Chapter

7

Theatre Traditions: East and West

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WHEN YOU WITNESS AN ACTOR playing a part—Hamlet, let's say—you are hearing words that have rung out thousands of times before, all over the world, in a nearly infinite variety of settings. And yet you are seeing *this* actor on *this* stage at *this* moment: the play exists completely in the present even as it recalls centuries of history. It is both ephemeral and permanent, fleeting and memorable. Old plays aren't entirely old, and new plays aren't entirely new—they inevitably get compared to earlier works. Likewise, contemporary actors—like contemporary athletes—also are 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. *The Lot Drawers,* a fourth-century B.C. Greek comedy by Diphilos concerning an old man foolishly in love with a young girl, was revised a century later by the Roman Plautus as *Casina*—and a thousand years later Plautus's version was revised by the Italian playwright, Niccolò Machiavelli, as *Clizia.* Nor did it end there: scenes and gags from *Clizia* later appeared in the plays of Shakespeare and Molière, and continue to be seen in American comedies on stage, film, and television right up to the present day.

Indeed, many of the world's greatest plays—in both the East and 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 tragedies of the seventeenth century, as well as comedies of the twentieth century, were often based on Greek and Roman models

more than two thousand years old. Many of William Shakespeare's best-known plays—*King Lear, Hamlet, Measure for Measure*, and *The Taming of the Shrew*, for example—were revisions of earlier English plays. 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 Rudnick'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*, Neil Simon's *The Goodbye Girl* and *Laughter on the 23rd Floor*, Punchdrunk's 2011 *Sleep No More*, and Rolin Jones's and Billy Joe Armstrong's *These Paper Bullets*, all of which parody or creatively extend portions of Shakespeare's plays. Shakespeare is the most prominent example, but the theatre as a whole continually resurrects its past traditions, just as it always seeks to extend and surpass them.

Therefore it is helpful, when looking at the theatre of today, to look to the traditions of the theatre in the past, from the West (Europe and the Americas) and the East (Asia and the Indian 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 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 while drama as we know it might be that old, African theatre more generally is far older. There are indications of performances in the activities of hundreds of ancient African tribal groups dating as far back as 6000 B.C. And although 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 performed in rural Africa today. From such present-day performances,

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 each person's stomach to heal both physical and psychological illnesses. © Art Wolfe/Iconica/Getty Images

we can see the two foundations of the theatre as it has been known and enjoyed throughout the course of human civilization: *ritual* and *storytelling*. Both have existed since ancient times, and both remain apparent—though in different forms—wherever theatre is performed today.

RITUAL

Ritual is the theatre's distant cousin—or, more accurately, its great-great-great-grandparent. A *ritual* is a collective ceremony, performed by members of a society, normally for religious or cultural reasons. One popular definition of performance is "twice-behaved behavior": something elevated beyond the everyday through repetition. The same can be said for ritual, which surely counts as a kind of performance. 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 observe important life events, such as the changing of the seasons, and to provide public witness to life passages such as birth, death, marriage, and coming of age. Contemporary Christian baptism and Jewish bar mitzvah (coming-of-age) rituals, along with funeral rites in nearly all cultures, are descendants of these ancient tribal ceremonies. Other rituals reenact defining moments of a culture's religious history—such as the birth, death, or resurrection of divine beings—thus allowing adherents to experience directly the passion of their culture's sacred heritage. Regardless of purpose, rituals all imbue bodily movements and objects with symbolic power. In a ritual, everything becomes heightened with meaning.

Over time, early tribal rituals began incorporating elements we would now consider essential to the theatrical event, such as staging, costuming, masks, makeup, music,

Mudmen of the South Pacific, isolated from the rest of the world until the twentieth century, still cover their bodies in mud and wear homemade 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. © *www.Frank-travel.com*

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. © *Bruno Morandi/Getty Images*

dance, formalized speech, chanting, singing, and specific physical props, such as staffs, spears, and skulls, which could contain totemic or spiritual properties. Though performed solely for the collective worship of the participants themselves, such theatricalized rituals also played a role in educating observers, including the children of the tribe and tribal visitors.

Not all rituals are based in religion. Secular rituals exist in Western society today that give a spiritual or larger-than-life dimension to more culturally significant events. Elements of secular rituals include 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 Pledge of Allegiance in American classrooms, and even the lowering of the ball in New York's Times Square on New Year's Eve. The 2013 play *Arguendo* clearly demonstrated the connection between secular ritual and the theatre: instead of a script, the company, Elevator Repair Service, used the transcript from a landmark Supreme Court case. The play was gripping and critically successful—a testament to how dramatic our civic rituals can be.

Perhaps the wedding ceremony is the most common collective ritual in Western culture, with its costumes (tuxedo or T-shirt), elevated language (psalms or sonnets), symbolic gift exchanges (ring or rings), and traditional music (Brahms or Beatles). And the slow march down the aisle retains the ancient symbolism of father figures giving their child away to their new partner, even though such symbolism has lost much (if not all) of its original meaning over the years.

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.

STORYTELLING

The art of storytelling emerged soon after the arrival of ritual activity. Quickly, the two forms began intermingling. Since humans developed coherent speech, they have sought to recount their own (and others') daily adventures, including stories of the hunt and histories of the tribe. Indeed, such storytelling was essential to the development of speech itself. Why invent words like *glorious* and *brave* and *beautiful* if not to augment a story being told?

