Chapter 7
Theatre Traditions: East & West
Theatre Origins

- “Theatre is a living art but also a living tradition”
- Many plays today are based on plays from the past.
- The first known dramatic presentation was in Africa in ancient Egypt. 3300 B.C.
  - A storytelling ritualistic event. (Dance-drama)
- The foundation of theatre can be rooted back to two main ideas.
  - Storytelling
  - Ritual
Ritual

- A ceremony performed by individuals of a society for religious or cultural reasons.
  - Summon Gods (Healing Ceremony)
  - Influence Nature (Rain Dance)
- Rituals were also used to observe important events in life.
  - Birth, Death, Marriage
  - Celebrations of gods
- Rituals often incorporated costumes, masks, music, props, speech and dance.
- Ritual makes events larger than life.
Storytelling emerged with the incorporation of ritual.
- Member of a tribe would act out their adventures of the day including the hunt and tribal history.

Storytelling is more personal than a ritual event. It usually involves a single voices recounting events from the past.
- Characters are created and **impersonated**. The story teller wants the audience to be a part of the event.

Storytelling is from a personal perspective and invites the audience into their own world.
Drama in Sub-Saharan Africa

- The beginning of theatrical performance.
  - Dance-drama.
- Today in Africa storytelling and ritual performances are very common.
  - The Dogon Performers of Mali perform on stilts and brightly colored masks.
  - The Senufo of Ivory Coast wear animal masks to frighten off witches.
- Headdresses, full face make-up, hand props, masks are very common in Dance-drama.
Dogon Performers

Senufo Performers
Egyptian Drama

- Theatrical performance spread through Africa and made its way to Egypt.
- The first known Egyptian drama was known as *Abydos Passion Play*. (2500 BC)
  - Staged each spring in a boat procession on the Nile. Performances took place at different temples along the way.
  - Tells the story of the murder of the god Osiris by his brother Set, the god of death.
  - Includes extreme violence, animal sacrifices, dance and stage effects.
- These were ritualistic dramas that ultimately were not sad but happy.
- Theatre spread from African north and found its way to Greece.
Greek Drama

- Said to be the greatest body of theatrical creation of all time.
- Athenian 4th & 5th century B.C.
- Result of a contest; each playwright submitted a trilogy of tragedies and one satyr play (satiric versions of Greek history)
- Much pageantry and a winner at the end of each week.
- Combination of myth, philosophy, poetry, music and dance.
- Explored the violence of living.
- Athenian drama created the forms of comedy and tragedy.
Greek Drama

- Aristotle tells us that Greek tragedy was originated from the dithyramb.
  - Ancient orgiastic rites that consisted of wine-drinking, phallus-worshipping, and chanting of ancient poems.
  - Dithyrambs honored the god Dionysus. (God of Wine and Fertility)
- Thespis (the first actor) is credited for transforming the dithyramb into a true theatrical performance where the actor would interact with the chorus.
- The Dionysia was a spring celebration of the fertility god Dionysus – known as the Festival of Dionysus
  - 534 B.C. First dramatic productions given at the festival.
  - A springtime festival.
  - Celebrated the rebirth of Dionysus.
  - Took place at the Theatre of Dionysus.
- By the end of 5th Century B.C. Three famous playwrights wrote and produced over 300 plays. We have 33 remaining.
  - Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides.
Tragedy Playwrights

- Aeschylus (524-455 B.C.) – used two men as actors; one talking to the other. Reduced the orchestra to twelve. 7 out of 90 plays survived.
- Sophocles (496-405 B.C.) – used three actors; each played several parts. Increased chorus to fifteen. 7 out of 123 plays survived.
- Euripides (480-406 B.C.) – used even more actors; angered the Greeks because he showed the Greeks and gods in a sometimes negative light as they really were; portrayed strong female characters. He was a rebel. 18 out of 95 plays survived.
Greek Drama

- Besides the tragedies, several comedies survived the time.
- Aristophanes wrote several comedies of which 11 have survived.
- Greek comedies explore contemporary issues affecting all people of Athens.
- Greek tragedies explore social, psychological and religious meanings of the gods and heroes of Greek history and myth.
- Both types were performed in simple wheat-threshing areas, as Greek culture expanded huge amphitheatres were built.
  - Some theatres could seat 15,000 people.
The famous Theatre of Dionysus was built into the mountain that housed the famed Acropolis.
Greek Drama

- All actors were male
- They performed in masks
  - partly to indicate the age, gender and personality of the character.
  - Amplify their voice.
- Tragic actors wore elevated shoes. (kothurnoi)
- Usually wore a colorful gown (himation) with a tunic over it (chlamys).
- Plays were usually performed with only two or three principle actors who would change masks during the show.
- The actors were supported by the chorus.
- Violence happened off stage.
Traditional Greek Masks
The Chorus

- Usually 12-15 singer/dancers.
- Usually chanted their lines.
- Danced
- represents the feelings or morals of the characters or audience
- gives important background information
- summarizes events
- comments on action or gives advice to the characters
The City Dionysia

- A weeklong festival of celebrations and dramatic competitions.
- Day 1 – proagon – plays announced
- Day 2 – processions, parades, sacrifices
- Day 3 – performance of the first five comedies
- Day 4-6 – performance of tragedies
- Day 7 – judging and awards
Traditional Greek Stage
Parts of the Greek Stage

- Theatron (seeing place) – the theatre
- Skene (hut or tent) – The scene house, were costume changes took place, evolved into background scenery.
- Proskenion- Area in front of the stage.
- Altar (Thymele) – middle of stage
- Orchestra- Dancing place, circular location in front of the stage, facing the audience. Where the chorus performed.
- Parodos- Two main entrances for actors and chorus.
- Koilon- The auditorium were the spectators sat.
- Diazoma- Upper & lower levels of auditorium.
Dodoni Ancient Greek Theatre

- Theatres were built into sides of hills so that they could make use of the natural acoustics.
Theatre of Epidaurus

- Restored during the 1950’s. This theatre can accommodate an audience of 14,000
- It is used for modern performances of ancient drama.
By the end of the 5th century B.C. the Greek empire lost its edge.

