South Valley University
Faculty of Arts
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Art of Theatre

2nd Year

مقرر الفرقة الثانية قسم اللغة الإنجليزية

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2023-2024


THEATRE DAY

Theatre has been around for what seems like forever or at least as far back as we can track society that is. Those who have tried to define it have often resorted to metaphors. For example, Samuel Johnson called theatre "an echo of the public's voice," Shakespeare called it "a mirror," Giraudoux "a trial," and Farquhar "a banquet." The last carried his comparison on at some length:

Like hungry guests, a sitting audience looks:
Plays are like suppers; poets are the cooks:
The founder's you: the table is this place:
The carver's we: the prologue is the grace.
Each act a course, each scene a different dish.

The word theatre itself means a place for seeing. The word theater, or its alternate spelling of theatre, comes from the Greek word theatron, meaning seeing or viewing place. This was the area where early Greek audiences sat to watch performances. Theatre is more than just a building, it is the telling of stories and putting on a show. It is turning a group of people into an audience and bringing them together through performing arts.

When you think of **the historical roots of theatre** it is often thought upon to go straight to Ancient Greece which you would be right so in doing as it’s the first recorded

theatre in Europe dating back to 600 B.C. but that would be putting theatre into a box and it's far too big for that. Arguably, theatre can be dated back all the way to 8500 B.C. considering tribal dance and religious rituals.

Herodotus, who lived in the age of classical drama, presents few reliable data about the preceding century in which theatre developed as an art form. In all the nine books of **The Histories** he notes only twice what seem to be theatre-like activities (note).

First, in Book 2 he describes an Egyptian festival that involves a ritual mock battle which may include an early form of drama. Herodotus is discussing the origin of the Greek gods and their connection to Egyptian deities in The Histories, Book 2.58-63.

> Indeed … the first people to do these things were the Egyptians, and from them the Greeks learned. My evidence for this is as follows: theirs (i.e. the Egyptians' ceremonies) seem to have been created over a long time, whereas the Greek ceremonies were created recently.

Whilst theatre has always been a part of human culture in one form or another, for example the Ancient Egyptians so great signs of being very involved in theatre and

performance, but many believe that it was in fact the Ancient Greeks who formed how we think of theatre today, despite its beginnings dating back over 2500 years. The records state it began with a religious festival, much like the history before them, in which they honored the god Dionysus (God of wine and fertility). The Dionysians developed the more structured form of drama that we are influenced by today; by dancing and singing.

A lot of the influences from the Greeks are still around today, such as the masks they used to show emotion and character, which are often used as a symbol of theatre. These masks were introduced by Thespis himself, a poet who won a dramatic play competition, and whom actors today are often named after: thespians. Tragedies were their forte, and told of Greek myths, many of them performed and interpreted to this day. The Romans too, were inspired by the Greek theatre, and much like everything else changed it to suit them. They wrote Greek plays in Latin and preferred comedies. Roman theatre had a lot of competition, what with it being 300 B.C. and the interesting public executions that were occurring, so from this came the need to be grander and bolder. Thus the creation of vast and impressive public

theatres of which over the next two centuries, the Roman's built approximately 125 of.

Despite the protests of the theatre that Christians brought, shutting down theatres and fighting, theatre eventually rose again with religious plays, once again (although it took them a good 1000 years to get back on track). Theatre expanded across the world, professional actors eventually making a comeback and theatres opening everywhere, slowly but surely commencing onwards.

The 1500's in England are what shaped a lot of our theatre today, what with Shakespeare on the scene and the birth of Globe Theatre. With all the greats that Shakespeare has given us though, theatre didn't go on without its hiccups and hurdles, closing and reopening, women being allowed to perform, the middle class dominating as the audiences and not to mention the new styles that were introduced whether in the play itself or the costumes and sets.

Theatre is influenced by history. All that has happened in its history has made it what it is. Now it is a bigger part of our culture than ever, thanks to all that came before it, and is more accessible than before. Hopefully, it will continue to grow and develop; and surely it will always be around.

History of Theater: A Timeline

Theater can be a form of literature because it tells a story, one that performers act out rather than simply narrate. The earliest records of theatrical performances come from ancient Egypt beginning around 2500 BCE. Like later forms of theater, these performances emerged as part of religious rituals for the gods. They could include dance, music, and other elements meant to please the gods as well as entertain and educate the audience. A passion play is a play about the life of a god, and the earliest recorded Egyptian passion play tells the tale of the god Osiris.

➔ *Greek Theater*

Western theater history began with the ancient Greeks around the 6th century BCE. Before formal, written plays emerged, the ancient Greeks performed rituals to honor Dionysus, god of wine and fertility, and to express gratitude for a bountiful harvest. Dithyrambs, passionate hymns sung and danced to honor Dionysus were performed by a chorus of men and boys as part of Dionysian festivals. The City Dionysia, or Great Dionysia, was held in Athens in the Spring.

Gradually, the theatrical process became more formal as people built amphitheaters to house the plays. Actors performed scripted plays for the public, and often wore stacked shoes to appear larger as well as large masks to depict their characters so that patrons could see them from a distance. The masks traditionally depicted faces appropriate to the type of play. The two main types of Greek plays were tragedies and comedies.

Aristotle broke tragedy down into six parts: Plot, Character, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, and Song. “Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear affecting the proper purgation of these emotions.”

There were many tragic poets (playwrights) who presented works at the Dionysian festivals over the years. Unfortunately, for any number of reasons, very few of their plays remain. The three best-known ancient Greek tragedians are Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides.

Aeschylus (525 BCE – 456 BCE) was a poet who may have written between eight to ninety plays, of which we only have seven complete texts and several fragments. Aeschylus is credited with diminishing the size of the chorus from fifty to twelve men and adding a second actor (*deuteragonist*). His best-known work is the dramatic trilogy, the *Oresteia,* which portrays the story of the House of Atreus. The trilogy is composed of *Agamemnon*, *The Libation Bearers,* and *The Eumenides.* The only complete trilogy of Greek drama to survive, the *Oresteia* was first performed in 458 BCE.

Sophocles (496 BCE – 406 BCE) was the younger contemporary of Aeschylus. He wrote prolifically, possibly as few as ninety or as many as one hundred and twenty-three plays, of which seven remain. He is said to have competed in the City Dionysia approximately thirty times and won twenty-four times. His best-known plays are *Oedipus Rex* and *Antigone.* Aside from the sheer volume of work he produced, Sophocles is known for his dramatic innovations. He changed the number of chorus members from twelve to fifteen and added the third actor (*tritagonist*). This allowed for more characters onstage, as well as more complex plots and interactions.

The third of the great tragedians was **Euripedes** (485 BCE – 406 BCE). His works differed from his predecessors by focusing on the more human aspects of heroes, as well as their fallibility. His characters also included strong female protagonists, as seen in *Medea* and *Trojan Women.* Euripedes also diminished the importance of the chorus. In *Medea*, which is practically a domestic drama, focusing on an individual character's personal tragedy, the chorus is more of a hindrance to the story than a help.

As these playwrights developed tragedy, **Aristophanes** (448 BCE – 388 BCE) blended comic elements from folk traditions, as well as politics of the day to create Greek comedy. Plays written before 400 BCE are called Old Comedy, and Aristophanes' plays fall into this category. There were many Old Comedy playwrights, but only eleven texts survive, all of them by Aristophanes. His plays focused on satirical social and political commentary. In *Lysistrata,* his most popular comedy, the women of Athens go on a sex strike to end a war.

Between approximately 350 BCE through 250 BCE was the period when New Comedy was preferred. **Menander** (342 BCE – 292 BCE) wrote in this

new style and although we have no complete plays of his, there are enough fragments to note its difference from the Old Comedy. Menander's plays deal with situations of urban life rather than political satire. The plays are more like a comedy of manners than the religious plays of theatre's origins. The smart and cunning slave has a main role in Menander's writing.

Greek drama was performed in outdoor theatres built into the hillside. The Theatre of Dionysus had a slope called the *theatron* (seeing place) and the flat area below was the *orchestra* (dancing place). There was an altar to Dionysus set in the middle of the orchestra. Later, a permanent structure was built that included stone seating in a semi-circle, a circular *orchestra*, and a *skene* (hut or tent used for changes, as well as entrances and exits) set behind the *orchestra*, opposite the *theatron*. The *skene* was originally a temporary wooden structure, but by the fourth century BCE, it became a permanent stone structure with three doors, which allowed for entrances and exits, as well as the ability to hear violent acts happening out of the audience's sight. The *paraskene* was a rectangular area just in front of the *skene* and was the primary acting area. Greek theatres also had *paradoi* (passages) to the side of

the *paraskene* leading offstage. The audience used these to enter the theatre, and they were also used by the chorus and characters such as messengers. The rendering below shows a modern design for a Greek theatre, utilizing the elements from theatres of antiquity.

All actors in Greek theatre were male and were probably not paid for their participation in the festivals. Their costumes consisted of typical clothing such as *chitons* (tunics) and *himations (*cloaks), as well as masks with wigs attached. These had wide mouth orifices, which aided in the projection of the voice, and were made of lightweight wood, cork, or linen, with exaggerated facial expressions. By changing their mask, actors were able to portray different characters and genders. Due to the fragility of the materials, we no longer have actual masks, but know what they look like thanks to representations found in ancient artwork. The costumes included a form of platform boots called *cothurni*. These aid in making the characters larger than life, which was useful when portraying heroic characters. It had the practical function of making the actor taller and easier to see.

Greek comic actors were less stately and heroic in appearance, wearing short tunics, often heavily padded,

and *socci* (soft shoes not unlike ballet shoes) which allowed for ease of movement to accommodate acrobatics. Many of Aristophanes' characters also wore a dangling phallus as part of their costume.

➔*Roman Theater*

As Rome rose to power in the 3rd century BCE, the Romans copied and adapted much of Greek culture as their own. This was true in theater; amphitheaters and plays were almost direct copies of Greek models. Plautus and Seneca the Younger were two successful Roman playwrights. The comedies of Plautus featured stock characters and sexual intrigue. The tragic plays of Seneca were traditionally read to small, private audiences rather than performed in public.

As Rome expanded its Empire into Greece, it would have encountered New Comedy. The Romans were excellent at assimilating the best and most useful ideas and items in the countries they controlled through the Empire. Comedy was the most popular dramatic form, and in the mid-third century, the Romans brought writer, Livius Andronicus, to Rome to alter a few elements of Greek comedies to suit Roman tastes. As a result, this gave rise to the two major playwrights of *fabula palliata* (Roman

comedy), Plautus (254 BCE – 184 BCE) and Terence (195 BCE – 159 BCE).

Plautus reworked original Greek comedies to suit Roman fashions. Full of stock characters, unlikely mistakes, and over-the-top humor, they became the basis for *Commedia Dell'arte*, and Shakespeare used *The Menaechmi* by Plautus as the foundation for *Comedy of Errors.* His work did not use a chorus, nor did it deal with political issues. It was farcical and fun, dealing with romantic foibles and missteps.

Terence, a freed slave from Libya, was well educated due to a generous patron. His plays were also based on Greek comedies, as were most Roman plays of the time, but he would often combine two plots from different plays and create an entirely fresh work. He had a more refined, literary style.

The Roman tragedy was not very popular. Seneca is the most well-known Roman tragic playwright. The only surviving examples of Roman tragedy are nine plays by Seneca. His work created the foundation on which Renaissance writers, including Shakespeare, structured their plays. Seneca's influence includes: breaking the play into five parts separated by choral odes, creating the basis for

the five-act tragedy; protagonists driven by overwhelming emotion which leads to their downfall, rather than having a tragic flaw; the use of supernatural characters like witches and ghosts; a focus on pithy language, asides, and soliloquies; and the use of violence onstage, rather than describing an offstage violent action as occurred in Greek tragedy.

Two important texts touching theatre were written at this time. *Ars Poetica*, by the poet Horace, acted as a guidebook for playwrights. In it, he discusses the importance of keeping comedy and tragedy separate. He dictated that plays should have a unity of time and place in order to achieve a unity of action.. “Poets, if they are to be successful, should provide both pleasure and instruction (333–34). The other text, which heavily influenced the building of theatres in the Renaissance, was *De Architectura*, by Vitruvius. The ten-volume work covers how to build cities, but also theatres and scenery.

➔ *Medieval Theater*

During the Medieval period in Europe from approximately the 5th century CE to the 14th century CE, the Catholic Church frowned upon formal theater, but people continued to

perform folk plays celebrating pagan festivals of seasonal birth and rebirth. To discourage these pagan practices and to interest and educate an illiterate audience about Christian ideas, the Church began incorporating theater into the Mass and liturgical drama was born. Mystery plays depicted Biblical events such as the Nativity, while miracle plays depicted the lives of saints. Liturgical drama became so popular that eventually, performances moved outside of churches. Traveling companies of professional players performed these plays in inn yards and other public spaces. Morality plays, dark allegorical plays which in many ways were sermons acted out on stage, also appeared.

The Catholic Church kept theatre alive through the institution of *liturgical drama* around 900 CE. The church introduces dramatic performances to Easter services, acting out the story of the Resurrection. Ironically, the institution that discouraged theater during the collapse of Rome became responsible for its rebirth in the West.

Early liturgical dramas included simple settings, costumes, and properties, and were performed in churches. A mansion represented settings for liturgical plays, including Jerusalem, Paradise, and Hell. The audience moved along

with the action. These performances relied on singing or chanting to communicate the stories of the plays. The performers were members of the clergy.

After 1200, new forms of religious drama began to appear, independent of the liturgy. Outdoor plays, or pageants, were staged in the towns and used the local languages rather than Latin. The performers moved from being clergy members to laymen. By 1350, the Feast of Corpus Christi became a focal point in the spring and summer months for the performance of plays. Religious themes were preserved and expanded to include events from the life of Christ, saints, or stories from the Old Testament. Mystery cycles emerged as episodic plays presenting Biblical history from Creation to Doomsday, in the form of drama. Morality plays, including *Everyman*, evolved as allegorical lessons of Church doctrine.

When religious dramas moved outdoors, the secular drama also experienced a rebirth, starting with masques performed for the members of the nobility, and mummers' plays. "'Mummers' plays' are traditional dramatic entertainment, still performed in a few villages in England and Northern Ireland, in which a champion is killed in a fight

and is then brought to life by a doctor. It is thought likely that the play has links with primitive ceremonies held to mark important stages in the agricultural year."

By the late 15th Century, a class of professional playwrights and actors had emerged under the patronage of wealthy members of society. Theatre patronage soon became an aristocratic badge of prestige. With the fall of Constantinople in 1453, many scholars fled west to Italy, bringing with them vestiges of classical artistry and writing salvaged from the libraries of the Eastern Empire.

➔ ***Renaissance Theater***

The period known as the Renaissance (or "rebirth") in Europe began around the 14th century CE, primarily in Italy. A renewed preoccupation with Greek and Roman artistic accomplishments resulted in an increasing interest in artistic expression focusing on humanity rather than religion. The 15th Century saw the rise of Humanism, the fundamental impulse driving the Renaissance. With the fall of Constantinople in 1453, classical texts became available due to the "rediscovery" of the ancient manuscripts as they came back to Western Europe.

This focus was inevitably felt in the theater, which again became a form of popular entertainment. New theatrical forms appeared, beginning in Italy, including elaborate pageants or processions as well as the beginnings of opera. Commedia dell'arte or "theater of the professionals", was probably the most popular form of Italian Renaissance theater. Commedia dell'arte focused on comic routines featuring song, dance, and acrobatics.

The Renaissance arrived in England a bit later than in southern Europe. The late Tudor period became the golden age of English theatre, yet elements of medieval theatre overlapped. The Greek and Roman classical texts eventually reached England and influenced many of the playwrights there.

Just who wrote the plays required to sustain a Golden Age of Theatre? You are probably familiar with William Shakespeare, playwright, actor, and part owner of the Globe Theatre, but there were many others writing at this time as well. The University Wits were an informal group of scholars (all were university educated, or had studied law at the Inns of Court) who applied classical standards to the needs of a strong contemporary stage. They were: Robert Green (1558-

1592); Thomas Kyd (1558-1594), who wrote *The Spanish Tragedy,* c. 1587, which was one of the most popular plays of the 16th Century; John Lyly (c. 1554-1606) known for prose comedies; and Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593), the contemporary of William Shakespeare, famous for his prose style and subject matter, known for *The Jew of Malta*, *Dr. Faustus*, and *Edward II*. His fame might have rivaled that of Shakespeare had he not died in a fight at the age of 29.

