

Introduction to Theater History



“The story of theatre is the story of humankind, because in its essential form theatre belongs to no one race, age, or culture.” - Joy H. Reilly

The Dawn of Theatre

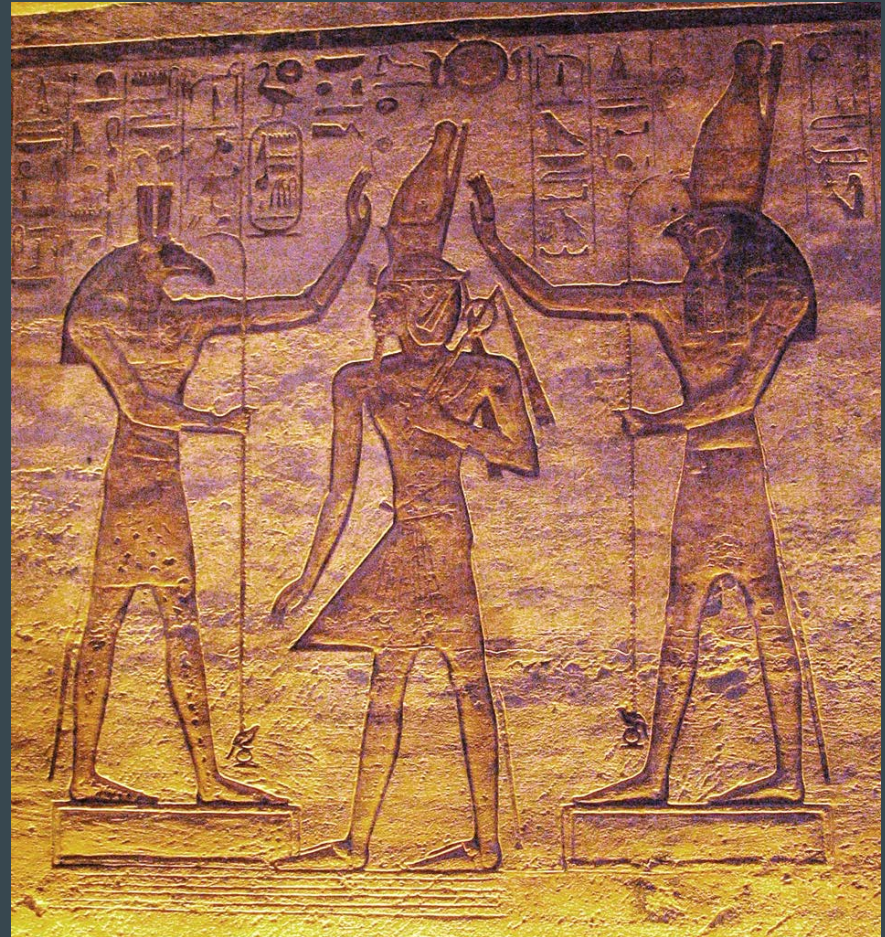
DRAMA: Greek origin, “to do” or “to act”

Born out of the dance ceremonies of primitive people where desire to imitate evolved into pantomimes of various traditions and rites of passage

First people who were known to have their ritualistic rites in the form of a play were the Egyptians, as early as 3000 BC

Plays were often written for important events such as a coronation of a new pharaoh

Hebrew Theater: *The Song of Solomon* and *Book of Job*



Greek Theatre

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550-220 BC Golden Age



National
Theatre

Bacchae, 2004, director Peter Hall
photo: Michael Harlan

Greek Theater

Beginnings in religious rites to pay homage to **Dionysus**, the God of Wine and Fertility. Greeks were polytheistic

Dithyrambs: Hymns that were sung and danced to honor Dionysus. As they gained in popularity, choral groups were organized to perform them

City Dionysia: 5-6 day festival, held in March in Athens. The final three days were spent featuring a trilogy of tragedies from different playwrights. At the end of the festival, the winner would be announced

Greek Plays in Performance

43 intact plays survive today

Tragedy: A drama in which a protagonist struggles against some force, usually making a sacrifice before going down in defeat (usually death). Acts of violence did not occur onstage, but off and described onstage. Ex: *Antigone*

Comedy: A play that ends happily and elicits laughter through humorous treatment of an aspect of life. Ex: *The Wasps*

Satire: A comedy that ridicules the foolish behavior of certain people. Ex: *The Frogs*

“Oh would some god, with sudden stroke, Convert me to a cloud of smoke!