The Roman empire was growing and excelled in architecture and engineering and less in the dramatic arts.

Roman theatres were designed as free standing buildings. First permanent theatre was 55 B.C.

The orchestra was cut in half and created tunneled entrances called vomitoria.

The Greek skene was replaced by a multi story decorated wall.
Roman Theatre
Roman Theatre in Volterra
Roman Theatre

- Roman Playwright were influenced by the Greeks.
  - Most plays were about Greek characters and struggles.
- Two famous playwrights include
  - Plautus & Terence. (comic writers) (stock character)
  - Seneca (encouraged onstage stabbings) (Chorus was not integral)
  - Their plays are rarely produced today.
- Roman Theatre degenerated into peer spectacle. Most theatres were converted into arenas
  - Gladiator battles
  - Sea battles
  - Public Masacres
- Violence was not an issue, people wanted more spectacle.
Medieval Drama

- The Fall of Rome brought an end to the classical era.
- A period between the fall of the Roman empire and the Renaissance.
- Early Christian and Islamic religions banned theatre, partly due to Roman excesses. (The connection between theatre and pagan religions.
- Theatre didn’t reappear until just before 1000 A.D.
  - Liturgical drama
    - Church sponsored bible stories
    - Usually traced to Easter services
- Between 1050 and 1300 A.D. towns began forming and with it large scale buildings, cathedrals and universities were built.
- These plays were done in Latin and excluded the common person.
Medieval Drama

- By 1250 These Bible based plays were brought outdoors to churchyards and then to streets and town squares.
- This style is referred to as Vernacular Drama.
- They were performed in common languages (French, Spanish, English, German, and Italian).
- These productions appealed to the common person.
- Dealt with Bible and other religious stories.
- Usually presented as a series of one act dramas.
Medieval Drama

- Two Types of Vernacular Drama
  - Mystery plays
    - Dramatized a series of religious events. (Noah and the flood)
  - Morality Plays
    - Used Religious characters to teach a moral lesson. (*Everyman*, *The Second Shepherds’ Play*)

- These plays were usually short and strung together as a series or cycle.
- Entire festivals of plays became popular. They were performed on outdoor stages called mansions.
- Touring shows were also popular and were performed on Pageant Wagons.
Pageant Wagon

Renaissance Drama

- Began in Italy during the late 1400’s
- Greek and Roman plays were being translated and performed.
  - Intermezzos were performed between acts of full length plays. (short mythological tales)
  - Pastoral plays were presented as a follow up to a Greek play. (Romantic short pieces)
- The opera was created. This was a fusion between music and drama.
- Loose Italian adaptations became very popular
  - Commedia erudita – “learned comedies”
    - Language was not easily understood by the general public. Usually performed by the “learned” nobility not by amateur actors.
    - Based on early Roman Authors.
- Led to commedia dell’arte (flourished from 1550-1750)
  - Using stock characters wearing commonly recognized costumes
    - Arlecchino (Harlequin) – witty gentleman valet
    - Pantelone – rich Venetian merchant
    - Pierrot – simpleminded servant
    - Scaramouche – the unscrupulous servant
    - Capitano – the braggart captain
  - Script was only a guideline. Mostly improvised.
  - Performed by professional actors.

- 1618, Teatro Farnese, first proscenium stage.
English Renaissance

- Elizabethan Period (1558-1603)
  - Language and Theatre flourished
- Theatres were located just outside London
  - Government restrictions
- Theatre was for all people and not just royalty.
- People viewed Theatre like we watch TV.
- Playwrights of the time included
  - William Shakespeare (1564-1616)
  - Christopher Marlowe (1564-1593)
  - Ben Johnson (1572-1637)
William Shakespeare

- Wrote 38 plays.
- Shakespeare was also an actor and part owner of Chamberlain's Men and Globe Theatre.
- Wrote both comedies, tragedies and history plays.
- Shakespeare was well respected during his time but did not claim the fame he has now until the 1800’s.
Elizabethan Theatres

- Sat between 2000-3000 people.
- Plays were performed between 2 and 5pm.
- Most of the Theatres were open air.
- Scenery was simple and not painted. A simple chair or furniture piece would be used to suggest a location.
  - Usually a raised platform that was surrounded on three sides by the audience. (Thrust Stage)
  - The stage house was called the tiring house.
- Costumes were traditional contemporary clothing and would suggest the social class of the character.
Elizabethan Theatre
Theatre in the East

- Asian drama is never just spoken
  - Danced, chanted, mimed and sung.
- Asian drama is rhythmic and melodic.
- Asian drama is more visual and sensual than literary or intellectual.
- Asian drama has a strong focus on storytelling and myth.
- Broadly stylized and deeply traditional.
- Major types include.
  - Kabuki Theatre, Sanskrit, Kathakali, and Xiqu.
Summary

• This is a brief insight to the history of theatre.
• There are many exciting and important times in history that affect how we do theatre today.
• You need to make sure you cover in detail Asian Theatre and the other parts of Ch.7 that we did not cover. We just took a step inside the door.
• Everything we do in theatre today, can be rooted back to a specific period of theatre history.