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Mikayla Burr
mikayla.burr@otterbein.edu

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AN EMBODIED ANALYSIS OF HUMANKIND’S DEVELOPMENT AND HISTORY AS VIEWED THROUGH OUR ART AND THEATRE

Mikayla A. Burr
Department of Theatre and Dance
Department of History and Political Science
Otterbein University
Westerville, Ohio 43081

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Advisory Committee:

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__________________________
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Storytelling is one of our strongest means of communication. Through it, we can convey truths that are both universal and individual. Whether these stories be acted out on stage, painted on a canvas, sung in an auditorium, written on pages, or projected on a screen, we continually tell them. Even in the most fantastical of tales, if they are well told, we can hope to see ourselves in the characters’ struggles and circumstances. Conversely, storytelling can be a means of discovering and working through issues we are not personally familiar with. In this way we learn and grow in our understanding of other people and the mechanics of the world at large. Yet another aspect of storytelling is merely to entertain and bring enjoyment. Whatever the medium or means to the end, whether the story be fictional or not, communication and self-expression through Art is arguably the best way to connect with and learn from people all over the world and all throughout history. The human experience can be broken down into five very broad verbs: Build, Destroy, Explore, Believe, and Progress. In my view, the innumerable subcategories housed within these verbs are the framework for what makes our experiences distinctly human and timeless. All people know birth, death, pain, joy, discovery, belief, and advancement. We cannot have one without the other and no matter one’s lot in life, we all know the same core principles and laws of Life. This framework is just as applicable to anything presented on the stage. If our stories in any way reflect our experiences, it makes sense to say that anything theatrical would be created using the same framework. Using design and technology, acting methods, stage shape, directorial practices, costume, scenery, lighting advancements, and levels of audience interaction, we can create a different experience every time a piece is performed even within the same company. In this way, each rehearsal, each performance, can teach the artist something new. Actors can discover a new aspect of their
character or can find a new way to portray a moment. Technicians can discover a better and more efficient way to execute a technical element or can find a more effective way to enhance an actor’s performance.

By working our way through our earliest days to our first civilizations to the destruction of what we built to the exploration of new lands to the beliefs we formed along the way to the progressions we make in all areas of life, we come to see that history is a cycle. With each cycle, we advance as a species and discover new ways to make life easier and longer, but we continue to experience those things which make humanity what it is. Our art will remain with us always just as our need for connection will and our need for self-expression. Through sharing what we create, whether it be on stage or on a canvas or in notes or on screen, we can help to continue the narrative started by our ancestors and keep their legacy moving forward. In a way, we can also connect with them by telling the stories they told and even sometimes telling their own personal ones. Theatre in all its forms has always been part of human history. It has borrowed from and included other art forms, including but not limited to music, dance, singing, and visual arts such as painting, woodworking, lighting principles, costume technology, and sound. The creation of theatre requires knowledge covering a number of disciplines and encompasses all areas of life. On stage, we Build the tangible aspects of the worlds we have dreamed up only to Destroy them at closing. We Explore different locales and time periods in order to challenge what we Believe and through our discoveries we can Progress forward both practically and artistically.

We show flattery by imitating; Art is said to imitate Life (and sometimes the other way around). We learn to navigate the world by imitating our parents and others around us. Though we don’t know exactly how early humans communicated before the advent of language, we
know through the study of cave paintings that early men and women dressed as animals in what appear to be hunting rituals. In some way we can conclude that this “acting” and ritual dance was the first theatre of its kind (Graham, 12-13). Along with imitation, ritual has always been a major component to early theatre. “Like theater, ritual emphasizes the doing of things- the concrete and the actual rather than the merely metaphysical. However, unlike theater, which merely says a few things about social relationships, ritual reinforces or changes them” (Graham, 13). Understanding these two principles is key to grasping the basic tenets of even modern performance art. As theatre practitioners, we work to tell basic human truths on stage, thus crafting and imitating Life in our art and using techniques and methods created by those who came before us and improving upon and perfecting them.

Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle writes in his Poetics

...the instinct of imitation is implanted in man from childhood, one difference between him and other animals being that he is the most imitative of living creatures, and through imitation learns his earliest lessons; and no less universal is the pleasure felt in things imitated. We have evidence of this in the facts of experience. Objects which in themselves we view with pain, we delight to contemplate when reproduced with minute fidelity: such as the forms of the most ignoble animals and of dead bodies. The cause of this again is, that to learn gives the liveliest pleasure, not only to philosophers but to men in general; whose capacity, however, of learning is more limited. Thus the reason why men enjoy seeing a likeness is, that in contemplating it they find themselves learning or inferring, and saying perhaps, 'Ah, that is he.' For if you happen not to have seen the original, the pleasure will be due not to the imitation as such, but to the execution, the coloring, or some such other cause.

By consuming works of art that convey painful truths or events, we can pick apart and process our own lives as well as Life in general without fear of that pain lasting long for us. We can see actors on stage and know that what they’re going through is fictional, at least in the sense that the play will end and everyone will go home at the end of the night. In the same way, actors can portray characters and despite what they might go through over the course of the play, they can
leave that behind them when they exit the theatre. Learning, as Aristotle states, is one of our
greatest pleasures in life and if we can create and imitate, and do it well, that is the pinnacle of pleasure. In my view, this is because of our insatiable hunger for exploring and discovering all that we possibly can. Why should this not extend to our experiences? We can use imitation, acting, to work through universal and individual experiences to learn from them in order to better be prepared for them when they do occur. We can also use them to cope with and work through hard experiences, such as death and loss.

Our theatre practices are just as diverse and rich as everything else in our history and often are products of the climate in which they are created. As time has propelled mankind forward, our art has developed with us and has in numerous cases both reflected and facilitated historic events. Our performances have always served one purpose or another. Medieval European churches utilized the stage to convey their truths to peasants and church services can be described as nothing less than a spectacle. Complete with flying set and prop pieces and grand entrances with echoing chants made for quite a sight. In this way theatre was a teaching tool. In
Native American ritual practices, the dances and chanting were often meant to bring upon a literal climate change, asking the spirits to bring a bountiful harvest and the rains needed to grow it. In this way theatre was a prayer. In Molière’s comedies, religious hypocrisy was attacked and, though not appreciated by the Church, was met with great enthusiasm by the king who even commissioned the playwright and actor to write for him (Graham, 42-43). In this way theatre was a political statement.

These few brief examples demonstrate to us plainly that theatre is not simply putting on a play for the entertainment of the masses (though there are plenty of those to go around). Theatre and Art reflect the current state of the world we live in and often portrays a world we should wish to strive for. The clergymen portrayed a world of spiritual devotion and piety; the Native Americans portrayed a world of cooperation between the natural, spiritual, and human spheres; Molière’s comedies portrayed power being taken away from those who would wield it for ill.

As we have seen thus far, theatre serves more than one purpose; it is not merely to entertain, but it is used to teach and to shape the way we view the world. It is just as important to study and learn as any other discipline, such as medicine or law, and understanding how it has grown alongside and shaped history is vital to moving forward as a race. To better prepare for the future, we need to look to the past and, much like in stories, glean what we can from those who came before us as history has a tendency to repeat itself. The incredible consistency in human nature allows us to look back on all of history and see downfalls as well as triumphs that mirror our current experiences. This means we have an infinite number of possible people, places, and time periods in which we can take from both creatively and practically and apply those lessons to our own work and lives.
Historian and professor, Peter N. Stearns, writes in his 1998 piece, “Why Study History?”,

History as art and entertainment serves a real purpose, on aesthetic grounds but also on the level of human understanding. Stories well done are stories that reveal how people and societies have actually functioned, and they prompt thoughts about the human experience in other times and places.

