

Eighteenth Century Theatre

Resource: Wilson/Goldfarb, Chapter 13 (cont.)

[Rationalism](#)

[Sentimentalism](#)

[Serious Drama in the 18th Century](#)

[Other 18th Century Forms](#)

[Staging in the 18th Century](#)

Rationalism

Restoration comedy, an aristocratic and seemingly amoral form of theatre, declined, at least in part because of the rise of a conservative Protestant (Puritan) middle class.

Such works as Jeremy Collier's 1698 *A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage* helped lead popular sentiment against the Restoration theatre.

During the 1700's, the concept of **Rationalism** (The Age

of Reason), faith in reason, began to take over from faith in God – Rationalism begins to lead away from the strict rules of Neoclassicism. This comes from a faith in man.

Part of this led to the movement of Sentimentalism in the theatre. – asserted that each person was essentially good.

Sentimentalism

Sentimentalism: characterized by an over-emphasis on arousing sympathetic responses to misfortune.

Begins in England, 1690's to 1730's.

Resulted in **Sentimental Comedies** / tearful comedies: more conservative, middle-class, sentimental, moralistic.

Sir Richard Steele (1672-1729) – sought to arouse noble sentiments...wanted a "pleasure too exquisite for laughter."

The Conscious Lovers (1722) – sentimental comedy with protagonists drawn from the middle class. The heroine, Indiana, after many trials, is discovered to be the daughter of a rich merchant – so she can marry, and thus a happy resolution. Servants have some funny scenes.

The 18th century view held that people are good; their instincts let them retain goodness. People could retain virtue by appealing to virtuous human feelings.

Oliver Goldsmith (1731-1774) -- wrote "laughing comedies" – sentimental comedies intended to make people laugh ??

She Stoops to Conquer (1773) – mistaken identities, benign trickery, keep two lovers apart.

Richard Sheridan – *The Rivals* (1775 – Mrs. **Malaprop** was a character).

School for Scandal (1777)

Serious Drama in the 18th Century:

Joseph Addison (1672-1719) – *Cato* (1713) is considered a masterpiece.

Heroic Tragedy:

Written in "heroic verse," which used "couplets," verses of iambic pentameter that are rhymed; it was an attempt to reproduce the French "Alexandrine" verse, which used 12 syllables per line and has no equivalent in English.

Dealt with conflicts between love and honor or duty, contained violent action, were melodramatic (the heroes were flawless and the heroines chaste).

These eventually declined in public favor – they were easily ridiculed and parodied.

Became replaced with more Neoclassical plays, such as:

John Dryden (1631-1700) – *All for Love* – a reworking of Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, with neoclassical ideals.

Other 18th Century Forms:

Ballad Opera – sections of dialog alternating with lyrics set to popular tunes.

John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1728) satirized British politics, using Georg Frederick Handel's *Messiah* and other tunes,

A precursor to musical comedy.

Farce was also popular. Henry Fielding was popular in the 1730's.

Pantomimes – became popular by 1715 – combined dancing, mime (silent mimicry), done to music, with elaborate scenery and special effects – done as an afterpiece after plays. They combined *commedia*, farce, mythology.

The **Harlequin** came from these pantomimes – with his magic wand, the scenery would change. Primarily visual and aural entertainment. Because the scenery was commissioned, there was often innovative scenery.

Staging in the 18th Century Theatre

Generally Italianate, but English theatres used a **forestage** – the **apron**.

Two doors were in the proscenium opening on to the

apron.

Most of the acting was done on the forestage.

The apron had been as large as the stage space, but by 1750, it was back to being as small as in Italy and France.

Theatres increased in size: from seating 650 people during the Restoration to 1500 people by 1750.

The stage jutted out into the pit, there were still galleries and boxes (private galleries).

Grooves were installed in the rakes stages. Usually stock sets were used, lit by candle-light, costumes were elaborate and contemporary.

Most Revolutionary Change!!:

Women on stage!

Acting companies used women for all female parts except witched and old women.

It was common for "**lines of business**" to emerge: the kind of role one would play and seldom stray from.

Many companies used "**possession of parts**": an agreement that when an actor joins a company he "owns" a particular role.

This led to traditionalism and conservatism.

Vocal power and versatility seemed to be essential.

"Playing for points" was common: getting applause and doing an encore after particular speeches; as you can imagine, this wasn't very realistic.

Some acting companies shared salaries, playing "benefits" to earn up to a year's salary (the opposite of what a "benefit" is today).

The "repertory" system was common: rotating a large number of plays.

Romanticism

Resource: Wilson/Goldfarb, Chapter 13 (cont.)