Like politicians’ words I’d rise, In gaseous vapour to the skies.”

(50, Act One, Scene One, *The Wasps* by Aristophanes)

Theater Structure

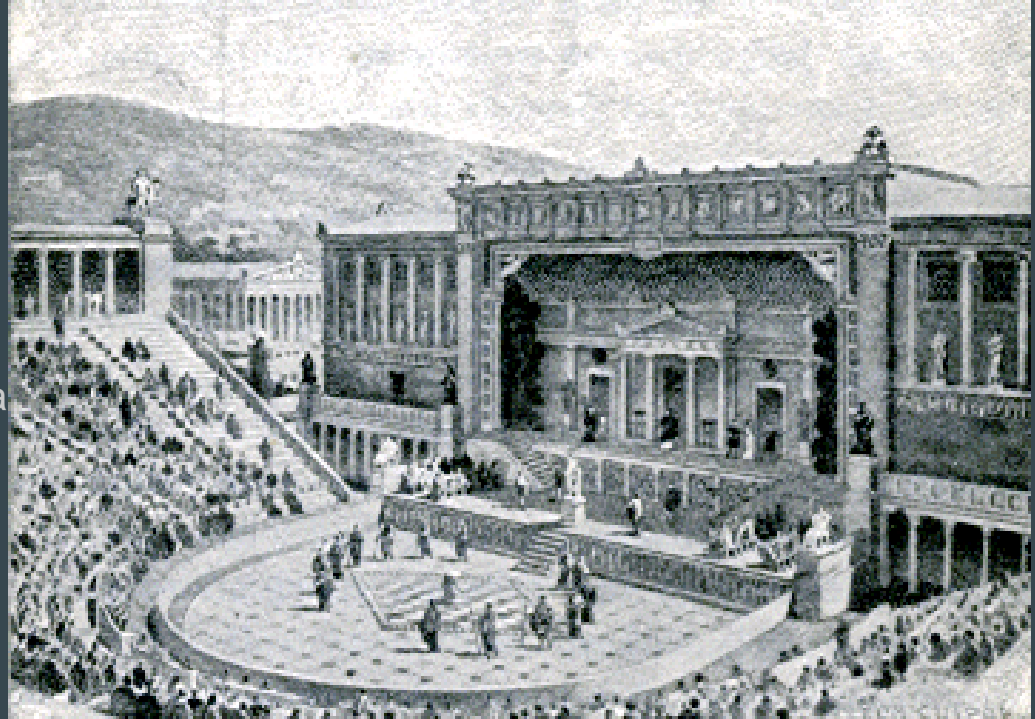
Always outdoors and built into a hill

Provided seating for up to 20,000

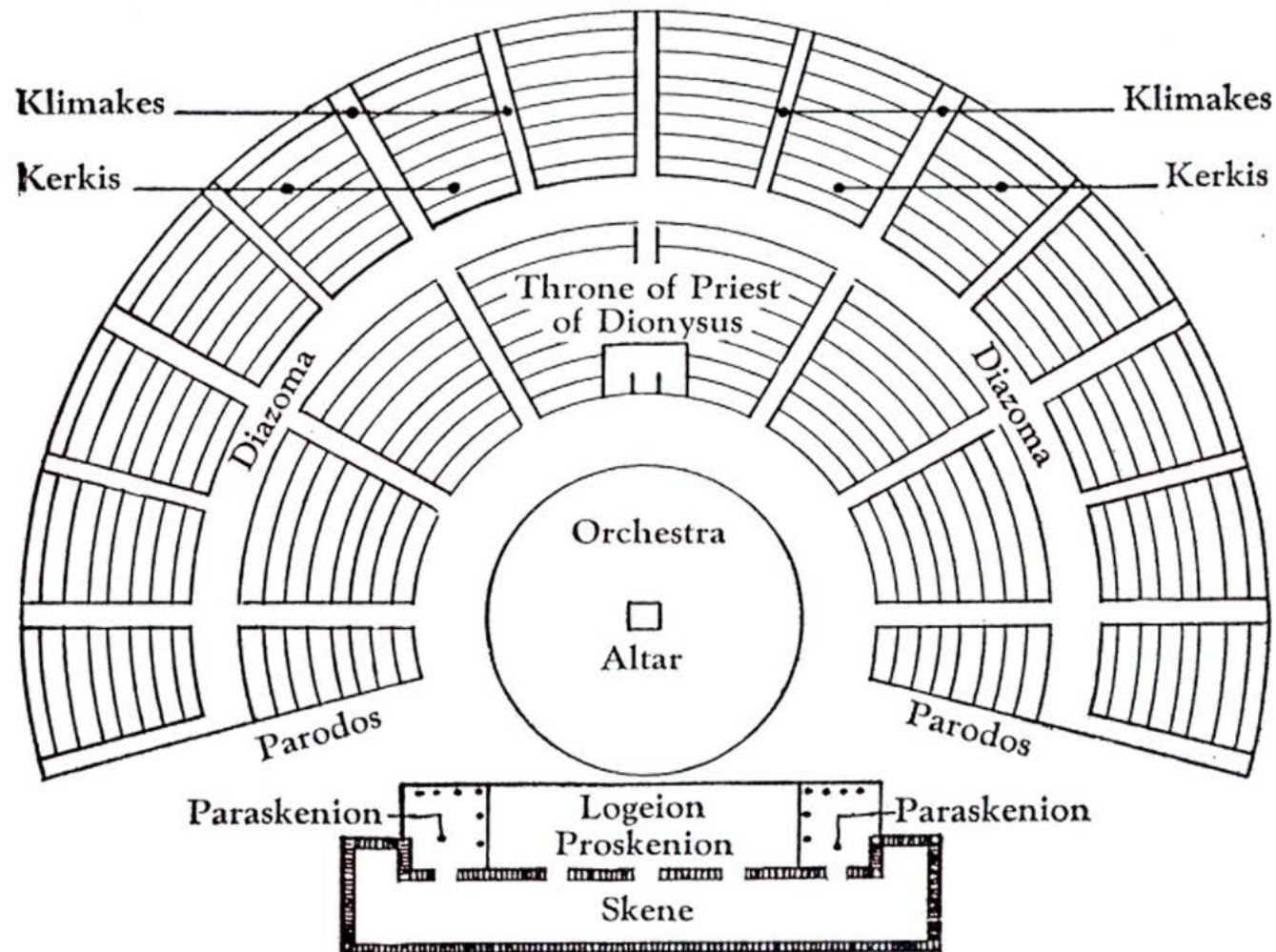
Orchestra: circular acting area on the ground at the foot of the hill

Skene: small building behind the orchestra for actors to change. Later developed into the word *scene*

Proskenion: platform in front of the skene for the actors to perform. Later developed into the term *proscenium*



THEATRON OR KOILON



Greek Theater

Hypokrites: first word for actor, means “answerer”, developed by the playwright Thespis, where “thespian” comes from

Actors used broad gestures and a declamatory vocal style since their audience was so far away

Wore masks to not only denote character and emotion but to also project the actor's voice

