

The English Theatre 1700-1800

- 1695-1715 37 new plays by women produced on London stages. More women writing for the stage now than at any time until the present. Most important include Mary Pix, Delariviere Manley, Catharine Trotter and Susannah Centlivre
- 1695-1708 Betterton, unhappy with Rich's management at Drury Lane, reopens Lincoln's Inn Fields Theatre. Performs much of Congreve's work. Companies reunited in 1708 at Drury Lane.
- 1709 Dorset Garden demolished. Rich expelled from management at Drury Lane, but son manages Lincoln's Inn Fields and Covent Garden from 1714 to 1761. Thomas Harris runs Covent Garden, from 1771 until the 19th century.
- 1710-1737 Outstanding actors include Colley Cibber, Robert Wilks, Thomas Doggett, Barton Booth and Anne Oldfield. Cibber, Wilks and Doggetts (replaced by Booth after 1713) successful management of Drury Lane helps set a model for the actor-manager who takes strong responsibility for aesthetic and technical considerations as well as commercial ones. (Managers interested in drama only as a commercial investment were more apt to neglect their duties or to make managerial decisions that were impractical, unwise or unpopular with audiences or actors.)
- 1720 The Haymarket, eventually the third venue for legitimate theatre, built The Conscious Lovers (Richard Steele) starts trend towards sentimental comedy
- 1732 Lincoln's Inn Fields, replaced by a larger theatre in 1714. becomes site of new Covent Garden Theatre. Remains in use until 1808.
- 1734-43 Charles Macklin serves as acting manager at Drury Lane. Helps initiate more naturalistic school of acting, and creates a sensation by reinterpreting Shylock as a dramatic rather than a comic role (1740). Also writes plays and experiments with more naturalistic costuming and stage design later in his career. Noted as a good teacher, and influences the young Garrick while together at Drury Lane.
 James Quin, of the older declamatory school, another notable actor of that generation. Acted at Drury Lane, 1712-14, acting manager for Rich at Covent Garden 1714-18. returns to act at Drury Lane 1734-1751.
- 1737-1843 Licensing Act imposes tighter censorship on plays and confirms the monopoly of Drury Lane and Covent Garden over legitimate theatre in England. While the Act did not cover "illegitimate" forms of drama, and the regulation was not as strongly enforced outside of London, allowing drama to flourish in the provinces, it remained in effect until 1843.
- 1747- 1776 David Garrick (staging) and John Lacy (acting) assume management of Drury Lane Theatre. Garrick sets the definitive model for the actor-manager until the early 20th century with his careful balancing of aesthetic integrity with commercial success. Not only did he dominate the stage of his time with his own talent as an actor and help push acting more in the direction of naturalism, but he built a strong company around him establishing the theatre's reputation for excellence in acting and production; revived some Shakespeare that had been out of the repertoire for some time or did more stage-worthy adaptations of Shakespearean works already in the canon; banished the audience from the stage (1762) and instituted reforms in lighting and stage design largely through hiring De Loutherbourg (1771-81), one of the continent's most innovative scene designers.
 Other noted actors of his generation whom he played with or competed against include Peg Woffington, Kitty Clive, Susanna Cibber, Hannah Pritchard, Frances Abington. George Ann Bellamy, and Spranger Barry.
- 1752 Proliferation of "illegitimate" drama, leads to licensing of all places of public entertainment within a 20 mile radius of London.
- 1752 William Hallam sends a troupe to America in an attempt to find a new market free of the Licensing Regulation. Marks the start of professional theatre in America.

- 1766 Samuel Foote allowed to open and run Haymarket Theatre, a third venue for legitimate theatre, over the summer months.
- 1768-1800 Parliament starts to legitimize theatre in major towns. By 1800, almost every 'major town has a theatre royal' or crown-authorized theatre. In 1788, another bill passed to allow Magistrates to license theatres for legitimate drama outside the 20 mile radius of London. Leads to proliferation of both touring and resident companies in the provinces.
- 1760-1780 Revolt against sentimental comedy. Resurgence of "laughing Comedy" in the works of Colman, Goldsmith and Sheridan. Attempt to restore some of the sparkle, humor and wit of the Restoration comedy without its excesses of debauchery and amorality.
- 1776-1809 Sheridan becomes manager at Drury Lane. Rebuilds theatre to accommodate 3,6(X), retiring shortly after the theatre burns in 1809. Stages his own *School for Scandal*, *The Critic* and several adaptations of Kotzebue's work. John Philip Kemble debuts in 1776, and moves into management with Sheridan in 1788 before he quarrels with him and leaves (1796), re-establishing himself at Covent Garden in 1802. Distinguishes himself by experiments in more authentic historical costuming and Shakespearean revivals using the new particularization of lighting and set design usually used up to that point just on minor work. His sister, Sarah Siddons, the leading actress of her time also consolidates her London career in 1782 and acts frequently at Drury Lane during her brother's tenure.
- 1785 Introduction of the Argand or "patent" lamp, with its cylindrical wick and glass chimney, revolutionizes lighting. Oil replaces candles for stage lighting and since chimneys could be colored