[The Age of Independence](#)

[The Major Characteristics of Romanticism](#)

[Actors During the Romantic Period](#)

[Romantic Theatre Practice](#)

The Age of Independence

The Rise of the middle class was occurring – trading and manufacturing joined agriculture as major sources of wealth. Concentration of people in towns and cities increased.

Between 1750 and 1800, Romanticism took hold, and flourished between 1789 and 1843 in Europe.

The American Revolution (1770) and the French Revolution (1791) further asserted that men had freedom to act on their own consciences.

Often called the **Age of Independence**.

Going along with this was the view that Nature was something to honor. God had created nature, and we must know as much about it as possible. Nature is Truth.

Major Characteristics of Romanticism:

Abiding trust in nature's goodness:

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emotions and instinct more important than reason (reason is the product of education – not natural – corruptible)

glorification of "The Natural Man" – the "noble savage" – the primitive and untutored personality (American Indians, African Blacks, South Sea Islanders) – all worthy people to observe).

Primitivism – the simple and unsophisticated life was best.

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led to an interest in old civilizations
archeology develops as a science – Egyptian and Medieval became important areas of study

glorification of Greek society (not Roman)
Medieval studies – urged by nationalism – helped
nations develop identity -- which was an
important aspect of Romanticism ideas.

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2. **Equality of people** – social and economic classes disparaged—
3. An era of revolutions – since overthrow of governments often seemed to require elimination of social classes.
4. **A premium on detail** – detail is the pathway to truth.
5. Tended to look for the particular, specific, and unique, not the general or typical. All creation was unified, a one-ness; therefore, each detail was important.
6. **Ultimate truth** must always be sought, but we will probably never find it.
7. Artists become seen as misunderstood geniuses, both blessed and cursed by their art. Common folk could not understand. The struggle for truth, which was unattainable, led to a melancholy strain in Romanticism.
8. **Art served an exalted purpose** – the role of art was to lead people
9. to perceive the underlying unity of all existence and thus to eliminate conflict – "to make man whole again"
10. **Subjectivity** – both artist and critic were necessarily subjective and personal. There was

no objective set of external criteria for achieving art or critiquing art.

The focus was not so much on the art, but on the artist or the perceiver of the art.

Thus, there was a "democratization" of art – one's feeling are as good as anyone else's.

Romantic Plays, old and new, tended to appeal to emotions rather than intellect.

Special effects therefore focused on the supernatural and the mysterious – visual over verbal, sensational rather than intellectual..

Aristocrats tended to go to the opera and ballet, and more middle-class now went to the theatre.

In Germany: ***Sturm und drang*** – "Storm and Stress"

Romanticism's sub-category in Germany was ***sturm und drang***.

Johann Wolfgang von **Goethe** [Guurr'-tuh) (1749-1832) – his plays characterized by sprawling action, long and arduous. ***Faust*** parts I and II, 1801 and 1831) is now accepted more as a closet drama, a literary work, rather than one to be presented on stage.

Friedrich **Schiller** (1759-1805) – ***William Tell*** (1804) – a stirring celebration of democracy, individualism, and nationalism.

In France – Victor **Hugo**'s ***Hernani*** (1830) -- caused a riot. Should long-accepted Romantic ideals be allowed in

France's National Theatre? Remember, the French Academy had determined that all French plays would be neoclassical in form!!

It contained elevated language, noble characters, and the five-act form, and was thus Neoclassical;

However, it also had common people as some important characters, struggles with a ruler, violence and death, and humor -- and was thus NOT neoclassical.

Eventually, Romanticism won out, even in France, but not without a struggle.

Actors During the Romantic Period:

The Kembles – dominated English theatre till 1815:

John Phillip Kemble (1757-1823), and **Mrs. Sarah Siddons**, his sister (1755-1831) – their acting was idealized – with grace, dignity, a "classical style.:

Edmund Kean (1787-1833) – considered to have "perfected" the romantic style. Usually played villainous roles – sacrificed dignity for emotion.

William Charles Macready (1793-1873) – a compromise between the Kembles and Kean – careful rehearsals, detailed characterizations. He popularized historical accuracy in settings and costumes.

Tyrone Power (1785-1844) – did comic Irish portrayals. – a comic actor.

Henry Irving (1838-1905) – the first English actor to be

knighted; worked with **Ellen Terry** (1847-1928)
Synthesized trends in complexity and realism in staging
(concealing set changes, for instance). Was also a
manager, as were most famous actors at that time.

In France: **Sarah Bernhardt** (1845-1923) -- specialized
in "**breeches roles**" (women playing men)

Edwin Booth (1833-1893) – brother of John Wilkes
Booth – famous for interpretations of Shakespearean
roles.