Meanwhile, in Spain, a parallel development arc occurred. Religious dramas, called *autos sacrament ales* were performed, representing the mysteries of Communion and the Eucharist. These had a strong similarity to the Mystery Cycles and Morality plays of England. Allegorical characters of Sin, Faith, Death, etc., were intended to guide audience members to be better members of society.

There were many popular playwrights at this time in Spain, but the main three were Miguel de Cervantes, Lopes de Vega, and Pedro Calderon de la Barca. Miguel de Cervantes (1547 – 1616), may be best known to the English-speaking world for his novel, *Don Quixote*, but he was one of Spain's early successful playwrights.

➔ *Elizabethan Theater*

The theater that emerged in England during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603) was one of the highlights of the Elizabethan age, one of the most creative periods in the history of theater. The queen and her court sponsored theatrical performances. At a time when religion was a very divisive issue and the first feelings of English nationalism appeared, playwrights avoided controversial religious topics and frequently found their subject matter in the history of England. The theater was both entertainment and an expression of national pride.

The three most important types of plays were histories, tragedies, and comedies. Playwrights took ideas from classical and medieval sources and freely adapted them for their audiences. They believed poetry was the appropriate form for artistic expression, but rhymed poetry did not lend itself to the natural phrasing needed for acting. As a result, blank verse, a form of unrhymed poetry, became the standard style of writing for Elizabethan plays.

The most famous Elizabethan playwright, indeed the most famous of all playwrights, was William Shakespeare. He was a partner in the Chamberlains' Men professional

acting company and wrote plays for the company. He frequently took old plays and poems and revised them to create some of the finest plays ever written. Performers continue to stage his tragedies, like Hamlet and Romeo and Juliet, and comedies, like A Midsummer Night's Dream and The Tempest, today. The two most important Elizabethan playwrights after Shakespeare were Christopher Marlowe and Ben Jonson.

➔*Restoration Theater*

After Shakespeare, there was a decline in English theatre. The onset of the First Civil War led to the closure of theatres in 1642 by the Long parliament. King Charles I had lost his head, and Charles II was in exile in France. Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans banned theatre. They considered all forms of "frivolous" entertainment to be immoral, and legally closed public theaters. Although private play performances continued, they banned public performances.

When Puritan control of the British government ended in 1660, the Stuart monarch King Charles II ascended the throne and transformed the British court. King Charles II was well known for his lavish and immoral lifestyle, and his tastes permeated high society. When the king ordered theaters to

reopen, plays reflected society's new values and tended to be comedies that featured witty dialogue and sexual intrigue. For the first time women appeared on the stage as performers in the Restoration Theatre, with pioneering actresses, Elizabeth Barry and Anne Bracegirdle, leading the way.

Another trailblazer who should not be forgotten is Mrs. Aphra Behn. Hroswitha may have been the first female playwright we know of in Western theatre, but Mrs. Aphra Behn was the first woman to make her living as a writer. She wrote poems, pamphlets, plays, and novels. Her early life was spent in Surinam, West Indies. Her first novel, *Oroonoko*, was based on her time there. She moved to England after her father's death, and married Mr. Behn, a Dutch merchant, but was soon widowed. She became a spy for Charles II during the war with the Dutch, but ended up in a debtors' prison, as the King apparently did not pay her. She wrote to support herself, creating twenty plays, but she was writing for a commercial audience and needed her words to sell tickets. She was told her writing was scandalous, and replied that it would not be so were she a man. *The Rover*, with its female-driven plot, gives Aphra Behn the moniker of an early feminist.

All women together, ought to let flowers fall upon the grave of Aphra Behn…for it was she who earned them the right to speak their minds…Behn proved that money could be made by writing at the sacrifice, perhaps, of certain agreeable qualities; and so by degrees writing became not merely a sign of folly and a distracted mind but was of practical importance.

➔*French Neoclassical Theatre and the Rise of Romanticism*

In the early 17th Century, French theatre struggled due to political instability in the country. In the 1630s, an educated class of playwrights began to emerge and in 1636, they established the French Academy, a group limited to forty writers and intellectuals. The Academy was given a royal charter in 1637. Pierre Corneille (1606 – 1684) wrote comedies early in his career, but it was his play, *Le Cid*, which brought him to the attention of the French Academy.

King Louis XIV was a great patron of the arts, and during his reign (1643 -1715) bestowed Royal patronage on theatre in France. This led to the construction of large public theatres in Paris, as well as the establishment of resident acting troupes, including an Italian *commedia* troupe.

What Corneille and Racine did for French tragedy (setting the standard for the next century), Molière did for French comedy. Jean Baptiste Poquelan (1622-1673), aka, Molière, was a favorite of Louis XIV. In the 1660s he successfully combined neoclassicism, *commedia dell'arte*, and French farce in plays that ridiculed social and moral pretense. His comedies were purely French and of his own devising, based on his experiences and observations, rather than reworkings of older Italian or Spanish plays. They were fresh and wickedly funny. Plays like *Tartuffe* (1664), *The Misanthrope* (1666), *The Bourgeois Gentleman* (1670), and *The Imaginary Invalid* (1673), have made Molière one of history's most famous and enduring playwrights.

➔ *Modern Theatre*

The Industrial Revolution, which reached its height in the 19th century CE, helped change the face of theater. Playwrights wrote plays that both reflected the values of the day and openly criticized the inequities occurring in a newly industrialized and urbanized world. A form of theater called realism focused on stories featuring middle-class characters and attempted to depict life as it really was. Naturalism in the theater was a form of realism focusing on the lower classes;

it tended to be more clinical in its approach, and naturalistic plays were dark and pessimistic.

Experimentation with new ideas also abounded in the theater, and performers sometimes did away with the traditional shape of the theater with a stage in front of an audience in favor of avant-garde performances. Also, playwrights crafted highly symbolic plays that did not feature traditional plot structures. They frequently created works that commented, often negatively, on social issues of the day and the place of humanity in society. These trends have continued well into the 20th and 21st centuries.

Realism

Realism in theatre came in response to the social changes taking place in the mid to late 19th Century. Men like Charles Darwin, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud helped shape the way society viewed the human condition. Theatre, then, became a mirror of society, acting as a direct observation of human behavior. Scenery and costumes became historically accurate, and scripts were written about socially uncomfortable issues.

The most famous playwrights who marked the beginning of “modern theatre” (Realistic Theatre) are :

Henrik Ibsen (Norwegian) (1828 – 1906), – though we studied his plays as examples of Romantic theatre at the end of the 19th century, they were considered transitional. Mostly Romantic, they also contained elements of realism. In addition, he tackled issues that other Romantic playwrights never would cover. In the 19th century they were considered taboo, subjects such as suicide, strong women, violating social norms, etc.

Ibsen is known as the father of modern realistic drama. He discarded asides and soliloquies in favor of exposition revealing the character's inner psychological motivation. His characters are influenced by their environment. His plays tackled topics like the role of women in society and war. He became the model for later realistic writers. *A Doll's House*, written in 1879, was banned in many countries, because the protagonist, Nora Helmer, leaves her husband and children at the play's conclusion.

August Strindberg (Swedish) – his plays contained elements of Romantic playwrights, too, but they focused on human internal struggles a opposed to the more outward looking Romantic plays.

Anton Chekhov (Russian) (1860 – 1904). He wrote plays about psychological realities where people are trapped by their social situations. Examples: *Three Sisters* (1900) and *The Cherry Orchard* (1902). his plays use many realistic traits, such as very complex and overlapping characters and story lines. He is often considered the foremost writer of Tragicomedies, though many of his plays tend to be darker than that genre usually is.

George Bernard Shaw (1856 – 1950) in England was known for his sharp wit. He wrote comedies that challenged societal norms. In *Pygmalion*, later turned into the musical, *My Fair Lady*, he reveals the superficiality of society by having a flower girl be elevated to a lady of society, merely by changing her pattern of speech. Shaw was specific about the production of his plays and is one of the premier playwrights of the 20th Century.

For much of the 20th Century, realism was the most prevalent form of theatre. Musical theatre grew out of the tradition of minstrel shows and vaudeville and became the most commercially popular form of theatre.

WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

1564-1616

For someone who lived almost 400 years ago, a surprising amount is known about Shakespeare's life. Indeed we know more about his life than about almost any other writer of his age. Nonetheless, for the life of the greatest writer in the English language, there are still significant gaps, and therefore much supposition surrounds the facts we have. He composed his plays during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, who ruled England from 1558 to 1603, and during the early part of the reign of her cousin James VI of Scotland, who took England's throne as James I after Elizabeth's death in 1603. During this period England saw an outpouring of poetry and drama, led by Shakespeare, Edmund Spenser, and Christopher Marlowe, that remains unsurpassed in English literary history.

THE WORKS OF SHAKESPEARE

So far as is known, Shakespeare had no hand in the publication of any of his plays and indeed no interest in the publication. Performance was the only public forum he sought for his plays. He supplied the scripts to the Chamberlain's Men and the King's Men, but acting

companies of that time often thought it bad business to allow their popular plays to be printed as it might give other companies access to their property. Some plays, however, did reach print. Eighteen were published in small, cheap quarto editions, though often in unreliable texts. A quarto resembled a pamphlet, its pages formed by folding pieces of paper in half twice. For none of these editions did Shakespeare receive money. In the absence of anything like modern copyright law, which recognizes an author's legal right to his or her creation, 16th- and 17th-century publishers paid for a manuscript, with no need to enquire about who wrote it, and then were able to publish it and establish their ownership of the copy. Fortunately for posterity, two fellow actors and friends of Shakespeare—Heminges and Condell—collected 36 of his plays, 18 of them never before printed, and published them in a handsome folio edition, a large book with individual pages formed by folding sheets of paper once. This edition, known as the First Folio, appeared in 1623, seven years after Shakespeare's death. The First Folio divided Shakespeare's plays into three categories: comedies, histories, and tragedies. These categories are used in this article, with the addition of a fourth category: tragicomedies, a term that modern critics have often used for

the late plays, which do not neatly fit into any of the three folio categories.

THE COMEDIES

Shakespeare's comedies celebrate human social life even as they expose human folly. By means that are sometimes humiliating, even painful, characters learn greater wisdom and emerge with a clearer view of reality. Some of his early comedies can be regarded as light farces in that their humor depends mainly upon complications of plot, minor foibles of the characters, and elements of physical comedy such as slapstick. The so-called joyous comedies follow the early comedies and culminate in As You Like It. Written about 1600, this comedy strikes a perfect balance between the worlds of the city and the country, verbal wit and physical comedy, and realism and fantasy.

After 1600, Shakespeare's comedies take on a darker tone, as Shakespeare uses the comic form to explore less changeable aspects of human behavior. All's Well That Ends Well and Measure for Measure test the ability of comedy to deal with the unsettling realities of human desire, and these plays, therefore, have usually been thought of as "problem

comedies," or, at very least, as evidence that comedy in its tendency toward wish fulfillment is a problem.

EARLY COMEDIES

Shakespeare remained busy writing comedies during his early years in London, until about 1595. These comedies reflect in their gaiety and exuberant language the lively and self-confident tone of the English nation after 1588, the year England defeated the Spanish Armada, an invasion force from Spain. The comedies in this group include The Comedy of Errors, The Two Gentlemen of Verona, The Taming of the Shrew, and Love's Labour's Lost.

➔ *THE COMEDY OF ERRORS*

Antipholus of Syracuse, newly arrived in the island state of Ephesus, awaits his servant Dromio. The pair are as yet unaware that their twin brothers, separated from them in a shipwreck soon after their births, are still alive and living in Ephesus. Confusion quickly ensues, as the newcomers are repeatedly mistaken for the island-dwelling pair, and vice versa. Shakespeare's quick-paced comedy has much in common with the modern genre of farce: the play features frequent quick entrances and exits, mistaken identities,

marital disharmony, and a good measure of slapstick. Just before this scene the Syracusan Antipholus has met with Dromio of Ephesus, and mistaken him for his own servant, resulting in a beating for the poor Ephesian, who has naturally not completed the task set for his Syracusan twin. When the latter finally arrives, and claims no knowledge of this incident, he too receives a beating. Things quickly become even more complicated with the arrival of the disaffected Adriana, in pursuit of her wayward husband, Antipholus of Ephesus… Shakespeare based the plot of The Comedy of Errors, a farce performed in 1594, on classical comedies by Plautus. It was published for the first time in the First Folio of 1623. The play, Shakespeare's shortest, depends for its appeal on the mistaken identities of two sets of twins both separated in their youth. The comedy ends happily with the reunion of both sets of twins, after a bewildering series of confusions. Shakespeare makes his play more complex than Plautus's by the addition of the second set of twins, twin servants to the twin brothers of the main action, and the play displays the young Shakespeare's formal mastery of the comic form and anticipates themes and techniques of his later plays.

➔ *THE TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA*

One of Shakespeare's earliest comedies, The Two Gentlemen of Verona follows the romantic fortunes of Proteus and Valentine, the gentlemen of the title. The changeable Proteus, having left his lover Julia in Verona with promises of affection, has traveled to Milan at his father's request. There he has fallen for Silvia, who is engaged to his friend Valentine. Unknown to Proteus, Julia has followed him to Milan, dressed as a page-boy. In this scene she watches as Proteus pretends to help Thurio, another suitor for Silvia's hand, to win Silvia's love by serenading her; the deceitful Proteus then remains behind to plead his own suit. Despite Silvia's obvious disinterest, and her strong disapproval of his disloyal behaviour towards both his friend and his lover, he persists, falsely claiming that both Valentine and Julia are dead. Although the situation presented is painful, there is much humour in the scene when staged, deriving from the hoodwinking of Thurio, the outrageous nature of Proteus's vain attempts to woo the exasperated Silvia, and the bitter irony in Julia's sharp wit, demonstrated in her double-edged comment to the Host that Proteus "plays false"—not, as the confused Host takes it to mean, in his music, but in his love.

The Two Gentlemen of Verona, which appears as the second comedy in the First Folio, was probably first performed about 1594. Shakespeare's first attempt at romantic comedy, it concerns two friends, Proteus and Valentine, and two women, Julia and Sylvia. The play traces the relations of the four, until the two sets of lovers are happily paired off: Proteus with Julia, and Valentine with Sylvia. Much of the humor in the play comes from a clownish servant, Launce, and his dog, Crab, described as "the sourestnatured dog that lives." Shakespeare probably wrote the part of Launce for comic actor Will Kemp.

➔ *THE TAMING OF THE SHREW*

The Taming of the Shrew (1593?) was first published in the First Folio in 1623. This comedy contrasts the prim and conventional Bianca, who grows willful and disobedient over the course of the play, with the shrewish Katherine, who is finally tamed by Petruchio, her suitor and, finally, husband. Yet Katherine and Petruchio are clearly well matched in style and temperament, and Katherine's speech at the end on the importance of obedience may be delivered with an obvious sense of how far this is from what she believes or even from what Petruchio really wants. Kiss Me Kate (1948), a musical

based on The Taming of the Shrew, proved popular on stage, as did a motion-picture version of Shakespeare's play in 1953 with actors Elizabeth Taylor and Richard Burton. However, unless the action is played with its possible ironies clearly apparent, audiences today will likely find the play's ostensible values difficult to take, especially the belief in the need to tame a wife.

➔ *LOVE'S LABOUR'S LOST*

King Ferdinand of Navarre and his companions, the lords Berowne, Longaville, and Dumaine, have sworn a vow, at the king's suggestion, that they will forego the society of women and the pleasures of love for three years, in order to devote themselves to study. A pre-arranged state visit from the Princess of France and her ladies, forgotten by the king, forces them to revise the terms of their vow to allow for the necessity of meeting with the women, and soon all four men are in love. As befits the courtly setting and the scholarly aims of the young men, the language and wit of Love's Labour's Lost are sophisticated and refined, but despite the literary atmosphere of the play, the comic possibilities of the stage are not neglected. In Act I V, Scene 3, Berowne—the only one of the lords to have protested at the impossibility of

maintaining the vow—is attempting to write a sonnet to his beloved, when he is disturbed by the arrival of the king and forced to hide. From his vantage point he spies on the other men, as one by one they enter to reveal—to both the on- and off-stage audiences—their own lovestruck attempts at poetry. Through the style of the young men's verses Shakespeare parodies the poetic fashions of the day for images of hunting and melancholy, but it is the structure of the scene that provides the greatest humour. The multiple eavesdropping is exquisitely executed, and as each man emerges to berate the others for breaking their vow, the audience has the pleasure of knowing that Berowne, too, is forsworn, and likely soon to be discovered. While Berowne is in the middle of a self-confident assault on his companions' treacherous promise-breaking, Costard and Jaquenetta make a perfectly timed entrance with an incriminating letter. Love's Labour's Lost was first published in 1598 and was the first published play to have "By W. Shakespeare" on its title page. The play's slight action serves as a peg on which to hang a glittering robe of wit and poetry. It satirizes the loves of its main male characters as well as their fashionable devotion to studious pursuits. The noblemen in the play have sought to avoid romantic and worldly entanglements by

devoting themselves in their studies, and they voice their pretensions in an artificially ornate style, until love forces them to recognize their own self-deceptions. The play's title anticipates its unconventional ending: The women refuse to marry at the end, demanding a waiting period of 12 months for the men to demonstrate their reformation. "Our wooing does not end like an old play," says Berowne; "Jack hath not Jill."