In my personal view, there is a huge misconception that history is “boring” and that the people who came before us were just as dry. Where we fail, rather, is in how we convey historical narratives. People living ten, twenty, a thousand years ago, in my belief, are truly no different than any of us living today. We have built cities and travelled from one to the other. We have developed language and faster and faster ways to communicate. We have developed better and more efficient ways to feed, clothe, and shelter ourselves. We have fallen in love with one another and bore children. We have been afraid and killed one another. The world we have created together looks radically different than it did when everything began, but it is a creation we have all had a part in and it is something that, despite the changes, has remained constant and rooted. Simply presenting facts and dates in a series of lists is no way to study history and does a gross injustice to the stories that make it up. Studying history and presenting it to the masses should be approached from the perspective that mankind’s current place in the world is a living and breathing continuation of the story that has been being told since the beginning. History isn’t something to leave on a shelf collecting dust, rather it should be taken out and examined.

This leads us to one of our verbs: Build. The earliest humans survived and thrived by forming social bonds with one another. Hunting and gathering was far easier with companions and in order to find those companions, one had to communicate. Phillip B. Zarrilli writes in Theatre Histories: An Introduction,
Early in human history, engaging in participatory, communal, bodily based activities such as early forms of hunting, music, dance, and archaic ritual served both to heighten one’s sensory perceptions and awareness, and to further orient and attune each person to others in the immediate group and to the environment (4).

He goes on to describe studies conducted by ethnologists who found that many animals perform “simple mimesis (imitation)” (5) and that, through imitation, animals and humans are able to learn behavior that is essential for survival. He also describes how imitation helped to develop gestures and facial expressions for non-verbal communication and how imitating one another can “generate a sense of well-being” through play (5). As our ability to verbally communicate grew, so did our ability to connect with and band together with those around us. Communities began to grow that shared common languages and who lived together, hunting and leading nomadic lives. These communities developed stories and the means to tell them. “They (based) their relationships on kinship; (shared) a common language; (exchanged) stories, words, dances, music, rituals, and goods” (Zarrilli, 8).

Historians aren’t entirely sure what led to the birth of agriculture and pastoralism, though they have a number of theories including post-glacial period conditions lending themselves to
farming, simply not having found evidence of agriculture earlier than that period, and there having to have been places suitable for agriculture even during the glacial period (Khan Academy, “The dawn of agriculture”). Whatever the reason,

the advent of civilization depended on the ability of some agricultural settlements to consistently produce surplus food, which allowed some people to specialize in non-agricultural work, which in turn allowed for increased production, trade, population, and social stratification (Khan Academy, “Early Civilizations”).

The best place to plant a civilization was in river valleys where there was rich soil and a means of faster transportation on the water itself. As urban centers began to grow and create hierarchies within themselves, they then began to have the means to expand outwards and stretch their influence. Improved farming technology and the creation of cities led to permanent settlements and population growth. “Many later civilizations either borrowed elements of, built on, or incorporated- through conquest- other civilizations” (Khan Academy, “Early civilizations”).

People could travel to different cities and interact with those who they had never met before and exchange not only goods, but ideas and culture. With the ever developing sense of group identities, with unique religions, government structures, and languages came the need to create new types of jobs including “bureaucrats, priests, and scribes” (Khan Academy, “Early civilizations”). In this way, Build led to the ability to Explore and develop beliefs and Progress towards advancement in all arenas of human life.
Along with the advent of cities and technological advances, language and culture developed and with it, the need to express oneself and communicate. Language “allowed particular societies and groups to remember, reflect upon, celebrate, and perform their evolving stories and identities through oral/verbal, bodily, and artistic modes of expression” (Zarrilli, 10).

Written language didn’t develop at the same pace as oral language and as such there were no set systems of depositing all the information into places such as libraries. Rather, humans became the vehicles for stories and traditions and they had to be passed down. Zarrilli writes

Apprenticeship in verbal arts of performance, drumming, hunting, dancing, or ritual requires some form of discipleship. Initial learning through listening, doing, the direct imitation of a teacher/elder, and repetition all allow a neophyte to reach a level of mastery sufficient to enable improvisation (within limits of accepted conventions) (18).