II Dominant Themes and Concerns

Neo-classicism

While rejecting the more legalistic and rigid interpretations of neo-classicism that tended to dominate criticism in France, the dominant critical spirit of the age remains neo-classical with its emphasis on connecting rationality with morality, and seeing the mandate of art to instruct and to delight. While acknowledging that art should "hold up a mirror to nature" - giving some critical respectability to the move towards more naturalistic acting, writing and scene design after 1750 - the emphasis still remains on portraying the general and universal truths underneath surface reality.

"The business of a poet...is to examine, not the individual, but the species: to remark general properties and large appearances: he does not number the streaks of the tulip, or describe the different shades in the verdure of the forest. He is to exhibit in his portraits of nature such prominent and striking features, as recall the original to every mind... But the knowledge of nature is only half the task of the poet; he must be acquainted likewise with all modes of life. His character requires that he estimate the happiness and misery of every condition... He must divest himself of the prejudices of his age or country: he must consider right and wrong in their abstracted and invariable state; he must rise to general and transcendental truths which will always be the same.... He must write as the interpreter of nature, and legislator of mankind, and consider himself as presiding over the thoughts and manners of future generations; as being superior to time and space."

Samuel Johnson, 1759

Bardolatry

Excessive reverence for Shakespeare as the best tragic dramatist of all time, a theatrical genius who portrayed the general and universal truths of nature, life and man in a way that could not be surpassed, had an inhibiting effect on the writing of native tragedy well into the 19th century. (Dramatists either emulated the Shakespearean form in an attempt to copy the master as closely as possible, or didn't attempt tragedy at all, since the best had already been done.) At the same time, the quality of an actor was often measured by his/her ability to interpret Shakespeare in performance, and (s)he had to steer a delicate balance between innovations which would make her/his performance memorable for an audience, and a growing tradition of conventionalisms in costuming, gesture and characterization which had grown up around many of the roles.

Liberal Humanism

Enlightenment philosophers like Locke, Diderot, Voltaire and Rousseau put a high emphasis on the intrinsic dignity, nobility and goodness of all men, and begin to analyze and criticize the faults not just in personal circumstances and attitudes, but education, and existing social, class and political conventions which prevent that natural goodness and nobility from reaching its full expression. Leads in literature and comedy to (1) continued probing of societal mores and conventions, including the changing role of marriage and women in society and (2) strong trend towards **sentimentalism**, based on the belief that most bad, thoughtless or aberrant human behaviour could be corrected not only through proper use of an enlightened reason, but a direct appeal to the naturally good sentiments and instincts which made up the “heart” of man. Pathetic situations and dramatic reformations of character used to stress the goodness of the characters through all trials, show how quickly the fallen could be redeemed once the proper chords in the heart had been touched, and to confirm the goodness of the audience to themselves since being moved by the sight of virtue in distress was a sign of a sensitive and moral nature.

Commercialism

Licensing Act of 1737 has important long-term effects by reinforcing the monopoly of legitimate drama to Covent Garden and Drury Lane and imposing tighter censorship on writing.

Censorship - Best drama of time still tends to be comedy, reflecting the Age’s absorption in exploring man as a social being influenced by the modes, manners and customs of upper middle-class and aristocratic society. However, best literary minds of the time increasingly turn to less censored prose forms. like the essay and, most notably, the novel, to express a serious, satirical or comprehensive view of life. Contributes to making the 18th century theatre a commercial (theatre management) and interpretative (acting, design) venture rather than a literary one. (During the Restoration, half the company’s repertory came from pre-Commonwealth times and half was new or recent. After 1750, one-third of the repertory was Shakespeare, (one-third was Restoration or early 18th century work, and only one-third consisted of new plays.)

Monopoly - Confinement of the legitimate theatre market to 2 theatre houses potentially made Drury Lane and Covent Garden into large, lucrative business ventures sustained almost entirely by the box office. Leads to increasingly large and diversified theatre companies. buildings, ticket prices and theatrical bills (including “non-legitimate drama”) to draw in as large and varied an audience as possible.

Also leads to a thriving provincial theatre, the start of professional theatre in the American colonies, and a proliferation of entertainment places offering “non-legitimate drama” (pantomime, ballad opera, comic opera and burlesque) as ways around the restriction of the monopoly.