MIDDLE COMEDIES

Although very different in tone, A Midsummer Night's Dream and The Merchant of Venice from the mid-1590s provide evidence of Shakespeare's growing mastery of the comic form and his willingness to explore and test its dramatic possibilities. A Midsummer Night's Dream represents Shakespeare's first outstanding success in the field of romantic comedy. The Merchant of Venice is in its main plot another example of a romantic comedy, but the presence of Shylock disrupts the comic action, haunting the place even after he has disappeared from it.

➔ *A MIDSUMMER NIGHT'S DREAM*

A Midsummer Night's Dream, first performed probably in 1594 or 1595 and first published in 1600, presents a happy blend of fantasy and realism, and may have been intended for performance at an aristocratic wedding. The comedy weaves together a number of separate plots involving three different realms: one inhabited by two pairs of noble Athenian lovers; another by members of the fairy world—notably, King Oberon, Queen Titania, and the mischievous Puck; and the third by a group of bumbling and unconsciously comic townspeople who seek to produce a play for wedding celebrations. These three worlds are brought together in a series of encounters that veer from the realistic to the magical to the absurd and back again in the space of only a few lines. In Act III, for example, Oberon plays a trick on Titania while she sleeps, employing Puck to anoint her with a potion that will cause her to fall in love with the first creature she sees on waking. As it happens, she opens her eyes to the sight of Bottom the weaver, adorned by Puck with an ass's head. Yet the comic episode of the Queen of the Fairies "enamored of an ass" echoes the play's more profound concerns with the nature of love and imagination. A Midsummer Night's Dream weaves together a

number of separate plots: an argument between the fairy king and queen; a royal wedding in Athens; the love affairs of four young Athenians; and the efforts of a group of common workmen to produce a play for the state wedding celebrations. Act I, Scene 2, introduces the workmen as they begin their production and assemble for the distribution of parts; Bottom the weaver's desire to steal the stage and play every role contrasts comically with Snug's timidity. They meet to begin their rehearsals in Act 3, Scene 1, and Shakespeare's portrayal of this early amateur dramatic society at work has charmed audiences for many years. As the summer night moves towards its conclusion the many strands of the plot are increasingly woven together. Here Bottom is drawn into the middle of the conflict between Oberon, the fairy king, and his queen Titania. The sleeping Titania has been bewitched with a magical flower so that she will fall in love with the first man she sees on waking. Stumbling across Bottom and his companions in the forest near Titania's bed, Oberon's servant Puck decides to ensure that the queen's humiliation—and thus his master 's revenge—are complete, by transforming the unwitting weaver into an ass.

➔ *THE MERCHANT OF VENICE*

The Merchant of Venice, first published in 1600 though seemingly written in 1596 or 1597, shares the lyric beauty and fairy-tale ending of A Midsummer Night's Dream. But the strong characterization of the play's villain, a Jewish moneylender named Shylock, shadows the gaiety. Shakespeare drew the main plot from an Italian story in which a crafty Jew threatens the life of a Christian merchant. Its composition may have arisen from a desire by Shakespeare's acting company to stage a play that could compete with The Jew of Malta (1589), a tragedy by English dramatist Christopher Marlowe, performed by a rival company, the Admiral's Men. In the play Shakespeare sets motifs of masculine friendship and romantic love in opposition to the bitterness of Shylock, whose own misfortunes are presented so as to arouse understanding and even sympathy. While this play reflects European anti-Semitism of the time (although Jews had been banished from England in 1290 and were not formally readmitted until 1656), its exploration of power and prejudice also promote a critique of such bigotry. As Shylock says, confronted by the double standards of his opponents: «He hath disgraced me, and hindered me half a million; laughed at my losses,

mocked at my gains, scorned my nation, thwarted my bargains, cooled my friends, heated mine enemies, and what's his reason?—I am a Jew. Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions; fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us do we not laugh? If you poison us do we not die? And if you wrong us shall we not revenge? If we are like you in the rest, we will resemble you in that». (Act III, scene 1)

MATURE COMEDIES

The romantic plays *Much Ado About Nothing*, *As You Like It, The Merry Wives of Windsor*, and Twelfth Night are often characterized as joyous comedies because of their generally happy mood and sympathetic characters. Written around 1599 and 1600, they represent Shakespeare's triumph in the field of high comedy. These mature comedies revolve around beautiful, intelligent, and strong-minded heroines, a type anticipated by the quickwitted heiress Portia in The Merchant of Venice. Nothing quite like these plays appears in earlier English drama, and Shakespeare never wrote

anything like them in later years. They present a contrast to the satiric comedy that was coming into fashion at the time, and many critics believe they demonstrate not only Shakespeare's mastery of his art but also his congenial temperament in the sympathy he reveals toward his characters.

➔ *MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING*

The war of wit between the independently-minded lovers-to-be Beatrice and Benedick has made Much Ado About Nothing one of the most popular of Shakespeare's comedies with modern audiences. The pair's favored status has a long history: in his copy of Shakespeare's published works, Charles I amended the play's title to read "Benedicke and Betteris". Nevertheless, their relationship is, in as far as the structure of the play is concerned, only a subplot to the conventional romance played out by their counterparts, Claudio and Hero. In this, the first scene of the play, the two intertwining stories are set up, and Beatrice and Benedick soon look set to steal the show. Leonato, his daughter Hero, and niece Beatrice await the return of the men who have been away at war. On their arrival, the quick-witted Benedick is soon involved in a "merry war" with the sharp-

tongued Beatrice. In spite of their rivalry, the couple's inability to think of much except for each other soon reveals to the audience, if not to themselves, the true nature of their feelings. Meanwhile, Claudio, much honored for his valour on the battlefield, confesses his love for the beautiful Hero, and, having confirmed that she is worthy of him, accepts the support of Don Pedro, the Prince of Arragon, in obtaining her hand in marriage. The witty comedy Much Ado About Nothing, written about 1599 and first published the following year, concerns two pairs of lovers. In the play's main plot, the war hero Claudius is deceived into believing Hero has been unfaithful and calls off their wedding, until he is forced to recognize his error and take her as his wife. The subplot, a "merry war" of words and wit between Beatrice and Benedick, has long delighted audiences. Although the two outwardly dislike each other, the audience soon comprehends the real affection between the two. One of the play's most popular characters is the bumbling village constable Dogbery, who finally exposes the plot that has deceived Claudio. In 1993 a film version was released, starring Kenneth Branagh and Emma Thompson.

➔ AS YOU LIKE IT

In As You Like It, written about 1599 but not published until the 1623 First Folio, Shakespeare draws a rich and varied contrast between the strict code of manners at the court and the relative freedom from such structure in the countryside. Yet it also satirizes popular pastoral plays, novels, and poems of the time. Those popular but sentimental works presented rural life as idyllic and its inhabitants as innocents not yet corrupted by the world. In Shakespeare's play the rural world is far from perfect, and the characters are not always what they appear. Rosalind and Celia have disguised themselves as men when they flee the court for the forest, but other characters not disguised are self-deceived. In the forest, however, true identities are re-established. A number of love matches mark the conclusion, and the play ends in a parade of lovers marching two-by-two, like "couples coming to the Ark." Even the melancholy Jacques, who remains outside the play's concluding harmonies, expresses his benevolent hopes for the lovers, as the comic logic promises all "true delights." The nobleman Orlando falls in love with the lady Rosalind. Rosalind, disguised as a boy named Ganymede, then comes across Orlando in the forest and urges him to

pretend that “Ganymede” is Rosalind. Orlando plays along, oblivious to the fact that he is indeed speaking to Rosalind. Other characters who appear in this scene are Rosalind’s cousin Celia, disguised as the boy Aliena, and the nobleman Jaques, whom Rosalind teases for his somberness.

➔ *THE MERRY WIVES OF WINDSOR*

The Merry Wives of Windsor is among the most popular of Shakespeare’s comedies. Firmly English in its character and setting, it draws its inspiration from the popularity of Sir John Falstaff in Shakespeare’s earlier history plays, Henry I V, Parts I and II, and from the body of folk tales and ribald fabliaux, popular in medieval and early modern England, that featured jealous husbands, wily wives, and lecherous and greedy old men. Falstaff, down on his luck, has been attempting to seduce both Mistress Ford and Mistress Page, in order to gain access to their finances. Neither woman is impressed by his advances, which they regard as an assault on their honor, and together they concoct schemes to humiliate him in revenge. In Act 3, Scene III, Falstaff arrives for a supposed love-tryst with Mistress Ford. The two women have planned to trick him into thinking that Ford, known for

his jealousy, is about to return home so that Falstaff will be forced into the trap they have set. The plan goes even better than the women could have hoped when Ford—who has earlier heard Falstaff bragging of his seduction attempt—arrives in person, but is unable to discover the secret. Mistress Ford is thus revenged not only on Falstaff and his dishonorable intentions, but also on her own distrustful husband, who is shamefully forced to admit that he has done wrong in doubting her. The comic potential of the situation is further exploited by the presence of Mistress Page's husband, together with the comically accented French doctor Caius and Welsh cleric Evans, as witnesses to Ford's humiliation. In its tone, situations, breakneck pace, and the opportunities it offers for slapstick and physical humour, it is perhaps Shakespeare's most farce-like comedy. The Merry Wives of Windsor, written probably in 1599 but first published in 1602, is Shakespeare's only comedy of middle-class life. The "merry wives," Mistress Page and Mistress Ford, outwit Shakespeare's greatest comic invention, Sir John Falstaff, who had first appeared in Henry I V. Falstaff's unsuccessful efforts to seduce the two wives and their comic revenge upon him make up the main plot of the play. The comedy also includes the story of Anne Page, who is wooed

by two inappropriate lovers, but who finally is united with Fenton, the man she loves. According to an early 18th-century tradition The Merry Wives of Windsor was written at the request of Queen Elizabeth I, who wished to see "Falstaff in love" following his comic appearance in both of the Henry IV plays.

➔ *TWELFTH NIGHT*

Twelfth Night is the most mature of Shakespeare's romantic comedies and one that recalls his own earlier plays. It was written probably in 1601 and was published for the first time in the Folio of 1623. We know it was performed in the winter of 1602 at the Middle Temple, one of London's law schools. It is a play of great emotional range, from farcical misunderstandings (based on a set of separated twins, as in The Comedy of Errors) to poignant moments in which a woman in disguise must serve the man she loves (as in Two Gentlemen of Verona). The play ends with lovers happily paired, but with the ambitious Malvolio isolated (like Jacques in As You Like It or Shylock in The Merchant of Venice) and swearing to "be revenged upon the whole pack of you." The comedy may have been written specifically for presentation at a festival of Twelfth Night, which occurs 12 nights after

Christmas Eve and was once a time for mirth and merrymaking, marking the end of the Christmas revels. The play's outrageous antics, especially for Sir Toby Belch, reflect in spirit the outrageous behavior permitted at Twelfth Night celebrations during the Middle Ages. Yet there is a darker side to Twelfth Night. Not only is Malvolio unreconciled to the community at the end, but Sir Andrew, Antonio, and the clown, Feste, all stand apart from the final celebrations, and Feste's final song reminds the audience of how far our dayto- day world is from the idealization of comedy.

PROBLEM COMEDIES

Three plays—All's Well That Ends Well, Troilus and Cressida, and Measure for Measure—written soon after the mature comedies are usually called by modern critics "problem plays," a term first coined for them in 1896. The problem comedies touch on complex and often unpleasant themes and contain characters whose moral flaws are graver and more difficult to change than the shortcomings of the characters in the farces or the joyous comedies. Little of the light-hearted humor of the earlier comedies, nor the easy satisfactions of their endings, appears in these plays. They are, however, emotionally rich and dramatically exciting, and

have become increasingly successful on stage and stimulating to readers.

➔ *ALL'S WELL THAT ENDS WELL*

All's Well That Ends Well, written about 1603 but not published until the 1623 Folio, adheres to the conventional pattern for comedy, as its title promises, ending with the reunion of a separated couple. But the reunion is deeply troubled and troubling. The callow, cowardly, and ungenerous Bertram is finally successfully paired with Helena, but they have reached that point through a process that has humiliated each. He immediately flees to Italy, and she must trick him to consummate the marriage. At the end they accept each other, but the ending is appropriately hedged with conditionals: "All yet seems well, and if it end so meet,/ The bitter past, more welcome is the sweet." The stability of even this muted resolution is itself unsettled by the King's offer to Diana, a young woman Bertram has tried to seduce, to choose a husband for herself. At best this offer reveals how little the King has learned and at worst it threatens to start the dispiriting action all over again.

➔ *TROILUS AND CRESSIDA*

Against the backdrop of the Trojan War, Prince Troilus has become infatuated with Cressida. The young woman is niece to Pandarus, one of the lords whom Troilus knows well from the battlefield. Cressida has long admired Troilus but has been wary of showing her affection. However, when Pandarus steps in and arranges a secret tryst between the pair, she consents. As Act 3, Scene II of Shakespeare's Troilus and Cressida begins, Pandarus awaits the arrival of Troilus, who is eagerly anticipating his meeting with Cressida. Pandarus fetches her in and fusses around the pair, making preparations for their night together. The play is complex —critics have long argued over its genre, whether it is tragedy, comedy, or something different —and this scene demonstrates some of its ambiguity. Although on the surface the action is that of a romantic union, the talk is more of fear, falsehood, folly, doubt, and shame, than of love. Moreover, the presence of Pandarus undercuts any illusion that this is an idyllic, generous-spirited love affair, despite Troilus's apparent concern with integrity, truth, and constancy. As the young couple walk in together to the bedchamber prepared for them, Pandarus joins their hands to seal the "bargain" of their love: instead of a priest to join them in the mutual

service of marriage, they have only a businesslike “pander”, or pimp, able to guarantee only temporal concerns. Critics always have had trouble classifying Troilus and Cressida (written about 1602) as a tragedy, a history, or a comedy. In many ways it qualifies as all three, and its earliest readers did not seem to know what kind of play it was. The editors of the First Folio placed the play at the beginning of the section of tragedies; the 1609 quarto titles the play The Famous Historie of Troylus and Cresesid; and the prefatory note in that edition considers the play one of Shakespeare’s comedies and worthy of comparison with the best of the classical comic playwrights. Some critics believe that Troilus somewhat resembles the satiric comedy in fashion at the time it was written. The play has two plots. The first, a dramatic version of the siege of Troy by Greek armies during the Trojan War, and the second, which gives the play its name, a rendering of the medieval legend of the doomed love between Troilus, son of the king of Troy, and Cressida, daughter of a Trojan priest who defects to the Greek side during the war. The legend inspired a number of other works, including the tragic poem Troilus and Criseyde (1385?) by Geoffrey Chaucer. Shakespeare’s play, however,

brilliantly combines the two plots in a withering exploration of the realities of both chivalric honor and romantic love.