Storytelling is more personal than collective ritual performance because it generally relies on a single voice—and therefore a single point of view. While rituals may attract an audience, storytelling requires one: every tale must, by definition, have hearer-spectators who either don't know the story being told or are eager to hear it again. Storytelling thus generates elements of *character,* both in its use of impersonation—the creation of voices, gestures, and facial expressions that reflect the personalities of the individuals portrayed—and its desire to convey different emotions. It also seeks to entertain, and thus provides a *structured narrative,* rather than a random series of observations, which in turn helps encourage audience engagement through suspense, graphic details, and a calculated momentum of escalating events. These elements of structured action, in drama, combine to become the *plot.* Storytelling is thus a stripped-down form of drama: all that is required is a teller, a tale, and a witness.

If ritual makes an event larger than life, storytelling makes it personal and affecting. The ritual of marriage gives wedlock a halo of dignity, incorporating its participants into larger cultural and historical traditions. But marrying couples also tell the audience their own story through choosing the event's dress, language, music, setting, and staging. Weddings have personal touches to balance the familiarity of ritual with the uniqueness of the story being told. The resulting event thus combines collective formality with personal narrative, conveying the newlyweds as part of a tradition and unique individuals.

SHAMANISM, TRANCE, AND MAGIC

The ancient form of theatre known as *dance-drama* began with the combination of ritual and storytelling. Dance-dramas appeared first on the African continent and afterward in tribal cultures around the world, and they continue to be performed in, among other places, Siberia, South America, Southeast Asia, Australia, and Native American enclaves. Storytelling provided these performances with audience-attracting narratives and details taken from familiar elements of daily human life. And ritual provided the intensity of the celebrants who could commit, body and soul, to the impersonation of divine spirits and reenactment of 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 prehistory. Humans who assume an animist role to mediate between spirit and earthly realities are—in a similarly general way—called *shamans.*

Shamans have been identified in the tribal cultures of the Upper Paleolithic era since at least 13,000 B.C. and possibly even earlier. In the eyes of his community, the shaman (almost always male in the ancient world)

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. © *Tom Raymond/Fresh Air Photo*

can cure the sick, aid the hunter, conjure the rain, and help the crops grow. Shamans may also appear as mediums, taking the forms of unearthly spirits, often animal or demonic. In most shamanic practices, the shaman performs in a state of *trance*: a level of consciousness beyond everyday awareness.

Since the shaman's trance leads him to otherworldly realms, 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. Acrobatic feats 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 the execution of hitherto inhuman feats. The San Bushmen of Namibia and Botswana eat live snakes and scorpions during hunting rituals. The Indian *fakir* (Arabic for "poor man") hangs suspended from a hook through his flesh. 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 into a spirit presence. Masks, common in almost all tribal cultures, initially adapted themselves 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 a prominent symbol of drama around the world.

THE BEGINNINGS OF TRADITIONAL DRAMA

When spoken dialogue comes into shamanistic rites, true traditional drama begins. The Sri Lankan *sanniyakuma*, a traditional, all-night curing ceremony of drumming and

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. © Fulvio Roiter/Encyclopedia/Corbis

"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 brief dialogue is surely not what we might call traditional theatre—yet it has all of theatre's elements: it uses impersonation to create suspense, conflict, danger, and action.

TRADITIONAL DRAMA IN SUB-SAHARAN AFRICA

Theatrical performances almost certainly began in Sub-Saharan Africa, where today we can still see a vast variety of traditional drama in which ritual and storytelling continually interweave. More than 1,000 languages are spoken here, and each language represents a culture with roots in the past and social community in the present. Many of these cultures 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 Ivory Coast and Burkina Faso have animal masks to frighten witches—with the tusks of wild boars, the teeth of alligators, and the horns of antelopes—and brightly colored masks for certain women characters (played by men). Such masks feature arched eyebrows, visible teeth, and scar marks on the cheeks, and the characters' hand props often include horsetail whisks. In the Yacouba country of 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 feature in Burundi performances; rain-dance rituals are common in Botswana.

EGYPTIAN DRAMA

After theatrical performances began in Sub-Saharan Africa, they soon drifted northward, down the Nile River to what we now know as Egypt, and then spread to Mesopotamia, Canaan, and eventually throughout the Middle East. Although the first written records we have of this activity are in Egypt, dating at least as far back as 2500 B.C., performances may have occurred as much as eight hundred years before that.

The first known Egyptian drama, known as the *Abydos Passion Play,* was apparently staged each spring in a boat procession on 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 Set, the god of death, and incorporates 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 fierce combat between Horus and Set. Dialogue, dance, animal sacrifices, elaborate offerings of royal treasure, mimed violence, a coronation ceremony, and sacred fertility rites were all part of the action, complemented with bold stage effects. Beads of carnelian (a translucent red stone) represented the great Eye of Horus, bloodied from when Set plucked it out in combat. Two maces represented Set's testicles, which Horus tore off and engrafted onto his own body to become stronger. The lowering and raising of ceremonial pillars into the Nile represented the burial and rebirth of Osiris.

Modern anthropology has discovered that this Egyptian springtime resurrection drama derives from even more ancient ritualized reenactments of the coming of spring that celebrated the rebirth of vegetation in the fields. For instance, the Babylonian play *Baal* tells the story of the god Baal dying, traveling to the equivalent of Purgatory, and rising again on the same day. These plays, performed in the springtime, are ultimately joyous, not sad. The deaths of Osiris and Baal are not permanent, and after Osiris's body is torn apart and thrown into the river, he will be revived—as will the coming year's wheat crop after its seeds are scattered by the wind and submerged in the annual flooding of the Nile. The tragedy of death, therefore, yields life, and the tears of lamentation become nourishment for the seeds of life's renewal. However painful, such tragedy brings with it rejuvenation and hope. And like theatre today, it thrives on both immediacy and a deep connection to the past.

