The Evolution of Theater from the 17th Century to Present Day

Author’s Name

Institutional Affiliation
The Evolution of Theater from the 17th Century to Present Day

Theater similarly to any other form of human activities has undergone many changes. It has been necessitated by changes in cultural settings, demographical adjustments, industrial revolution, and technological advancement. All these factors have impacted on human activities shaping them in many ways. For instance, theaters have thrived during times when men valued leisure and suffered when cultures shifted towards more work and less leisure activities. The evolution of theatre can best be studied in the context of how they were organized, the plays or acts that took place in the theaters and the type of audience that was popular in the theaters. These factors are distinct in theaters mainly present in the early civilizations of Europe.

The 16th century was characterized by a society stratified based on social classes. As Brook (1996) connotes, everyone attended the theaters in the early Greece, but where one sat was determined by their position in the society. It meant that the privileged in the society took up front seats while those of the lower classes and women enjoyed the plays from the back. Brook also notes that the seats were made in a discriminatory manner with cushioned seats made available only for those in the upper strata of the society. The arrangement was common across many societies too.

In England, the 17th century saw the sponsorship of theaters and production houses by the wealthy in the society. It saw the rise of playhouses associated to the royal family. Such theaters with names such as The King’s Men, Lord Chamberlain’s Men, and The Prince’s Men rose to unprecedented success due to the support they received from their patrons (Brook, 1996). During the same time, actors and playwrighters became popular due to the high number of plays that they acted. Such popular artists of this era include William Shakespeare and Sir William Davenant.
The Roman theaters were pretty much similar to the Greek theaters only that their acts included more of human combat than artistic plays that characterized the English and Greek theaters. Theaters in the 17th century Rome were also used as arenas where public executions were held. The audience was not restricted but individuals’ social status determined where in the arena one sat. When events at the theaters turned more into regular gladiatorial contests, those who held to the Christian doctrines became opposed to theaters and all that they stood for. It was not long until the Roman Empire collapsed, further weakening theater development (Kraus et al., 2005).

Historical occurrences in the various societies influenced theaters. In England, plagues were a major source of theater interruptions during the 17th and early 18th century. During such times, theaters were a target of the regulators who were tasked with ensuring that the plagues did not spread. Seeing as it is that theaters were usually thronged by different types of people, it was hard arguing for their continuity anytime that London was threatened by a plague. Brook (1996) argues that it was during such a time that Shakespeare composed and developed a majority of his works.

Another important occurrence that saw a change of theater activities is the puritan revolution that saw the rise of strictly Christian society that was purified of the evil nature of theaters and games. This era was characterized by strict adherence to the Christian doctrines with zero tolerance for any form of merrymaking. The playhouses were raided, and those participating in theatrics were arrested and punished. While it is believed that plays were still performed in private establishments, this period, known to many as the dark period, shows little in terms of theater activities (Kraus et al, 2005).
The restoration period saw theaters reopened and developed to exceed their earlier prosperity. Much of the restoration period theater was attributed to Sir William Davenant who had managed to defy the puritan’s rules and continued to stage plays under the guise of narratives and operas. When King Charles II was reinstated, he gave Sir Davenant exclusive monopoly rights to theatrics in London. Brook (1996) argues that this period was marked by a shift of attention more to the audience than to the performance. It was mainly due to a change in audience from a mixed lot to purely the privileged in the society. He argues that theater goers in the restoration period were keen on displaying their fashionable attires and being seen in the public places than on enjoying theatrics. It changed when a modification in the lighting systems shifted attention back on stage with lights above the audience dimming before a play begins.

In 18th century, theater was characterized by a more intense activity under the patented rights of two theater producers through a monopoly granted by King Charles to Sir William Davenant and Thomas Kiligrew. It also saw the rise of legitimate and illegitimate theater where non-patented theater houses staged plays that could not be categorized as the theater drama that had been patented. It included the development of melodramas, where short plays were acted out with episodes separated by music. It made the theaters safe from being accused of infringing patent rights.

The decline of religious control that had marked the puritan era also contributed to the growth of theaters in the 18th century. Kraus et al (2005) argue that while the church had drafted and implemented laws regulating leisure activities, people had managed to associate leisure with work thereby earning themselves some leeway into enjoying some form of amusements. It saw the return of musicals, dance, and lotteries that were used by the church to raise funds. With the
continued loosening of the regulations, plays found their way back to the English society as well as to other regions that were under Puritanism.

In America, theaters borrowed largely from the English society with its inception being after the puritan era ended (Kraus et al 2005). Many of the settlers in the New World were mainly concerned with achieving economic prosperity first before indulging in leisure activities like attending plays in theaters or participating in games. With time, however, the southern states were able to import the English culture of merrymaking, which incorporated performing plays in privately owned theaters (Sayre, 2010). The 18th century was marked by regulations on theatres, and performing plays was largely prohibited across the country. It was not until the end of the century that theaters could perform legally and openly in the cities across the country (Dirks, 2005).

While it was illegal to perform drama in America in 18th century, it was not uncommon for playwrights to compose and perform in wealthy people’s large estates. Wealthy landowners in the southern states were able to arrange for plays to be dramatized in their big and affluent estates (Kraus et al, 2005). Kraus et al (2005) further indicate that playwrights in America at the time were mostly of European origin with plays performed from one city to the other in the style of the 17th century masquerade. It implies that theaters were not mainly constructed as fixed areas, but were made in the city that the masques went to perform.

The 18th century marked the beginning of the Star System (Dirks, 2005). It was where actors rose to popularity due to their exemplary skills. Due to performers’ popularity, theaters were able to attract large crowds of people enabling theater owners to make huge profits. As a result, theaters were developed with a purpose of entertaining without depending on patronage from the wealthy, but now, with confidence of making profits.
The 19th century inherited the Star system and saw theaters erected in virtually all the cities in America. The profiteering from plays performed at theaters facilitated construction of large theaters to accommodate a bigger audience. Kraus et al (2005) indicate that some of the theaters constructed at the time could accommodate up to four thousand people. The plays were dramatized by touring players who entertained people in their hometowns. It was primarily because there was a general surge in the urban population, which had been stimulated by the industrial growth in the US. This era also marked the initial take up of technological advancement in the theater with recorded use of electronics in theaters (Dirks, 2005). It was the case in England too since industrial growth was at its peak. It meant higher demand for entertainment, which saw the review of the licensing law early in the century that had given monopoly rights to two playhouses in London.

The 20th century was marked by intense commercialization of theaters and plays. Dirks (2005) affirm that theaters were by this time very popular in major cities across the US. The plays performed were mainly melodrama although classics were performed in various theaters. Playwriting was at its peak during this era with realism emerging to compete with melodrama. In England, some of the big playhouses carried out organized performances of Shakespeare’s work. In a way, some theaters held on to the old era while others were quick to adopt the popular themes as well as forms of entertainment (Sayre, 2010).

The new century has been characterized by an unprecedented consumption of technological entertainment. It implies that theaters have had to compete with forms of entertainment that could reach millions of people faster and more efficiently. Borrowing from other forms of audio-visual media, theaters have employed technology to attain higher levels of delivery with theaters constructed to achieve higher quality of delivery. However, Dirks (2005)
argues that with all the advancement in technology, much of the playwriting of 21st century is inferior to the work portrayed in theaters in the past. It does not mean that theater faces absolution: a change of perception has been ignited that tends to set aside theaters as being more symbolic and metaphorical relative to mass media (Brandes, 2007).
References