➔ *MEASURE FOR MEASURE*

Sex, death, and justice are the central concerns of Shakespeare's Measure for Measure. The Duke of Vienna has disguised himself as a friar so that he can move freely among his subjects, leaving the severe Angelo as acting head of state. Angelo begins to act upon the harsh laws that govern moral purity in Vienna, which the Duke had left unregarded. Claudio, now sentenced to death for having gotten his fiancйe, Julia, pregnant, waits in jail, hoping that his religious sister Isabella's attempt to plead for his pardon will succeed. In Act III, Scene 1, the Friar-Duke is speaking with Claudio when Isabella arrives to tell her brother of Angelo's offer of mercy: if Isabella will consent to sleep with Angelo, Claudio will be freed. Claudio, fearing death, begs her to give up her virginity; Isabella, proud of her virtue and fearing eternal punishment, urges him to die with honour. Their conflict, passionately argued, throws the issues at stake into a sharper relief than any rhetorical debate between Flesh and Spirit, and the straining of the brother-sister bond between them makes the scene painful to watch;

there appears to be no possible solution. Only the intervention of the Duke prevents a total estrangement of the pair, though his remedy—that Angelo's abandoned wife stand in for Isabella in the device of the bed-trick—is in itself morally perplexing. In this, the scene mirrors the play as a whole: even once the Duke has returned to government at the close of the play, and provided formal resolution by uniting the various couples, the questions that have been raised throughout Measure for Measure remain unanswered. What are the essential differences between love and lust, sex and marriage? And which is it more important to maintain: law or liberty, innocence or life? Measure for Measure (written about 1604 but not printed until the 1623 Folio) raises complex questions about sex, marriage, identity, and justice but does not offer the comfort of easy solutions. Like the other problem plays, it stretches the normal limits of the comic form. In the play the Duke of Vienna sets out in disguise to test the virtue of his unruly subjects, and leaves a harsh deputy, Angelo, in charge. Although the deputy reveals himself a hypocrite and couples are successfully united at the end, the questions that the play raises remain unanswered. At the very end Isabella remains silent at the Duke's proposal of marriage, leaving

open the question of whether she is overcome with joy or with horror, whether the proposal promises future happiness or a mere recapitulation of Angelo's earlier intimidations. The play's most likely source was Promos and Cassandra (1578), a twopart play by English author George Whetstone. Shakespeare's additions and 36 changes, however, create a far more disturbing play, which increasingly has found enthusiasm from critics and audiences in its anticipation of modern questionings: Can one find a middle ground between law and liberty? Is sexual desire constructive or transgressive (an overstepping of proper limits)? Can morality be legislated?

THE HISTORY PLAYS

History plays, sometimes known as chronicle plays (after the "chronicles" from which the plots were taken), were a highly popular form of drama in Shakespeare's time. By 1623, every English monarch from William the Conqueror to Elizabeth I had been represented in a play, as the English past served as an important repository of plots for the dramatists of the burgeoning theater industry of Elizabethan England. The plays not only offered entertainment but also served many people as an important source of information

about the nation's past. In 1612 English dramatist Thomas Heywood claimed that such plays "instructed such as cannot read in the discovery of all our English Chronicles."

The Elizabethans considered history instructive but did not always agree on the particular lessons it taught. Sometimes history was thought to be a branch of theology, the record of God's providential guidance of events, and sometimes it was seen solely as the record of human motives and actions. Sometimes history was valued because it was an accurate record of the past, and sometimes because it provided examples of behavior to be imitated or avoided. History plays became increasingly popular after 1588 and the defeat of the Spanish Armada, so clearly the interest in English history reflected a growing patriotic consciousness.

Shakespeare wrote ten plays listed in the 1623 Folio as histories and differentiated from the other categories, comedies and tragedies, by their common origin in English history. Eight of Shakespeare's history plays recreate the period in English history from 1399, when King Henry IV took the throne after deposing King Richard II, to the defeat of Richard III in battle in 1485. Henry IV was the first English king from the house of Lancaster. The history plays cover

the conflict between the houses of Lancaster and York, known as the Wars of the Roses, from 1455 to 1485. The final event is the victory of Henry VII over Richard III in 1485, ending the rule of the York dynasty and beginning the Tudor dynasty. The eight plays devoted to this period, listed in the chronological order of the kings with the dates of their 37 composition in parentheses, are Richard II (1597); Henry IV, Parts I and II (1597); Henry V (1598); Henry VI, Parts I, II, and III (1590-1592); and Richard III (1592-1593). As their dates indicate, Shakespeare did not write the plays in chronological order. He wrote the second half of the story first, and only later returned to the events that initiated the political problems.

The two remaining Shakespeare history plays are King John (1596) and Henry VIII (1613). King John, beginning soon after John's coronation in 1199, was seemingly reworked from an anonymous, older play on the same subject. It treats the English king's failed effort to resist the power of the pope, a theme of obvious relevance in England after the Protestant Reformation. Henry VIII, probably co-written with English dramatist John Fletcher, is a loosely connected pageant of events in Henry's reign, ending with

the prophecy of the birth of Elizabeth and her succession by King James.

Shakespeare's main sources for the events of the history plays were the Chronicles of England, Scotland, and Ireland (1577; 2nd ed. 1586, which Shakespeare used) by Raphael Holinshed and Edward Hall's Chronicle (1542). Although Shakespeare took situations from these and a few other historical sources, he selected only such facts as suited his dramatic purposes. Sometimes he ignored chronology and telescoped the events of years to fit his own dramatic time scheme. Above all, he used the power of his imagination and language to mold vivid and memorable characters out of the historical figures he found in his sources.

The overall theme of the history plays is the importance of a stable political order, but also the heavy moral and emotional price that often must be paid for it. Shakespeare dramatized the great social upheaval that followed Henry IV's usurpation of the throne until the first Tudor king, Queen Elizabeth's grandfather, restored peace and stability. In addition to chronicling the often violent careers of England's great kings, Shakespeare's history plays explore the extreme pressures of public life, the moral conflicts that

kings and queens uniquely face, and the potential tragedy of monarchy.

EARLY HISTORIES

The four plays that dramatize the Wars of the Roses, the turbulent period from 1422 to 1485, are possibly Shakespeare's earliest dramatic works. These plays, Henry VI, Parts I, II, and III and Richard III, deal with disorder resulting from weak leadership and from national disunity fostered for selfish ends. Richard III, however, closes triumphantly with the death of Richard and the ascent to the throne of Henry VII, the founder of the Tudor dynasty and grandfather of Queen Elizabeth.

➔ *HENRY VI*

Henry VI, Parts I, II, and III, chronicle the troubled reign of Henry VI, during which time England is reduced from a position of influence and status within Western Europe, earned by his father, Henry V, to a state that is all but torn apart by civil war. A pious man but not a gifted ruler, Henry VI was beset by opposition from the House of York, culminating in the Wars of the Roses, which disturbed English soil for 30 years. In Part III, Act 2, Scene V,

Shakespeare poignantly illustrates the personal torment that inevitably arises from the public conflict of civil war: the upsetting of the order of the state has upset the natural order of kinship, so that father is set against son, and son against father, in a war that “profits nobody”. The despairing Henry is powerless to do anything but sit by and lament as he observes the tragic grief of men whom, as king, he should have had the authority and ability to lead and protect, as a shepherd does his flock. The three parts of Henry VI chronicle the troubled reign of that king, from the death of his father in 1422 to his own death in 1471. During that time England was all but torn apart by civil strife following the death of Henry V. Part I deals with wars in France, including combat with Joan of Arc, and had early success on stage, performed 15 times in 1592 alone. Parts II and III, revealing Henry VI as a weak and ineffectual king, treat England after it has lost its possessions in France and factionalism at home erupts into full-fledged civil war. Today, the Henry VI plays, if staged at all, are likely to be seen in condensed adaptations or conflations (combination of parts) as in English director John Barton’s Wars of the Roses in 1963 at Stratford-upon- Avon.

➔ *RICHARD III*

Richard III begins where Henry VI, Part III leaves off and completes the sequence begun with the Henry VI plays. It presents a fictionalized account of Richard III's rise and fall, from the time he gains the crown through murder and treachery to his death at the Battle of Bosworth Field, which ends the Wars of the Roses and brings the Tudor dynasty to power. The story of Richard's rise and fall derives from an account by English statesman Thomas More, written about 1513. As presented by Shakespeare, Richard is an eloquent, intelligent man, who is morally and physically deformed. Richard dominates the stage with a combination of wit and wickedness that has fascinated audiences and made the part a popular one among actors.

LATER HISTORIES

Shakespeare wrote his most important history plays in the period from 1596 to 1598, plays that reveal both his dramatic mastery and his deep 39 understanding of politics and history. The so-called second tetralogy (four related works), consisting of Richard II, Henry I V, Parts I and II, and Henry V, encompass the 23 years immediately prior to those portrayed in the Henry VI plays. The last three plays of the

second tetralogy constitute Shakespeare's supreme achievement in writing histories, focusing on the development of Prince Hal (in the two parts of Henry IV) into England's greatest medieval hero—King Henry V.

➔ *RICHARD II*

In 1601, on the day before beginning his unsuccessful revolt against Queen Elizabeth I, the earl of Essex commissioned a group of actors to perform a play about Richard II at the Globe Theatre, believed by many critics to have been Shakespeare's Richard II. The performance was controversial, since Elizabeth disliked any connection made between herself and the earlier monarch, who had come to a tragic end. In 1599 the archbishop of Canterbury, acting on her behalf, had ordered the destruction of a book concerning King Richard and Henry Bolingbroke, who had taken over Richard's throne to become Henry IV: the book had borne a dedication to Essex and the potential for comparison was deemed too dangerous. It is thought unlikely, however, that Shakespeare had any such direct political purpose in mind, and the actors who undertook the 1601 performance were not punished along with the conspirators. In one of the contentious episodes, Act 4, Scene I, Richard, resigned to

his fate, sends news of his abdication of the throne to his stronger opponent, Bolingbroke, and those assembled with him. The bishop of Carlisle, who voices opposition, is silenced and arrested for treason, just before Richard arrives to hand over the crown. Although self-indulgent, Richard's melancholy is poignantly expressed, and while the forceful, plain-speaking Bolingbroke seems a more natural leader, the contrasting presentation of the pair is not entirely unsympathetic to Richard's plight.

Richard II is a study of a sensitive, self-dramatizing, ineffective but sympathetic monarch who loses his kingdom to his forceful successor, Henry I V. As a model for this play Shakespeare relied heavily on Marlowe's chronicle play Edward II (1592) with its focus on a personality ill-suited for the demands of rule. The play was a success on stage and in the bookstalls, but until 1608 the scene of Richard relinquishing his crown to Henry Bolingbroke, in Act 4, was omitted from the printed versions because it portrayed the overthrow of a monarch.

➔ *HENRY IV*

Henry IV, Parts I and II, continue the quartet of history plays begun with Richard II and ending with Henry V. In the Henry

IV plays, however, Shakespeare makes much use of comedy, particularly in the portrayal of Sir John Falstaff, to provide light relief and to offer parallels to, and a level of commentary on, the main plot. In Richard II, King Henry IV had usurped the throne from Richard; in Henry IV, Part I, he finds himself facing rebellion from both his subjects and his own son and heir, Prince Hal. Hal is the real focus of the plays: together they trace his development from a seemingly wayward youth, enjoying the company and influence of an ignoble fatherfigure, Falstaff, to the loyal son and future king who will prove triumphant in Henry V. The first scene presented here, taken from Part I, shows Hal idling with Falstaff and his friends; yet even though he agrees to join in their plan to commit a robbery, his final speech begins to set the stage for the transformation that is to come. The second scene, the deathbed scene from Part II, movingly portrays the moment at which Hal is reconciled to his true father, and takes up his destiny: the crown of England. In the two parts of Henry IV, Henry recognizes his own guilt for usurping the throne from Richard and finds himself facing rebellion from the very families that had helped him to the throne. His son, Prince Hal, is, however, in many ways the focus of the plays, which trace the prince’s development from a seemingly

wayward youth, enjoying the company and influence of the fat knight Falstaff and other drinking cronies, to the future king who proves triumphant in the play Henry V. Many critics consider Henry IV, Part I to be the most entertaining and dramatic of the Henry plays with its struggle between King Henry and his rebellious nobles, led by the volatile Hotspur. The king's fears for his son prove unfounded when Prince Hal leaves the tavern to take his place on the battlefield, where his defeat of Hotspur in combat proves his readiness to assume the burdens of rule. Shakespeare makes much use of comedy in the plays, particularly in the portrayal of the fat knight Falstaff, whose irrepressible wit has long been the major source of the plays' remarkable popularity. The comedy, however, neither dominates nor is subordinated to the historical plot, but is brilliantly intermingled with it, commenting often witheringly on its actions and values. At the same the comedy insists that history is something more spacious than a mere record of aristocratic men and motives.

➔ *HENRY V*

Henry V was the last history play that Shakespeare wrote, until he returned to the genre with his collaboration on Henry

VIII late in his career. Henry V celebrates the great military and political achievements of the king in his victories over France, but also allows other angles of vision upon his accomplishments that may well raise doubts about their moral cost. While the Chorus speaks the lofty rhetoric of heroic idealization, the comic plot reveals a world of baser motive, which parallels and comments on the historical action. Henry V may well have been the first play performed at the Globe Theatre in the summer of 1599. In the history play Henry V, Shakespeare's rhetoric successfully creates a heroic vision of the English king and his people in their fight against the French. The use of a formal chorus, as here at the beginning of Act 3, further emphasizes the epic thrust of the play. Patriotic—almost jingoistic—in sentiment, the play has become a symbol of popular nationalism, and was famously presented in this manner in the classic 1944 film by Laurence Olivier, during World War II. In Act 3, Scene I, Henry delivers a rousing speech to rally his troops in readiness for the battle at Agincourt; the time has come for bravery: "The game's afoot!" British actors Kenneth Branagh and Emma Thompson share a scene in the 1989 film Henry V, which Branagh also directed. After defeating French forces at the battle of Agincourt, Henry, who speaks no

French, courts French princess Katherine, who speaks no English.

THE TRAGEDIES

Shakespeare's tragedies are among the most powerful studies of human nature in all literature and appropriately stand as the greatest achievements of his dramatic artistry. Attention understandably has focused on his unforgettable tragic characters, such as Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Othello, King Lear, and Macbeth. Ye t the plays also explore and extend the very nature of tragedy itself by discovering within it a structure that derives meaning precisely from its refusal to offer consolation or compensation for the suffering it traces.

EARLY TRAGEDIES

Shakespeare wrote his first tragedies in 1594 and 1595. But he left the 42 field of tragedy untouched for at least five years after finishing Romeo and Juliet, probably in 1595, and turned to comedy and history plays. Julius Caesar, written about 1599, served as a link between the history plays and the mature tragedies that followed.

➔ *TITUS ANDRONICUS*

Titus Andronicus, thought to have been Shakespeare's first tragedy, moves at a frantic pace through successive sensational episodes of violence and revenge. Returning from war against the Goths, the Roman general Titus sacrifices Alarbus, son of Empress Tamora of the Goths, in honour of the death of his own sons during the campaign. The sacrifice, together with Titus's involvement in the selection of the new emperor of Rome, triggers a chain of violent acts that does not cease until both families have been slaughtered. At the conclusion of the play, only Lucius, Titus's one remaining son, is left to bring about a restoration of order. At the point that has been reached in Act 3, Scene i, Titus is pleading in vain with the Roman tribunes to free two of his sons, who have been wrongly accused and sentenced to death for the murder of their brother-in-law. Titus's misery is compounded by the arrival of his brother Marcus, who has found Titus's daughter, Lavinia, raped and mutilated—her tongue and hands cut off so that she cannot identify her attackers. Titus is then tricked into cutting off his own hand by Aaron, Tamora's lover, who convinces him that it is the only way to save his sons. The horrifying scene reaches its climax when the hand, together with the heads of

the young men, is delivered back to Titus, leaving him hysterical, and vowing revenge. The bloody violence in the play reaches outrageous, even ridiculous, extremes—yet there is dignity in the verse with which Titus, Marcus, and Lucius express the depth of their grief. The earliest tragedy attributed to Shakespeare is Titus Andronicus (published in 1594). In its treatment of murder, mutilation, and bloody revenge, the play is characteristic of many popular tragedies of the Elizabethan period (see Revenge Tragedy). The structure of a spectacular revenge for earlier heinous and bloody acts, all of which are staged in sensational detail, derives from Roman dramatist Seneca. It probably reached Shakespeare by way of Thomas Kyd's The Spanish Tragedy (1589). Shakespeare's gory tragedy proved highly successful in Shakespeare's time. But later audiences found the violent excesses of Titus Andronicus absurd or disgusting, and only recently has the play's theatrical power been rediscovered. From the 1960s on, many directors and critics have recognized in the play's daring exploration of violence concerns that go beyond the merely sensationalistic to address some of the deepest fears and 43 preoccupations of the modern world.