Romantic Theatre Practice:

Audience size increased even more.

As seeing becomes more important than hearing
(remember, the sound was so important before, and
detailed, realistic sets were not the norm), the orchestra
seats (which had up till then been the cheap seats)
became more valuable.

The upper galleries – the "gods" – were the cheapest.

Audiences, especially those in the gods, were loud and
vocal.

Scenery included drops, flats, ground rows (cutaway flats
standing free on the stage floor).

Carefully and realistically painted.

Natural settings.

Candles or oil lamps – but by 1830, gaslight was used

(Chestnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia was the first to be lit by gas, in 1816). By the 1820's, Covent garden and Drury lane Theatres in London used gaslight.

Gaslight increased illumination, had better control of intensity, but still had wavering flames.

Many special effects:

Flying, trap doors, water pump systems, moving panoramas to give the illusion of travel, treadmills by the late 1800 (allowed for horses and chariot races, etc.), volcanic eruptions, fires, etc.

Assumptions: The stage was to present an illusion of reality, with many details, and was to be historically and geographically accurate.

Significance: While Romanticism was not at all realistic in its acting, drama, or direction, in set, costume, and lighting it attempted to be as realistic as possible.

Romanticism inadvertently paved the way for easier acceptance of Realism.

But first, we must go through a movement that helped make theatre more popular and accepted by the common person.

19th Century Melodrama

Resource: Wilson/Goldfarb, Chapter 13 (cont.)

[The Primary 19th Century Theatrical Form](#)

[Characteristics of Melodramas](#)

[Types of Melodramas](#)

[Melodramatic Writers](#)

[Other Popular 19th Century Theatrical Forms](#)

[Major Trends in 19th Century Theatre](#)

[19th Century Staging](#)

The Primary 19th Century Theatrical Form

Melodrama was the primary form of theatre during the 19th century, despite other influences, becoming the most popular by 1840. Melodrama is still with us today.

In the early 1800's, most were romantic, exotic, or supernatural.

In the 1820's, they became more familiar in settings and characters.

In the 1830's, became more elevated: "gentlemanly" melodrama.

Characteristics of Melodrama:

- Comes from "music drama" – music was used to increase emotions or to signify characters (signature music).
- A simplified moral universe; good and evil are embodied in stock characters.
- Episodic form: the villain poses a threat, the hero or heroine escapes, etc.—with a happy ending.
- Almost never five acts – usually 2-5 (five acts reserved for "serious" drama).
- Many special effects: fires, explosions, drownings, earthquakes.

Types of Melodrama:

- Animals used (along with the Romantic concept of nature):
- Equestrian dramas: horses, often on treadmills – forerunners of the modern Western.
- Canine melodramas: like *Lassie*
- Nautical melodramas: interest in the sea.
- Disaster melodramas.

Melodramatic Writers

Melodramatic writers who formalized melodrama--in France:

August Friederich **von Kotzebue** (1761-1819) – German
– over 200 plays: domestic melodramas:

Treated common people with dignity.

Often introduced controversial views without offending the audience, helping them to ask questions of life and society.

Often called the "father of sensationalism" – he mixed sentimental philosophy with startling theatrical effects.

René Charles Guilbert **de Pixérécourt** (1773-1844) –
over 100 plays.

Specialized in canine melodramas, disaster melodramas (floods, volcanoes, etc.).

Sometimes he "directed" his own plays.

Plays had easily identified character types and startling theatrical effects that were more important than the dialog.

In the U.S.:

Dion **Boucicault** (1822-1890) – the most successful English-language melodramas.

Corsican Brothers (1852), *The Octoroon* (1859).

Combined sentiment, wit, and local color with sensational and spectacular endings.

He was the first in the U.S. to demand and receive royalties for performances of his plays.

Instrumental in The International Copyright Agreement of 1886.

His plays contained volcanoes, earthquakes, burning buildings, etc.

The most successful and popular melodrama:

Uncle Tom's Cabin – the novel by Harriet Beecher Stowe (1852) had several dramatizations:

George L. Aiken's was the most popular--1853. Six acts, done without an afterpiece – established the single-play format. 325 performances in New York.

In the 1870's, at least 50 companies doing it in the U.S.

In 1899: 500 companies.

In 1927: 12 still doing it.

12 movie versions since 1900.

The most popular melodrama in the world until the First World War.

**Other Popular 19th Century
Theatrical Forms:**

Specialty acts: jugglers, tumblers, etc.

Pantomimes – elaborate tricks with scenery and costume.

Short musical revues ("vaudevilles" in France) – topical.

