, these buildings could seat somewhere between two hundred and five hundred spectators. Two doors, with an onstage orchestra between them, provided access to the dressing area behind the stage, and four columns held up the roof or an upper pavilion. Carved wooden elephants, tigers, and snakes adorned the pillars and perhaps the ceiling. Sanskrit drama was danced and acted with an onstage instrumental and percussion accompaniment. Performers, all from priestly castes and trained from very early childhood, were absolute virtuosos of their particularly demanding art.

Sanskrit drama died out around the tenth century, as the broad-based Hindu court culture fragmented in the wake of repeated Mongol invasions and the peoples of India fell back into preexisting regional cultures and languages. In succeeding centuries, dozens—even hundreds—of provincial theatre forms became popular throughout the subcontinent, a vast number of which remain to the present day. Despite their many differences, all Indian drama forms share many of the fundamental theatre aesthetics of their Sanskrit predecessors and the doctrines of the ancient *Natyasastra*.

Indian Kathakali

Today the most widely known of these regional dance-drama forms is the *kathakali* (“story play”), which originated in rural villages in the

*All dates in early Indian drama are extremely approximate, within a plus-or-minus margin of sometimes up to four or five centuries.

province of Kerala in the seventeenth century; it currently plays in many urban centers in the province and often abroad. Kathakali is a drama based on any of thousands of stories from the two great Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. Kathakali performance itself is somewhat of an epic as well, with its outdoor performances lasting from about ten at night until well beyond dawn the next day. Traditionally, audience members are free to leave, take naps, and eat during the performance; today, however, kathakali is more often performed in the three-hour evening time blocks common to Western theatre.

In kathakali, the text is sung—to a percussion accompaniment of gongs, drums, and cymbals—by two singers seated at the side. Actors dance and pantomime the dramatic action; by employing precise and elaborate hand gestures, footwork patterns, distinctive eye and eyebrow movements, and postural contortions, they reveal subtleties of meaning and characterization that are barely suggested by the text. Consequently, actors train rigorously for kathakali performance from early childhood, achieving mastery—if at all—only by about age forty. Highly stylized makeup and costuming also convey characterization and attitude: red- or black-bearded characters represent evil, and white-bearded ones the divine. No scenery is used in kathakali, as plays are presented in arbitrary sites, with four simple poles defining the acting area.

Chinese Xiqu

China, Asia's largest nation, is Asia's oldest continuous culture, as well as the home of Asia's oldest continuous theatre tradition. As with all Asian drama, Chinese theatre is more sung than spoken, but since even Chinese speech is itself semimusical—as it is based on tonal changes as well as syllabic pronunciation—all traditional Chinese theatre is known by the Chinese term *xiqu* ("tuneful theatre"), which we translate as "Chinese Opera."



In the Indian kathakali dance-drama, royal characters wear an elaborate *kiritam*, or crown, which frames the actor's eye movements—one of the most intensively studied skills of kathakali performers. Kalamandalam Gopi, a senior kathakali maestro, is shown here in the role of King Rugmangada in *Rugmangadacharitam*, performed in Trichur, Kerala (India) in 1993.

Although forms of xiqu existed in China before the first century, the first well-defined Chinese Opera form, known as *zaju* ("various plays"), appeared in China during the Song dynasty in the tenth century, reaching its golden age in the thirteenth century under the Mongol emperor Kublai Khan. Zaju was a comedic music-dance-drama, with acrobatics and clowning; it was so popular that a single amusement park in thirteenth-century Keifeng (then China's northern capital) featured at least fifty indoor zaju theatres, the largest holding several thousand people.



Circus-style acrobatics have always been a great feature of the stylized battle scenes in Chinese *xiqu*, as shown here by the brilliant leaps and flips of the *wu sheng* (acrobat warrior) performers of China's Hebei Opera Company during their 1998 international tour.