➔ *ROMEO AND JULIET*

In the famous balcony scene from the tragedy Romeo and Juliet by William Shakespeare, Juliet Capulet emerges from her bedroom to muse upon the young man she has just met and fallen in love with, Romeo Montague. He, much taken with her, overhears her thoughts with pleasure while hidden below. A longstanding feud between the Capulets and Montagues keeps the young lovers apart. Romeo and Juliet (1595) is justly famous for its poetic treatment of the ecstasy of youthful love. The play dramatizes the fate of two lovers victimized by the feuds and misunderstandings of their elders and by their own hasty temperaments. Shakespeare borrowed the tragic story of the two young Italian lovers from a long narrative poem, The Tragicall Historye of Romeus and Juliet (1562) by English writer Arthur Brooke. Shakespeare, however, added the character of Mercutio, increased the roles of the friar and the nurse, and reduced the moralizing of Brooke's work. The play made an instant hit; four editions of the play were published before the 1623 Folio, demonstrating its popularity. The play continues to be widely read and performed today, and its story of innocent love destroyed by inherited hatred has seen numerous reworkings, as, for example, in the musical West Side Story

(1957) by American composer Leonard Bernstein. The balcony scene (Act 2, Scene II) from Romeo and Juliet is one of the best-known scenes in Shakespeare's plays, and is almost certainly the most frequently parodied. Juliet's line "O Romeo, Romeo!— wherefore art thou Romeo?" is perhaps as well-known as Hamlet's famous question, "To be or not to be…?", but is often misunderstood. Romeo, having fallen for Juliet at a party he gatecrashed, has made his way to her window to woo her. There he overhears her talking aloud of her own love for him, and her concern about the fact that he is a Montague, born of a family that are enemies to her own household: "wherefore", or "why", she asks herself, could he not have been born with any other name? The celestial imagery that Romeo uses to describe Juliet, and her use of beautiful images from nature — a rose, the sea — develop a richly romantic atmosphere. However, at the same time, Juliet's concern for the danger facing Romeo should he be found, and the interruptions of the nurse, who almost discovers their secret meeting, build up dramatic tension, foreshadowing the tragedy that will eventually engulf these "star-crossed lovers".

➔ *JULIUS CAESAR*

The great English dramatist William Shakespeare showed his mastery of the art of rhetoric in this excerpt from Julius Caesar (1599). The scene, the funeral of Roman ruler Julius Caesar, opens with a well-received speech by Marcus Brutus, one of Caesar's assassins. Brutus, who was highly respected by the people of Rome, argues that Caesar had become overly ambitious. Here, Roman statesman Mark Antony replies with a virtuoso address that turns the crowd against Brutus, but leaves the impression that Antony is a noble bystander, rather than a cunning agitator. Julius Caesar was written about 1599 and first published in 1623. Though a serious tragedy of political rivalries, it is less intense in style than the tragic dramas that followed it. Shakespeare based this political tragedy concerning the plot to overthrow Julius Caesar on Lives of the Noble Grecians and Romans by 1st-century Greek biographer Plutarch. Plutarch's Lives had first appeared in English in 1579, in a version produced by Thomas North from a French translation of the original. The North translation provided Shakespeare and his contemporaries with a great deal of historical material. Shakespeare followed Plutarch closely in Julius Caesar; little of incident or character appears in the

play that is not found in the Lives as well, and he sometimes used North's wording. Shakespeare's play centers on the issue of whether the conspirators were justified in killing Caesar. How a production answers that question determines whether the conspirator Brutus is seen as sympathetic or tragically self-deceived.

MATURE TRAGEDIES

Since first performed in the early 1600s, the title role in William Shakespeare's Hamlet has remained a favorite of many actors because of the emotional complexity of Hamlet's personality. Nowhere is this complexity more apparent than in Hamlet's famous soliloquy in Act III, Scene 1. The soliloquy is a monologue in which a character reveals inner thoughts, motivations, and feelings. Shakespeare used the technique often, and his soliloquies are poetic and rich in imagery. In Hamlet, a play about a man whose mind may be his fatal flaw, the form reaches its highest level.

The tragedies Shakespeare wrote after 1600 are considered the most profound of his works and constitute the pillars upon which his literary reputation rests. Some scholars have tied the darkening of his dramatic imagination in this period to the death of his son in 1601. But in the absence of any

compelling biographical information to support this theory, it remains 45 only a speculation. For whatever reason, sometime around 1600 Shakespeare began work on a series of plays that in their power and profundity are arguably unmatched in the achievement of any other writer.

➔ *HAMLET*

Hamlet, written about 1601 and first printed in 1603, is perhaps Shakespeare's most famous play. It exceeds by far most other tragedies of revenge in the power of its ethical and psychological imagining. The play is based on the story of Amleth, a 9th-century Danish prince, which Shakespeare encountered in a 16th-century French account by Fran3ois Belleforest. Shakespeare's Hamlet tells the story of the prince's effort to revenge the murder of his father, who has been poisoned by Hamlet's uncle, Claudius, the man who then becomes Hamlet's stepfather and the king. The prince alternates between rash action and delay that disgusts him, as he tries to enact the revenge his father's ghost has asked from him. The play ends in a spectacular scene of death: As Hamlet, his mother, his uncle, and Laertes (the lord chamberlain's son) all lie dead, the Norwegian prince Fortinbras marches in to claim the Danish throne. Hamlet is

certainly Shakespeare's most intellectually engaging and elusive play. Literary critics and actors turn to it again and again, possibly succeeding only in confirming the play's inexhaustible richness and the inadequacy of any single attempt finally or fully to capture it.

At the opening of the drama, Hamlet, the prince of Denmark, has returned home after the death of his father, the king. Shortly after the funeral, Hamlet's mother remarried Hamlet's uncle Claudius, who succeeded his father on the throne. In the following scenes from the first act, Hamlet is visited by his father's ghost, which tells Hamlet that he was murdered by Claudius. Hamlet then vows to avenge his father's death, and forces his friends Horatio and Marcellus to swear never to tell what they saw or heard that night. British actor Laurence played the title character in the Academy Awardwinning motion picture Hamlet (1948), based on the play by William Shakespeare. Olivier is considered by many people to be one of the most famous stage and film actors in history. He produced, directed, and acted in a series of films based on plays by Shakespeare, including Henry V (1946), Hamlet, and Richard III (1962).

Hamlet's Soliloquy, Act III In this excerpt from the tragic play Hamlet by William Shakespeare, Hamlet reveals that his

self-doubt and inability to avenge his father's death have led him to the brink of suicide. A British actor with the Royal Shakespeare Company recites the well-known soliloquy "To Be or Not to Be.

➔ *OTHELLO*

Othello was written about 1604, though it was not published until 1622. It portrays the growth of unjustified jealousy in the noble protagonist, Othello, a Moor serving as a general in the Venetian army. The innocent object of his jealousy is his wife, Desdemona. In this domestic tragedy, Othello's evil lieutenant Iago draws him into mistaken jealousy in order to ruin him. Othello is destroyed partly through his gullibility and willingness to trust Iago and partly through the manipulations of this villain, who clearly enjoys the exercise of evildoing just as he hates the spectacle of goodness and happiness around him. At the end of the play, Othello comes to understand his terrible error; but as always in tragedy, that knowledge comes too late and he dies by his own hand in atonement for his error. In his final act of selfdestruction, he becomes again and for a final time the defender of Venice and Venetian values.

➔ *KING LEAR*

King Lear was written about 1605 and first published in 1608. Conceived on a grander emotional and philosophic scale than Othello, it deals with the consequences of the arrogance and misjudgment of Lear, a ruler of early Britain, and the parallel behavior of his councilor, the Duke of Gloucester. Each of these fathers tragically banishes the child who most has his interests at heart and places himself in the power of the wicked child or children. Each is finally restored to the loving child, but only after a rending journey of suffering, and each finally dies, having learned the truth about himself and the world, but too late to avert disaster. King Lear is arguably Shakespeare's most shocking play; the scenes of Lear with his dead child and of Gloucester having his eyes struck out are horrible images of the world's cruelty. But the 47 play offers moving if ineffective examples of love and compassion: Even if these emotions are incapable of redeeming this world, they are discovered as infinitely precious in their very defeat.

➔ *ANTONY AND CLEOPATRA*

Antony and Cleopatra was written about 1606 and first published in 1623. It deals with a different type of love than

that in Shakespeare's earlier tragedies, namely the middle-aged passions of the Roman general Mark Antony and the Egyptian queen Cleopatra. Their love, which destroys an empire, is glorified by some of Shakespeare's most sensuous poetry. Antony and Cleopatra, like the other two plays that close Shakespeare's tragic period—Timon of Athens and Coriolanus—depicts events from ancient history and draws on North's translation of Plutarch's Lives. The action in the play shifts from Egypt to Rome to Greece and back to Egypt and includes a battle at sea. In the process the play contrasts the luxuriant atmosphere of Egypt with the strict military code of Rome, and the cold and calculating Roman general Octavius with the passionate but ill-advised Antony. The contrasts between Roman rigor and Egyptian luxury are at the heart of this play, which keeps them in provocative balance and offers "no midway/Twixt these extremes at all."

➔ *MACBETH*

Macbeth was written about 1606 and first published in 1623. In the play Shakespeare depicts the tragedy of a man torn between an amoral will and a powerfully moral intellect. Macbeth knows his actions are wrong but enacts his fearful

deeds anyway, led on in part by the excitement of his own wrongdoing. In securing the Scottish throne, Macbeth deadens his moral intelligence to the point where he becomes capable of increasingly murderous (and pointless) behavior, although he never becomes the monster the moral world sees. At all times he feels the pull of his humanity. Yet for Macbeth there is no redemption, only the sharp descent into a bleak pessimism. Human existence, as he sees it (or as he has made it, at least for himself), amounts to nothing:

«Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day
To the last syllable of recorded time,
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle.
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing». (Act V, scene 4)

Shakespeare's Macbeth is a study of the evil that is in every human heart, and of one man's downfall as he willfully gives way to its temptations. Returning from battle, Macbeth is greeted by three witches, who tell him that he will one day become king. As a reward for his military successes, he then receives the title of Thane of Cawdor from King Duncan,

confirming part of the witches' prophecy. Once Macbeth arrives back at his estate, Lady Macbeth spurs her husband's ambition forward, and together they hatch a plan to kill the king and thereby hasten Macbeth's accession to the throne. In Act 2, Scene II, Lady Macbeth is waiting while her husband carries out the murder. When he enters in disarray, the murder weapons still in his bloodstained hands, she takes it upon herself to frame Duncan's grooms for the killing, and to ensure that her husband's guilt is concealed. The Lady's purposeful activity provides a stark contrast to Macbeth's almost paralytic state as he becomes locked into an obsessive contemplation of the bloody deed. Lady Macbeth berates him for allowing such fearful imaginings to distract him, but to a 17th-century audience Macbeth's account of his inability to say "amen" to the grooms' prayer clearly illustrates the real peril of his soul. Transfixed by the horror of his crime and the power that it promises, he consciously rejects the possibility of repentance, salvation, and an eternal future for the man that he has been—he chooses to know himself no longer, but instead to "know" only the deed and the power it will bring, and so he becomes the very embodiment of his crime: the bloody, usurping tyrant. Ultimately Macbeth brings about his own downfall,

deliberately yielding himself to the destiny suggested by his prophetic encounter with the witches — fleeting kingship and eternal damnation.

➔ *CORIOLANUS*

In Coriolanus Shakespeare explores the conflicts between public and private life, between personal needs and those of the community, and between the pressures of individual honour and family ties. Previously a respected Roman general, Coriolanus has been banished from the city as a result of political unrest within the state. To satisfy his desire for vengeance against those he feels have betrayed him, he has joined with his former enemy, the Volscian leader Tullus Aufidius, and is preparing to fight against Rome. Coriolanus rejects the pleas of friends sent from Rome to persuade him to change his course of action, and believes himself capable of operating independently of and unaffected by others. However, in Act 5, Scene 3, his 49 mother, wife, and young son are sent to plead with him on behalf of Rome, and Coriolanus's pride is finally overcome, ultimately leading to his downfall. Shakespeare's last tragedies, Coriolanus and Timon of Athens, both set in classical times, were written in 1607 and 1608 and first published in the 1623 Folio.

Because their protagonists appear to lack the emotional greatness or tragic stature of the protagonists of the major tragedies, the two plays have an austerity that has cost them the popularity they may well merit. In Coriolanus Shakespeare adapts Plutarch's account of the legendary Roman hero Gnaeus Marcius Coriolanus to the tragedy of a man who is arrogant and rigid, even in his virtue "too noble for the world." If Coriolanus in his integrity refuses to curry favor with the populace, he also reveals his contempt for the citizenry. The isolating pride of this great but flawed individual prevents him from finding any comfortable place in the community. Finally, he is banished from Rome, and he seeks revenge against the city. Eventually his wife, mother, and young son are sent to plead with him to spare Rome, an action that reveals the relatedness to his others he would deny. The play powerfully explores the conflicts between public and private life, between personal needs and those of the community, and between the pressures of individual honor and family ties and national ties.

➔ *TIMON OF ATHENS*

Timon of Athens, written about 1608 and first published in the 1623 Folio, is a bitter play about a character who reacts

to the ingratitude he discovers by hating all of humanity. Through his generosity to friends and flatterers, Timon bankrupts himself and then finds these same people unwilling to assist him in his poverty. His withering misanthropy follows. As in The Merchant of Venice, Shakespeare explores the relationships between financial ties and ties of friendship. Shakespeare probably found some of the material for his play in Plutarch's Lives, where anecdotes about Timon appear in the life of Marc Antony and the life of the Greek politician and general Alcibiades. He perhaps also found material in a dialogue, Timon, the Man-Hater, by the Greek writer Lucian, which had been adapted into an anonymous English play, Timon, and probably performed around 1602 in one of the London law schools, known as Inns of Court.

THE LATE PLAYS

Toward the end of his career, Shakespeare created several experimental plays that have become known as **tragicomedies** or **romances**. These plays differ considerably from Shakespeare's earlier comedies, being more radical in their dramatic art and showing greater concern with reconciliation among generations. Yet like the

earlier comedies the tragicomedies end happily with reunions or renewal. Typically, virtue is sorely tested in the tragicomedies, but almost miraculously succeeds. Through the intervention of magic and art—or their emotional equivalent, compassion, or their theological equivalent, grace—the spectacular triumph of virtue that marks the ends of these plays suggests redemptive hope for the human condition. In these late plays, the necessity of death and sadness in human existence is recognized but located within larger patterns of harmony that suggest we are “led on by heaven, and crowned with joy at last,” as the epilogue of Pericles proposes.

➔ *PERICLES, PRINCE OF TYRE*

Pericles exists only in a somewhat corrupted text, an unauthorized version probably “pirated” by Shakespeare’s contemporaries—created from notes taken during performances and published in order to capitalize on its great popularity. The play is also thought by critics to have originally been a collaborative effort between Shakespeare and another author. Its central themes, however, are characteristic of the tragicomic romances of Shakespeare’s late period. As in The Winter’s Tale and The Tempest, the

play focuses particularly on the relationship between father and daughter. Its backdrop of the sea further recalling the exotic atmosphere of The Tempest, while its concern with separation and reunion is reminiscent of Leontes' estrangement from and reconciliation with his wife and daughter in The Winter's Tale—although, unlike Leontes, Pericles is innocent of any blame for the separation. Here, in Act 5, Scene i, after a series of adventures, King Pericles, believing his wife and daughter to be dead, has fallen into a deep depression and has not spoken for three months. His ship comes to rest near Mytilene. There, he is welcomed by the governor, Lysimachus, who, hearing of the King's plight, introduces him to a girl whose beauty and virtue he believes may help to effect a cure. The cure is indeed successful, as the girl is discovered to be Pericles' long-lost daughter Marina. The romantic tragicomedy Pericles, Prince of Tyre was written in 1607 and 1608 and first published in 1609. It concerns the trials and tribulations of 51 the title character, including the painful loss of his wife and the persecution of his daughter. After many exotic adventures, Pericles is reunited with his loved ones; even his supposedly dead wife is discovered to have been magically preserved. The play's central themes are characteristic of the late plays. Pericles

focuses particularly on the relationship between father and daughter, as do The Winter's Tale and The Tempest. Its backdrop of the sea also recalls the setting of The Tempest, while its concern with separation and reunion is reminiscent of The Winter's Tale. However, Pericles is innocent of any blame for the disruption of his family, unlike Leontes's estrangement from his wife and daughter in The Winter's Tale. Although Pericles, Prince of Tyre was a great success in its own time, the play exists only in a somewhat corrupted text. It did not appear in the First Folio, and critics have long debated how much of it Shakespeare actually wrote. Some believe the play was a collaborative effort between Shakespeare and another author, usually thought to be George Wilkins. Pericles is based on a medieval legend, Apollonius, Prince of Tyre, which had many English retellings, from Confessio Amantis (Confessions of a Poet) by John Gower in the late 14th century to a prose novella by Laurence Twine written in the 1570s.