Comic operas – sentimental stories, original music.

Revivals of Shakespeare – usually Bowdlerized

("Bowdlerizing" a play -- refers to deleting or changing parts of a script, removing socially "unacceptable" or sexually "offensive" parts of the script)

From Thomas Bowdler, who published the "Family Shakespeare," with sexual innuendo and reference left out, and turning sad endings into happy ones.

The well-made play: "*piece bien-fait*."

Eugène **Scribe** (1791-1861) (pronounced "Schreeb"). – French – over 300 plays.

His plays gave the appearance of having tightly woven plots unified by causality, when in fact his plays had many lines of action unfolded by coincidence and chance.

But his influence on later writers was great—Ibsen in particular.

Major Trends in 19th Century Theatre

The typical producing organization was the resident company performing a large number of plays each season, till the end of the 19th century.

"Stock companies" – actors together played a wide

variety of roles in many plays, usually with fixed salaries.

Some variations: visiting stars, touring companies, long runs.

Exploitation of stars – the star system, after 1810, was popular. English actors would tour with American companies as stars, perform famous roles with resident companies. By 1850, the craze was universal. Many stars made round-the-world tours.

This was helped by the Romanticist's idea of individual genius, and better transportation (U.S. railroad system from coast to coast complete by 1870).

Stars received unfairly high salaries – one French actress made as much as France's Prime Minister (imagine ACTORS getting that much money!).

After 1850, the size of the repertory decreased as the length of the runs increased – took longer to recoup investment in the show (Wallock's Theatre in New York had 60 plays per season in the mid 1850's; only 5-10 by the 1880's).

The repertory system finally fell when the long-term contract was deemed unfeasible, as some actors were idle during some shows; actors began to be employed only for the length of the play.

So, by 1900, the repertory system had all but disappeared in favor of the "single play, long run policy."

The number of plays and amount of theatrical activity

increased, however.

With touring, came changes:

New York became the theatrical center –actors went there to get hired, local managers would book events. By the 1880's, the booking system was chaotic, since managers had to negotiate with several producers – there were many defaults on contracts.

The Theatrical Syndicate was formed in 1896:

In effect, it was a monopoly, dominating American theatrical production from 1896 to 1915, placing commercial over artistic motives.

Other trends

Theatres grew in size – this encouraged spectacle.

After mid-1800's, regular drama and specialty acts separated, and theatres specialized in one form of entertainment.

The **pit** was renamed the **orchestra** and became the best seats.

19th Century Staging:

Increased interest in historical accuracy. Expanded to interest in unusual or exotic; therefore, authentic folk dances and costumes and picturesque settings became to be on stage.

Charles Kemble's production of Shakespeare's **King**

John (London, 1823) was the first to claim complete historical accuracy. By 1850, it was important everywhere.

Realism of spectacle led to the elimination of the wing and drop sets, and the development of the "**box set**," with three walls and perhaps a ceiling to represent interiors. It was not used consistently until the end of the 19th century.

This "realism" also led to the leveling of the stage floor, stagehands moving scenery manually (though grooves or chariot-and-pole systems were still used), revolving stages, elevators, rolling platforms, groundrows (cutaway flats), closed front curtain, acting upstage of the proscenium line (rather than on the apron), and the **4th wall** convention was accepted more fully.

With the use of electric lighting, which illuminated much better, there was an increased need for greater scenic realism.

But the plays themselves were still romantic and melodramatic. The movement of **Realism** would shake things up a bit.

Realism

Resource: Wilson/Goldfarb, Chapter 14

Background

The Emergence of Realism

Beginnings of the Movement

Writers of Realism

Other Movements:

- Naturalism
- The Independent Theatre Movement

Background

Realism in the last half of the 19th-century began as an experiment to make theater more useful to society. The mainstream theatre from 1859 to 1900 was still bound up in melodramas, spectacle plays (disasters, etc.), comic operas, and vaudevilles.

But political events—including attempts to reform some political systems—led to some different ways of thinking. Revolutions in Europe in 1848 showed that there was a desire for political, social, and economic reform. The many governments were frightened into

promising change, but most didn't implement changes after the violence ended.

Technological advances were also encouraged by industry and trade, leading to an increased belief that science could solve human problems. But the working classes still had to fight for every increase in rights: unionization and strikes became the principal weapons workers would use after the 1860s—but success came only from costly work stoppages and violence. In other words there seems to be rejection of Romantic idealism; pragmatism reigned instead. The common man seemed to feel that he needed to be recognized, and people asserted themselves through action.