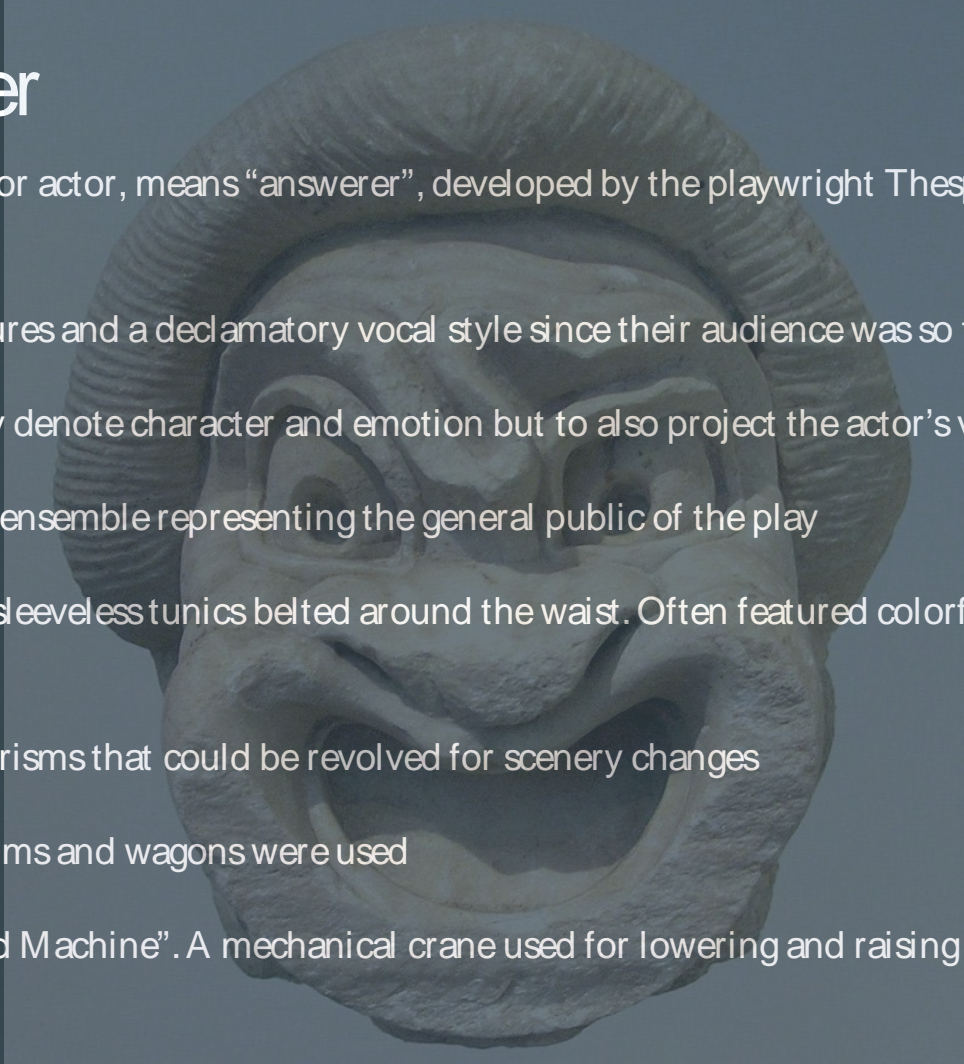
Chorus of 12-50 actors, ensemble representing the general public of the play

Costumes consisted of sleeveless tunics belted around the waist. Often featured colorful patterns and embroidered designs

Periaktoi: Triangular prisms that could be revolved for scenery changes

Small props such as drums and wagons were used

Deus Ex Machina: “God Machine”. A mechanical crane used for lowering and raising the Gods