➔ *CYMBELINE*

Cymbeline was written about 1610 and first published in the 1623 Folio, where it appears as the last of the tragedies. Like the other late plays, Cymbeline responds to the fashion

of the time for colorful plots and theatrical display. It is packed with adventure, plot reversals, and dramatic spectacle, and was perhaps intended to exploit the mechanical resources of Blackfriars, the new indoor theater of Shakespeare's company. One stage direction instructs that "Jupiter descends in thunder and lightning, sitting upon an eagle he throws a thunderbolt." This bit of staging was far better suited to the indoor theater than to the Globe, where the play was also performed. The play has three interrelated plots: one concerns Imogen's love for her husband, Posthumus, and his jealousy; another involves the long-lost sons of King Cymbeline; and the third concerns Britain's challenge to the power of Rome. The three plots marvelously come together in the play's astonishing conclusion, as characters move from error to truth, from skepticism to faith, and from hatred to love. Confusion and loss are replaced by clarity and gain, as families and nations are reunited and are again at peace. At the play's end, the comic order is, as the Soothsayer says, "full accomplished." King Cymbeline ruled at the time of Jesus Christ's incarnation. If the Soothsayer's words seem to the echo Christ's "consummatum est" (it is finished), it may 52 be because the achievement of harmony

in the play offers a secular (worldly) reflection of the patterns of Christian salvation history.

➔ *THE WINTER'S TALE*

The Winter's Tale was written about 1610 and published for the first time in the 1623 Folio. In The Winter's Tale, as in Cymbeline, characters suffer great loss and pain and families are driven apart, but by the end most of what has been lost has been regained. This poignant romance revolves around the estrangement of Leontes, King of Sicilia, from his wife and daughter. In a sudden fit of jealousy Leontes becomes convinced that his wife, Hermione, has been conducting an affair with his friend Polixenes. Believing the daughter she bears is not his own, he orders the child to be abandoned abroad. The first three acts deal with Leontes's jealousy, his persecution of Hermione, the death of his son, Mamillius, the loss of his daughter, Perdita, and the recognition of his error and subsequent repentance. In the middle of the play a speech by Time marks the change of fortunes that lead to the reconciliation and renewal of the final scene, with its spectacular revelation that Hermione, long thought dead, in fact still lives. Shakespeare borrowed the plot for The Winter's Tale from Pandosto, the Triumph of

Time (1588), a romance in prose by English writer Robert Greene. One of Shakespeare's last plays, the beautiful, poignant romance story of The Winter's Tale revolves around the estrangement of Leontes, King of Sicilia, from his wife and daughter, and their eventual reconciliation. In a sudden fit of jealousy Leontes becomes convinced that his wife has been conducting an affair with his friend Polixenes and orders the daughter she bears to be abandoned abroad, believing the child is not his own. The first scene presented here shows the humiliating trial to which Leontes then subjects his wife, Hermione, and his tragic realization—too late—that he has made a grave error. Guided by Hermione's servant Paulina, he enters a 16- year period of mourning and repentance. The fourth act of the play follows the girl, christened Perdita, as she grows up in the Bohemian countryside, before her chance return to her father's court, where her true identity is gratefully discovered. Finally, in the second scene given below, Paulina leads Perdita to view her mother 's statue, where the penitent Leontes is granted an even greater miracle of grace and reconciliation. The statue awakes, and the three are finally reunited. "A sad tale's best for winter", perhaps, but as this tale reveals, spring follows winter, and the hope of renewal is thus ever present.

➔ *THE TEMPEST*

The Tempest, perhaps the most successful of the tragicomedies, was written about 1611 and published for the first time in the 1623 Folio. The play's resolution suggests the beneficial effects of the union of wisdom and power. In this play Prospero is deprived of his dukedom by his brother and banished to an island. But he defeats his usurping brother by employing magical powers and furthering a love match between his daughter and the son of the king of Naples. At the play's conclusion, Prospero surrenders his magical powers. In this surrender some critics have seen Shakespeare's own relinquishment of the magic of the theater. In spite of the appealing sentimentality of this idea, The Tempest was not Shakespeare's last play, and it is worth remembering that Prospero gives up his magic only to return to the responsibilities of rule he had previously ignored.

«Our revels now are ended. These our actors,
As I foretold you, were all spirits and
Are melted into air, into thin air:
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,
The cloud-capp'd towers, the gorgeous palaces,
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,
Ye all which it inherit, shall dissolve

And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff
As dreams are made on, and our little life
Is rounded with a sleep». (Act I V, scene 1)

The closing lines of English dramatist William Shakespeare's tragicomedy The Tempest (1611?) are often interpreted as Shakespeare's own farewell to the theater. The play is thought to be the last written solely by Shakespeare. It tells the story of Prospero, magician and former duke of Milan, who has been exiled and shipwrecked on an island. The Tempest is a masterful meditation on authorship and the process of creation, and on the ephemeral nature of art and life. As Prospero turns and addresses the audience in the epilogue, the voices of character, actor, and author emerge and intertwine. The Tempest is without doubt reflective in tone, especially on the end of life, in its concerns with remembrance and forgiveness, the loss and limitation of power, and the need for the reconciliation of the past, present, and future.

LATE COLLABORATIONS

Although The Tempest probably was Shakespeare's final solo creation, he is thought to have continued to work as a collaborator on several plays, including Henry VIII and The

Two Noble Kinsmen. The historical drama Henry VIII, also known as All Is True, was probably written about 1613 with English dramatist John Fletcher, and first published in the 1623 Folio. It dramatizes events from Henry's reign leading to the birth of the future Queen Elizabeth I, presenting an implied history of the Reformation in a series of scenes on the fall from greatness of some characters (the Duke of Buckingham, Catherine of Aragyn, and Thomas Cardinal Wolsey) and the rise of others (Anne Boleyn and Thomas Cranmer). At the end of a performance at the Globe on June 29, 1613, the theater's thatched roof caught fire and the building burned to the ground.

The Two Noble Kinsmen, probably the last play Shakespeare wrote, was written jointly with John Fletcher about 1613. Both men's names appear on the first published edition in 1634. Scholars generally attribute to Shakespeare most of acts one and five and to Fletcher the bulk of the play's middle. The play tells of the competition of two friends, Palamon and Arcite, for the love of one woman, Emilia. She is the sister of Hippolyta, who was queen of the Amazons and wife of the Greek hero Theseus. The story is taken from The Knight's Tale, part of Chaucer's influential 14th-century masterpiece The Canterbury Tales.

THE HYPHENATED IDENTITY IN CONTEMPORARY MULTIETHNIC AMERICAN DRAMA

The term “hyphenated American” was in slang use by the late nineteenth century and assertion of such identity came to be looked upon with suspicion especially during the two world wars because it allegedly called into question the primary political loyalty of certain immigrant groups in the United States. Addressing the Knights of Columbus in New York City on 12 October 1915, Former President Theodore Roosevelt said: “When I refer to hyphenated Americans, I do not refer to naturalized Americans…. a hyphenated American is not an American at all…. The only man who is a good American is the man who is an American and nothing else” (“Theodore Roosevelt: Quotes, Sayings, and Aphorisms”). Who was this “good American”? American national identity had long been synonymous with a single white, male, middle-class culture – a collusion of race, gender, and class. And it is “hard not to acknowledge [in it] the shadows of … [American] national history” (Renshon 82). Various ethno-racial groups had been subjected to discriminatory treatment and had reasons to become increasingly conscious of their “hyphenated” identity as they

gradually learnt to negotiate the negative experiences they had gone through over the centuries.

Especially since the turbulent 1960s such marginalized communities have asserted their group identities, and multiculturalists have contested the concept of assimilation on the grounds that it demands diverse immigrant cultures to conform to Anglo-American ideals/values and harbors “deep layers of ethnocentric pretensions” (Rumbaut, qtd. in Renshon 84). The government has also increasingly “shied away from too close an association with fostering a national identity,” and this has resulted, as alleged by some sociologists, in the loss of American identity itself (Renshon 57). September 11, 2001 might have changed the scenario to an extent, underscoring the need, in certain cases, to find “in the direction of individualism” “[t]he path to One America” (94). Yet ethnic identification remains a strong element of the identity of many Americans. American identity, viewed in this light, has long been a hyphenated entity, paring the ethnic/ancestral by a hyphen with the fluid-rather-than-fixed “mainstream” called “American.” Most of today’s style guides recommend dropping the hyphen, designating the first word that indicates ancestral origin, as an adjective for

“American.” By contrast, several ethnic groups insist on retaining the hyphen, arguing that American identity is compatible with hybridity which should enrich rather than weaken the country. The epithet, hyphenated or compound, is there to stay. The relationship between the two terms, nevertheless, is in a constant state of flux: now the first prioritized over the second, now the second preferred over the first, now a more delicate balance envisioned between the two.

The multiethnic literature of the United States has addressed the identity issue most effectively, showing the difficulty of determining the “American-ness” (read: essence) of American culture itself. In his 2002 presidential address to the American Studies Association, Stephen H. Sumida significantly referred to the Japan/U.S. Friendship Commission’s dropping in 1993 of the term “American studies” in favor of the term “the study of the United States” and emphasized the need, after Gunter Lenz, to conceptualize “the national context, … national identities, … intercultural differences and conflicts of the U.S. American (multi)culture” (336-40).

In fact, ethnic identity now frames claims to social and economic visibility as well as to political power and participation. This significant shift has encouraged the hyphenated Americans to recover/emphasize the importance of their ethnicity as a way to claim, to borrow phrases from Paul R. Brass, “status and recognition… as a group at least equal to other groups” (19). While “many traditionalists see these trends as divisive forces,” especially in the wake of recent threats to national security/integration, others view the emphasis on cultural diversity as “the defining character of contemporary American society” (Hirschman and Snipp 89-90). The most recent trend in multiethnic American drama, as David Henry Hwang notes in his Foreword to *Asian American Drama*, is to “explode the very myth of an immutable cultural identity.” True, culture is “a living thing, born of ever-changing experience and therefore subject to continual reinterpretation.” True, ethnic identities cannot be separated, to quote Hwang, from “the other cultures which have also become part of our personal histories, whether these be Jewish, gay, or the natural result of a mixed-race heritage” (Hwang viii). Yet the need remains, as the plays discussed above suggest in various ways and to different degrees, to stay connected with one’s ethnic roots even as

they imbibe other cultures rather than adapt to the majority (read: white) culture once passed off as “mainstream” America.

The choice for the people with ethnic backgrounds is not between holding onto their own identity or having it wholly transformed, but maintaining a balance between the two positions in the ever-changing relations of power. However, there is no reason why work by ethnic playwrights should be produced only by ethnic theaters since it would ghettoize valuable work “that should speak to all races, especially to the culturally pluralistic society that the United States is fast becoming” (Ellis viii). Seeing each other’s works is, for the majority as well as for minority groups, a good way of developing a cross-cultural bond. Together, such plays speak to a mixed audience about what it means to be an American today.

African American theatre

(1900-1950)

Early in the century saw the establishment of African American Theatre**.** Bert Williams and George Walker had been a successful comedy team in vaudeville. In 1903, Williams and Walker opened *In Dahomey*, the first full-length, all-black musical on a major Broadway stage. It ran for 1,100 performances and then went to England. A truncated version of the show was performed for the King at Buckingham palace on June 27, 1903. Bert Williams joined Ziegfeld's Follies of 1910 and became the first African American performer in the Follies. By this time, he was earning as much money as the President of the United States.

The Harlem Renaissance was a rich period for the arts in New York. Centered in Harlem, it spanned from approximately 1918 through the mid-1930s. African American arts and literature gained national attention. It celebrated the emergence from enslavement and cultural ties to Africa. Prominent performers included Josephine Baker, Louis Armstrong, Paul Robeson, and Bill "Bojangles" Robinson. Of writers and playwrights at this time, Zora Neale

Hurston, Eulalie Spence, and Langston Hughes number among them. Langston Hughes wrote his play, *Mulatto*, in 1935, and it ran on Broadway for 373 performances, making it the longest-running African American drama until *A Raisin in the Sun* in 1959.

(since 1950)

Since 1950, however, the situation has begun to change significantly. There has been a virtual explosion of African American playwrights and plays – and performers – making their way to mainstream theatres. After the soldiers returned home from World War II, many of whom were African American, there was a strong movement to keep their access to the full spectrum of American culture and opportunities alive. That's what led, in large part, to the **Civil Rights movement of the 1960s**. The movement was scary and sometimes violent, but it was also ultimately successful in breaking through the segregationist barriers of the early part of the century and affording Black actors and playwrights a huge foothold in the industry. Just look around at the number of Black actors and actresses in theatre and the movies today. Essentially, it was the increase in numbers of black audience members that created the cause & effect

of this expansion of black themed plays and black acting companies, and actors.

In 1965, following the assassination of Malcolm X, LeRoi Jones, later Amiri Baraka (1934 – 2014), established the Black Arts Repertory Theatre in Harlem, NY. His desire was to create a Black aesthetic in American theatre and inspire future black theatres. The mission was to make theatre, “by us, about us, and for us.” Many of his plays, including *The Dutchman*, were staged there in the 1960s.

August Wilson (1945 – 2005) earned popular and critical success with his plays about the African American experience. His “American Century Cycle” (also called The Pittsburgh Cycle) is a series of ten plays, one for each decade, chronicling racial issues in the twentieth century. Wilson is quoted as saying, “I write about the black experience in America…because it is a human experience. And contained within that experience are all the universalities.”

The objectives of August Wilson’s rewriting of black history can be best summed up in his own words: “Let’s look at this [past] again and see where we’ve come from and how

we've gotten where we are now. I think if you know that, it helps determine how to proceed with the future" (qtd. in Hunter and White 373). In an attempt to dig out the black experience of the last hundred years in the U.S., Wilson planned a play-cycle: "I'm taking each decade and looking at one of the most important questions that blacks confronted in that decade and writing a play about it. Put them all together and you have a history" (qtd in Hunter and White 370). Centering around one of the most significant events in African-American history, the Great Migration, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (JTCG) dramatizes "the need for African-Americans to forge anew their identity, an identity that is at once African and American" (DeVries, qtd. in Hunter and White 375). Critiquing the "melting pot" metaphor of liberal white America, Wilson tells Bill Moyers in an interview: "Blacks don't melt in a pot… because we're very visible minority… We have a culture." ("August Wilson Playwright" 173).

Arab American Theater

Arab American theater is broadly defined as drama and performance in the United States created by artists of Arab heritage, who self-identify as Arab American, or who hail from one of the twenty-two Arabic-speaking countries in Southwest Asia and Africa. This definition has its pitfalls, including the fact that not all who come from the Arab world identify as such (e.g., Kurds or Maronites) or speak Arabic as their mother tongue (e.g., Armenians). Nonetheless, however they may identify, these artists have embodied knowledge of Arab culture that is unique to them and which they explore in various ways through their theater making in the American diaspora.

Additional defining features of Arab American theater include works that explore Arab diaspora experiences of dislocation, acculturation, and alienation; works that interrogate the forced politicization of Arabs in the United States and/or their persecution; works that narrate the negotiations of Arab identity and cultural plurality; and works that weave together Arab and American theatrical conventions, especially the use of Arabic language alongside English on stage.

Theater scholar Michael Malek Najjar asserts that Arab American drama, like Middle Eastern American drama more broadly, is rooted in polyculturalism, transnationalism, and diaspora conditions. Najjar further proposes thematic categories within this genre of drama as follows: return to homeland plays, persecution plays, diaspora plays, plays set in the homeland, and conflict plays. Thus, Arab American drama can also be defined by how it captures the push and pull between various sites or ways of belonging in the diaspora.

Arab American theater adopts American dramatic forms and, in that, varies from indigenous performance forms of the Arab world. The latter include poetry recitation (*zajal*, *muwashahat*, *maqamat*), puppetry and shadow plays (*khayal-al-zhill*), oral history and storytelling (*hakawati*, *rawi*, *hleiqi*), and other forms of popular or street performance, such as the *halqa*. Despite their differences, indigenous and American forms often blend together in the creative work of Arab American theater makers.

Early amateur plays represented stories from Arab history and folklore. Written and performed by immigrants taking part in cultural clubs and social organizations, they aimed to teach and preserve the homeland culture in their

new host society. The first known performance of this kind was of a play titled *Andromak* (1896), presented in New York by the Syrian Youth Society and reported on in the Egyptian Arabic newspaper al-Mushir.

At the turn of the 20th century, Arab immigrant writers in the United States began to develop more formal kinds of literary drama. Most of these early playwrights were educated intellectuals, not theater professionals, whose dramatic output was small in comparison to their poetry, essays, and novels. They included one-act and multiact works, Arabic and English language, and topics ranging from daily life in the homeland to cultural conflict among immigrants in the United States. These writings formed the earliest identifiable pieces of the Arab American theater canon.

20th-Century Beginnings

Arab American theater emerged among Arab migrants who made their way to the United States at the turn of the 20th century. Modern immigration from the Arab world to the United States began in the late 1800s and continued into the early 1900s, while much of the Arab world was still under Ottoman rule. It coincided with the Nahda (النهضة) cultural movement in the region, which brought about reforms in

many areas of society, including literature and theater in particular. Some of these reforms encompassed experimentation with language, such as writing in vernacular versus literary Arabic, and form, which included adaptations of European theatrical conventions and plays.

