The Modern Theatre

One of theatre’s greatest periods continues today. The modern period and its drama were shaped by world-changing forces, such as industrial-technological revolution, democratic revolutions, and an intellectual revolution that would disrupt earlier conceptions of time, space, the divine, human psychology, and social order. As a result, a theatre of challenge and experimentation emerged. Realism, the movement with the most pervasive and long-lived effect on modern theatre, was conceived as a laboratory in which the ills of society, familial problems, and the nature of relationships could be "objectively" presented for the judgment of impartial observers. Its goal, of likeness to life, demanded that settings resemble their prescribed locales precisely and seem like rooms from real life in which one wall have been removed. The playwright Henrik Ibsen initiated the realistic period with plays focused on contemporary, day-to-day themes that skillfully reveal both sides of a conflict through brilliantly capturing psychological detail. Anton Chekhov, in Russia, would bring the form to its stylistic apogee with plays whose even minor characters seem to breathe the air we do and in which the plots and themes are developed primarily between the lines. An independent but concurrent movement, naturalism, would be an even more extreme attempt to dramatize human reality without the appearance of dramaturgical shaping. While realist plays would address well-defined social issues, naturalist plays offered a simple "slice of life" free from dramatic convention. With the same reverence for nature, the human being was conceived as a mere biological phenomenon whose behavior was determined by heredity and environment.

A counterforce to realism, initiated by symbolism, began in the late nineteenth century that would expand into what might be called antirealistic theatre. Symbolism would contest realism's apparent spiritual bankruptcy with a form that would explore, through images and metaphors, the inner realities of human experience that cannot be directly perceived. A focus on traditional aesthetic values, such as poetry, imagery, and profundity would reflect the importance of purity of vision over observation, abstraction and enlargement over the mundane and ordinary. The movement spread quickly and affected every aspect of theatrical production.

Symbolism's contestation of realism gave rise to an era of "isms," during which the aesthetics of dramatic art assumed a new social and political significance. Such "isms" became, in time, used consciously as stylization in new dramatic formats. Such antirealistic theatre does not discard reality but enhances it with symbol and metaphor, elucidates parable and allegory, deconstructs and reconstructs subjects through language, scenery, and lighting, and finally uses the theatre's own theatricality explicitly. Briefly examining eleven of these movements makes the
diverse qualities and perspectives within antirealistic theatre apparent. From the emotional and "irrational" perspectives of Theatre of Cruelty to the rational and thought-provoking nature of Intellectual Comedy, pre-World War II antirealistic approaches such as Expressionism, Theatricalism, and the French Avant-Garde challenged and extended the limits of theatrical art. Through redefining the importance and function of language, extending the concept of character to include abstract forces or archetypes, reconstructing stage imagery through metaphoric scenery and lighting, and exploring themes often tinged with anxiety, such isms and stylizations have created much of the theatrical language used on today's stages.

Following World War II, Theatre of Alienation would introduce new theatre practices and reawaken theatre's sense of social responsibility, while the Theatre of the Absurd would express the futility of all action and pointlessness of all direction. Philosophical Melodrama accepted the Absurd's premise that humans are alone in a silent universe, but takes it as a challenge to creating an effective life. The Comedy of Contemporary Manners would unmask the ridiculousness of social convention, while Political Satire ruthlessly reveals the hypocrisies and exploitations of political and economic systems within a comedic and often highly stylized framework. The Case Study uses, most often, medical problems as a perspective for philosophical investigations, frequently taking the audience into and back out of the "patient's" experience. By contrast, the ostensible realism of Suprarealism is actually suffused with a menacing obscurity and mythic symbolism that seeks out patterns below surfaces.

You should be familiar with the social and political influences and concepts that form the basis of realism and naturalism.

You need to know the qualities of drama and theatrical production most characteristic to realism and to naturalism and how they differ.

You should be acquainted with the reasons that the antirealitic theatre movements began.

You should know the goals and qualities of symbolism.

You need to know the basic characteristics or tendencies in stylized theatre.
You should understand the basic qualities and perspectives of each of eleven antirealistic movements.

REALISM -- THE FIRST PHASE

The theoretical, technological, and social changes that affected the nineteenth-century theatre led to an unprecedented outpouring of dramatic creativity across the continent of Europe. Henrik Ibsen, generally considered the first modern playwright, wrote in Norwegian; August Strindberg, Ibsen's rival and contemporary, wrote in Swedish. Anton Chekhov, perhaps the most influential of early modern playwrights, wrote in Russian. Despite the linguistic and cultural diversity of this disparate group of writers, in the aggregate they forged a new theatrical world.