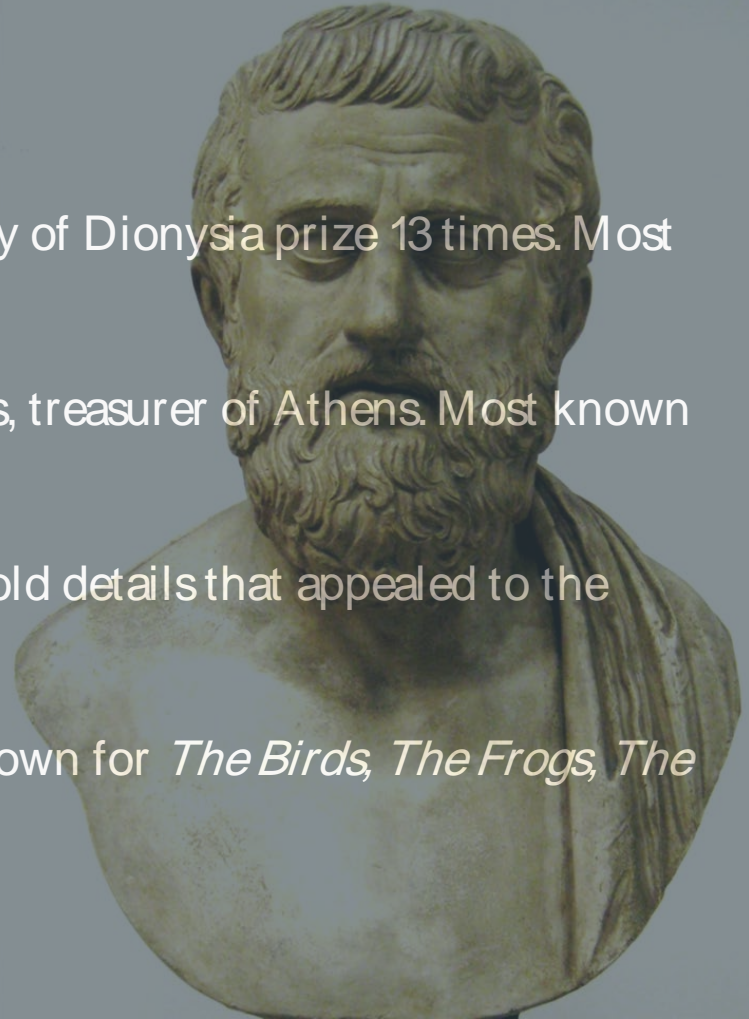
Greek Playwrights

Aeschylus: Father of Greek Tragedy, won the City of Dionysia prize 13 times. Most notable play is the *Oresteia* trilogy

Sophocles: Known also for interest in civic affairs, treasurer of Athens. Most known for *Electra*, *Oedipus Rex*, *Antigone*

Euripides: First to humanize drama with household details that appealed to the emotions. Most known for *Medea*, *Alcestis*

Aristophanes: considered finest comic writer. Known for *The Birds*, *The Frogs*, *The Clouds*





Japanese Theatre



Japanese Theatre - Noh Plays

Noh: Japanese dramatic tragedy in classical style performed with poetry, dance, and music. Often written in a formal language for aristocrats. Noh plays are short, serious, philosophical studies

Movements are slow and a series of postures

As each actor enters, they bow, state their name, where they come from, and what they will do.

Actors begin training at seven years old. 35 is considered the actor's prime

Japanese Theatre - Noh Plays

Stages built to specific measurements with the audience on three sides, and a pointed roof.

The floor features large empty jars underneath to provide a unique sound when actors thump their feet

Scenery consisted of a pine tree tapestry hung on the back wall



Noh Plays

Only essential props were used, many were a suggestion used for many things. Ex: a fan that was used as a dagger, a tray, or a letter or to represent the sun rising or a character's journey

Costumes consisted of ornate silks, and the cut was what differentiated social class

15 masks were standard in Noh plays, each displaying a different emotion

Kyogen: a short comedy presented before or after a Noh drama to offset its serious tone

Bunraku: Ancient Puppetry Form

Considered the most highly evolved form of puppetry

Puppets were about half the size of humans, and had many movable parts: eyes, eyebrows, mouths, arms, hands

Three puppeteers were needed to operate each main character puppet

The narrator would tell the story in view of the audience



A Bunraku puppet is shown on a stage, wearing a red and white horizontally striped kimono. The puppet has a white face and is positioned in the center of the frame. The background is dark, with a wooden structure visible on the left. The text "THE NATION" is in the bottom left, and "Bunraku" is in the bottom right.