As we can see, the idea of imitation and watching and learning from one another has held through both practical survival methods and artistic self-expression. Additionally, Zarrilli writes about the imitation of early cave paintings in early performance. Based on what historians and archaeologists have discovered, early performers made use of images to convey stories and
passed down ideas from generation to generation. This is evident even in early written languages such as cuneiform and hieroglyphics, pictographic methods of written language.

The oldest, and still practiced, completely oral tradition in the world is the chanting of the Vedas, Hindu holy mantras. These chants have been passed down for thousands of years and only recently have been written down. Upper caste male priests pass them down to young upper caste boys who go on to become priests themselves. They chant the mantras and prayers and perform the rituals needed to keep their traditions and beliefs alive. This is just one example of the importance of performance, community, and continuity associated with the verb Believe.

Another example of ritualistic performance comes from various Native American tribes; we will look specifically at the shamanistic traditions of the Cherokee. The interesting feature of their theatrical practices was that they “took place inside circular and domed council houses or domed seven-sided temples. The temples were usually located at the summit of flat-topped mounds in the central village plaza…” (Waldman, 52). Honoring the animals and their respective spirits was an extremely important part of Cherokee culture. It was believed that if a hunter did not pay proper respect, the animal’s spirit would bring illness upon them (Hartz, 76). Shamans and medicine men would be called upon to bring health back to the tribe and just as the illnesses were normally inflicted by the supernatural, they had to be taken away supernaturally. To do so, the shamans would call upon spirits through ceremonial dances and would also wear costumes in order to channel these healing spirits (Hartz, 76-77).

To fully understand shamanism, it is important to understand that the medicine these healers practiced was not the same medicine of our doctors today. Instead their medicinal practices, as discussed, involve communication with the spirit world as well as using natural and
herbal substances. It is also important to understand that the Shamans were called upon by spirits to be healers and sometimes it was against their will. However, once you were called to be a shaman, you had to undergo a “visionary journey” and represent your tribe in spiritual matters (Versluis, 50). It was a “full time job” and was sometimes dangerous as these shamans had to call upon many powerful spirits in their dances. Zarrilli tells us that

The term “shaman” originally derived from Siberian (Tungus), referring to religious specialists able to mediate between the human world and the spirit world by means of an altered state of consciousness described as trance, spirit possession, or ecstasy. The shaman’s goal is to control the spirits in order to heal the sick and protect society from evil. Shaman are, or have been active in every continent inhabited by humans (45).

It is particularly interesting to note that this tradition has existed in every continent thereby indicating humanity’s obvious need to connect with something beyond ourselves and relying on outside forces as well as natural sources. One could take this in a number of ways and arrive at any number of conclusions about human nature, but one cannot deny that shamanistic traditions are an integral part of all nations’ experiences.

Stanley Good Voice Elk, Lakota Heyoka (Shaman)
Photo Courtesy of fractalenligtenment.com
Another example of shamanism comes from Korea. The ritual is called kut and is performed by mostly female shaman, called mudang. “Kut may be performed to let the dead vent anger, regrets, or desires in order to rest in peace; to heal the sick and control epidemics; or to obtain good luck” (46). This tradition differs from the Cherokee in that it focuses in part on helping the spirits of the deceased as opposed to simply calling upon them to help the living.

Honoring the gods was just as important to the ancient Greeks as it was to the ancient Hindus and Native Americans. This period of history also saw the rise of the foundations of modern democracy. In the Khan Academy lesson on “The Greek polis” we read

Without a powerful, centralized state, smaller governing bodies created political order. One such type of governing body was the city-state or polis. Initially, the term polis referred to a fortified area or citadel which offered protection during times of war. Because of the relative safety these structures afforded, people flocked to them and set up communities and commercial centers. Over time, poleis—the plural of polis—became urban centers whose power and influence extended to the surrounding agricultural regions, which provided resources and paid taxes.

