

HISTORY OF THEATRE – GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES

CP 10.1 - Examine the history of theatre from a variety of traditions

Lesson Objectives

By the end of this lesson students will be expected to:

1. Have developed a basic understanding of the roots of Western theatre practices
2. Have developed a basic understanding of diverse dramatic traditions from around the world and how they contributed to the history and practice of theatre.
3. Have conducted inquiry research into a branch of theatre of interest to them and to have shared that knowledge with their peers.
4. Have presented a selected piece representing that theatre tradition (optional)

Background

Theatre has a long history both Western civilization and around the world.

Most cultures have developed their own unique types of theatre or performing art.

The root of Western theatre is found in classical Greece – particularly in the city-state of Athens.



Theatre in Ancient Greece

- Theatrical performances in Ancient Greece was not limited to the stage. These performances involved not only plays but also religious rituals, political oratory, weddings, funerals, legal oratory, and athletic events.
- Participation in these civic festivals and events was an important part of life for Athenian citizens. In fact, it was expected.
- Not every person in Ancient Athens was a citizen – slaves, women, children, and foreigners were not considered to be citizens. This meant that early Athenian theatre was an “elite affair” as only 10 – 20% of the populace could participate.



Types of Greek Theatre

- The theatre of Ancient Greece consisted of only a few types of plays:
 - A. Tragedy
 - B. Comedy
 - C. Satyr Plays

A “Satyr Play” was a type of play featuring a chorus of Satyrs. These plays were based on Greek myth and were quite bawdy featuring sexual jokes and drunken antics. This is par for the course as the satyrs were the followers of the God Dionysus.

These developed around 500 B.C. and were generally shorter plays. They were used as a type of “comic relief” in Greek festivals and served to break up the sadness of tragic plays.

The only satyr play to survive in its entirety is Euripides “*Cylops*”



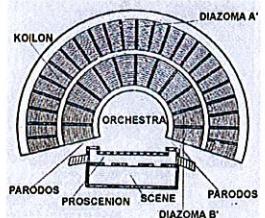
Architecture of Ancient Greek Theatre

- The theatre design of Ancient Greece also influenced the theatre design in the modern period. What the Greeks were able to achieve in terms of acoustics and sightlines remains remarkable to this day.
- Some of the ancient theatres have been partially restored and are in use currently.

(See list - <https://www.tripsavvy.com/ancient-greek-theaters-where-you-can-see-a-show-4157865>)

Design

- Most Greek theatres were built into the slope of a hill (pre-existing or manmade). Seating was elevated with a good viewing place to the action below. The Greeks called this a "Theatron" which means "seeing place".
- At the bottom of the hill there was a flattened circular performance space known as the "Orchestra" or "dancing place". The chorus often performed here as did musicians, actors were mainly on the stage above.
- Behind the orchestra there was a backdrop or wall known as a "Skene" - this is the origin of the word "scene".
- These theatres were often very large and were built to seat many thousands of people. The Theatre of Dionysus in Athens could seat 17,000 people. These were designed with acoustics in mind so that the actor's voices could be heard by all those in attendance.



The Odeon of Herodes Atticus – Athens

Showing seating, orchestra, skene, and stage

Seating for 5,000 people

**Native American Theatre**

- The culture of many indigenous peoples is rich with various components of theatre. These involve various rituals, ceremonies, and storytelling activities. These activities often involved dramatic elements that would be familiar to a European audience such as use of masks, singing, dancing, et cetera...
- Though these activities were not designed to be theatre per se it is important to recognize them as a vital part of Canada's cultural diversity.
- Most of the scholarship on Indigenous North American theatre is recent, this is probably due to Eurocentric beliefs which predominated academia until recent years.
- Likewise, most of the indigenous theatre productions are recent with the bulk of the development coming from the post civil rights period. It is inspiring to see Indigenous people tell their own stories through drama.

Important events in Indigenous Theatre

- Late 1890s - Emily Pauline Johnson (a Mohawk woman) provided dramatic readings of her poetry in Toronto.
- 1949 - Great Pine Forest Theatre on the Six Nations reserve
- 1950 - Tzinquaw: The Thunderbird and the Killer Whale - performed in Duncan B.C. with an entirely First Nations cast.
- 1992 - Full Circle: First Nations Performing Theatre in British Columbia
- 1999 - Saskatchewan Native Theatre company is founded. Later this was renamed the "Gordon Tootoosis Nikaniwin Theatre". They are in Saskatoon and create culturally grounded theatre and provide a training program for indigenous youth. They see Indigenous theatre as a way for young people to reconnect with their culture, language, and history.
- Modern Indigenous theatre focusses on preserving and celebrating culture, challenging stereotypes, and promoting heritage.

Assignment – Inquiry Project and Presentation on a selected type of theatre

Outcome Evaluated: Examine the history of theatre from a variety of traditions (CP 10.1)

Student Task: Select a type of theatre from the list provided or choose your own (with your teacher's permission). Conduct research into this type of theatre with the goal of discovering: What makes this type of theatre unique? How has it contributed to the broader tapestry of the theatre as we know it?

Present this information to the class in a presentation of ten slides which answer the above question and detail the following:

- Provide an overview of the art form*
- What is the history of this type of theatre? When and where did it develop?*
- What are some examples of this type of theatre – pictures and videos will help strengthen your answer.*
- Present a short segment of this type of theatre – may be a modern adaptation or something "inspired by" the type in question. (optional – up to teacher's discretion)*

Types of Theatre Traditions

- Ancient Greek – Approx. 6th century B.C.
- Roman Theatre – Approx. 3rd century B.C.
- Indian Classical Drama – Approx. 200 B.C.
- Chinese Drama
- Tang Dynasty – Approx. 618 – 907 A.D.
 - Shadow Puppetry
 - Xiansheng - A form of "stand up comedy" dating from the Qing Dynasty (Mid 1800s)
- Medieval Theatre
 - Passion Plays
 - Mystery Plays
 - Morality Plays

F. Renaissance Theatre/Elizabethan Theatre
 - Shakespeare and contemporaries

G. Victorian Theatre
 - Extravaganza
 - Melodrama
 - Musical Theatre - Gilbert and Sullivan and contemporaries

H. 20th Century and Modern theatre

I. Japanese Theatre
 - Noh
 - Kabuki
 - Bunraku - puppets

J. First Nations Theatre

Optional – Expansion or adaptation

https://www.ancient.eu/Greek_Theatre/

1. What are the origins of the Greek tragedy? What are the connections to religious ritual?
2. Why was the use of masks and costumes so important to Greek theatre?
3. What role did competition play in Greek theatre? Can you connect this to modern day drama festivals? How are they similar?
4. Who were three of the most celebrated Greek playwrights – why were they important? What did they do?
5. How did Greek comedy differ from Greek tragedy?