By the end of the Ming dynasty, in 1644, *zaju* had been succeeded by a more stately, poetic, and aristocratic opera known as *kunqu*, originating from the town of Kunshan; soon thereafter *kunqu* became the favored theatre entertainment of the Chinese court. *Kunqu* is still performed today. More popular theatre developed around the same time in the form of a more boisterous “clapper opera,” characterized by the furious rhythmic beating of drumsticks on a hardwood block. And in subsequent years, many regional theatre styles, influenced by the *zaju*, *kunqu*, and clapper opera forms, arose throughout the country. Today there are as many as 360 variations of Chinese Opera in the People's Republic, most of them—such as Cantonese Opera, Sichuan Opera, Hui Opera—known by their regional origins.

The most famous Chinese Opera in modern times, however, is the Beijing (Peking) Opera, which is known in Chinese as *jingju*, or “theatre of the capital.” *Jingju* was founded in 1790, when, in celebration of the emperor's eightieth birthday, a group of actors from the mountains of Anhui—led by one Cheng Chang-geng—came to Beijing and amazed the court with their brilliant and innovative style of singing, music, and (in particular) acrobatics and martial arts. As local actors assimilated the Anhui style with their own, a new “capital” style was developed, reaching its current form by about 1850, by which time it had become the dominant popular theatre of all China. Beijing Opera remains not just one of the great glories of the world's traditional performing arts but—after a nearly thirteen-year hiatus occasioned



The Monkey King – a ferocious scamp – is the most enduring character in xiqu; he is always dressed in yellow, as shown here in this Shanghai Jingju Theatre production of *Pansi Cave*.

by the Chinese Cultural Revolution in the 1960s and 1970s—a highly popular national entertainment in China and around the world.

Because the stories and plots of Chinese Opera are normally ancient and well known, the actual staging of such works becomes, above all, a celebration of the performers' individual skills (*gong*); in particular, actors must master the classic fourfold combination of singing (*chang*), speech (*nian*), acting and movement (*zuo*), and martial arts and acrobatics (*da*). Virtually all Chinese Opera performers are proficient in all four of these arts; the greatest performing artists—who are famous throughout China—have mastered each of them to

virtuoso standards. Indeed, it might be said that the equivalent of a great Chinese actor in the West would be someone who could perform for the American Ballet Theatre, La Scala Opera, the Royal Shakespeare Company, the Ringling Brothers Circus, and the French foreign legion—all on the same evening.

Chinese Opera is a spectacular visual feast, with dazzling costumes, huge glittery head-dresses, and brilliantly colorful face painting. Actors of both sexes wear multilayered gowns in bold primary colors, many of which have “water-sleeves,” which fall all the way to the floor. Chinese Opera singing, much of which is in an extreme falsetto (originally employed

SPEAKING THEATRICAL CHINESE

There are several Chinese words referring to the theatrical arts. *Xi* (pronounced “shee”) refers to theatrical entertainments of all sorts. *Qu* (“chyoo”) denotes tune, or music. Their combination, *xiqu* (pronounced “shee-chyoo” and meaning “tuneful theatre”), is the most common term by which we refer to all varieties of traditional Chinese theatre, commonly known in the West as Chinese Opera. *Ju* is a more limited Chinese word for theatre, and *xiju* can be used to refer to modern as well as Chinese theatre. Unfortunately, Western ears have difficulty distinguishing the pronunciation of *qu* and *ju*, both of which are phonetically transcribed into English as “chyoo” but are aspirated differently in spoken Mandarin. *Jing* (pronounced “jean”) means “capital”; therefore, *jingju* (pronounced “jean-chyoo” and meaning “theatre of the capital”) refers specifically to Beijing Opera, the most popular form of *xiqu*. (*Beijing* literally means “northern capital.”)

By current convention, these and other generic Asian theatre terms such as *kathakali*, *kabuki*, and *nō* are normally uncapitalized in English.

so that actors could be heard over the din of people talking during the performance), is accompanied by the near-constant clanging of gongs and cymbals, clapper claps, drumbeats, and the furious strumming of various two-stringed fiddles. Movement skills include a rapid heel-to-toe walk, contortionist bendings and swayings, sudden jerks and freezes, and thrilling displays of full-stage acrobatics: continuously back-springing performers bound across the stage in a literal blur, and in battle scenes combatants repel spear thrusts—sixteen at a time, all from different directions—with both hands and both feet. Chinese Opera has never been dependent on scenery—an actor who enters holding a paddle behind him is assumed to be on a boat; an actor entering with a riding crop is assumed to be on horseback—but its storytelling conventions and its spectacular musical, visual, and acrobatic displays offer

audiences one of the world’s most thrilling and magnificent theatrical experiences.