Ancient Greek theatre practices reflected this focus on government and democratic values. Outdoor festivals were held each year to honor the god of wine, Dionysus, and in this way there was also the religious aspect to these events. Sarah Grochala writes in her piece “Ancient Greek Theatre”, “At the City Dionysia Festival, the plays were presented in competition with each other. There were prizes for the best comedy and the best tragedy. In the tragedy competition, three playwrights would each present a trilogy of plays” (2012). Though actors were semi-professional and were paid for their skills, the chorus, or ensemble, were chosen from the populus and they were expected to perform as part of their civic duty. Additionally, wealthy citizens would pay for the productions in exchange for not having to pay their taxes (Grochala). Despite the immense popularity of comedies and tragedies on stage and in literature, the oral
tradition still had its place in Greek society. Stories such as *The Iliad* and *Odyssey* were still enacted and weren’t written down and compiled until around 670 BCE (Khan Academy, “Classical Greek culture”).

Greek influence not only reached into the political and theatrical spheres, but also into visual art and architecture. Greek sculptors were concerned with capturing the human form as closely as possible in regards to poise and proportion and their works went on to become among the most recognizable pieces of art in the world (Khan Academy, “Classical Greek culture”). “Greek architects provided some of the finest and most distinctive buildings in the entire Ancient World and some of their structures— including temples, theatres, and stadia—would become staple features of towns and cities from antiquity onwards” (Khan Academy, “Classical Greek culture”).

The next step in the evolution of an ever growing and expanding populus is empires. One seat of power takes over the smaller city states and creates one mega realm. In the Khan Academy lesson on “Comparing the rise and fall of empires” it says
the term empire refers to a central state that exercises political control over a large amount of territory containing many diverse groups. Often, this centralized power rules from one or several capital cities. We usually refer to an empire as if it were a single unit. But, because empires are so large, they are often divided into smaller, more manageable political units, usually called provinces.

Different empires rise for different reasons, though there are common themes. Military conquest, forced conversion to a certain religion, taking over a society politically, and seizure of territory are all viable option for expanding one’s empire. In this way, groups of people or a singular person in power go out and, in some capacity, Destroy neighboring territories, destroying what they had built for themselves or what culture and belief systems they had made. This was not always the case however. For instance, in the case of the Roman Republic, “although a militaristic society, (they) did not generally set out to conquer territory… After defeating enemies, Rome usually offered them some level of citizenship in exchange for loyalty” (Khan Academy, “Comparing the rise and fall of empires”). Conversely, the Persians used military conquest to build their empire, later being taken over by the same means by Alexander the Great of Macedon.

At the same time in the far East, the Han Chinese were setting up their own empire. The Han dynasty did so much to shape China into what it is today, the word “Han” is used to denote someone who is ethnically Chinese (Encyclopedia Britannica). This dynasty built itself upon the principles of the proceeding Qin dynasty, dividing the nation into “administrative areas” and appointing officials to rule over them. However, they differed from the Qin in that this empire focused more on Confucian values, such as “moderation, virtue, and filial piety”; this served to mask the authoritarian regime that ruled over the empire (Encyclopedia Britannica).
The Han Chinese were obsessive record keepers and, as such, we know much about their society and cultural practices. Along with being obsessive record keepers, they also wrote poetry and prose. In addition, in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* article on the dynasty, the editors write

In the court and the Confucian temples, music fell into two categories: music to accompany banquets and ritual music. In temple rituals, dance was often an important element, and something resembling a system of dance notation recorded the movements of large bands of musicians and companies of dancers in their performances. There also were highly informal dances with much body movement but little footwork that were part of private entertainment. Several forms of plucked string instruments were in use during the Han. Buddhism came to China from India during the dynasty, and with it came richly sonorous bronze bells. A form of drama appeared in which performers acted out the heroic deeds of celebrated warriors.