The Emergence of Realism

3 major developments helped lead to the emergence of realism:

- **August Comte (1798-1857)**, often considered to be the "father of Sociology," developed a theory known as Positivism. Among the Comte's ideas was an encouragement for understanding the cause and effect of nature through precise observation.
- **Charles Darwin (1809-1882)** published *The Origin of Species* in 1859, and created a worldwide stir which exists to this day. Darwin's essential series suggested that life developed gradually from common ancestry and that life favored "survival of the fittest." The implications of Darwin's Theories were threefold:

people were controlled by heredity and
environment
behaviors were beyond our control
humanity is a natural object, rather than being
above all else

Karl Marx (1818-1883) in the late 1840's espoused a political philosophy arguing against urbanization and in favor of a more equal distribution of wealth
These three stated ideas that helped open the door for a type of theatre that would be different from any that had come before.

Even **Richard Wagner** (pronounced "Rih-Kard' Vahg'-ner") (1813-1883), while rejecting contemporary trends toward realism, helps lead toward a moderate realistic theatre. Wagner wanted complete illusionism, but wanted the dramatists to be more than a recorder—he wanted to be of "myth-maker."

True drama, according to Wagner, should be "dipped in the magic founding of music," which allows greater control over performance than spoken drama. Wagner wanted complete control over every aspect of the production in order to get a "*gesamtkunstwerk*," or "master art work."

Because Wagner aimed for complete illusion, even though his operas were not all realistic, many of his production practices helped lead the way for realism. For instance the auditorium was darkened, the stage was framed with a double proscenium arch, there were no side boxes and no center aisle, and all seats were equally

good. Further, he forbade musicians to tune in the orchestra pit, allowed no applause or curtain calls, and strove for historical accuracy in scenery and costumes. Therefore, even though Wagner's operas are fantastic and mythical, his attempts at illusionism helped gain public acceptance for realism.

Beginnings of the Movement:

Realism came about partly as a response to these new social / artistic conditions. The "movement" began in France and by 1860 had some general precepts:

1. truth resides in material objects we perceived to all five senses; truth is verified through science
2. the scientific method—observation—would solve everything
3. human problems were the highest were home of science

Art—according to the realist view—had as its purpose to better mankind.

Drama was to involve the direct observation of human behavior; therefore, there was a thrust to use contemporary settings and time periods, and it was to deal with everyday life and problems as subjects.

As already mentioned, realism first showed itself in staging and costuming. Three-dimensional details had been added by 1800. By 1850, theater productions used historically accurate settings and costumes and details, partly as a result of romantic ideals. But it was harder to get realism accepted widely.

The Duke of Saxe-Meiningen helped unify productions; Richard Wagner wanted theatre to fuse the emotional and the intellectual, though his operas were highly mythical and fantastic.

Writers of Realism

In France, two Playwrights helped popularized the idea of realism but both clung to two inherent traditional morality and values:

Alexandre Dumas fils (the *fils* stands for "son," and designates the "illegitimate son of Alexandre Dumas") – (1824-1895)

His novel, *Camille*, was dramatized in 1849. About a "kept woman," the play was written in prose, and dealt with contemporary life. Eventually, he wrote "thesis plays," about contemporary social problems.

Emile Augier (1820-1889) also wrote plays about contemporary conditions.

In Norway: **Henrik Ibsen** (1828-1906) is considered to be the father of modern realistic drama. His plays attacked society's values and dealt with unconventional subjects within the form of the well-made play (causally related).

Ibsen perfected the well-made play formula; and by using a familiar formula made his plays, with a very shocking subject matter, acceptable. He discarded soliloquies, asides, etc. Exposition in the plays was motivated, there were causally related scenes, inner

psychological motivation was emphasized, the environment had an influence on characters' personalities, and all the things characters did and all of things the characters used revealed their socio-economic milieu. He became a model for later realistic writers.

Among the subjects addressed by Ibsen in his plays are: *euthanasia, the role of women, war and business, and syphilis*.

Some of Ibsen's Plays:

- *Ghosts*—1881—dealt with the concept of the sins of the father transferring to the son, resulting in syphilis.
- *Pillars of Society* – 1877 – dealt with war and business.
- *Hedda Gabbler* – 1890 – a powerful woman takes her life at the end of the play to get away from her boredom with society.
- *A Doll's House* – 1879 – Nora leaves her husband Torvald and her children at the end of the play; often considered "the slam heard around the world," Nora's action must have been very shocking to the Victorian audience.

Later in life, Ibsen turned to more symbolic and abstract dramas; but his "realism" affected others, and helped lead to realistic theatre, which has become, despite variations and rejections against it, the predominant form of theatre even today.