Theatre in the West

Drama did not continue to flourish in the Middle East, however. While many artistic forms persisted, 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., generally viewed depictions of humans—in both the visual and the performing arts—as irreligious. But the dramatic arts moved on: from their Egyptian and Middle Eastern origins, they spread rapidly both east and west. In India and Attica (now Greece), cultic rituals took place well before the first millennium B.C. And by the middle of that millennium, there arose a spectacular theatre in the city-state of Athens, which over the course of 150 years—mere moments in the timeline of civilization—produced four of the greatest playwrights and the most important dramatic theorist in the theatre's long history. Greek drama established the formal foundations of Western theatre, shaping and defining the essential concepts—such as tragedy, comedy, characters, and plotlines—that remain essential to 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 blend of myth, legend, philosophy, social commentary, poetry, dance, music, public participation, and visual splendor, Athenian drama created the fundamental genres of tragedy and comedy. Its characters have become cultural archetypes in successive eras, laying the foundation not only of future Western drama but also of continuing debates as to how—and to what purposes—life should be lived.

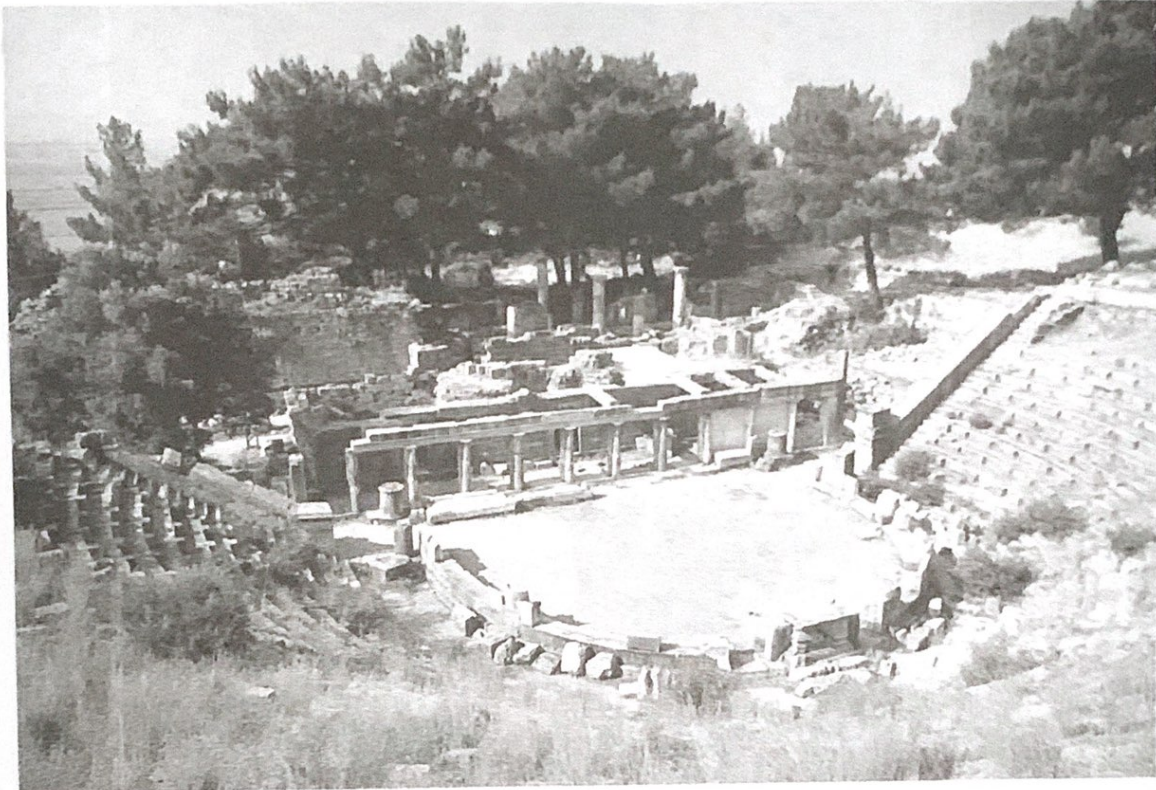
Aristotle and later scholars tell us Greek tragedy derived from *dithyrambs,* ancient orgiastic rites that celebrated Dionysus, the demigod of fertility and wine. Appropriately enough, worshipping Dionysus consisted of ecstatically worshipping symbols of fertility—such as phalluses—while drinking copious amounts of wine and chanting ancient poems. According to myth, Dionysus had arrived by way of the Middle East. We can think of him, therefore, as the counterpart of Egypt's Osiris who, like the Egyptian wheat-god, was believed to have been dismembered in the winter and resurrected in the spring. While celebrating Dionysus was fun, the stakes were high: his death and rebirth mirrored the return of the harvest, and with it, life. Keeping him happy meant living another year. 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 return was celebrated. Dionysus has, ever since, been considered the founding deity of Western drama.

Peter Hall's production of Euripides' *The Bacchae* played at England's National Theatre in 2002, and then to an audience of eleven thousand at the ancient theatre of Epidaurus in Greece. Hall and his designers employed bold and uniform colors—blood orange and sea green—to emphasize the masklike uniformity of members of the chorus as they collectively, not individually, wrestle with the play's giant spiritual themes. © *Geraint Lewis*

Although the precise transition from orgiastic celebrations to tragic drama is impossible to figure out, we do know that by the end of the fifth century B.C. three great tragedians—Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides—had written and produced close to three hundred plays. Thirty-three have come down to us, and most of them 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 *Poetics*, a treatise on dramatic theory), flourished in the century that followed. Even the small number of surviving texts we have make for one of the richest bodies of dramatic work ever created.