The Father of the Modern Drama: Henrik Ibsen

Henrik Ibsen was born in Norway in 1828. During his early childhood, his family lived well, but when he was eight years old, his father was disgraced in a business scandal and went bankrupt. Embittered by their loss of status, the young Ibsen felt estranged from his distraught parents and isolated himself. By the time he reached the age of twenty, he left home, never to return. As a child, Ibsen withdrew from these domestic tensions by playing with his toy theatre; thus the theatre may first have attracted him because it offered an escape from "real life." Yet his mature work may be read as an effort to come to terms with reality, the reality of his early life and the reality of society as a whole.

When the adult Ibsen began to write, his first performed play won him a contract to write for the theatre company of Bergen, a Norwegian town. Before beginning this job, however, he was sent abroad to Denmark and Germany, to gain some practical theatrical experience. In the 1850s and '60s, he was responsible for producing plays, many of them by the popular French playwright Eugène Scribe, for several provincial Norwegian companies. Since these well-made plays of modern life seemed shallow, Ibsen persisted in writing historical and romantic verse drama,(1) thinking that only such heroic subjects would allow him to address serious subjects. However, the work that made his name demonstrates that he had absorbed thoroughly the technical methods of the Boulevard drama he deplored.

Ibsen is perhaps best known for eight plays he wrote in Italy and Germany between 1877 and 1890. By separating himself physically from his homeland, he gained the freedom and perspective to criticize it. Dissatisfied with the heroic and mythic poetic dramas he had been writing, Ibsen embarked on a series of realistic prose plays exposing contemporary problems in contemporary Norwegian settings. Concentrating directly on bourgeois Norwegian society, he nevertheless addressed universal concerns, for the social problems that provide the context for these plays -- among them the question of women's rights in A Doll House (1879), hereditary syphilis in Ghosts (1881), and municipal corruption in An Enemy of the People (1882) -- were instantly recognizable to audiences throughout Western Europe and America.
Realism in the Modern Theatre

The early modern dramatists, including Strindberg, Chekhov, and George Bernard Shaw, knew Ibsen's work intimately and acknowledged its significance in their own development. One of the great practitioners of psychological realism, the American-born novelist Henry James, commented on the first London production of *Hedda Gabler* in 1891, scarcely one year after its original Norwegian production. James explains the power of Ibsen's theatrical realism by pointing out that "the ugly interior on which his curtain inexorably rises" provides a visual equivalent of "the pervasive air of small interests and standards, the signs of limited local life." (2) In Ibsen's realistic drama, detailed and specific props and scenery were not devices to sweep the audience away to exotic foreign locations or distant historical eras; instead, they encouraged viewers to contemplate the petty possessions, the furniture and bric-a-brac, which an acquisitive middle class accumulated in order to stake its claim in the modern world.

Ibsen's realistic plays take place in three-dimensional rooms, rather than against flat painted or architectural backdrops. What James (whose own practice as a novelist in some ways resembled Ibsen's in drama) and others perceived was how Ibsen manipulated this realistic stagecraft to create a new species of poetic symbolism. The French plays that Ibsen studied in his apprenticeship used decor as window dressing; in the intricately written stage directions of Ibsen's texts, however, decor becomes symbol. When a second-act curtain rises on an altered stage picture -- a piano has been removed in *Hedda Gabler*, for example, and a Christmas tree stripped of its ornaments in *A Doll House* -- the audience must read the significance of such alterations, for the Heddas and the Noras of the modern world reveal through their belongings the motives and passions which they have been taught to repress in their speech and actions. The genius of realism, in the novel as well as on the stage, is not merely to mirror faithfully the "real world," but also to demand that we scrutinize and judge the details that we often ignore because of their surface familiarity.