Other writers of realism:

George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) – in England

Uncommon for his witty humor

Made fun of societies notion using for the purpose of educating and changing. His plays tended to show the accepted attitude, then demolished that attitude while showing his own solutions.

- *Arms and the Man* (1894) – about love and war and honor.
- *Mrs. Warren's Profession* – prostitution.
- *Major Barbara* (1905) – a munitions manufacturer gives more to the world (jobs, etc.) while the Salvation Army only prolongs of the status quo.
- *Pygmalion* (1913) – shows the transforming of a flower girl into a society woman, and exposes the phoniness of society. The musical *My Fair Lady* was based on this play.

Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) – in Russia

Chekhov is known more for poetic expiration and symbolism, compelling psychological reality, people trapped in social situations, hope in hopeless situations. He claimed that he wrote comedies; others think they are sad and tragic. Characters in Chekhov's plays seem to have a fate that is a direct result of what they are. His plays have an illusion of plotlessness.

- *The Seagull* (1898).
- *Three Sisters* (1900) – we did the show here last year; about three sisters who want to move to Moscow but never do.
- *The Cherry Orchard* (1902)

Again, his realism has affected other Playwrights, as did his symbolic meanings in the texts of his plays and in the

titles of his plays.

Other Movements

Two other "movements" that developed concurrently with realism warrant our attention, *Naturalism* and the *Independent Theatre Movement*. Each of these had an influence on the developing realist movement.

Naturalism

While Ibsen was perfecting realism, France was demanding a new drama based on Darwinism:

1. all forms of life developed gradually from common ancestry,
2. evolution of species is explained by survival of the fittest

The implications of Darwin's ideas seemed to be that 1) heredity and environment control people; 2) no person is responsible, since forces are beyond control; 3) the must go to society; 4) progress is the same as improvement/evolution; it is inevitable and can be hastened by the application of the scientific method; 5) man is reduced to a natural object.

France had been defeated in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71, ending Napoleon III's empire, and making France a Republic. Attitudes shifted: the working man had few privileges, it appeared, and socialism gained support. By 1900, every major country in Europe had a Constitution (except Russia); there was therefore a strong interest in the plight of the working class. Science and

technology became major tools for dealing with contemporary problems.

Naturalism became a conscious movement in France in the 1870's; Emile Zola (1849-1902) was an admirer of Comte and an advocate of the scientific method. Literature, he felt, must become scientific or perish; it should illustrate the inevitable laws of heredity and environment or record case studies. To experiment with the same detachment as a scientist, the writer could become like a doctor (seeking the cause of disease to cure it, bringing the disease in the open to be examined), aiming to cure social ills.

Zola's first major statement came in a novel, *Thérèse Raquin*, which was dramatized in 1873; his preface states his views. He also wrote a few treatises about naturalism in the theatre and in the novel: he wanted art to detect "a scrap of an existence."

Even though *Thérèse Raquin* failed to adhere to most of the principles of naturalism, except in the setting (it was mostly a melodrama about murder and retribution), his followers were even more zealous. The most famous phrase we hear about naturalism is that it should be "a slice of life." We often tend to forget what a later French writer stated should be included with that phrase: "... put on the stage with art."

Naturalism, as it was interpreted, almost obliterated the distinction between life and art. As you can imagine, there is a serious lack of good naturalistic plays and embodying its principles, has it is virtually impossible to do. Henri Becque (1837-1899) most nearly captured the

essence of naturalism in two of his plays, *The Vultures* (1882) and *La Parisienne* (1885), both of which it dealt with sordid subjects, were pessimistic and cynical, had no obvious climaxes, had no sympathetic characters, and progressed slowly to the end. However, Becque refused to comply with suggested changes when the show was first produced in a conservative theatre, so naturalism was still not really accepted.

The Independent Theatre Movement

It would take [André Antoine](#) and the [Théâtre Libre](#) – the beginnings of the Independent Theatre Movement – to make naturalism and realism more acceptable.

Antoine (1858-1943) has become known as the father of naturalistic staging. He had little acting or theatre Experience—he was a clerk in a gas Co. and work in an Archer theatre—and when he wanted to produce a dramatization of a Zola novel, the amateur groups refused.

So he founded the Théâtre Libre (Free Theatre), first program was a success and by the end of 1887 he was famous, and worked in the theatre till 1914. The Théâtre Libre used a subscription basis—productions were open only two members—so his theatre was exempt from censorship. His theatre did many plays that had been refused licenses other places (for instance, *Ghosts* had been banned in much of Europe). While some of the plays tended to reverse morality—repelling many and helping to lead to the idea that naturalism was depraved—key paved the way for greater freedom in

established theatres. The Théâtre Libre also began producing at least one foreign work per year, introducing a world theatre to France.