Greek tragedies explore the social, psychological, and religious meanings of the ancient gods and heroes of Greek history and myth; the comedies presented contemporary issues affecting all Athenians. Both types of drama were first staged in a simple wheat-threshing area 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 seated upward of fifteen thousand people—were built in Athens and subsequently throughout the growing Greek empire. Many of those later theatres remain today, in various stages of ruin and renovation, in parts of Greece, Italy, and Turkey, and the terms *orchestra, scene,* and *theatre* remained to define the theatre of future eras.

All ancient Greek actors were 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* derives from the Latin *per sonum,* or "for sound," which initially referred to the amplification of the actor's voice



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. © Robert Cohen

and later became the root of the term *dramatis personae*, or "cast of characters.") Each tragic actor wore elevated shoes (*kothurnoi*), an elaborate headdress (*onkos*), and a long colorful gown (*himation*) with a tunic (*chlamys*) over it. The ornate costumes and props helped enhance the larger-than-life struggles depicted in the drama—no ordinary-looking characters could so do. 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 chorus of twelve or fifteen singer-dancers (usually representing 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, separated from the main interactions.

Greek tragedy was chanted 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. Greek comedy, in contrast, provided the foundation of today's 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) that still supply the elements of many of today's television shows.

The City Dionysia was a weeklong festival of celebrations and dramatic competitions. On the first day, during introductory ceremonies, each playwright introduced his cast and announced the theme of his work. The second day featured processions, sacrifices, and the presentation

In the dithyrambs that preceded ancient Greek tragedy, there was a chorus of fifty performers. Romanian director Silviu Purcarete, at the National Theatre of Craiova, employed a chorus of double that number—fifty men and fifty women—in his innovative production of *Les Danaides*, adapted from Aeschylus's war tetralogy, *The Suppliants*. Purcarete's highly stylized production, performed (in French) in Manhattan's Damrosch Park as part of the Lincoln Center Theatre 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. © *Stephanie Berger*

of ten dithyrambs; 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 that led to some of the most thrilling dramas and theatrical spectacles in history.

ROMAN DRAMA

Greek civilization, battered by internal wars, had lost its vitality 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 (*vomitoria*) on both sides. The simple Greek skene became an elaborate three-story wall (the *frons scaenae*) decorated by dozens of statues.

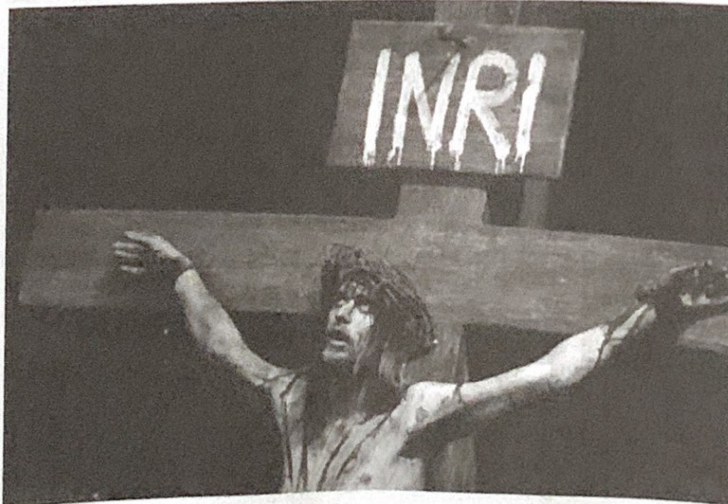
The most ancient theatre is often the most modern. This 1996 English production of Sophocles' *Oedipus Tyrannos*, with Greg Hicks shown here as Tiresias, premiered at the ancient Greek theatre of Epidaurus before reopening at the National Theatre in London. Packed houses greeted it with rousing acclaim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

Roman dramatists almost always drew upon Greek sources for their work; 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 mentor (and ultimately 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. Together, Greek and Roman drama form a classical foundation for Western drama right up to the present day.

MEDIEVAL DRAMA

The fall of Rome (around the middle of the first millennium A.D.) brought the classical era of theatre to an end. The early Christian religion banned theatrical representations altogether, partly in reaction to the excesses of late Roman theatre. When Western drama reappeared, as it did in Europe in the tenth century, it was an altogether different product—now it was sponsored by the same Christian Church that had once forbidden 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 would reenact the Biblical story of the Three Marys visiting 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 has risen." They then break into a chorus of hallelujahs. Thus medieval European drama, 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 traditional Judeo-Christian stories, from the Creation of the Universe and Adam and Eve to Doomsday and the Harrowing of Hell.

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. *© Ray Mickshaw/The Actors' Gang, Los Angeles*



The Oberammergau Passion Play, depicting the trial and crucifixion of Jesus, is certainly the most attended medieval play in the world today, as it has been produced in that southern Bavarian city every ten years (with a few exceptions) since 1634, where it is viewed by tens of thousands of mainly foreign visitors. Here Frederik Mayet, one of the 2,000 Oberammergau residents that take part in the production, plays Jesus speaking his last words to God in the 2010 production directed by Christian Stückl. *© Johannes Simon/ Getty Images Entertainment/Getty Images*

Medieval drama remained in church liturgy for nearly two centuries, but by about 1250, Bible-based drama had moved outdoors, first to churchyards, then to public streets throughout Europe. By this time the medieval *mystery plays*, as they were then called, were performed in the common languages of French, English, Spanish, German, and Italian rather than Latin, and they included scenes that were more secular than purely religious, often with contemporary political overtones. The actors were no longer monks but ordinary citizens, and some of them—those who had mastered the leading parts—were well paid for their efforts. Though anonymous to us, the authors were highly prized by their communities, as they converted the formal text of the Bible into the stuff of robust, gripping drama: comic interplay, jesting repartee, swashbuckling bluster, and harrowing tragedy.