Among the initial immigrants to the United States from *bilad al-Sham* (بِلَاد الشَّام), or Greater Syria, in the eastern Mediterranean were intellectuals that carried the spirit of the Nahda with them and established their own diasporic cultural movement in the Americas, called al-Mahjar (المهجر). Mahjar writers—mostly poets, essayists, and novelists—included the earliest known Arab American playwrights: Ameen Rihani (1874–1940), Kahlil Gibran (1883–1931), and Mikhail Naimy (1889–1988). The three writers joined forces with other Arab American intellectuals to create the Pen League, or al-Rabita al-Qalamiyya (الرابطة القلمية). This New York–based literary society aimed to revive Arabic literature and shape philosophies of emergent Arab nationalism. Thus, even beyond playwriting, these early dramatists planted the seeds of Arab American cultural identity that would continue to grow.

The dramatic works of Mahjar writers revolved around stories from Arab history or the homeland, explorations of

East–West cultural differences, and collective versus individual identity formation in the diaspora. They were written in both Arabic and English, often as closet dramas that were meant to be read but not staged. While no known productions of these early plays occurred in the playwrights' lifetimes, some were published in Arab American periodicals and others enjoyed private readings. Notable works include Rihani's *Wajdah* (c. 1908),Gibran's *The Chameleons* (1916), and Naimy's *Fathers and Sons* (1916, revised 1953).

Early Productions and Companies

The mid- to late 20th century saw the first Arab American theatrical productions and the establishment of various nonprofessional theatrical troupes and companies. Most productions of this period remained localized to the immigrant communities that produced them and made up their target audience. Some exceptions to this insularity occurred, such as when well-known Arab American actor and comedian Danny Thomas performed *Ode to a Wailing Syrian* in 1944, a nightclub comedy routine about a Syrian immigrant mourning the death of his countrymen due to famine and conflict with the Ottomans. This tragicomic piece

serves as the precursor to distinctly Arab American stand-up comedy that would emerge in the early 2000s.

The first full-length Arab American play to be professionally produced, S. K. Hershewe's *An Oasis in Manhattan*, premiered in Los Angeles in 1965. The comedy told the story of a Lebanese American girl who, to her father's horror, brings home a Jewish American fiancé. It explores the prejudices of both Arab and Jewish communities, and Arab American actor Vic Tayback revived it in 1990.

After the 1967 Arab–Israeli war, and following the backlash the conflict caused against Arabs in the United States, assimilated Arab Americans made more concerted efforts to rally behind a distinct "Arab American" identity. The arts played an important role in this process. Between the 1980s and 2000s, those concerned with the power of self-definition and self-representation established several theater troupes and companies with the explicit mission of producing Arab American and/or Middle Eastern works.

Detroit, a growing hub for Arab American populations in the United States, became home to the Baghdad Theater in 1985, Firqat al-Yawm (Today's Troupe) in 1987, the Arab Theatrical Arts Guild in 1988, and Ajyal Theater Ensemble

in 1989. These troupes performed primarily Arabic-language plays written in vernacular, such as Iraqi dialect, for example, to entertain and educate an audience of more recent immigrants as they assimilated into their new society. In Los Angeles, another center of the Arab American populace, theater makers founded the Arab American Children's Theater Company in 1989, Al-Funun Al-Arabiya (Arab Arts) in 1992, and the Kanaaqeel Theater Group in 1998. These companies similarly aimed their productions at Arab American audiences, with some plays even developed through community-based methods that engaged target audiences as collaborators in the creative process.

21st-Century Professionalization

By the late 1990s and early 2000s, a greater number of theater companies and artists supported Arab American theater and contributed to its increasing professionalization. Among the most influential companies that produced contemporary Arab American works at this time were Golden Thread Productions in San Francisco, Silk Road Rising in Chicago, Noor Theatre in New York, and New Arab American Theater Works in Minneapolis. Together, these companies helped catapult the Middle Eastern American

theater movement that has gained momentum and visibility in the 21st century.

Founding artistic director Torange Yeghiazarian and a collective of artists looking to create a space for Middle Eastern cultures on American stages established Golden Thread Productions in 1996 in San Francisco. The company bills itself as the first American theater company devoted to the Middle East and has served as an incubator and platform for many contemporary Middle Eastern playwrights, including the most prolific Arab American playwright, Yussef El Guindi. He remains a long-time resident artist at Golden Thread and holds the record as the most produced playwright at the company.

Jamil Khoury and Malik Gillani cofounded Silk Road Rising in Chicago in 2003. Their vision for the company was to create a hub for theatrical and digital media storytelling that represented the Silk Road regions, including East Asia, South Asia, and the Middle East. In part, the company also emerged as a response to the aftermath of the attacks of 9/11 in which both the US government and media vilified many communities with Silk Road backgrounds. As such, activism, education, and community engagement have formed central tenants of Silk Road Rising’s mission.

Lameece Issaq, Maha Chelaoui, and Nancy Vitale, with the support of the New York Theatre Workshop at which it is a company-in-residence, established Noor Theater in 2010. The company dedicates itself to developing and producing works of Middle Eastern American theater artists through staged readings and co-productions. Their mission, which also came as a response to post-9/11 anti-Arab and Islamophobic backlash, strives to create a space where misrepresented Middle Eastern artists can explore their own narratives and voices without mediation.

New Arab American Theater Works began in Minneapolis in 2012 as a home for Arab, Arab American, and Muslim American theater artists. Under the leadership of founding artistic director Kathryn Haddad, the company has pursued a mission of fostering contemporary theater and literature by Arab and Muslim groups. This includes collaborations with its sister organization Mizna, which hosts cultural programming and publishes an arts journal by the same name.

Other notable companies that supported the professionalization of Arab American theater at the turn of the 21st century include the Nibras Theatre Ensemble and the Lark Play Development Center, both in New York, and

the Mosaic Theater in Washington, DC. While the first two companies no longer operate, Mosaic continues to produce Arab American plays as part of its mission to foster civic discourse and cross-cultural dialogue.

Playwrights and the Impact of 9/11

Arab American theater makers, along with their extended communities, found themselves pushed into the spotlight by the attacks of 9/11 and their aftermath. As the nation cast Arabs and Muslims as hyper visible enemies of the United States, Arab American artists felt pressure to react and respond through their artistic work. Theatrical production increased with the urgent need for fair and responsible representation. Playwrights in this period wrote in a resistant voice that challenged misperceptions about their communities, questioned government surveillance and abuse of power, challenged US intervention in the Middle East, and asserted Arab Americans' right to define themselves rather than be defined by biased dominant narratives. They wrote plays that spoke to both Arab American audiences and the broader public, finding ways to raise pressing issues that were at once specific and universal in their relevance.

Arab American playwrights that emerged in the early 21st century include Yussef El Guindi, Betty Shamieh, Heather Raffo, Mona Mansour, Ismail Khalidi, Leila Buck, Nathalie Handal, Denmo Ibrahim, Jamil Khoury, Sam Younis, Andrea Assaf, and Najla Said. Their plays include a range of forms and styles, from solo performance to ensemble plays, and dark comedies to emotional dramas. The most influential professional playwrights of the period—El Guindi, Shamieh, Raffo, and Mansour—helped energize the Arab and Middle Eastern and North African (MENA) American theater movement, increasing the visibility of their communities through national productions and published works.

Yussef El Guindi

El Guindi is an Egyptian American playwright born in Egypt and educated in London, France, and the United States. He received an Master of Fine Arts from Carnegie Mellon University in 1983. By far the most produced and published contemporary Arab American playwright, he has won numerous awards, including the Steinberg/ATCA New Play Award and the 2010 Middle East America Distinguished Playwright Award. His plays are overwhelmingly comedic, often leaning into farce and satire. El Guindi uses comedy to

disarm his audience and raise awareness about serious social and political issues that affect Arab and Muslim immigrant experiences.

El Guindi's notable works include Back of the *Throat* (2005), *Ten Acrobats in an Amazing Leap of Faith* (2005), *Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes* (2008), *Our Enemies: Lively Scenes of Love and Combat* (2008), *Language Rooms* (2010), *Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World* (2011), *Threesome* (2015), *The Talented Ones* (2017), *People of the Book* (2019), and *Hotter than Egypt* (2019). His plays have been published by Dramatists Play Service, Broadway Play Publishing, and National New Play Exchange. Five of his plays can also be found in his anthology *The Selected Works of Yussef El Guindi* (2019), published by Methuen Drama.

Back of the Throat dramatizes the persecution of innocent Arab Americans by the US government after the terror attacks of 9/11. It follows the surreal and threatening experience of Khaled, an Arab American writer who gets a surprise visit from two government agents accusing him of plotting with a terrorist. The play premiered in Seattle at

Theater Schmeater in 2005 and has been produced over a dozen times across the country to rave reviews.

Ten Acrobats in an Amazing Leap of Faith tells the story of an Egyptian American family whose members struggle with conflicting concepts of cultural identity and religiosity. As a family drama, it captures the diasporic experience and multi-generational challenges with identity formation. It premiered at Silk Road Rising in Chicago in 2005.

Jihad Jones and the Kalashnikov Babes and *Our Enemies: Lively Scenes of Love and Combat* show the playwright's interest in representations of Arabs and Muslims in the media, specifically in film and publishing, respectively. Arab American protagonists in these comedies face off against gatekeepers of industries set on reducing Arab and Muslim American representation to two dimensional caricatures of backward, repressed, and violent people. Both plays critique systemic misrepresentation in American media while also demonstrating how Arab Americans themselves can become complicit in these representations. They question whether any one voice is entitled to speak on behalf of a community. *Jihad Jones* had its world premiere at Golden Thread Productions in San Francisco in 2008,

and *Our Enemies* debuted at Silk Road Rising in Chicago that same year.

Like *Back of the Throat*, *Language Rooms* also deals with the persecution of Arabs and Arab Americans at the hands of the US government. Interestingly, however, the persecutor in this case is an Arab American himself: a government worker assigned to interrogate his own father. The play deals with the internal struggles of Arab Americans whose loyalties are tested and who feel torn between duty to their country and their families and communities. *Language Rooms* premiered at the Wilma Theater in Philadelphia in 2010.

Pilgrims Musa and Sheri in the New World adopts a different perspective as a romantic comedy about finding love and negotiating cross-cultural expectations. The play's protagonist, Musa, is a Muslim Egyptian American betrothed to a fellow Muslim but falling in love with a non-Muslim woman named Sheri. The play explores the tensions that immigrants face between their obligations to and desires for independence from social norms. *Pilgrims* debuted at ACT, A Contemporary Theatre in Seattle in 2011.

Threesome takes an uncomfortable look into relationships and the insidious issues that undermine them.

After a couple tries to solve their intimacy problems by inviting a stranger to a threesome, an excavation of secrets and traumas that rattle the relationship ensues. The dark comedy unpacks what makes us vulnerable to one another while dismantling assumptions about Arab women and sexuality in particular. *Threesome* premiered at Portland Center Stage and ACT, A Contemporary Theatre in 2015.

The Talented Ones examines the hopes and struggles of immigrants who pursue the American Dream. As aspirations and temptations test an immigrant couple's marriage, the play asks how definitions of success and failure condition our lives and relationships. It premiered at the Artists Repertory Theater in Portland in 2017.

Lastly, both *People of the Book* and *Hotter Than Egypt* delve into what happens when encounters with the past trouble present relationships. In the former, a reunion between two couples raises questions about loyalty, patriotism, and the often xenophobic American gaze. In the latter, another couple confronts temptation and personal politics while on a trip to Cairo. *People of the Book* premiered at ACT, A Contemporary Theater in Seattle in 2019, while *Hotter Than Egypt* debuted at ACT, A Contemporary Theatre and Marin Theatre Company in 2022.

Betty Shamieh

Shamieh is a Palestinian American actor and playwright born and raised in San Francisco to immigrant parents from Ramallah, Palestine. She earned degrees at Harvard and the Yale School of Drama, as well as numerous awards for her work, including an National Endowment for the Arts/Theatre Communications Group grant and Mellon Foundation Playwright in Residence fellowship. Her plays critique oppressive systems and explore topics such as the displacement and alienation of Palestinians, the communal tensions among Arabs in the diaspora, and the experiences of Arab women in relation to their social and political conditions.

Shamieh's most notable plays include *Chocolate in Heat* (2001), *Roar* (2004), *The Black Eyed* (2005), *Again and Against* (2006), *Territories* (2008), *Fit for a Queen* (2016), *The Strangest* (2017), and *As Soon as Impossible* (2021). Her plays have been translated into seven languages, performed in the United States and Europe, and published by Broadway Play Publishing Inc. and Theatre Communications Group.

Chocolate in Heat, Shamieh's debut play, tells the story of an Arab American woman whose life changes after a

violent hate crime. As a coming-of-age dark comedy, it unfolds in a series of interweaving monologues traveling backward in time. Shamieh herself performed in the title role at the world premiere at the New York International Fringe Festival in 2001.

Roar is a family drama that explores Palestinian exilic loss, the complexity of family ties, and the fear of persecution that Arab Americans felt in the post–Gulf War period of the early 1990s. It tells the story of a Palestinian American family living in Detroit whose members struggle to achieve their dreams, each in their own ways, and sometimes at a high cost. It opened off Broadway at the New Group in 2004 and was selected as a *New York Times* Critics Pick.

The Black Eyed, a deeply theatrical play about unanswered questions, brings together four Palestinian women from four different eras. The characters—which include the biblical Delilah and an Arab American victim of a terrorist attack—converge in the waiting room of the afterlife and struggle together to come to terms with their lives. The play premiered at the Magic Theatre in 2005 and off Broadway at New York Theatre Workshop in 2007.

Again and Against tells the story of an Arab American woman detained and interrogated by the Federal Bureau of Investigation for her suspected involvement in a terrorist plot hatched by her boyfriend. The play explores the governmental abuse of power in the surveillance, detention, and entrapment of Arab Americans in the age of the war on terror. It premiered in Stockholm, Sweden, at the Playhouse Theatre in 2006.

Commissioned by Trinity Rep and developed with Al-Harah Theatre Company at the Bethlehem Peace Center, *Territories* follows the fictionalized story of a nameless woman whom history has forgotten. Shamieh uses the sister of the medieval Islamic leader Saladin, kidnapped by a French crusader, to reveal the struggles of women embroiled in men's wars. The play premiered at the Magic Theater in San Francisco in 2008.

Another play inspired by historical women, *Fit for a Queen*, hilariously explores the power struggles of a fictional ancient Egypt. Queen Hatshepsut, who ruled as pharaoh in the 15th century BCE, faces off against challengers within her own family in this farce about political intrigue and sexual politics. The play received its world premiere at the Classical Theatre of Harlem in New York in 2016.

In *The Strangest*, Shamieh presents a murder mystery of sorts, interrogating the fate of an unnamed dead Arab from Albert Camus's novel *The Stranger*. Within a traditional oral storytelling frame, the playwright weaves together a play about romance, revolution, and family rivalry that results in the murder of the anonymous Arab. The play premiered at the Fourth Street Theatre in New York in 2017 to numerous accolades.

Lastly, *As Soon as Impossible* is a comedy that investigates how implicit bias can corrupt even the closest friendships. A pair of old friends—one Arab and one white—have their bond tested by the intrusion of chaotic characters, secrets, and surprises. Commissioned by Second Stage with support from the Time Warner Commissioning Program, the play received its first production at Stanford University in 2021.

Heather Raffo

An actor and playwright, Raffo was born and raised in Michigan by an Iraqi father and American mother. She graduated from the University of Michigan with a bachelors in English and received her MFA in acting from the University of California, San Diego, in 1998. The following year, she expanded her graduate thesis project into her first

play and launched her acting career in New York. Raffo's work has garnered international acclaim and numerous awards, including a Lucille Lortel Award and the prestigious Susan Smith Blackburn and Marian Seldes-Garson Kanin playwriting awards.

Raffo's plays explore conflict, loss, and identity as they relate to Iraqi and Iraqi American experiences. Her best-known play is the monodrama *9 Parts of Desire* (2003), and her other works include *Sounds of Desire* (2009), *Fallujah* (2016), and *Noura* (2018). The play *9 Parts of Desire* was first published in *Salaam|Peace, an Anthology of Middle Eastern American Drama* (2009). It was republished along with *Fallujah* and *Noura* in the anthology *Heather Raffo's Iraq Plays* (2021).