Antoine's production techniques were innovative. He had seen the Meiningen troupe and was influenced to produce authenticity: real beef carcasses hanging on stage; the "box set" was used so that "the fourth wall" was adhered to constantly (he popularized the terms and the ideas—legend has it that he arranged rooms as they would be, and then later decided what wall to "remove"); he discouraged declamation in favor of more natural acting; replaced footlights with more natural lighting; emphasized ensemble acting; and adhered to his belief that each play had its own environment.

Antoine had many problems: as actors became well-known, they left the company; his high standards left him always in debt; and his theatre did only three performances of any production. By 1894, he left the Théâtre Libre.

Eventually, he opened the Théâtre Antoine in Paris in 1897, all fully professional company, and then later became the director of all fully-modernized state-subsidized theatre. His influence was undeniable in helping the acceptance of realism/naturalism and in the development of the independent theatre movement.

The Independent Theatre Movement developed in other countries as well. For instance, in Germany, many small theatres had opened up buying 1890 in Berlin, but were severely limited by censorship in their choice of plays. Most had been influenced by the Meiningen troupe—

some advocated realism, while others advocated severe naturalism. But these theatres lacked focus until the development of the Independent Theatre Movement.

The Freie Bühne (Free Stage) was founded in Berlin and 1889. Unlike Antoine's theatre, the Freie Bühne was democratically organized, with officers and a governing council. Otto Brahm (1856-1912), a drama critic, became president and guided the group. They gave performances on Sunday afternoons (so that professional actors could be in them), had different performers in each production, and exercised much less control over the theatrical productions. Its major contribution was performing censored plays. The theatre dissolved in 1894, and Brahm was named head of the Deutches theatre.

The Freie Volksbühne (People's Theatre) was organized by socialist workers in 1890 after a ban on such organizations had been lifted. Using the Freie Bühne as its model it produced plays on Sunday afternoons and sold its tickets cheap.

Shortly after that, another similar theatre was formed; both groups merged before World War I, and had a combined membership of 70,000. The Workers Theatre Movement flourished in Germany and Austria, and built a broad-based theatre audience.

Early Twentieth Century Theatre

Resource: Wilson/Goldfarb, Chapter 14

For most of 20th-century theatre, realism has been the mainstream. There have been some, however, who have turned their backs on realism. Realism originally began as an experiment to make theatre more useful to society—a reaction against melodrama, highly romanticized plays—and realism has become the dominant form of theatre in the 20th-century. There have been some experiments, though, which have allowed for more adventurous innovation in mainstream theatre.

In the 1920s, realism had become widespread in England, France, and the United States; in the U.S. theatre boomed— There were 200 to 275 new productions a year average. One of the important groups that enhanced the theatrical presence in the U.S. was the Theatre Guild, founded in 1919 with the intention of bringing important foreign works to improve theatre in the U.S. By the mid 1920s, playwrights the United States were also competing to have their works produced by the Theatre Guild.

Perhaps the most significant American playwright to have plays produced by the Theatre Guild was Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953), with five of his plays appearing at one time in New York during the 1924-25 season. O'Neill helped establish serious realistic Drama as the

main Broadway form. His *Long Day's Journey Into Night* and *Desire Under The Elms* are two of his great serious dramas.

Also in the 1920s, came something called "The New Stagecraft." The Theatrical Syndicate had pretty much controlled American theatre till around 1915. But developing around 1910 was a loose-knit group of what came to be known as the "little theatres." The Provincetown Players introduced the work of O'Neill, and the Washington Square Players, which later evolved into the Theatre Guild, encouraged the New Stagecraft. Two major American designers who advocated this New Stagecraft were Robert Edmund Jones (1887-1954) and Lee Simonson (1888-1967). Both were major forces in American theatrical design in the first half of 20th-century, moving away from realism and towards suggestion and mood--perhaps a realism of mood and feeling would describe its "realist" origins.

But during the 1920s, as well, a period known as the roaring twenties--the American musical theatre began to develop more fully, with the Ziegfeld Follies offering variety acts and introducing songwriters and performers to theatre audiences.

During the decade of the twenties, there were also the beginnings of the Workers' Theatre Movement. In 1926, a small group of authors and theater directors formed the Workers' Drama League, and the New Playwrights' Theatre formed the next year. Both hoped to present drama that had some social significance and would deal with some of the problems of the day. The workers' theatre movement would not develop fully in the United

States until after the stock market crash of October 1929.