Entire festivals of such plays, numbering in the dozens, were presented in hundreds of European towns every spring and attracted 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 they were performed in sequence. In England, the plays were performed on wagon-mounted stages, one for each play, which were 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, at least in contrast to the splendor of the classic Greek tragedies, but twenty-first-century productions have demonstrated their tremendous dramatic impact, even to today's religiously diverse audiences. 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.

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

An eighteenth-century illustration of Italian *commedia dell'arte*. © Bettmann/Corbis

Like its predecessor, the modern Globe Theatre 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. © Robert Cohen

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. © Geraint Lewis

Spotlight

Did Shakespeare Write Shakespeare?

Students occasionally wonder about the so-called "authorship question," which challenges the commonly accepted belief that Shakespeare's plays were written by Shakespeare. Yet although 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. No shred of evidence has 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 one of America's most noted Shakespearean scholars, Harold Bloom, simply dismisses as "lunacy."

Shakespeare's name appears as author on the title pages of 37 editions of plays published between 1598 and 1622, far more frequently than that of any other poet or dramatist of this period. Eleven of his plays are cited (and praised) 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 its 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 shows him with pen in hand, looking down at his own grave. 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, Euripides, Henrik Ibsen, 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 the extensive travel literature and gossip of the era—and it wasn't even geographically accurate (Shakespeare writes of one who could "lose the tide" sailing 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. That we don't know of a memorial ceremony doesn't mean there wasn't one, and evidence clearly indicates the engraving of a penless monument was simply one of many errors in a 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.

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. By imposing today's standards of celebrity, authorship, and print culture, we are doing a disservice to the practice of history. It's as if people were angry because George Washington didn't have a cell phone.

published, their influence—on all arts and culture, not merely the theatre—proved overwhelming. This period in which ancient culture was "reborn" and fused, sometimes uneasily, with the medieval and Gothic forms that had been dominant for centuries is called the *Renaissance.*

By most reckonings, the Renaissance began in Italy, where the plays of Plautus and Seneca were first translated in the 1470s. Amateur productions of these Italian versions 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 expanding upon—Roman drama. By the middle of the sixteenth century, groups of itinerant professional actors began performing a semi-improvised variation of this *commedia erudita,* which soon became known as *commedia dell'arte* as it spread in popularity throughout the Italian peninsula and even beyond. Soon both commedia dell'arte and scripted plays in modern European languages—based

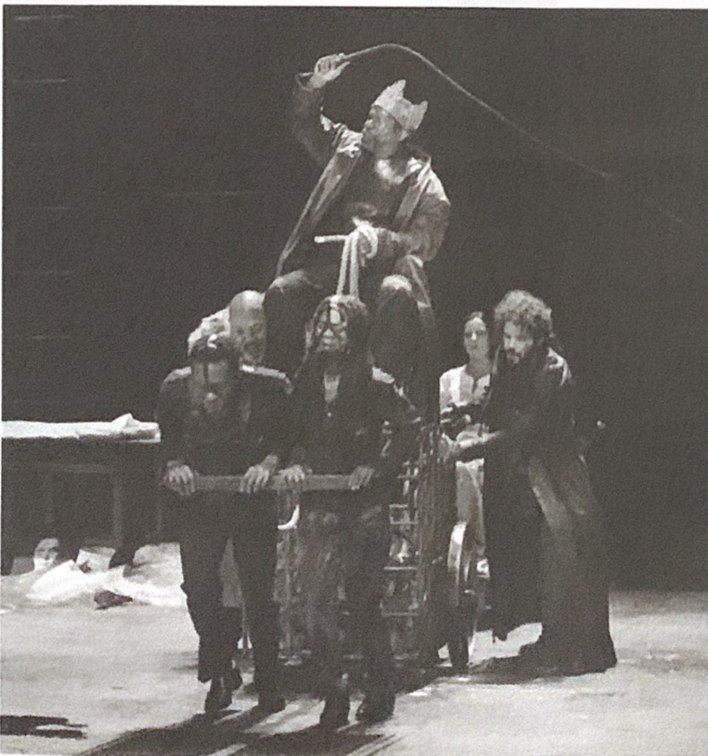
The Blackfriars Theatre in Staunton, Virginia, is considered the only reproduction of Shakespeare's indoor London stage of that name; the theatre maintains a year-round professional company dedicated to the performance of Shakespearean era works. Here is the company's 2014–2015 production of Shakespeare's *Pericles*. © *American Shakespeare Center*

on classic or current themes rather than Biblical ones—became 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 (1564–1616). The England of Shakespeare's day witnessed the rise of a vibrant theatrical culture, with palatial court theatres, freestanding outdoor public theatres (and at least one indoor one), and companies of traveling professional actors who entertained in court and public. The theatre of the Renaissance featured dozens of playwrights whose works remain popular today. While Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, and John Webster are three of Shakespeare's most prominent contemporaries, and brilliant authors in their own right, none fully compare to Shakespeare himself. Nearly alone among the world's greatest writers, Shakespeare was equally adept at producing exemplary masterpieces of both comedy and tragedy. Four centuries after they were written (from approximately 1580 to 1610), his plays are the most-produced dramas in literally thousands of theatres around the world and comprise the primary repertoires of more than 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 has now been built near the original site and, since its 1997 opening, has been used for the presentation of Shakespearean-era 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 restored Globe helps us better understand the power of Shakespearean-era staging and the potential of his drama to electrify a large and diverse audience with profound intelligence and passion. 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, pageantry, and humor, which only performance truly brings to life. They are both great dramatic art and magnificent theatrical entertainment.