The great plays of the past tend toward generalized settings, although the psychological implications of place were not unimportant. In a Shakespearean play, for instance, a change in scene often reflects a change in mood; the forest typically creates a special mental freedom that is not available in the court. But Ibsen and his colleagues rarely set their characters free in any undefined territory. On the contrary, their modern insight told them that human beings are never free. Indeed, it is significant that most early modern drama is played out in domestic sets. The smaller size to which the modern world seems to reduce its inhabitants dictates that crucial actions occur in enclosed architectural limits. In Strindberg's Preface to *Miss Julie*, written in 1888, he complained of flimsy old-fashioned canvas-painted sets still in use that prevented audience involvement. A one-act play of searing intensity, daringly staged not in the drawing room but the kitchen of an aristocratic home, *Miss Julie* demanded authentic production. Strindberg insisted that "there is nothing so hard to find on the stage as an interior set that comes close to looking as a room should look. . . . There are so many other conventions on the stage that strain our imagination; certainly we might be freed from overexerting ourselves in an effort to believe that pots and pans painted on the scenery are real."(3)

Yet modern dramatists knew that realism in the theatre transcends set design and involves more than real pots and pans. Ibsen's mid-career decision to abandon poetry for prose signals his
conviction that the key to characterization lay in authentic speech. By replacing brilliant soliloquies with the conversational rhythms of everyday expression, Ibsen began to write in a way that audiences accept as "true to life." Although dramatic dialogue is always artificial, nevertheless, every important playwright and every theatrical era must find a strategy for tailoring that artifice to seem as real as possible. Early modern drama, it should be remembered, was written while Sigmund Freud was developing a psychoanalytic treatment that asked patients to speak in their own everyday voices until unwittingly they revealed their unconscious feelings. Ibsen and his contemporaries exploited a similar insight. They created dramatic characters whose routine-sounding dialogue divulged the truth about themselves as surely as and more "realistically" than an explicitly self-revealing soliloquy. Every hesitation, every slip of the tongue, every euphemism, for Ibsen and for Chekhov, as for Freud, has profound meaning. Moreover, the modern writer saw that the prose of daily life can be as shrewdly manipulated as the verse of Aeschylus or Shakespeare to yield a consistent structure of imagery. In A Doll House, for example, every apparently random reference to an audit contributes to a tightly structured plot and builds a convincing poetry from the commonplace. If where we choose to place a desk in a sitting room may betray our unconscious desires, how much more may the words we choose reveal about our character.

Thus ordinary speech and mundane settings, originally manipulated by the likes of Scribe and Sardou to serve a facile melodrama, provide realistic instruments to probe psychological and social truths in the work of the early modern dramatists.

Similarly, the underlying structure of "Sardoodledom," as George Bernard Shaw called the well-made play, was transformed by Ibsen into an almost Sophoclean device. As Oedipus interviews messengers who possess pieces of an old puzzle that he painstakingly fits together, so the hidden secrets of Ibsen's realistic drama gradually come to light through coincidences, lost letters found, and old love affairs unveiled.

All of these devices, finally, rest on a belief that the past predetermines the present. In the late nineteenth century, as narrative artists already had, dramatists trained the lens of realism on human behavior, viewing it under the influence of the materialist legacies of Darwin and of Marx as the sum of genetic and financial inheritances. Most important, perhaps, the early modern drama provides intellectual satisfaction, as does Freudian analysis, by promising that once the crucial genetic, financial, and emotional clues are unearthed, the process of understanding human experience can begin.

Modern Drama after Ibsen: Shaw, Strindberg, and Chekhov

Oddly enough, the biographical circumstances of all these early modern dramatists inclined them to criticize and challenge society. The plots of Ibsen's best known plays revolve around buried shame that must be uncovered to release the true self. It may be more than coincidental that Ibsen struggled to separate himself from his own parents' shame. Not only Ibsen, but also Strindberg, Chekhov, and Shaw in early childhood experienced the humiliation of watching their fathers sink into financial failure. Ibsen and Shaw wanted so much to distance themselves from paternal disgrace that each entertained fantasies of illegitimacy, refusing to believe themselves the sons of their nominal fathers. Perhaps we may fairly conclude that their childhood disillusion with
authority contributed to the force of the dramas they publicly displayed when they became adults, exposés of collapsing social structures undermined by false pretense.

Shaw, Strindberg, and Chekhov each found a different dramatic model potential in the realistic mode evolved by Ibsen. Of the three, the Irish-born George Bernard Shaw (1856-1950) most fully acknowledged his debt to Ibsen. The author of one of the earliest appreciations of Ibsen, *The Quintessence of Ibsenism* (1891), Shaw believed that Ibsen fundamentally had transformed the theatrical formula drawn from the French Boulevard plays by incorporating a new intellectual vigor in them. "Now the serious playwright recognizes in the discussion . . . the real centre of his play's interest," Shaw observed. Shaw's own witty plays explore the possibilities of *discussion*, as he calls it, and today seem a bit dated because the social problems that he attacked often have less significance for us than for his own audience.