THE NATION

Bunraku

Kabuki Theater

Mean's "Tilting" or "Askew". Refers to a style of behavior. What we would now call modern, hip, punk, etc.

Originally featured all women. In the course of 50 years, due to government influence, now is all adult males.

Now name is altered for new meaning:

Ka: Song

Bu: Dance

Ki: Skill

Kabuki Theatre

A melodramatic, sensational Japanese drama with song and dance, intended for the common man

More variety of subject matter including historical tragedies, love triangles, demons, murder, and torture

Actors enter to the stage through a flowerway: a ramp that begins at the back of the auditorium and goes up through to the stage

Since 1793 most Kabuki theatres utilize a revolving stage, and colorful extravagant scenery



Dinner Theater

- Performances during the day and night
- Audience eats during, and can purchase food in the lobby



Kabuki Theatre

No masks, like Noh, but actors do use stylized makeup and wigs to denote their character's station, age, and personality

Elaborate and colorful silk costumes

Actors are traditionally men, but women are allowed to act in Kabuki

The profession of acting has been passed on in Japan through family lines. It is a highly regarded profession, and Fathers will pass on their skills and roles to their favored sons.



Chinese Theater

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2000 BC

Chinese Theater

Interpretive Dance: Dance that tells a story. Became more dramatic in form as ancestor worship and military celebrations were staged. However, these were always under religious contexts

Emperor Ming Huang: developed a school for actors. Primarily performed three formal themes: ancestor worship, military glory, and faithfulness to a husband. Written in a classical style for the well-educated

Became patron saint of Chinese Theater

Shifted to more action and song/dance when Mongols invaded.

Peking Opera

Term coined by Westerners due to the great amount of chanting, singing and musical accompaniment. It is not really opera at all! High tonal quality.

Performed in the Beijing dialect, “theatre of the capital”

Two categories: martial (featuring stunts and acrobatics) and civil (featuring singing)

All characters were played by men

Sheng - male

Dan - young female

Jing - painted face, male

Chou - clown, male and female

Jing: Brightly colored
facial makeup
representing
character's style and
personality

Very little scenery.
Audience is free to
eat, talk, and move
about during the
show



Performance

Red = faithfulness

Blue = cruelty

White = evil

Movements and poses are highly symbolic

Every gesture means something specific

Props also have symbolic meaning





African Drama



African Traditional Drama

Roots in sub-Saharan Africa where ritual and storytelling interweave

Over 800 languages spoken, each with its own traditions from stilt walking, masks and beaded headdresses, to makeup and acrobatics

Dogon of Central Mali = Known for their funerary *dan* rituals intended to ensure spirits of the deceased a successful passage to their ancestors' realm



Mmonwu Theater

Mmonwu: “masquerade” of the Igbo people of Nigeria. A musical dance-drama with all male performers. Combines the existence of two worlds through trance performance