Silk weaving and paintings on silk were also very popular art forms and were heavily traded on what became known as the Silk Road. This route allowed the Roman Empire and the Han Dynasty to trade goods with one another and expand their empires economically and politically. This also allowed for exploration as traders and sailors needed to find the fastest and easiest ways to transport their cargo across Eurasia. Along with the silk from China, “spices from the East Indies, glass beads from Rome, silk, ginger, and lacquerware from China, furs from animals of the Caucasian steppe and slaves”, ideas and culture were also traded amongst travelers (Khan Academy, “The Silk Road”). For instance, as aforementioned, the tenets of Buddhism found their way to China through trade with India.
In the Scandinavian region of Europe lived a group of seafaring raiders and traders called the Vikings. Unlike their neighbors to the south, the Vikings did not live on land that was suitable for agriculture and so they had to find other groups of people to trade with. Fortunately, their aforementioned neighbors had plenty of natural resources and wealth. “Empires were good markets for luxury goods because wealth tended to be concentrated in large cities, meaning lots of potential customers were living in one place” (Khan Academy, “Environment and Trade: Viking Age”). Archaeological evidence has shown us that the Vikings made it as far as Kiev, Constantinople, and even Baghdad. This group of Nordic people didn’t last forever however. We read in Khan Academy’s piece “Environment and Trade: Viking Age”

Even though political and economic conditions changed, the resources of the Baltic region remained in demand. The Vikings slowly disappeared, but trade in the goods they had traditionally carried was taken up by new groups. By the early twelfth century, the beginnings of what would become the Hanseatic League—a collection of trading city-states—was taking control of much of the Baltic trade. As long as Baltic goods were in demand, people found ways to trade them profitably. By the mid-eleventh century, most Viking communities had converted to Christianity and established more settled, permanent states.
In this continuing theme of trade, it cannot be ignored that through this basic need to acquire goods, both for survival and desire, that exploration and discovery were positive byproducts. Albeit not always willingly, the need to give and take from one another led to not only the exchange of goods but also, as mentioned with the Chinese and the Romans, the exchange of ideas and culture.

The fall of the Roman Empire around the year 500 AD signaled a shift in the very structure of the Western world. The thousand year period that followed came to be known as the Middle, or Medieval, Ages. In the latter part of that millenia, Europe’s strife rested in plagues, disease, and religious corruption. In the History Channel’s piece titled “Middle Ages”, they write

> After the fall of Rome, no single state or government united the people who lived on the European continent. Instead, the Catholic Church became the most powerful institution of the medieval period. Kings, queens and other leaders derived much of their power from their alliances with and protection of the Church.

The importance of religion still is a major theme in Medieval Europe and arguably in a more intense way than ever. The Church controlled most aspects of civilian life and part of its corruption stemmed from being able to easily influence illiterate and poverty stricken peasants. A popular way to reach out to communities was morality, mystery, and miracle plays.

Firstly, looking at morality plays, these plays were performed by quasi-professional actors and were the stepping stone between strictly liturgical plays and secular dramas (Encyclopedia Britannica, “Morality play”). These plays specifically taught moral lessons as the name would suggest and

> The action of the morality play centres on a hero, such as Mankind, whose inherent weaknesses are assaulted by such personified diabolic forces as the Seven Deadly Sins but who may choose redemption and enlist the aid of such figures as the Four Daughters of God (Mercy, Justice, Temperance, and Truth) (Encyclopedia Britannica, “Morality play”).
Mystery plays normally depicted Biblical stories and were performed on what were called pageant wagons. They were also sponsored by the Church. The pageant wagons “provided both scaffold stage and dressing room and could be moved about readily” (Encyclopedia Britannica, “Mystery play”). Lastly, miracle plays, also referred to as Saint’s Plays, presented “a real or fictitious account of the life, miracles, or martyrdom of a saint” (Encyclopedia Britannica, “Miracle play”). As we can see, the relationship between the seat of power and control of popular art was crucial to ensuring the agenda of the Church was pushed whenever and wherever possible.