Modern American Theatre

Resource: Wilson/Goldfarb, Chapter 14

Realism is in the mainstream. But some turn their backs on it. Change comes slowly. Experiments occur -- with the results that the experiment comes less radical (its effects going into the mainstream), and the mainstream theatre becomes more adventures (its traditional practices expanding to accommodate the innovations).

Realism had begun as experiment to make theatre more useful to society, and as a reaction against melodrama, those highly romanticized plays. So realism becomes the dominant form of theatre in the 20th century.

By the 1920s, realism was widespread in England, France, and the U.S. In the 1920s, U.S. theatre boomed. There were 200-275 new productions per year on average.

The Theatre Guild, developed in 1919 (discussed below), to bring important foreign works to improve United States theatre, lead to U.S. playwrights competing with the foreign plays.

One of the most important Playwrights to appear at this time was Eugene O'Neill (1888-1953), who during the 1924-25 season, had five plays appearing at one

time. O'Neill helped establish serious realistic drama as a major form on Broadway.

The American theatre between 1915 and 1940.

Not till 1915 did the U.S. become aware of technical innovations from around the world

the a number of nonprofessional groups arose -- -- the term "little theatres" came into being. Fees quotes little theatres" emulated the independent theatres of Europe.

Some of these "little theatres" included the following:

Toy Theatre, Boston, 1912.

Chicago Little Theatre, 1912.

Neighborhood Playhouse, New York, 1915.

Washington Square Players, New York, 1915.

Provincetown Players, Massachusetts, 1915.

Detroit, Arts and Crafts Theatre, 1916.

By 1917, there were more than 50 of these "little theatres."

Usually, these theatres used unpaid volunteers and used a subscription system for making money.

They produced several plays per year, using European experimental techniques, which were called "New Stagecraft" in the United States.

Between 1912 and 1920, they helped prepare audiences for you drama and methods.

After 1920, little theatres arose, just like community theatres, which had begun around 1905. By 1925, about 2000 community theatres or little theatres were registered with the Drama League of America.

Drama also began in colleges and universities. There had been no courses in Drama till 1903 -- although there had been performances.

In 1903, [George Pierce Baker](#) (1836-1935) began teaching play writing at Radcliffe, then opened it up to Harvard, then in 1913 included workshops for production. His classes studied Eugene O'Neill, S.N. Behrman, and Robert Edmund Jones

In 1945, Baker went to Yale, and established a drama department.

Meanwhile, Thomas Wood Stevens was teaching drama at Carnegie by 1914; by 1918, Frederick Koch was working with the Carolina Playmakers.

By 1940, Drama education in colleges became accepted.

The "New Stagecraft" (European techniques) was really made respectable by 1940. American playwriting was encouraged by such organizations as the Provincetown Players and Theatre Guild.

The Provincetown Players began first in Cape Cod then went to New York in 1916. By 1925, it had presented 93 plays by 47 authors -- all of the American Playwrights. By 1923, it broke into two branches -- one doing American plays, and one doing foreign and period plays.

The Washington's Square Players, disbanded in 1918 and in 1919 formed the Theatre Guild, which was a fully professional theatre. It vowed to present plays that were not commercially. It uses subscription system and soon became the most respected little theatre in America by 1928 the theatre Guild had reached six other American cities. It was governed by the Board of Directors; and began with a nucleus of actors

There became an eclectic approach to stage. Lee Simonson (1888-1967) was the principal designer, who used a "modified realism," which drew on European ideas.

In 1918, Arthur Hopkins(1878-1950) became a producer. He was adventurous and experimental, working with Robert Edmund Jones. for instance in 1921, the theatre performed *Macbeth*, which used expressionist tilted arches.

This production demonstrated the commercial viability of "New Stagecraft." By 1930 this was the primary approach.

It was primarily a visual approach -- a "simplified realism."

Lee Simonson, Robert Edmund Jones, and Norman Bel

Geddes (1893-1958)-- who was a visionary, like Appia, directed the *Divine Comedy* that steps, platforms, interesting lighting -- one production had platforms that were 50 feet high.

Many other directors and designers were involved in this "movement," who, while different, all had in common a respect for simplicity to capture the spirit of the text.

In the 1930s, developments continued. The Group Theatre, formed in 1931, was outwardly anti-commercial. It wanted to do plays that had social relevance, and it popularized the "method" style of acting based on the Stanislavsky system. Its predominant visual style was selective (or simplified) realism. Perhaps the most famous playwright to come from the Group Theatre was Clifford Odets (1906-63), whose *Waiting For Lefty* (1935) was the best example of 1930s "agitprop" theatre.

Much (but certainly not all) of the theatre of the 1930s focused on political/social concerns.