Shakespeare is most famous for his tragedies and comedies, but he also wrote ten tragedies about the Kings of England and their struggles—and also about their friends, foes, and non-royal countrymen, good and evil. Here Stacy Keach plays the ever-inebriated Sir John Falstaff as he plays around with Maggie Kettering as the prostitute, Doll Tearsheet, in the 2014 National Shakespeare Theatre (Washington) production of *Henry IV, Part II*, directed by Michael Kahn. © *Scott Suchman*



Pre-Shakespearean English playwright Christopher Marlowe's *Tamburlaine the Great* here features John Douglas Thompson, as the title character, forcing his conquered rivals to pull his chariot; the production was a great success in Michael Boyd's 2014 off-Broadway production of both Parts I and II at the Theater for a New Audience in Brooklyn, NY. © *Sara Krulwich/The New York Times/Redux*

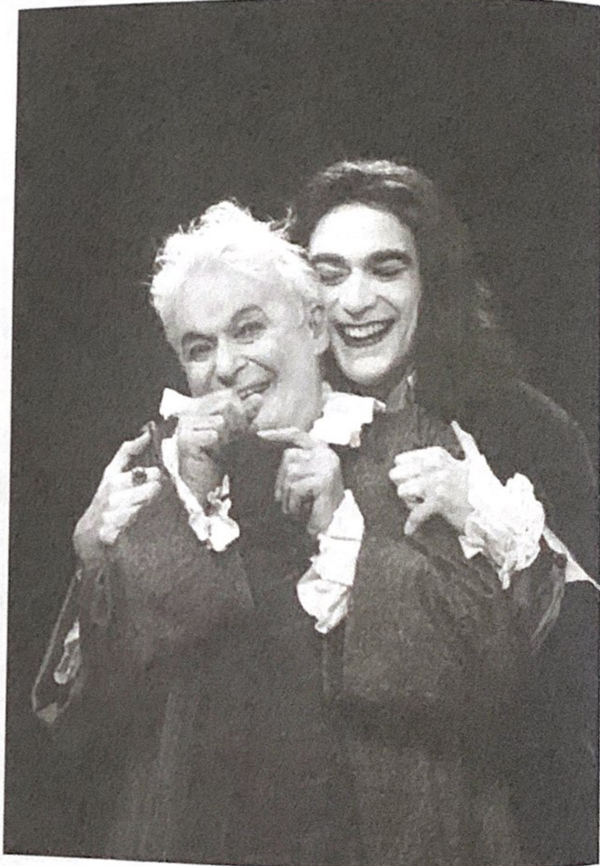
THE ROYAL THEATRE

The energy that characterized the Renaissance became consolidated and refined in the era that followed. This age, too, was characterized by a passion for understanding the wider world through historical study, natural observation, and global exploration. But now these ideas became more focused and ordered. The *Royal Era,* as we will call it, emphasized empirical science and rational philosophy. It also, as its name implies, saw the increasing importance of European royalty. Much of the seventeenth-century European theatre enjoyed powerful support from the monarchy: 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 the patronage of King Louis XIV in France, and the Restoration comedies of William Wycherley and William Congreve under English king Charles II.

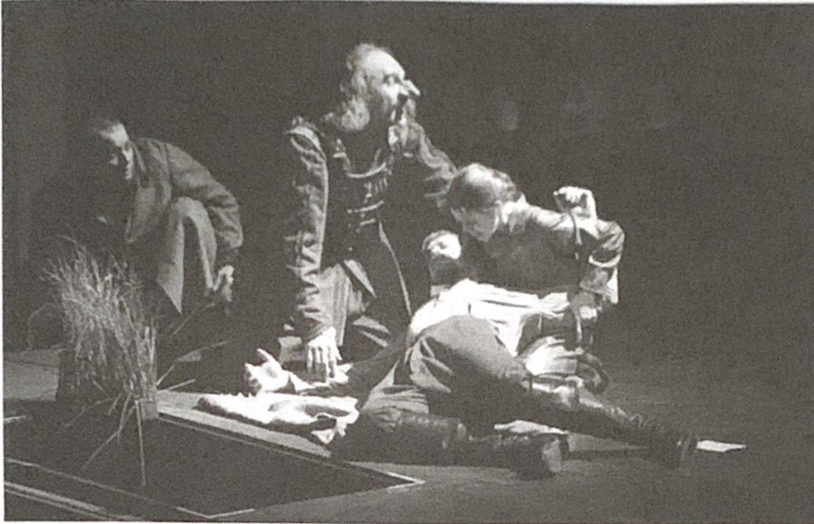
Though the era saw the rise of amateur theatre companies, burlesque entertainers, and play-reading groups, the main theatres of the times were generally aimed more at the aristocracy than at the general populace and, as such, reflected the gentility of the seemingly refined taste of courtly patrons. Rational sensibility dominated the times: theories of drama, adapted—often incorrectly—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, 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. Style, wit, grace, and class distinction became not merely the framework of drama but its chief subject, and aristocratic items such as 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 reports and evidence—both textual and visual—of the era's dramatic repertoires, acting styles, artists' lives, and manifestos that attempt to define the art of drama. The era also saw women first grace the stage as performers in the English theatre—previously, only men and boys (often dressed up as women) had been allowed to act.