![Pageant Wagon](Photo Courtesy of kvl.cch.kcl.ac.uk)

The religious intensity that marked this period in history was evident not only on the stage and the churches themselves, but in the actions of the Crusades. In the History Channel’s piece on this period we read

The Crusades were a series of religious wars between Christians and Muslims started primarily to secure control of holy sites considered sacred by both groups. In all, eight major Crusade expeditions occurred between 1096 and 1291. The bloody, violent and often ruthless conflicts propelled the status of European Christians, making them major players in the fight for land in the Middle East.
We go on further to read that though the Crusades ended in defeat for the Europeans, it can be argued that where they did not fail was in spreading Christianity and Western civilization. It also inadvertently helped to create greater trade and better transportation methods. “The wars created a constant demand for supplies and transportation, which resulted in ship-building and the manufacturing of various supplies” (History Channel, “The Crusades”). Despite these positive outcomes, however, one cannot ignore the very negative ones. The Muslim world saw the conflicts as immoral and savage. This, obviously, led to tension and and resentment for many years and can still even be seen today.

What followed the death and destruction of the Crusades and all the disease by way of bubonic plague was a period of advancement and greater cultural exchange. “After the Crusades, there was a heightened interest in travel and learning throughout Europe, which some historians believe may have paved the way for the Renaissance” (History Channel, “The Crusades”). The influential theatrical practice to come out of this era was commedia dell’arte. Stock characters in stock plots made up this Italian invention though they were heavily inspired by the works of Greek playwrights Plautus and Terence. “Even though they were indebted to academic comedy, the acting troupes styled themselves dell’arte- that is professional- to distinguish their work from the amatuer efforts of academic theatre” (Zarrilli, 175). After having experienced “a long period of cultural decline and stagnation”, Renaissance thinkers saw the new era as a time to expand knowledge and revival Classical scholarship (Encyclopedia Britannica, “Renaissance”). Art was part of this resurgence of the pursuit of knowledge and was seen as its own branch, “valuable in its own right and capable of providing man with images of God and his creations as well as with
insights into man’s position in the universe” (Encyclopedia Britannica, “Renaissance”). In this way, the continuing theme of attaching art and performance to religion prevails.

The Roman Catholic Church continued to hold political and spiritual power over Western Europe until the 1500s. “Popes… commanded armies, made political alliances and enemies, and, sometimes, even waged war” (Khan Academy, “An introduction to the Protestant Reformation”). This left little time for church leaders to care much about the spiritual concerns of their parishioners. Numerous attempts were made to eradicate the corruption of the Church, including attempts by John Wyclif and Jan Hus, but none were successful until Martin Luther. We read

Luther sparked the Reformation in 1517 by posting, at least according to tradition, his "95 Theses" on the door of the Castle Church in Wittenberg, Germany - these theses were a list of statements that expressed Luther's concerns about certain Church practices - largely the sale of indulgences, but they were based on Luther's deeper concerns with Church doctrine (Khan Academy, “An introduction to the Protestant Reformation”).

During this time of change also came another type of revolutions: scientists were challenging doctrines preached by the Church, calling into question widely held beliefs about the nature of the universe. The need to spread Christian tenets still persisted and as such exploration and cultural meetings continued throughout this era as well.

Seats of power eventually began breaking away from being theocracies, though they still remained largely in the hands of a select few, often corrupt, individuals. We will now look at two of the major revolutions of the late 1700s: the American and French revolutions. These two bloody conflicts happened alongside technological and transportational progress in yet another revolution: the Industrial Revolution. Larger and larger urban centers developed as people left their homes in the country in hopes of finding work and a better life in the city. Despite the boom in progress and the enhancement of the quality of life, millions suffered as the wealthy only
increased their wealth and those with nothing continued to live their lives in poverty. The ever growing cities couldn’t keep up with the influx of people and a lack of labor laws led to disease, premature death, child laborers, and a massive divide between those at the top and those at the bottom. This premise, that the rich held too much of the wealth and that the poor were oppressed by the monarchy, led to the French Revolution. The American Revolution was similar in that colonists fought for freedom from a king who ruled them from across the ocean, treating them as subjects and not asking for any representation to be given to them in making decisions and laws. Many pilgrims had fled to the what later became the United States to escape religious persecution and make a life for themselves and to continue being ruled by the same people from whom they fled did nothing but defeat the purpose of leaving.

