Where Did Theater Go? Crash Course Theater #18

Crash Course: Theater
https://youtube.com/watch?v=1xrcHQB5EEU
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/1xrcHQB5EEU

===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

Hey there i'm Mike Rugnetta, this is crash course theatre and remember how we said it was going to take a bunch of buzz-kill Puritans to end this huge flowering of art and culture and awesomeness? Well, here they are. Today we're going to be talking about objections to theatres in renaissance England and how the theatres eventually closed.But good news, the theaters eventually reopened two decades later with smutty comedy and expurgated Shakespeare and also women, on stage sometimes wearing pants. What a time to have been alive. As you remember from our episodes on classical theatre Puritans didn't invent hating on theatre, a phenomenon we call, anti-theatricalism.Boo-hiss. The father of anti-theatricalism is as far as recorded history goes is… Plato. Yeah, that Plato. *quote* Please also note though that Plato wrote his own philosophy in dialogue form so… Anyway, while the Greeks, the Romans and the early Christians all had problems with theatre and those who performed it to some degree there ain't any anti-theatricalist like a Puritan anti-theatricalist.Think of the thing that you hate the most in the world and then multiply that hate by a lot more loathing and suspicion and also fear of the plague, you probably still don't hate the theatre like the Puritans did. Let's see some examples. This first is from Elizabeth's reign; a letter sent by the Lord, Mayor and Alderman of London in 1597 which called for all plays to be cancelled.
Plays he wrote… *quote*

===== (02:00) to (04:00) =====

He also went on to say that they make people lazy and criminal and give then black death. Which i mean, I've worked with some flat-footed lighting technicians but no one with the pestilence. Other Puritans came along and started writing some long and unhinged pamphlets. They said that plays taught people how to sin, that they made men effeminate, remember all those boy actors dressed as spunky heroines in pants? Yeah, the Puritans did not love that. And surprise, surprise, that plays went against God. And here's something for the irony fans, remember how theatre was used to jazz up church services not so long before this? Well, some Protestant English critics objected to renaissance theatre because it emerged from liturgical drama and that made it too "popish", not religious enough or too religious? It's almost like the nature of theatre isn't the problem here. The greatest example of an anti-theatrical text is probably William Prynne's "Historiomastix", a thousand pages of invective against the theatre, published in 1632. How bananas is this book? Well, here is an abridged version of the title, yeesh: *quote* Abridged people, this is the abridged title, yeesh. Somewhere in those thousand pages Prynne mentions that women actors are notorious whores and maybe you're thinking: uh… what? Women actors? Prynne claimed he was talking about a troupe of French actresses who had visited London in 1629 and had been booed and "pippin-pelted" off the stage.

===== (04:00) to (06:00) =====

That means that they got apples tossed at them. But hey, also, remember how court masks featured noble women including the queen Henrietta Maria?

The nobles remembered. And when the courts read Prynne's book, he was put on trial for seditious libel because you kinda can't imply that the queen is a whore and not maybe get your own thousand page book thrown at you.

But ok, Prynne's work wasn't the final dramatic nail in the theater's coffin. What did it? Well, it starts with Charles the First, king of England, Scottland, and Ireland, and hubby to Henrietta Maria. Charles the first had worse problems than men seditiously libeling his wife.

His main problem was money, wars did not come cheap and he fought lots of them. And I'm sure all of those Inigo Jones sets and nymph costumes didn't help things either. He and parliment, which was largely puritanical, used to fight all the time about his military spending. So he kept disolving parliament.

In 1629, he disbanded it all together and decided to go it alone, levying some unpopular taxes to keep everything afloat. And that went ok until 1640, when he needed money to fight against the Scots. He reconvened parliament, and then dissolved it again, and then reconvened it again and the house of commons basically passed a bill telling the king that he was a royal pain in the neck. Then ireland rebelled.

Here is where we get back to theater. Civil war now fully underway, the puritanical parliament used the conflict as an excuse to ban theater, mostly on religious grounds. In 1642, they passed an edict which read:

"Public sports do not well agree with public calamities, nor public stage-plays with the seasons of humiliation, this being an exercise of sad and pious solemnity, and the other being spectacles of pleasure, too commonly expressing lascivious mirth and levity: It is therefore thought fit, and ordained, by the lords and commons in this parliament assembled, that, while these sad causes and set times of humiliation do continue, public stage plays shall cease, and be forborn.

===== (06:00) to (08:00) =====

Basically, how can you theater at a time lilke this?!

In 1647, parliament published another edict threatening punishment for anyone who put on a play. The next year they passed a law saying actors should be aprehended as criminals and theaters should be demolished. An actor caught acting once was whipped, twice treated as an incorrigible rogue - which actually sounds fine but probably was awful.

Anyone attending a play would be fined five shillings, which was a mint then, and in 1649, a few months after the beheaded Charles I, the puritan parliamentarians appointed a provost martial who was tasked with imprissioning all ballad singers and shutting down stage-plays. No. Fun. Allowed.