III Dramatic Forms

Non-legitimate Drama

Pantomime	Most popular form after 1723. Combines elements of <i>commedia</i> and farce with topical satire, stories drawn from classical mythology, dance, music and lavish spectacle
Ballad opera	Both draws upon and satirizes conventions of Italian opera. Alternates spoken dialogue with lyrics set to popular tunes. (John Gay <i>Beggar’s Opera</i> , 1728)
Comic Opera	increasingly replaces ballad opera after the Licensing Act. Uses sentimental plots and original music.
Burlesque	Differs from ballad opera in its absence of sung portions. Satirizes major figures and events of the day. (Fielding, later noted as a novelist, composes a number of notable ones between 1730 and 1737.) Form declines after Licensing Act, being replaced by some which satiric familiar literary and dramatic works instead.
Opera	Despite financial difficulties, becomes increasingly popular and prestigious with the aristocracy, especially after Handel’s arrival in 1710 and the establishment of the Royal Academy of Music (1719).

Legitimate Drama

Sentimental Comedy (Richard Steele *The Conscious Lovers* 1722)

Domestic Tragedy (George Lillo *The London Merchant* 1731)

Comedy of Manners (Colman, Sheridan, Goldsmith 1760-1800)

Critics

Samuel Johnson (1709-1784), Richard Steele (1672-1729)

IV Actors and Acting

Companies

Expense and complexity of running a theatre of Covent Garden or Drury Lane's size moves actors away from old profit-sharing system, and brings about major changes in company organization.

(1) Main financial risk falls on the theatre manager who leases the theatre and runs the company. Leads to the rise of the actor-manager as the main aesthetic and commercial arbitrator of the company's fortunes. System really begins with David Garrick's brilliant management of Drury Lane (1747-1776) and prevails until World War I.

(2) Size of company increases enormously leading to greater stratification, rivalry and lines of specialization within a company. Where the Restoration company had 35-40 people, the troupe of 18(X) had 80 including prompters, dancers, musicians, bill distributors, ticket takers, scene painters, candle snuffer-s, stagehands, wardrobe keepers, dressers, laundresses and maintenance personnel. The largest troupes employed up to 2(X) people. Four distinct ranks of actors in the larger companies:

1. General utility players

-beginners with the company who play a large number of small roles each season until they find the "line of business" (limited range of character types) they are best suited for and in which they will usually remain for the rest of their careers.

2. Players of 3rd line parts (often called "walking ladies" or "walking

gentlemen")

Lesser ranks include specialists in low comedy roles ("singing chambermaids"), fathers and elderly men, eccentric types, witches and hags.

3. Players of secondary roles

4. Players of leading roles

Best paid performers in the company, some earning over 3(X) pounds a year by 1790, and usually on longer contracts than the rest of the company. Higher ranks of actors usually cultivated both a comic and a serious "line of business", and the possession of lead roles in particular was jealously guarded. (Garrick continued to play Romeo until he was in his 60s.) Mrs. Oldfield had 26 parts in her active repertory, Barton Booth, 35; Garrick, 96.

Beyond the utility level, once a part had been assigned and mastered, it was the actors to perform as long as (s)he was with the company and (s)he was expected to be able to perform it on 24 hours notice.

As in France, many actors hoping to make it in London, often served an apprenticeship in the provinces where the smaller companies gave an actor more room to play a variety of parts and hone his/her skills.

Style

(1) Aesthetic

The same neo-classical aesthetics and idea of decorum that dictated the Restoration acting style continued to exert a strong influence on the acting of the 18th century, though an increasing emphasis on the importance of verisimilitude - "holding up a mirror to nature" - in artistic representations, helped pave the way, especially after

1750, for a more naturalistic style of acting based more closely on direct observation of life, and more specific and individualized characterization.

(2) Practical

The increasing size of the theatres and withdrawal of the action into the proscenium tended to mitigate against an overly intimate or naturalistic style, and until 1750, the dominant style, as exercised by Betterton, Booth and Quin tended to be oratorical.

The personal success of Macklin and Garrick in promoting a more naturalistic form of acting helped turn the tide towards greater realism after 1750. as did the increasing policy of doing longer runs of fewer but more carefully rehearsed and mounted productions, so that there was more time for particularization. Still, the acting style still tended to be rather “operatic” in nature for a number of reasons:

1. The size of the theatres still put a heavy emphasis on comparatively broad gestures and the cultivation of a strong voice and skill in rhetoric. Also, actors tended to restrict the action to the front of the stage where they could be better seen and heard. Furniture was seldom used, the actors usually standing throughout.