THE ROMANTIC THEATRE

Every era in theatre, to some extent, rebels against the previous one, and the romantic theatre of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was no exception. Gone was the Royal Era's emphasis on decorum and rationality. *Romanticism,* in contrast, celebrated florid expressiveness over dignified restraint, and believed wholeheartedly in the vital spirit of the individual rather than the social organization of class, court, or 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 grand,



Jean-Baptiste Molière is France's greatest playwright of all time, and his 1665 sexual comedy, *Dom Juan,* is certainly a classical masterpiece, along with its foreign descendants, Byron's *Don Juan* and Mozart's *Don Giovanni.* Here Arnaud Denis (right) directs and plays the title role of Juan, while Jean-Pierre Leroux is his loyal and comic servant, Sganerelle, to whom the Dom happily explains the joys of love. Presented in Paris, at Theatre 14, in 2014, with captivating period costumes by Virginia Houdinière. © *Laurencine Lot*



Michel Vuillermoz plays Cyrano, the famously hook-nosed poet-warrior in Edmond Rostand's romantic 1897 masterpiece, *Cyrano de Bergerac*, here shown kneeling above his young friend Christian (Éric Ruf), who is dying in the arms of Roxanne (Françoise Gillard), a woman tragically fated to love them both. This 2006 Comédie-Française production was directed by Denis Podalydès in 2006; Ruf served also as the scene designer. © *Laurencine Lot*

larger-than-life characters: devils and monsters, robbers and priests, hunchbacks and heroes.

The excesses of Romanticism gave rise to melodrama and grand opera, and supplied 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 traditions of theatre that sprang from Egyptian and Canaanite beginnings and soon resurfaced on the Indian subcontinent and later throughout Asia.

Theatre in the East

There is no singular "Asian theatre." There is instead a sprawling array of Asian theatre*s*, each as distinct as the Asian cultures that produce them. Asia, after all—with nearly two-thirds of the world's population—comprises dozens of countries, hundreds of languages, and, as a result, thousands of theatre forms. Nevertheless, although types of Asian theatre differ markedly from each other, they generally adhere to many fundamental principles, mostly in strong contrast to Western traditions:

- Asian drama is 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, and appreciated for its sound as much as 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.
- Asian theatre is ordinarily more visual and sensual than literary or intellectual. Although some Asian dramatists are known for their literary gifts (several of whom 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 modes 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 does not have a Western sense of plot. There are rarely escalating incidents, reversals, climaxes, or elaborate plot closures. Asian theatre, whose metaphysical roots lie in timeless meditations on human existence, instead may seem, to Western tastes, more loose in its structure.
- Asian theatre is broadly stylized. As one might expect of a dramatic form that relies on music and dance, slice-of-life realism is practically unknown. Oftentimes, Asian theatre flaunts its own nonrealism:

brilliantly colored costumes and makeup, long and obviously artificial beards, elegantly danced battle scenes, and live instrumental accompaniment are almost standard.

- 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 deep association with folk history, ancient religions, and cultural myths.

INDIAN SANSKRIT DRAMA

Asian drama probably began in India, where it sprang from the same Middle Eastern roots as its Western counterpart; some scholars even believe the Greek god, Dionysus, had an Indian heritage. India's oldest dramatic form is Sanskrit dance-theatre, which seems to have been created around the second century 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 most comprehensive study of theatre that survives from the ancient world, the *Natyasastra* contains detailed analyses of Sanskrit dramatic texts, theatre buildings, acting, staging, music, gesture, dance, and even theatre-company organization. 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, *Sakuntala and the Ring of Recollection,* 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 roofed buildings. 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 acce[illegible] the dressing area behind the stage, and four colu[illegible] held up the roof or an upper pavilion. Carved woo[illegible] elephants, tigers, and snakes adorned the pillars [illegible] perhaps the ceiling. The performers, all from prie[illegible] castes and trained from early childhood, danced a[illegible] acted with an onstage instrumental and percuss[illegible] accompaniment.

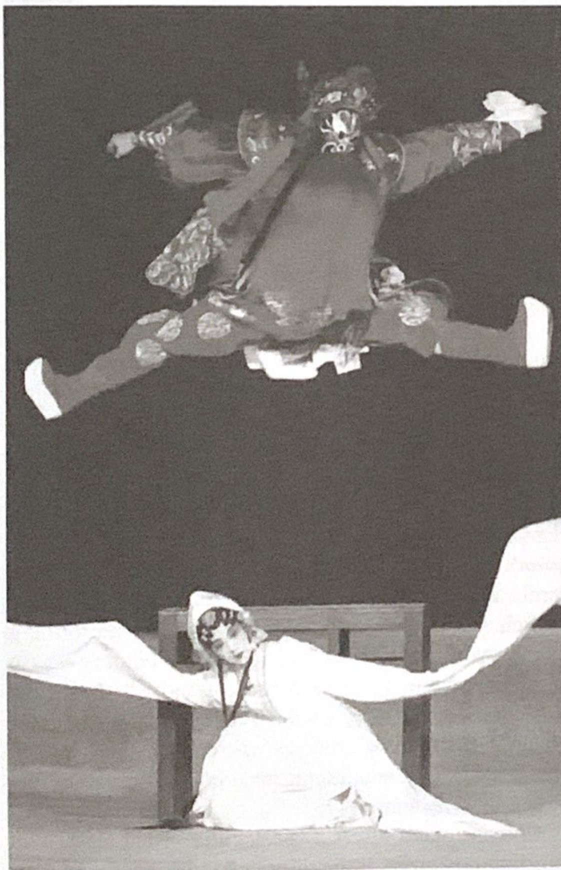
Sanskrit drama died out around the tenth centu[illegible] when the Hindu court culture fragmented in the wa[illegible] of repeated Mongol invasions. In succeeding centurie[illegible] an abundance of provincial theatre forms became popu[illegible] lar throughout the subcontinent, a vast number of whic[illegible] remain to the present day. Despite their many differences, all Indian drama forms share many of the fundamenta[illegible] theatre aesthetics of their Sanskrit predecessors and the doctrines of the ancient *Natyasastra.*

INDIAN KATHAKALI

Today the most widely known dance-drama form is the *kathakali* ("story play"). Originating in rural villages in the province of Kerala in the seventeenth century, Kathakali is currently performed in many urban centers in India and abroad. Its stories come from the two great Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata,* and its traditional performance can be somewhat of an epic itself, beginning at ten in the evening and lasting well past dawn of the following day. Audience members are free to leave, take naps, and eat during these performances, however, and in modern times, kathakali performances are more commonly confined to more manageable three-hour evening time blocks.