For August Strindberg (1849-1912), the social questions raised in plays like *A Doll House* were only of superficial interest. A neurotic and troubled person, Strindberg responded more to the emotional tangles in which Ibsen's characters struggle, and in his own drama, probed the disfigurations of family life even more scathingly than did the man he regarded as his rival. In his domestic plots, a category that includes *Miss Julie* and *The Dance of Death* (1901), the thrice-married Strindberg, son of a debased aristocrat and a servant woman, showed men and women trapped in cruel and all-consuming sexual relationships. These plays, more naturalistic than realistic in their depiction of the unrelenting pressure of heredity and physical impulse, leave little room for the possibility of remaking the self to which Ibsen's characters at least could aspire. In other works, like *A Dream Play* (1902) and *The Road To Damascus* (1898, 1904), Strindberg experimented with a phantasmagoric style that may have influenced Ibsen in his final, less realistic plays, a style that pointed to the theatrical expressionism that the next generation of modern dramatists was to explore.

Despite his early death, Anton Chekhov (1860-1904) left a major body of short stories and plays, and in both forms continued to examine the minutiae of everyday experience. Less schooled than Ibsen in the conventions of nineteenth-century French theatre and less morbid than Strindberg, Chekhov used realism more delicately than they did. The characters in his four great plays -- *The Seagull* (1896), *Uncle Vanya* (1897), *The Three Sisters* (1900), and *The Cherry Orchard* (1904) -- rarely experience definitive revelations of truth. However dreadful the events encompassed in his plays, including lovers separated and families dispossessed, and death by duel and by suicide, Chekhov maintains so fine an emotional balance that his characters are simultaneously tragic and comic, pathetic and ridiculous.
In a way, Chekhov's achievement brought the early modern drama to an impasse. Like Ibsen, Shaw, and Strindberg, he identified a series of social and personal problems that defined a seemingly worldwide collapse of central authority as the twentieth century evolved. His work, however, proposes neither a rationale nor a resolution for that collapse. In fact, the short stories and plays of Chekhov convince us that, no matter how intimately we may probe character, the human condition remains mysterious. To that sense of mystery, lovingly and realistically examined yet unexplained, only one word can be assigned: "Chekhovian."

The Stage Director Par Excellence--Stanislavsky

Chekhov's plays, scrupulously observed depictions of ineffectual lives endured in dreary provincial towns, were produced in extraordinarily detailed sets by one of the most important acting ensembles of modern times, The Moscow Art Theatre. Under the direction of Konstantin Stanislavsky (1863-1938), this group introduced a new acting method(4) that confirmed the real source of energy in nineteenth-century realism. Although Stanislavsky did not stint on stage reproductions of reality, he knew that external realistic portrayal in and of itself lacked value. The true subject of the great realists was the human soul. Convinced that the brilliantly artificial acting styles required by high poetic drama did not fit the differently scaled speeches of unheroic dramatic characters, Stanislavsky resolved to re-train his company. Stanislavsky-influenced rehearsals require that cast members focus on emotional exercises designed to arouse within them personal feelings that replicate the characters' The goal of theatre was no longer, as Aristotle had described it long ago, to imitate an action but literally to enact it. Ultimately, the development of theatre in the twentieth century reveals that in the very success of Stanislavsky's method lay the seeds of its rejection. As with every art form, once theatrical realism totally fulfilled its mission, the genre began to seem obsolete, and gradually gave way to a new phase of modern theatre.

Footnotes

(1) Notable among Ibsen's early poetic dramas are Brand (1865) and Peer Gynt (1867), and almost cinematic fantasy very highly regarded today, proved difficult to stage when new. Dissatisfied, Ibsen gave up this mode of playwriting as a dead end; in his final plays, however, he muted the realistic detail of his middle style n favor of more overtly symbolic textures.


(4) In the United States, a "method actor" owes some debt to this Stanislavskian creed.
Less art, more substance. New tendencies in contemporary theatre

Birgit Schuhbeck on February 22, 2012

Trying to point out what constitutes contemporary theatre is a difficult task. When I asked Johan Simons, artistic director of the ‘Münchner Kammerspiele’ (a theatre that is known for its up-to-date, experimental and avant-garde performances) in a talk on culture on February, 9th 2012 in Munich, he advocated the freedom of the arts instead, meaning not only the sujet of the plays, but also the way they are interpreted and performed on stage: “Each play speaks to you [to the director]. The story itself tells you how to organize it, where to put the emphasis on and what kind of atmosphere you can create with it. Theatre does not position itself in any specific movement, it is very diverse, and plurality is the thing that signifies it most.” As usual, directors and actors negate any kind of categorization of their work. Granted, the plays themselves and the ways they are presented seem to differ from each other much, but isn´t there any common thread that connects them all?

