Zola, France, Realism, and Naturalism: Crash Course Theater #31

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

Hey there!

I'm Mike Rugnetta. This is Crash Course Theater, and today we're headed back to France.

Hang onto your culturally appropriate head-wear because today there's gonna be murder. There's gonna be sexy times. There's gonna be tuberculosis.

Rebels are gonna pee in the aisles. Au revoir, neoclassicism. Don't let the minimal scene changes hit you on the way out.

We'll be taking a quick look at French Romanticism before moving on to Realism and then Naturalism, which is a lot like Realism, only more realer. Allons-y! INTRO Let's start with Victor Hugo, who you may know as the author of "Les Miserables." The novel "Les Miserables." But Hugo also wrote plays.

And in 1827, he wrote "Cromwell," which we now mostly know because of its awesome preface, in which Hugo argues that if you really wanna show how grotesque, sublime, and weird life is, you can't play by the neoclassical rules. "Let us tear down that old plasterwork that hides the façade of art," he writes. "There are no rules, no models; rather, there are no rules other than the general laws of Nature… Nature then! Nature and truth!" But maybe not too much nature? "Everyone knows that color and light are lost in a simple reflection," Hugo writes. "The drama, therefore, must be a concentrating mirror, which, instead of weakening, concentrates and condenses the colored rays, which makes of a mere gleam a light, and of a light a flame." It's sort like the old documentarian nugget about wanting to tell the truth, but don't get bogged down in all the facts. He tried out these natural-but-not-too-natural ideas in his play "Hernani," which premiered in 1830.

Kind of like "Le Cid" with a sad ending, "Hernani" is the story of a noble outlaw and his noble non-outlaw girlfriend. It ends in a double suicide. But remember how Corneille was toeing the Neoclassical/Academie Francaise line?

Hugo was not into it. He mixed comedy and tragedy and flipped the bird to the unities of place and time. He was cool with the unity of action though.

And he was like, I'mma mess with your twelve-syllable alexandrine and use words that have been considered beneath the dignity of tragedy, so how do ya like me now? Still going to write in verse, because… c'mon I'M NOT A HEATHEN. Hugo!

So rebellious! But within reason. The play premiered in late February after weeks of editorials and counter-editorials about what a shock it would be.

One paper announced there would be riots and death and a small civil war if Hernani went on. It went on. And there was a riot—a small and slightly gross one.

Four hours before the performance, a large group of Hugo-supporting bohemians snuck into the theater, occupying the pit and the gallery. They snacked and drank and peed in the aisles. And when the upper class patrons arrived for the show, they were not thrilled.

The two groups spent most of the performance fighting each other. But then in the last act, when everything became very sad, the two groups settled down and wept together, and the play was a hit. Hugo hired a hundred people to come and applaud it every night though, so that probably helped.

Following Hugo, a few people half-heartedly attempted to make the theater a little more like life. Mostly they did this by moving popular theater away from grandiose, avalanche-heavy melodrama ... towards intimate, sofa-heavy melodrama. This form was perfected by Eugene Scribe in the piece bien faite, or the well-made play—a five-act prose drama that hooks the audience with a series of discoveries, reversals, and recognitions before ultimately reaffirming nice, conservative bourgeois values.

Scribe, who wrote nearly four hundred plays, definitely wasn't interested in making the theater all that life like. He wrote: "You go to theater, not for instruction or correction, but for relaxation and amusement. Now what amuses you most is not truth, but fiction… the extraordinary, the romantic, that is what charms you, that is what one is eager to offer you." Scribe was incredibly popular, and so were his dramaturgical roll crew, Georges Feydeau and Victorien Sardou.

Playwright George Bernard Shaw despised Sardou so much that he coined... ...the term "Sardoodledom" to describe his plays. But other writers were starting to wonder if the well-made play could be made even better by being brought more in line with observable reality. And this is basically where we got theatrical realism!

The term "realism" started popping up in France in the 1850s. And there was even a journal called Realisme. Theorists called for realistic situations, realistic characters, and realistic dialogue.

Even grammatically incorrect dialogue! A development which I am aghast … about Alexandre Dumas fils, the son of Alexandre Dumas of "Three Musketeers" fame, was one of the first writers to shift the well-made play into an even more realistic social problem play. As Dumas wrote, "invention does not exist for us.

We have nothing to invent. We have only to look and remember, to feel, to co-ordinate and give back, under a special form, that which all the spectators should immediately remember to have felt or witnessed." But that special form thing is important. A true artist can't just reproduce life; "he has to discover and to reveal to us that which we do not see in things we look at every day," Dumas wrote.