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 with precise and elaborate hand gestures, footwork patterns, distinctive eye movements, and bodily contortions. In a sense, these movements are the "script" as much as the text. The performers' physicality reveals subtleties of meaning and characterization that are barely suggested by the written words. 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, white-bearded ones the divine. No scenery is used in kathakali, as plays are presented in various sites, with four simple poles to define the acting area.

In the Indian *kathakali* dance-drama, royal characters wear an elaborate *kiritom*, 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. © K.K. Gopalakrishnan



Professional-level acrobatics are a fundamental part of all *kunqu*, and indeed of all Chinese opera. Here, in Hell, a devil leaps high over Du Liniang to terrorize her in the Suzhou Kun Opera production of *The Peony Pavilion* at the University of California–Irvine in 2006. © Hsu Pei Hung

CHINESE XIQU

China is Asia's largest nation and its oldest continuous culture. It also has Asia's oldest continuous theatre tradition. Like all Asian drama, Chinese theatre is more sung than spoken, but since Chinese speech itself is semimusical—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."

Although forms of xiqu existed in China before the first century A.D., the first well-defined Chinese opera form, known as *zaju* ("various plays"), appeared in China during the Song dynasty in the tenth century and reached 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.

By the end of the Ming dynasty, in 1644, zaju had been succeeded by a more stately, aristocratic, and poetic opera form known as *kunqu,* which originated from the town of Kunshan. Soon thereafter, kunqu became the favored theatre entertainment of the Chinese court; it is still performed

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*. © Courtesy Press Office, Hong Kong Cultural Centre, Serene Lai

today. More popular theatre developed around the same time in the form of a boisterous "clapper opera," characterized by the furious rhythmic beating of drumsticks on a hardwood block. Subsequent years saw the rise of other regional theatre styles, influenced by the zaju, kunqu, and clapper-opera forms. As a result of all this intermixing, China today sports as many as 360 variations of Chinese opera, most of them—such as Cantonese opera, Sichuan opera, and Hui opera—known by their regional origins.

The most famous Chinese opera in modern times is 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 Changgeng—came to Beijing and amazed the court with their brilliant and innovative style of singing, music, and acrobatics. A new "capital" style arose as local actors assimilated the Anhui style with their own. This new genre reached its current form about 1850, by which time it had become the dominant popular theatre throughout China.

Because the stories and plots of Chinese opera are normally ancient and well known, their actual staging becomes, above all, celebrations of their performers' individual skills; in particular, actors must master the classic fourfold combination of singing (*chang*), speech (*nian*), acting and movement (*zuo*), and martial arts and acrobatics (*da*). Nearly all Chinese opera performers are proficient in all four of these arts; the greatest performing artists—who are famous throughout the country—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 ballet, opera, Shakespearean drama, and circus gymnastics—all on the same evening!

Chinese opera offers a spectacular visual feast, with dazzling costumes, huge glittery headdresses, and brilliantly colorful face painting. Actors of both sexes wear

multilayered gowns in bold primary colors; many of them have long, flowing "water-sleeves" that fall all the way to the floor. Chinese opera singing, much of it in an extreme falsetto (originally employed, according to traditional accounts, so actors could be heard over the din of people talking during the performance), is accompanied by the near-constant ringing of gongs and cymbals, clapper claps, and drumbeats, and the furious strumming of various two-stringed fiddles. Movement skills include a rapid heel-to-toe walk, contorted body-bending maneuvers, sudden jerks and freezes, and thrilling displays of full-stage acrobatics. Backspringing performers bound across the stage in a 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. Instead, entire worlds are conjured through the simple manipulation of props: an actor who enters holding a paddle behind him is on a boat; an actor entering with a riding crop is on horseback. All in all, its innovative storytelling conventions and its spectacular 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 previous centuries, yet each is also an immensely satisfying theatre experience for today's audiences.

Nō is Japan's most revered and cerebral theatre. It is also the oldest continuously performed style of theatre in the world. Perfected in the fourteenth and fifteenth

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.
© Toshiyuki Aizawa/Reuters/Corbis

centuries almost entirely 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 that almost always portrays supernatural events and characters. All *nō* plays center on a single figure, the *shite* ("doer"—pronounced "she-tay"), 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, unlike the waki, wears a mask. *Nō* actors, all of them male, train for only one of these role types and then perform them throughout their careers. Extensive training provides actors with the precise choreography and musical notations required of their danced and chanted performances.

The actual *nō* stage is a square of highly polished Japanese cypress flooring, about eighteen feet across, supported from below by large earthenware jars that resonate with the actors' foot-stompings. A bridgelike runway (*hashigakari*) allows for solemn entrances and exits; an ornate, curved roof sits atop 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. This wall depicts a painted pine tree, which provides the only scenery. A four-man orchestra—flute, small and large hand drums, and stick drum—provides continuous musical accompaniment at the rear of the

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 Nakamura Schichinosuki II). © *Tomoko Ogawa*