Before the time of the French Revolution, Sentimentalism ruled on not only French, but European stages at large. This changed near the end of the 1700s as a new movement, borne out of opposition to Enlightenment rationalism, “celebrated natural, sincere, (and) authentic humanity” (Zarrilli, 244). “Enlightenment principles were deployed to justify revolutionary slaughter” and as the revolution continued on, the general populous, who made up the vast majority of France, didn’t want to see anything sentimental on stage. Rather, they thronged “to see nationalistic spectacles, gothic thrillers, and melodramas. In theatres where heroic virtues or genteel pathos had inspired neoclassical or sentimental responses, the emotions of rage, fear, and panic now stirred spectators” (Zarrilli, 246). In this way, theatre reflected the already present sentiments in the poor French and played a part in facilitating their capacity to Destroy what had been built all while spurring actions in order to Progress.
The opening of the 20th century saw its own conflict, this time on a global scale: the Great War, otherwise referred to as World War I. The major players in the war were divided into two sides with the Allies including Great Britain, France, Russia, and Italy on one side and the Central Powers including Germany, Austria-Hungary, Ottoman Empire, and Bulgaria on the other. New and improved methods were developed to attack and kill the other side including poison gases, trench warfare, and military vehicles such as tanks. These advancements in technology brought about one of the highest death tolls during wartime at that point in history.

All while the world stage was telling the story of death, destruction, and nationalism, the smaller stages were struggling to bring in the crowds it once did. “Popular entertainment, never more popular than in the decade before 1914, now faced significant competition from silent films” (Zarrilli, 323). This fight for supremacy continued in the following decade when “talkies” were introduced in the year 1927.
Throughout the remainder of the 20th century, theatre began to become a viable option for making one’s livelihood not only as an actor, but as a director or a technician or a dramatist. Modernists as they came to be called “shared with most avant-garde movements a revulsion against many aspects of modern life. They, too, rejected the utilitarian reasoning, tasteless consumerism, blatant hypocrisies, and madding crowds that dominated modern urban living” (Zarrilli, 322). Experimentation with stage shape and size, audience orientation and engagement, and subject matter reigned supreme in the theatre of the 20th century and even worked to incorporate “the new reality effects of film and radio” (Zarrilli, 322). At this point in the narrative of mankind, wealth and access to technology were more easily accessible to the masses and individuals are able to pursue a career in the arts in order to sustain themselves. There also was no control over theatre like in the days of the Medieval Catholic Church and there were faster and easier ways to communicate across the globe and share ideas. All of these things led to a greater freedom to create and experiment in all art forms and bring what we have learned to the stage.

In looking through an extremely abbreviated version of the story of mankind from the beginning, we have come to see how vital it is that we fulfill the basic human need to communicate and express ourselves to one another through storytelling. In doing so, we create a highly interconnected world where artistic and practical exchange are commonplace and rich traditions are passed down and created. Further studies on the stories we tell will show that there is also an incredible interconnectedness amongst what cultures across time and geography have found important and also may suggest certain truths about history, such as in our creation, flood, and god myths. Whatever the story and whatever the medium it is being told in, it’s clear that we
must tell stories in order for our continued progress forward and for humanity to retain a core part of its essence: creative, complicated, and social creatures. Humanity will continue moving forward and that means we will continue building, destroying, believing, exploring, and progressing; human nature won’t allow for anything less. Our ability to do these things with rationality and the capacity to learn and grow separate us from all other creatures on Earth as does our ability to be crea-tive and form stories about them.
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