Japanese Nō

The island nation of Japan has created two great theatre forms, *nō* and *kabuki*. Each is virtually a living museum of centuries-old theatre practice—*nō* and *kabuki* are performed today in very much the same fashion as in earlier times—yet each is also an immensely satisfying theatre experience for modern audiences attuned to the Japanese culture.

Nō is Japan’s most revered and cerebral theatre. It is also the oldest continuously performed drama in the world. Perfected in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries almost solely by a single father-son team (Kan’ami and Zeami), who between them wrote and produced approximately 240 of the surviving plays, *nō* is a highly ceremonial drama, mysterious and tragic, that almost always portrays supernatural events and characters. All *nō* plays center on a single character, known as the *shite* (the “doer”), who is interrogated, prompted, and challenged by a secondary character, called the *waki*. Whereas *waki* characters are always living male humans—usually ministers, commoners, or priests—*shite* characters may be gods, ghosts, women, animals, or warriors; the *shite* role, unlike the *waki*, is played in a mask. *Nō* actors—all of whom are male—train for only one of these role types, which they normally perform throughout their careers. Long training provides actors with the precise choreography and the musical notations required of their danced and chanted performance.

The actual *nō* stage is a precisely measured square of highly polished Japanese cypress flooring, about eighteen feet across, supported from below by large earthenware jars that resonate with the actors’ foot-stomping. A bridge-like runway (*hashigakari*) provides stage access from stage right; it is used for the solemn entrances and exits particularly characteristic of *nō*. An ornate, curved roof covers the stage and



Nō actors usually come from long-standing nō families that operate nō schools. Here one of Japan's "living national treasures," the venerable Otoshige Sakai of the Kanze Nō-gakudo school, which was founded in the fourteenth century, helps mask his son, Otaharu, before a 2004 performance in Tokyo.

is reminiscent of the time when the stage was housed in a separate building, which the audience observed from a distance; the nō roof is supported by four wooden pillars, each with its own name and historic dramatic function. A wooden "mirror wall" at the rear of the stage bounces back the sounds of music and singing to the audience; on the wall, a painted pine tree, delicately gnarled and highly stylized, provides the only scenery. A four-man orchestra—whose instruments include a flute, small and large hand drums, and a stick drum—provides continuous musical accompaniment at the rear of the stage, and a chorus of six to ten singer-chanters is positioned on a platform addition at stage left. The absolute precision of

the theatre design and the stately performance choreography and musicality give nō a ceremonial quality that is unique in world drama.

Nō has never been a theatre of mass entertainment, and first-time patrons today—including many Japanese—often find it bewildering. Plotting, even in comparison to other Asian forms, is weak or virtually nonexistent. The language is medieval, elliptical, and often forbiddingly obscure. The cast is small, the action relatively static, and the pace, by modern standards, virtually glacial: the basic nō walk, said to be derived from tramping through rice paddies, is an agonizingly deliberate slip-slide shuffle, with the feet barely leaving the ground. The actors are trained to keep their faces im-

mobile and expressionless at all times, even when unmasked. Certainly *nō* is produced today more for enthusiasts than for the general public, but it is notable that the number of such enthusiasts—at least in Japan—is currently growing, not falling; in fact, one scholar claims that “performances are at their most popular level in the history of the art.” Like the study of martial arts, flower arranging, and the tea ceremony, *nō* remains a Japanese national passion. Its sublime mystery and serenity—reflective of deep Buddhist and Shinto values—resonate profoundly in contemporary Japanese life and have proven increasingly influential to Japanese as well as Western dramatists of the current era.

Japanese Kabuki

Created two hundred years after *nō*, kabuki has always been a more spectacular and accessible form of theatrical entertainment. Whereas *nō* is refined, dignified, and designed for small, studious audiences, kabuki is gaudy and exhilarating; from its earliest days, it was created to delight large crowds of merchants, traders, courtesans, and ordinary city dwellers. Whereas *nō* is sober and ascetic and staged on a relatively small, bare platform, kabuki is a theatrical extravaganza of dazzling colors, flamboyant dance and recitation, passionate emotion, and elaborate stage machinery and effects. Japanese audiences often respond by shouting their favorite actors' names or other words of encouragement at key moments in the play.