So, did the theater disapear entirely? Sort of. Public performances were semi-secretly held until the king was beheaded, but they really dried up after that.

Late in the 1650's, the playwright William Davenant basically invented English language opera because musical performances hadn't been specifically forbidden. He was like, "Look, everybody's singing all the time! This definitely isn't a play! No, no, no, not at all."

Otherwise, performances were small and clandestine, held in private homes, tenis courts, and inns. And this would be the case for about 12 years.

In 1658, Oliver Cromwell, the leader of the commonwealth, died. His son lost the confidence of the military; the rolayists started rising up again; and in 1660, Charles II was restored to the throne. Almost immediately, he started licensing theater companies and helping theaters reopen.

In London, there were two main companies. One led by William Davenant, the opera guy, the other lead by Thomas Killigrew. Descendants of these companies basically had a lock on spoken drama in London until 1843.

===== (08:00) to (10:00) =====

At first, the restoration theater relied on old plays. Tragic comedies were popular, especially those by Beaumont and Fletcher. Shakespeare was almost immediately revived, but with a difference. Remember those tragedies where everyone died and it was very moving? Yorick does. He knows them well.

Restoration audiences were not into it. After that whole civil war thing, people wanted happy endings, not a stage full of corpses. So playwrights rewrote Shakespeare. Suddenly, Juliet gets to wake up before Romeo kills himself and Lear survives. Also, Edgar and Cordelia get married, and Miranda gets a sister. Companies also started using all those fancy scenic design elements that Inigo Jones had introduced, but the biggest difference was women.

Women on stage, Charles II approved it. Why? It's unclear. Though, actresses were common in France, where he had been hiding out.

Women not only took on female roles, they also took on male roles or "breeches parts." Maybe they did it for the actorly challenge, or maybe they did it because theater managers realized that male audience members went crazy when women wore pants and showed their ankles. Ooh, la la.

And women not only appeared on stage, there were also several important female restoration playwrights, including Aphra Behn and Susanna Centlivre. The restoration also brought some new styles of playwriting to England. Most were heroic tragedies and swashbuckling romances borrowed from Spain and France, but it did birth one homegrown genre: the restoration comedy.

Restoration comedies are...smutty, even by today's standards. They're witty, sexy, outrageous plays about upper-class people looking for love. Lots of that love is adulterous. Like most comedies, they rely on familiar types and while they don't have that Shakespearean depth of characterization, they are funny.

A bunch of those hoots and hollers derived from voicing an cynical distrust of conventional morality, because after that whole beheading the king and living under puritan rule, conventional morality just doesn't look so great. In fact, it looks downright oppressive.

===== (10:00) to (12:00) =====

Marriage isn't the happy ending here. No social contract is treated as objectively rad. These plays are skeptical of airy concepts like love, honor, and fidelity; they're much more about lust, envy, and covetousness as motivating forces.

For example, William Wycherley's 1675 play "The Country Wife" is sort of based on Moliere, but luder. Take us to the country, Thought Bubble.

Harry Horner, check out that name, decides that the best way to sleep with all the women in town is to spread the rumor that he's impotent so that husbands will leave their wives alone with him. It works! That Horner.

Meanwhile, Pinchwife has just gotten married to Margery, and is so worried about adultery that he won't let her out of her house, won't let ler have any friends, and keeps her in the country. Get it? She's the country wife.

Finally, he agrees to take her for a walk in town, but only after disguising her as a boy. Horner meets the disguised Margery, clocks that she's a woman, and runs off with her.

When he and pinchwife are reuinited, he tells her that she can never see Horner again, and makes her write a letter saying how disguisting she finds him. But instead of a weird chaste affidavit, she writes a love letter. Horner likes her too, but still finds time to, um, "horn" Lady Fidget in a scene that uses a lot of ceramics metaphors. It's hilarious.

He also sleeps with all of her friends, and maybe you'd expect a playwright to try to protect Margery from sex-addict Horner, but Wycherley would rather see his characters happily bonking than unhappily chaste. Margery dresses up as Pinchwife's sister and goes to Horner's room. Pinchwife finds them, but owing to some fast-talking, Horner and Margery get off scot-free and Pinchwife seems to believe the tales of Horner's impotence, leaving him to carouse another day.

So it all ends smutilly ever after. Take that, Puritans. Thanks Thought Bubble. That was permissive.

===== (12:00) to (13:27) =====

So, we can see that this is a lot rowdier than the Shakespeare style of comedy and even a bit wittier in the text, too. Restoration comedy encouraged anti-theatricalists too. Jeremy Collier's 1698 pamphlet "A Short View of the Immorality and Profaneness of the English Stage" is 300 pages. Short by Prynne's standards.

Collier writes, "Nothing has gone farther in debauching the age than the stage, poets, and playhouse." And his ideas were so influential that he encouraged some playwrights to reform.

He also caught the attention of James II, who decreed that plays should maybe be less smutty. Boring.

No, but ok, we're gonna get less smutty too as we head to Spain and France to explore Golden Age drama on the continent. But, until then, curtain.

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