Uwa: perceptible matter

Mmuo: imperceptible spirit

The mmuo incarnates the uwa of the actor's mask

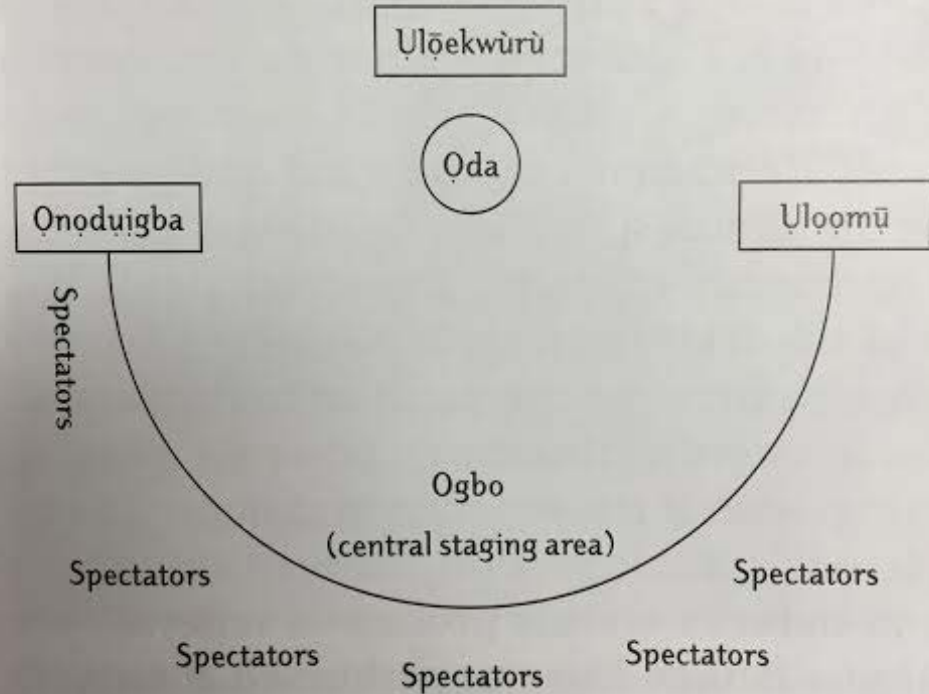
Language is often poetic chanting

Mmonwu Theater

Ogbo: central acting area

Oda: platform of authority
where a single speaker can
rise above to deliver a
poetic chant

Spectators surround on three
sides, and may talk to the
performers during the
drama



This drawing, by Nnabuenyi Ugonna, is the basic layout of the *obom mmonwu*, the outdoor staging area for the Nigerian *mmonwu* drama of the Igbo people.



Renaissance Theatre

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Italy and Spain

“Rebirth”

New evolution in thinking, new awareness of
the individual's potential, mind expansion

Italy - Commedia dell'Arte 16th century

Niccolo Machiavelli: author who developed *commedia erudita* "learned comedy", which followed models developed from the ancient conventional plots and stock characters. Pre-cursor to *commedia dell'arte*

Commedia Dell'Arte: A form of largely improvised, masked street theatre employing principal characters that appear throughout the stories

No written scripts remain due to improvisation

Built around specific scenarios, stock characters, and set comedic business

Known for its magnificent energy, characters, masks and costumes

A company, usually consisting of 7 men and 3 women, were clever and inventive to keep the plot moving. Female roles were played by women

The Commedia Characters

The lovers: Innamorato and Innamorata. Never play in mask. Typically have the most stylish outfits