Kabuki was created in Kyoto around 1600 by the legendary shrine maiden Izumo Okuni, whose flamboyant and dramatic style of dancing became hugely popular in Kyoto's brothels and teahouses. The outlandish extravagance of Okuni's costumes and the fact that women performed both male and female parts invited the term *kabuku*, meaning “askew” (we might translate it today as “punk”). This fast-developing and exotic entertainment was transformed by midcentury—in a series of government edicts

—from an all-female to an all-male performing art. More complex dramatic storytelling—with themes based on traditional myths, historical incidents, local sex scandals and suicides, and already-ancient *nō* drama—was adapted into the evolving format, which was by then renamed *kabuki*, a term made up of three ideographs: *ka* (“song”), *bu* (“dance”), and *ki* (“skill”), the three major ingredients of kabuki.

By the century's end, kabuki staging had incorporated curtains and scenery, playwrights' names were being printed in kabuki programs, and star actors had emerged, creating the two principal kabuki acting styles: *wagoto* (the elegant and naturalistic “soft style” of actor Sakata Tōjūrō I, from Kyoto) and *aragoto* (the thundering “rough style” of Ichikawa Danjūrō I, from Edo, now Tokyo). The traditions of both these actors remain central to kabuki to the present day, as all kabuki actors are members of but eleven famous families and all can trace their lineage—familial and professional—back to their kabuki-performing ancestors. The current star Ichikawa Danjūrō XII, for example, is the great-great-great-great-great-great-great-great-grandson of Ichikawa Danjūrō I, born in 1660; the celebrated Danjūrō style has been directly passed, father to son, down through the centuries.

There are many types of kabuki dramas, but the major works fall generally into two categories: history plays (*jidaimono*, or “period things”) and domestic plays (*sewamono*, or “common things”). The history plays dramatize—usually in spectacular fashion—major political events of the remote past; often, however, the historical distance was little more than a protective cover for past playwrights and actors, who were in fact reflecting—under the guise of an apparently historical depiction—various controversial issues of nobles and political officials of their own time. Domestic plays, in contrast, deal with the affairs of the townspeople, merchants, lovers, and courtesans of the playwright's own era, often focusing on the conflicts—intense throughout Japanese



In kabuki's famous dance-drama *Kagami Jishi* (The Lion Dance), the lion (played by Nakamura Kankuro V) is teased by butterflies (played by his sons Nakamura Kantaro II and Nakamuro Schichinosuki II).