A 1993 visit to Baghdad inspired *9 Parts of Desire*, Raffo's most performed and acclaimed play, which considers the impact of the dual Gulf Wars on Iraq. The play spans the decades between the two wars and weaves together monologues capturing the lives of a cross-section of Iraqi women, exploring what it means to be a woman in a community ravaged by war. Raffo performed the play herself, premiering it at the Traverse Theater in Edinburgh, Scotland, in 2003. The play's off-Broadway premiere at the

Manhattan Ensemble Theatre sold out its nine-month run and was a critic's pick for over twenty-four weeks. She has toured the performance across the United States and internationally to great acclaim. In 2009, Raffo and Iraqi musician Amir El Saffar created a concert version of the play called *Sounds of Desire*, which premiered at the Kennedy Center.

Fallujah, the first opera about the Iraq war and for which Raffo wrote the libretto, is a collaborative creation that explores the ravages of posttraumatic stress on a soldier who served in Iraq and was one of a handful of survivors of the Battle of Fallujah. Inspired by the true story of US Marine Corps Sergeant Christian Ellis, the opera takes place in a veteran's hospital over the course of seventy-two hours in which a marine is on suicide watch. *Fallujah* weaves together scenes from before, during, and after the battle, illuminating the trauma and loss endured by both US soldiers and Iraqis. Raffo based the libretto on interviews with Ellis, as well as other American members of the armed forces and Iraqis, including her own family in Iraq. *Fallujah* received a staged reading at the 2014 Kennedy Center International Theater Festival and its world premiere at the Long Beach Opera in Southern California in 2016.

Finally, Raffo conceived of her play *Noura* in response to a community-centered workshop asking immigrant and American-born Middle Eastern women in New York to write their own narratives relating to themes from Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*. The play tells the story of an immigrant Iraqi couple living in New York, whose Christmas dinner and lives get disrupted by the appearance of an unexpected guest. *Noura* explores themes of motherhood, marriage, and the trauma of being forced to flee one's home. It premiered at the Shakespeare Theater in Washington, DC, in 2018 and has since been produced across the United States and internationally.

Mona Mansour

Playwright Mansour grew up in the suburbs of San Diego, California, as the daughter of a Lebanese immigrant and American mother. She studied acting and improvisation before turning to writing as a member of Second City Chicago and Groundlings Sunday Company. She moved to New York to pursue theater shortly after the 9/11 attacks and began exploring her bicultural identity through her writing and collaborations with the city's growing Middle Eastern American theater community. Produced across the United States, Mansour's work has earned her prestigious awards,

including the 2020 Kesselring Prize and Helen Merrill Award for Playwriting. She also co-founded the theater company SOCIETY in 2019 with Scott Illingworth and Tim Nicolai. Her notable plays include *The Way West* (2014), *Unseen* (2017), *We Swim, We Talk, We Go to War* (2018), and *The Vagrant Trilogy* (2018), which was published by Methuen Drama in 2022.

The Way West, a dark comedy, explores the stories people tell themselves to avoid painful realities. A financially ruined mother and her two grown daughters bounce between bickering, singing, and weaving tales of pioneer glory as they scramble for survival. The play had its world premiere at Steppenwolf Theater in Chicago in 2014.

Unseen follows an American conflict photographer, her mother, and her Turkish ex-lover as they grapple with the mystery of how she ended up unconscious at the site of a massacre in the Middle East. Through its exploration of trauma and ethics, the play asks what it means for individuals and societies to face the hidden impacts of their actions. *Unseen* premiered in 2017 at the Gift Theatre in Chicago.

We Swim, We Talk, We Go to War navigates questions of family, identity, and politics while challenging audiences to

think about the consequences of war. When an Arab American aunt and nephew find themselves on opposite sides of political debates, their heated exchanges test the bonds of love and nation. The Middle East America fellowship, a collaborative initiative of Golden Thread Productions, Silk Road Rising, and the Lark Play Development Center, commissioned the play in 2014. It received its premiere production in 2018 at Golden Thread in San Francisco.

Lastly, *The Vagrant Trilogy* consists of three plays titled *The Hour of Feeling*, *The Vagrant*, and *Urge for Going*. Mansour describes them as a conditional trilogy that depicts the moment of displacement and two alternate fates of a Palestinian refugee and his family. She first conceived of *Urge for Going* as an exploration of her father's homeland, where displaced Palestinian refugees live in perpetual liminality. The play tells the story of Adham and his family, who live in a refugee camp in southern Lebanon and struggle to achieve liberation and fulfillment, particularly for his daughter and son. It earned Mansour a place in the Public Theater's 2009 Emerging Writers Group, where she developed the idea of a trilogy. The Public Theater subsequently commissioned *The Vagrant*, the second in the

series, which explores an alternate fate for Adham. It depicts what might have happened if he had seized the opportunity to start a new life in London and left his family in Palestine after the 1967 Arab–Israeli war. The final piece of the trilogy, *The Hour of Feeling*, captures the beginning of the saga in 1967 and the moment that forces Adham to make his life-altering decision. While Mansour developed and produced the plays separately in 2011 (*Urge*), 2013 (*Vagrant*), and 2016 (*Hour*), the entire trilogy received a finishing commission at the Public Theater in 2017 and its world premiere at the Mosaic Theater in Washington, DC, in 2018. The trilogy debuted in New York at the Public Theater in 2022 after a long pandemic-induced delay and to rave reviews.

Stand-Up Comedy

Similar to playwriting, Arab American stand-up comedy grew greatly in the new millennium, amplified by the social and political conditions of the United States after 9/11.16 Comedians who previously did not necessarily identify as Arab American or did not perform culturally specific material began highlighting their heritage in their work. Their comedy became explicitly critical of issues affecting Arab Americans, such as anti-Arab bias,

government profiling, and stereotyping in the media. Prominent comedians of this period include Ahmed Ahmed, Aron Kader, Dean Obeidallah, Maysoon Zayid, Eman Morgan, Remy Munasifi, Sammy Obeid, Atheer Yacoub, Mike Esmaeil, Dave Merheje, Ramy Youssef, and Mo Amer.

Obeidallah and Zayid established the New York Arab American Comedy Festival in 2003 with the goal of countering negative images and stereotypes of Arabs in the media. As the first stand-up comedy festival to bring comedians together under the Arab American banner, it provided a network, as well as a platform, for the amplification of Arab American perspectives in comedy. It also helped facilitate connections to other emergent Middle Eastern stand-up comedy communities in the United States and abroad.

Some comedians during this period also found success in transitioning their comedy to mainstream media such as television, radio, and streaming services. *The Axis of Evil Comedy Tour*, a comedy special featuring Ahmed, Obeidallah, Kader, and Iranian American comedian Maz Jobrani, became the first such performance to gain a wider national audience. Featured on the broadcast network Comedy Central in 2007, it went on to tour nationally and

internationally in the Middle East. Subsequently, Arab American comedians began getting featured in late-night television shows and taking their routines to social media platforms like YouTube and streaming services like Netflix. In 2017, Obeidallah transformed his comedy into a radio show on Sirius XM called *The Dean Obeidallah Show*.

In addition to filming stand-up comedy specials for HBO and Netflix, respectively, comedians Youssef and Amer succeeded in creating original scripted comedy series for streaming services as well. Youssef premiered his self-titled show *Ramy* in 2019 on Hulu. The series follows a young Egyptian American man on his spiritual journey of self-discovery, complete with political and social faux pas, intergenerational struggles with his Muslim parents, and everyday life lessons about love and survival. Youssef won the Golden Globe for Best Actor in a Television Comedy in 2020 for his performance in the series.18 Meanwhile, Amer premiered his self-titled series *Mo* on Netflix in 2022. The loosely autobiographical comedy-drama follows the titular character as he navigates the experiences of being an undocumented Palestinian refugee living in Houston, Texas. The show has won critical acclaim as groundbreaking in its

depiction of the refugee experience and for being the first American series to feature a Palestinian protagonist.19

Discussion of the Literature

Arab American theater scholarship, while limited, has focused on history and dramatic criticism. It has also tended to center the historical narrative of the contemporary Arab American theater movement on the resistant strategies of post-9/11 drama and performance. Theater historian Michael Malek Najjar authored the foundational book on the subject, *Arab American Drama, Film and Performance: A Critical Study from 1908 to the Present* (2015). It argues that Arab American artists restage and recast their identity through their art as a way of resisting negative stereotypes. Najjar contends that plays, stand-up comedy, films, and solo performances sometimes fruitfully disrupt and other times unintentionally reify stereotypes.

Other scholars explore dramas among wider studies of literature that negotiate Arab American identity and cultural resistance. Somaya Samy Sabry's *Arab-American Women's Writing and Performance: Orientalism, Race and the Idea of the Arabian Nights (2011)* analyzes Arab American women's writing and performance, arguing that they utilize orality as a resistant strategy, resituating their narratives within the non-

Western tradition. Carol Fadda-Conrey's *Contemporary Arab American Literature: Transnational Configurations of Citizenship and Belonging (2014)* explores how Arab American dramas attempt to destabilize the homogenization of cultural identity and uplift transnational belonging, thereby de-emphasizing assimilation or nostalgia in favor of interrogating identity construction.

Meanwhile, some scholars tend to emphasize 9/11 as a turning point for Arab American theater in both the conceptual and practical sense. Theater scholar Dalia Basiouny's chapter "Descent as Dissent: Arab American Theatrical Responses to 9/11" (2012) highlights how 9/11 drove artists to seek each other out intentionally and to reclaim their Arabness through unprecedented collective work. Sarah Giese's chapter "'This Is My Country Too, You Know!': Intercultural Encounters in Post-9/11 Arab American Drama" (2016) points out that the post-9/11 Arab American theater movement emerged as a nonhomogeneous response to hyper visibility. Roaa Ali's *"In Response to Narratives of Stereotypes: Arab American Playwrights Reclaim and Fortify Arab American Representation" (2017)* notes how post-9/11 narratives of collective blame and terrorism forced artists to contend with their internalized conditions and stereotypes while using drama to reclaim their identities.

Scholars continue to deepen the field of Arab American theater studies and increase the availability of primary and secondary texts for study. Michael Malek Najjar has expanded his previous work through the publication of *Middle Eastern American Theatre: Communities, Cultures and Artists (2021),* which places Arab American theater history and drama in conversation with its contemporaries of MENA American culture. He has also spearheaded the publications of several anthologies of Arab American plays by El Guindi, Raffo, Mansour, and others. Yasser Fouad Selim has authored several articles on identity, transnationalism, and censorship in Arab American theater and stand-up comedy. Important research questions regarding the conditions of Arab American cultural production and systemic bias remain. For example, what challenges and opportunities do the socio-political conditions in the United States pose to Arab American cultural production? How do Arab American artists navigate systemic bias in the process of creating and publicizing their work? How can theater makers, arts leaders, and institutions sustain and grow Arab American theater? Scholars like Selim, Ali, and Hala Baki have begun to explore these questions.

From Comedy to Tragedy:
A Brief History of the Evolution of Theatre in Egypt

(MARY ARAVANIS, 7 OCTOBER 2020)

Although theatre, as an art form, is said to have been present during the time of the pharaohs, the theatre most of us are familiar with today didn't exist in Egypt until fairly recently—starting in the late 18th century, to be precise.

Ancient Greece is known to have been the birthplace of modern theatre, with their tragedies, comedies and satires being both studied and performed to this very day. It is believed, however, that some form of theatre preceded this both in Greece and Ancient Egypt.

These Ancient Egyptian shows were quite different from the drama we are familiar with today however, and were most likely ritualistic and religious in nature, without a certain type pf structure or storyline to it. That being said, we will look more closely at the evolution of modern 'dramatic' theatre in Egypt.

EGYPT'S INTRODUCTION TO THEATRE

According to information provided through Egypt's State Information Service (SIS), theatre first appeared in Egypt during the French campaign in 1789.

Almost a century later, in 1869, Khedive Ismail established the French Comedy Theatre and the Opera House as part of celebrations he had prepared on the occasion of opening the Suez Canal.

During this time, theatre in Egypt was heavily influenced by European culture and therefore adopted the same format of drama. In that sense, theatre was introduced in its traditional European sense, with court-style theaters and long complex dramas being performed.

As stated in a 1935 article entitled ‘The Arabic Theatre in Egypt’, published by Cambridge University Press and written by Nevill Barbour, “the establishment of theatre in Egypt, like many other Western innovations, was aided by the initiative of the Khedive Ismail.” It was indeed Khedive Ismail who encouraged theatre to thrive in Egypt—even the now world-renowned opera Aida by Verdi was actually commissioned by Khedive Ismail for the opening of the Suez Canal, but it was not completed in time.

As time passed, theatre evolved in Egypt and began to adopt more culturally-specific aspects, having had more and more plays written and performed in Arabic and tying

in stories and contexts that reflect Egyptian society, as opposed to European social and cultural themes.

It wasn't until the year 1921, however, that Egypt finally established its first national theatre. Widely considered to be the art form's golden age in the country, the early 20th century was a pivotal period in time for the development of Egyptian theatre.

THE GOLDEN AGE OF EGYPTIAN THEATRE

During the early 20th century, Egypt saw a multitude of sociopolitical changes—having initially been under British rule and occupation, and then transitioning into a republic following the 1952 revolution.

As such, theatre in Egypt naturally saw a ton of experimentation during this time. Preceding this, the country had already established itself as an artistic hub, which saw many artists migrate to Egypt in search of creative and social freedom.

According to an American Theatre article by Joseph Fahim, there existed two main brands of theatre at the time, those being "the comic theatre, represented by the companies of Naguib Al Rihani and Ali El Kassar, and the

dramatic theatre, represented by the legendary company of Youssef Wahbi, which incorporated the biggest stage performers of the time."

As previously touched on, over time—most notably following the 1952 revolution—Egyptian Theatre evolved to include more culturally specific aspects. Classical texts were put aside and legendary Egyptian playwrights such as Tawfik Al Hakim, Youssef Idris, Alfred Farag and Noaman Ashour started to emerge onto the scene, producing wonderfully original and Egypt-centric pieces that are still highly regarded, celebrated and performed to this day.

Comic theatre also started to steal the spotlight away from dramatic, poetic or political theatre as more and more people veered towards comedic performances such as those of Fouad Al Mohandes. Comic theatre continued to rise in popularity, and by the 1960s and 70s, Egyptian audiences were regularly attending theatrical plays in order to enjoy a good laugh from the likes of Adel Imam and Mohammed Sobhi.

This was the time when timeless plays, such as Madraseit El Moshaghbeen (The School of

Troublemakers, 1973) and Al Motazawegoon (The Married Couples, 1978), emerged, and they are still widely revered and loved by Egyptians today.

It wasn't until the 1980s that Egyptian theatre slowly started to lose its appeal and began deteriorating. This was due, in large part, to former Egyptian President Anwar Sadat's open door economic policies, which were introduced in the 1970s. As the country's sociopolitical climate started to change drastically and economic hardship affected more and more Egyptians, little thought or importance was given to theatre—or the arts in general.

As such, barely any effort was put into the development of Egypt's theatre scene following that time. However, theatre—and Egypt's arts and culture scene in the general sense—has been making a slight comeback after the 2011 revolution.

HOW THEATRE LIVES ON IN EGYPT TODAY

Theatre is very much alive and well in Egypt today, with more and more people trying to revive the scene. Although it may still not be as widely popular or as highly regarded—especially when compared to Egyptian cinema,

for example, the importance of the art form has been more widely recognized in recent years.

Following the 2011 revolution, Egypt saw a surge of politically infused plays, bringing back to light this amazing platform of expression. Over the years, younger Egyptian generations have made efforts to experiment and re-introduce theatre under new perspectives—infusing plays with poetry, dance, projection and experimenting with different styles of writing.

In addition to this, more and more festivals and events have popped up over the years that have managed to both attract local and international theatre-makers, bringing them together to offer Egyptian audiences a new theatre experience.

An example of one of these festivals is the annual Downtown Contemporary Arts Festival (D-CAF), which first started taking place in 2012. This multidisciplinary festival is the ultimate hub for contemporary arts and artists alike, attracting art-lovers from all walks of life. When it comes to theatre, the festival always manages to introduce fresh local talent and offers a theatre experience quite different from that of the 1960s and 70s.

Current theatre-makers are making efforts to build Egypt's theatre scene anew, somewhat demolishing this idea of a rather old-fashioned comic slapstick style theatre experience that Egyptian audiences once knew and loved. Rather, they are introducing an energetic and dynamic theatre experience that aims to make statements as opposed to merely entertain. Yes, entertainment is still a main aspect of it, yet Egypt's theatre-makers of today also aim to give voice to that which may have been deemed unspeakable over the years; they aim to highlight the power, influence and beauty of the arts.