Which all sounds great. But if you read Dumas's most famous play, "La Dame Aux Camilles," with its courtesan -with-a-heart-of-gold-reforms-her-life-and-then-dies-of- culosis-because-it's-easier-to-forgive-a-fallen-women-when-they're-dead plot, you'll see that there is definitely some invention and some tear-jerking going on. I mean, I guess you can rip only so much from the headlines, y'know?

And even though realism was supposed to be a move away from the sensationalism and moralism of melodrama—well, there's still a lot of sensation. As we'll see in upcoming episodes, the problem with a lot of new artistic movements is that it's hard to be faithful to your theories and write plays people wanna see. The realistic movement coincides with a whole bunch of scientific discoveries and publications, notably Charles Darwin's "Origin of Species." Artists were fascinated by this text and by what Darwin suggests about how heredity and environment come together to create character.

In theater, the big-time early adopter of evolution was Emile Zola, who was described as a fat, pot-bellied whiner by one of his colleagues. Instead of the well-made play formula, Zola said that theater should use other formulas: scientific formulas! This was naturalism.

Theater, Zola thought, should be a laboratory of human life, with its experiments based not on the demands of plot, but on the inner conflicts of a group of characters. Each play should test a

hypothesis, investigating what happens if you put these characters, with these hereditary traits, into this environment. Spoiler alert: Nothing good!

Naturalism doesn't include a lot of happy endings. Zola's plays were so intense that they were considered too radical for some former radicals. Victor Hugo's supporters came to boo them.

You know how those earlier realists were like, We want the theater to be like life but maybe not too much? Zola was all, Make it all the way like life. More life!

LIFE TO THE MAX In his preface to "Therese Raquin," the 1873 study of an adulterous couple that he adapted from his own novel, Zola wrote... "I am waiting for the time to come when they will tell us no more incredible stories, when they will no longer spoil the effects of just observations by romantic incidents… I am waiting for them to abandon the cut and dried rules, the worked-out formulas, the tears and cheap laughs… I am waiting, finally… until they return to the source of science and modern arts, to the study of nature, to the anatomy of man, to the painting of life, in an exact reproduction, more original and powerful than anyone has so far." Let's test some of these ideas out with "Therese Raquin." Hope you brought your life jacket, Thought Bubble.

Therese is a poor girl who lives with her aunt and her aunt's hypochondriac son, Camille. Therese is semi-forced to marry Camille, and the family moves to Paris. Then one day, Camille brings home a work friend, and artist Laurent. And before you can say heredity and environment, Laurent and Therese start a torrid affair But… sneaking around is tough. So eventually they're like, Hey, Camille, let's all go for a boat ride. Their plan is to drown Camille and then live happily ever after. But the drowning doesn't go so well: Camille bites Laurent, and no one can find the body. And then the happily-ever-after doesn't go so well, because after they get married, Laurent and Therese are tortured by guilt. They keep hallucinating that zombie-Camille is actually in their bedroom, which really interferes with sexy time. Therese can't sleep. Laurent can't paint. They both go a little crazy. Therese's aunt finds out about the murder, but she's had a couple of strokes and can only communicate with her eyes and one finger. So she does a lot of ominous staring. She tries to expose them, but fails. The pressure is so great that Therese decides to kill Laurent, and Laurent decides to kill Therese. Then they figure out that each is trying to kill the other, so they hug and cry and drink poison while the aunt watches, and probably some pointing? TOO REAL, Thought Bubble. Or I guess, not REAL but … NATURAL?

In some ways "Therese Raquin" proves Zola's ideas pretty well. The murder occurs because of the kind of temperaments each character has and the opportunities that their environment provides. And there aren't a lot of cut and dried rules or cheap laughs. But ok - how real or natural is this play? Eh. Even Zola acknowledged that it had problems. It's an incredible story. It's full of romantic incidents. It doesn't feel like an exact reproduction of my life or probably your life … hopefully. Unless you have thrown yourself into a passionate affair and then drowned your husband. If this is a slice of life, it's a very lurid slice, and it actually looks a lot like a sad version of bourgeois melodrama. Realism, like melodrama, is one of those genres that's still very much with us today. In plays, in movies, on TV shows. Realism and naturalism promise us art that looks a lot like life, but it turns out that life isn't always so easy to stage. It's long; a lot of it is boring; and people normally get really miffed when you call INTERMISSION in the middle of it. Also don't get me started on the costumes. K actually, that's pretty good. This means that realistic art adopts its own less-than-exactingly-realistic conventions. Maybe they're not as strict as neoclassicism, but they're definitely there. Like the way that opening scenes have to establish who all the characters are, or the way that a crisis has to be instigated and then resolved. And speaking of resolution: we'll be staying in France for one more episode, to take a look at a sea change in acting and the rise of the director. Until then… curtain!