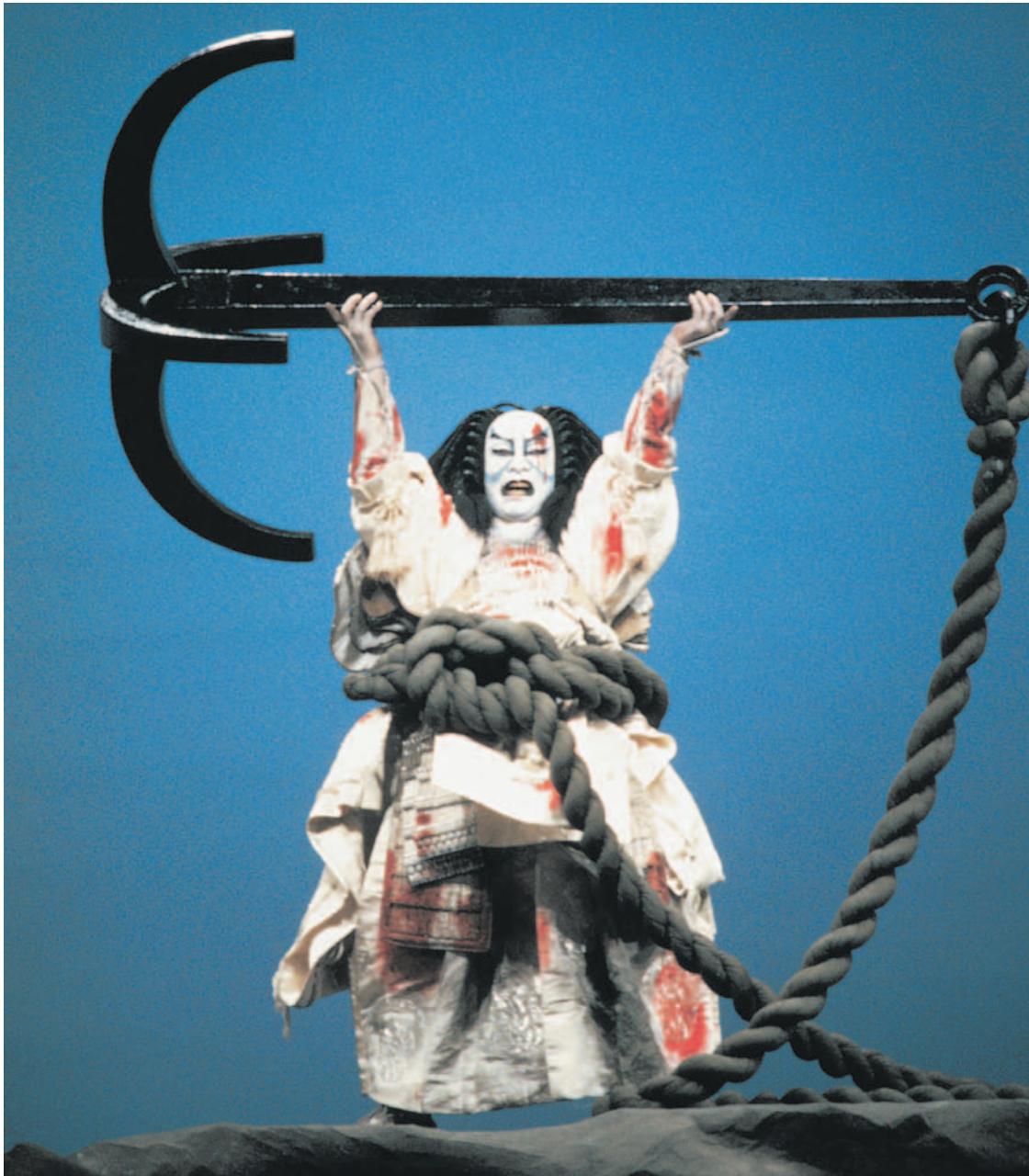
culture—between affairs of the heart and the call of duty. A great many domestic plays end in suicide (many, in fact, end in double suicides), with the lovers vowing to meet again in the world to come; such plays have been the subject of attempted bannings, as they have led to real suicides in consequence.

Kabuki is mainly an actor's theatre; many of its plays are of unknown authorship and have been augmented over the centuries by actors' additions. One notable exception, however, is the kabuki author Chikamatsu Monzaemon (1653–1725). Considered the greatest Japanese dramatist of all time, Chikamatsu was also a

famous playwright of the Japanese puppet theatre *bunraku*.

The Theatrical Tradition Today: East and West

These eleven great theatre traditions of the past—Greek, Roman, medieval, Renaissance, Royal, and romantic in the Western world; Sanskrit, kathakali, xiqu, nō, and kabuki in the East—are all alive today, either in the form of regular and careful revivals or, happier yet in the case of the last four (and, to some extent,



One of kabuki's most celebrated moments is Tomomori's suicide, which ends the 1747 history play *Yoshitsune Sembon Zakura* (Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees). Tomomori, a defeated Heike warlord, ties a ship's anchor to his waist and throws it back over his head, following it overboard to a watery death. The role is performed here by Ichikawa Danjūrō XII.

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This bunraku performance of *Yoshitsune and the Thousand Cherry Trees* was performed at the National Theatre of Osaka, Japan.

the plays of the Royal and romantic eras as well), by a continuous tradition of performance. All of these traditions have influenced the modern theatre, as we will see in the next chapter. Increasingly, that influence crosses

and recrosses the East-West divide that has existed in theatre history since the decline of the Egyptian resurrection dramas two thousand years ago.