After decades in which plays were marked by association, citation and intertextuality, nowadays we appear to experience a comeback of a kind of play that puts the focus on logic, psychological motivation and straightforward narration. In my opinion, what theater aims for is not simple provocation. Also, its aesthetic can no longer be reduced to being taboo-breaking and ‘risk-taking’[1]. Theatre turns towards ‘real’ people with real problems. The plays refer to more than just themselves, and in the process stories are created that have an effect on the viewer again. Those stories don´t allow the viewer to be distanced anymore. Heavily influenced by the experience of postmodern apathetic theater, contemporary drama tries to incorporate an ethical perspective again. Small stories about small communities relate to a bigger picture or as Christoph Henke and Martin Middeke put it: “[…] each drama, therefore, is a micro-society which interacts with the real one, albeit without being a simple reproduction of it.”[2]

The basic form of society is a family consisting of two parents and their child. In Gift [Poison] (2009), written by Dutch Lot Vekemans and directed by Johan Simons in the ‘Münchner Kammerspiele’, this little society is destroyed when the son dies in a fatal accident. The remaining parents split up, because they can’t stand their shared grief, and only meet again after nine years. In this meeting they attempt to negotiate their different ways of dealing with the tragedy. Their argument is full of bitter irony, but it seems to be the first time that they are truly
honest with each other. Eventually, they achieve a kind of harmony that is based on an aesthetic experience that the husband encountered: When one time waiting for a choir session to start, he listens to a male voice singing the song “Let it be blues”. So touched by this, he wonders what would happen if his life would stay the way it is now: He feels he would be relieved by this intensive experience of presence. Now, in the argument with his ex-wife, he also remembers the last minutes with their son, when the mother sang a silent song for her dying child. In both cases a song comforted them. In the end, what they share on an aesthetic level becomes eventually more powerful than what separates them.

The return to clear-structured storylines – a set beginning and a definite ending – seems to be a return to traditional elements, but is, in fact, a very contemporary tendency. Birgit Haas calls this – in a purposely tautological way – ‘dramatic drama’[3]. Moreover, theatre regains its political responsibility back which was theatre´s main task from its beginning. Theatre´s political function is derived from ‘human interaction and personal conflicts’[4], the individual is re-installed as the active subject. By closely observing relationships between individuals the viewer can reconstruct how political structures are developed in an experimental playground.

This appears to be a step back to older forms of representation, when the individual was the centre of the play like in ancient Greek theatre. But, in fact, in this period of theatre the individual was only the victim of fate and had no possibility to act in a self-determined way. It also differs from a psychological theatre with a social background – as German drama was characterized around 1910 – which concentrated on an exact, detailed and subjective representation of reality without referring to its own limits. Therefore today´s plays cannot be simply brushed aside as being old-fashioned, rather theatre tries to defines itself anew. Nowadays, theatre understands itself again as a critical force that reveals and deals with society’s hidden power-structures, instead of simply giving up in face of an overcomplicated world.

The ‘dramatic drama’ tries to convey a concept of unity. The mosaic structure of postmodernism is not appropriate anymore to represent the current developments in culture, the ‘new’ theater feels the need to turn to seemingly ‘old’ traditions like mimesis, and the pristine urge to tell stories. The stage is not an open (postmodern) stage, rather it serves as a virtual closed space. Fiction is separated from reality again. Roland Schimmelpfennig´s play Peggy Pickit sieht das Gesicht Gottes [Peggy Pickit sees the face of God] (2010) directed by Martin Kušej in
'Bayerisches Staatsschauspiel’ (a more traditional theatre in Munich) is an example for this kind of ‘new’ theatre.

This is shown best when looking at the play’s dialogic situation. The four characters have a conversation about the weather, about their past lives and when they’ve seen each other the last time. However, from time to time some fragments appear that don’t really belong or fit into the conversation. In addition, the characters often freeze like in a time-out. Characters act as if mediums of a message by an unknown sender.

These fragments will appear later again – this time making much more sense. Information of coming discussions are anticipated constantly. Interestingly, this doesn’t have a disrupting effect, rather a uniting one, because these little fragments will find their well-deserved place later by a re-constructive work.