2. Because it was an actor’s rather than a writer’s theatre, audiences came out to see a particular actor’s interpretation of an important role and, more specifically, (if key scenes and speeches) in it. This tended to detract from true ensemble work since some actors were more important than others and productions tended to revolve around showcasing their talents. Actors also apparently altered their style between “level speaking” for less important passages, and a more passionate, vehement style for key ones that merited an audience’s close notice. Also, since roles were passed down from one generation to the next, traditional interpretations of the same roles were also often passed down, since the whole repertory could not be restaged to suit one actor. This made particularization of traditional roles - especially Shakespearean ones- difficult, and doing significantly new conceptions of characters or line readings (i.e. Macklin’s Shylock) could cause a sensation.

3. Rehearsal time - 4 hours a day for 2 weeks - was still light, and many actors “saved” themselves for the performance. While the dramatist helped guide the company through the first 3 rehearsals of a new work, tradition, convention and the actors’ importance played a greater role in deciding movement and blocking in revivals, and the prompter (equivalent of a stage manager) was often as important as the “acting manager” (usually an experienced actor who supervised the rehearsals) in getting the performance together.

V Audience

Audience behaviour similar to that of Restoration audiences, though an attempt was made to appeal to a much larger, less sophisticated audience to increase the commercial viability of the theatrical venture. Theatre seats and range of seating and ticket prices increased to attract a more homogeneous crowd. Theatre bills also increased in length and variety. After 1720, an evening’s performance ran between 3-5 hours in length, consisting of a half hour of music, a prologue, a full-length play with variety entertainment between acts, an afterpiece following the main drama (usually a two act pantomime, farce or comic opera) and finally, a song and dance.

VI Theatre and Staging

Theatres

Became increasingly large and sumptuous to accommodate as large a clientele as possible.

Auditorium

Continued to be divided into pit, boxes and 3 galleries, but everything enlarged.

The Haymarket	1766	1,500
Drury Lane	1700	650
	1790	2,300
	1793	3,600
Covent Garden	1732	1,300-1,400
	1780s	2,500
	1793	3,000

Stage

Forestage continued to pull back and the staging area behind the proscenium to deepen. Around 1700, Rich removed one set of the proscenium doors and shortened the forestage to 12 feet to make room for more seats in the pit. Remained the favorite acting space until 1765, after which time it was used less extensively. Stage behind the proscenium at Drury Lane increased to 30 feet in 1700, and by 1790, some theatres had stages more than 50 feet deep. Work areas for production (dressing room, green room, construction and storage) also continued to expand in size.

Scenery and Staging

While spectacle became increasingly important in non-legitimate drama, the neo-classical ideal that viewed specific times and places as irrelevant if not detrimental to the conveyance of universal truths in drama, tended to keep scenery fairly simple and generic until around 1760. Generic, reusable scenes such as temples, city walls and gates, palace exteriors, streets, chambers, prisons, gardens and rural prospects covered most needs. Until 1750 only about one-tenth of a company's income was spent on scene designers.

Situation starts to change after 1750 with both Rich and Garrick bringing in new scenic ideas from the continent that stressed the importance of the scene painter, and more illusionistic, particularized settings. Most important designer was Philippe DeLoutherbourg whom Garrick brought from France in 1771. Main innovations included (1) achieving unity of design by overseeing all visual elements of production (2) popularizing depiction of actual places in England and of "local color" in the scene design (3) breaking the stage picture with ground rows and set pieces to gain a greater sense of depth and reality, and avoiding symmetrical composition imposed by parallel wings and shutters and (4) revamping lighting system using overhead battens, silk screens and gauze curtains to get greater variation and control over colored lighting and more realistic portrayals of changes in weather and times of day.

As the theatrical bill moves from the afternoon into the evening slot, efficient lighting becomes ever more important. Dimmable lights on ladders behind each wing, chandeliers over stage and audience and footlights continue to be used, but Garrick reforms lighting in 1765 by removing visible light sources from the stage and improves brightness with improved lamps and reflectors. DeLoutherbourg's innovations in color and lighting and the invention of the Argand lamp also mark important reforms. In 1745 theatres spent only 340 pounds a year on lighting; by the 1770s, cost had risen to 1,970.

Costuming also continues to neo-classical conventions, though a greater concern for realism and appropriateness of costume begins around the 1740s and gains greater momentum towards the end of the century especially with Kemble. Rich, sumptuous contemporary dress, some from the company wardrobe, some purchased by the actor, continues to be used in most productions, though conventionalized costumes continue to be used for classical heroes (habit à la romaine), Near Eastern characters (turbans, baggy trousers, long fur-trimmed robes) and some Shakespearean roles (Hamlet - dressed in black, Lear - ermine trim to robes, Macbeth - uniform of British army officer, Falstaff - ruff and cavalier boots, Richard III - Elizabethan pumpkin hose, and Henry VIII - Holbein portrait) and some comic types (parasites, country bumpkins). Actresses wore black velvet in tragedy until 1750, then reverted to contemporary fashions. Even in classical or Near Eastern roles, they were more apt to simply add a feathered headdress or a few exotic touches.