

History of theatre

Ancient Greek theatre (1000BC–146BC)

The Ancient Greeks created purpose-built theatres called amphitheatres. Amphitheatres were usually cut into a hillside, with tiered seating surrounding the stage in a semi-circle. Most plays were based on myths and legends, and often involved a 'chorus' who commented on the action. Actors wore masks and used grandiose gestures. The works of famous Greek playwrights, such as Sophocles, Aristophanes and Euripedes, are still performed today.

Roman theatre (753BC–AD476)

The Romans continued the Greek theatrical tradition. Their theatres resembled Greek amphitheatres but were built on their own foundations and often enclosed on all sides. The Colosseum in Rome, which was built between AD72 and AD80, is an example of a traditional Roman theatre. Theatrical events were huge spectacles and could involve acrobatics, dancing, fighting or a person or animal being killed on stage. Roman actors wore specific costumes to represent different types of familiar characters.

Medieval theatre (900s–1500s)

After the Romans left Britain, theatre all but died out. It was reintroduced during the 10th century in the form of religious dramas, plays with morals and 'mystery' plays performed in churches, and later outdoors. At a time when church services were conducted in Latin, plays were designed to teach Christian stories and messages to people who could not read.

Commedia dell'Arte (1500s Italy)

This form of Italian theatre became popular in the 16th and 17th centuries. Props and costumes were basic and the plays were performed – free for all – on raised platforms in public piazzas (squares). Plots generally centred around the struggle of young lovers, whose union was being hindered by an elder. These plays made use of a set of similar characters that all had different characteristics. This type of play also found its way into both French and English theatre.

Elizabethan theatre (1558–1603)

Theatre during the reign of Elizabeth I has largely become linked with one name – William Shakespeare, arguably the most influential and famous dramatist of all time. During Elizabethan times, plays were staged in special wooden playhouses. The Globe Theatre, on the banks of the River Thames in London, is a prime example. The majority of the audience would have stood in the 'pit' in front of the stage, while richer audience members sat on seats around the edge.

Kabuki theatre (1600s–today Japan)

Japanese kabuki theatre is famous for its elaborate costumes and make-up, and unique style of music. It originally used female performers playing both male and female roles, but women were banned from performing kabuki in 1629 and male actors continue this tradition today. Performances usually centre on historical events or morality. Speech is in monotone and Japanese instruments accompany the action. Features of the kabuki stage include trapdoors, a section that rotates and a footbridge into the audience.

Restoration theatre (1660–1714)

After the English Civil War, puritans banned all stage performances. However, theatres were reopened in 1660 and bold and witty comedies were popular. Audiences were made up of rich people, as well as the middle classes and servants. Under the reign of King Charles II, some women were permitted on stage.

American Vaudeville (1800s–1900s)

Light-hearted variety entertainment, known as Vaudeville, was popular in America during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It was usually inexpensive and could involve dance, music, comedy, singing, magic, sketches, acrobatics or animal acts.

Victorian theatre (1837–1901)

The industrial revolution had an impact on theatre in the form of electric lighting and the use of machinery to create visual and audio spectacles. The theatre became a popular pastime for the middle classes. Pantomime, Vaudeville (see left), melodramas and light operas were popular. Social plays – known as ‘cup and saucer dramas’ – also became popular.

Modern theatre (21st century)

Theatre today ranges from big budget musicals and plays on New York’s Broadway and in London’s West End to local ‘fringe’ productions and amateur dramatics, such as The Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Drama is used to enlighten, amuse, shock, comment and educate.