Capitano: foolishly bragging soldier, “wannabe”, actually afraid of everything



The Commedia Characters

Pantalone: wealthy, retired Venetian merchant who is stingy with his money

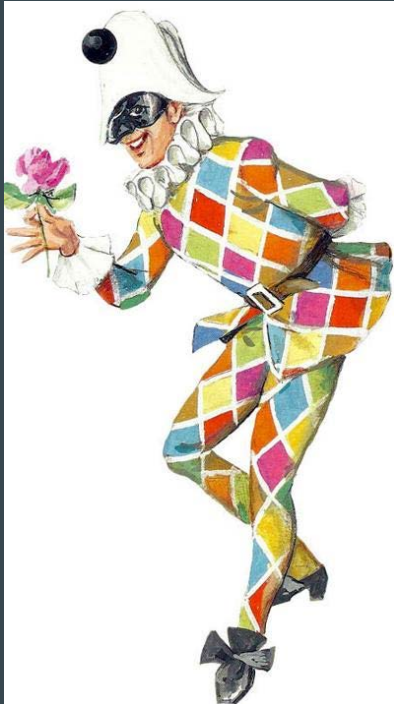


Dottore: absurdly pompous, self professed doctor



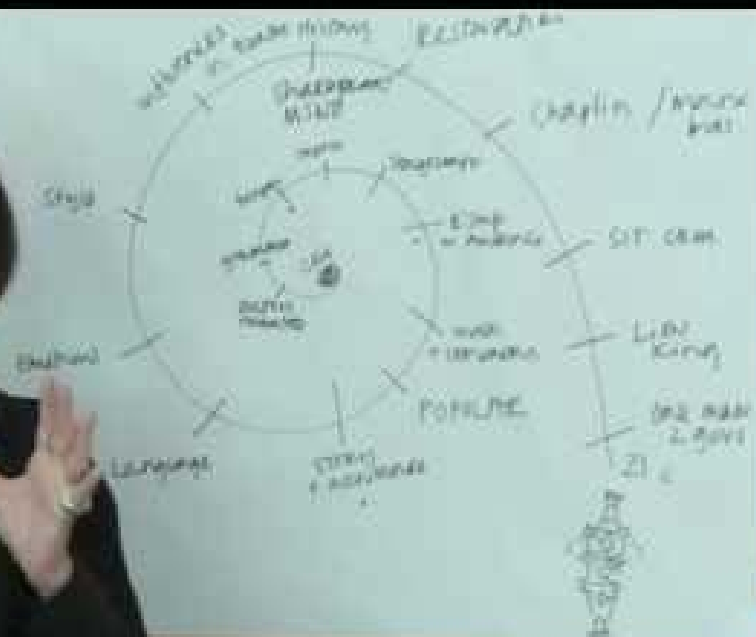
The Commedia Characters

Arlecchino (Harlequin): the mischievous, witty servant of Pantalone



Brighella: greedy to a fault, always ready to double-cross someone. Typically a middle class business owner





Commedia Dell'Arte

Character's performed stock bits of clownish business, called lazzi, incorporating physical humor and well-rehearsed jokes. Comedy was very physical.

The traditional plot is that the Innamorati are in love, but are stopped by some type of elder (Pantalone or Dottore), causing the Innamorati to turn to the servants for help. The story will typically have a happy ending with marriage and forgiveness of any wrongdoings

Impact is still seen in theater today throughout TV shows, comedies, etc.

Spain's Golden Age

Roots in liturgy (public religious worship)

Lope de Vega: playwright, followed Shakespeare. Wrote 1,500 plays centered around personal honor

New Art of Writing Plays (1609): first study of actual playwriting.

Centered on drama combining characters from social classes, mixing serious with comedy, and entertainment

Miguel de Cervantes: most famous for his novel *Don Quixote*, now played in stage adaptations

Women performed onstage throughout most of the century

Corrales de Comedia: balconied wooden theaters



The French Theatre



The Royal Era

French Theater

King Louis XIV would present plays in museums, palaces and chateaus.

Developed from a game called *jeu de paume* or “palm game”, a modern- day tennis

Courts were rectangular in structure with spectators on both sides. Lent themselves well to a theatrical setting

As the game became more popular, so did theater!



French Theater

Varied audience that attended Parisian public theaters. Mix of old nobility and young money

Place to display fashion, ideas and opinions

Doors would open 2 hours prior to performance, and theater would fill with activity: eating, drinking, brawls, peddling, etc

Pay for better seats to display high fashion and get closer to the King

Moliere

Most produced French playwright of all time

Actor, producer, critic and comic playwright = complete “man of the theater”

Not only the leader of his own troupe, but produced dozens of other plays as well

Known primarily for his comic plays: *Tartuffe*, *The Misanthrope*, *The Miser*

Actors would follow Commedia structure, and often improvise on the spot on stage

Strong relationship with King Louis XIV who provided him with this theatre and his title. He also performed in two of his plays!

