What Is Theater? Crash Course Theater #1

Crash Course: Theater
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Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta and this is the first episode of Crash Course Theater. Welcome!

In the episodes to come, we'll have it all: tragedy, comedy, history, pastoral, pastoral-comical, historical-pastoral, tragical-historical, tragical-comical-historical-pastorla-expealidocious. Yeah, I mean, this series could go on forever.

And let me introduce you to Dionysus, the Greek god of the theater. And wine. I mean, they can't all be charming, genius birdmen, I guess.

In this series, we'll explore the history of theater and how we can understand and analyze it. We'll take a look at significant plays and performances along the way, but in this episode we're gonna define theater and look at some theories about how it got started.

So, prologue over! Act 1, Scene 1 - begin.

[Opening music]

First, let's define theater, the building: a theater is a place in which a play is performed. If you trace the word back to its Greek origins, it literally means "the seeing place." It can be big or small, indoors or outdoors, purpose built or just borrowed. Sometimes plays are performed in spaces that aren't really theaters at all - in a park or a parking lot, on a sidewalk, or in a private home.

Theater also refers to the performance of plays and to the body of literature and other documentation that has accompanied it. Some plays, known as closet dramas, aren't even written to be performed. And that's theater too. So are improvised plays that don't have a script and plays that have a script but don't use words, like some of Samuel Beckett's shorts.

A familiar definition is that theater requires at least one actor and at least one audience member, and that definitely covers a lot of stuff. But, like, what's an actor? What's an audience member?

While most plays use human actors, there are plays performed by robots and laptops with voice synthesizers. There are plays performed by animals and by puppets, though usually there's a human helping out with those. I hope.

Sooo, is everything theater? If you want a really expansive definition, the composer John Cage said that "theater takes place all the time, wherever one is; an art simply facilitates persuading one this is the case."

So, is this theater? Well, not for you. You're watching a video recorded earlier. But here, in this room. I'm performing, right? And there's an audience if you include Stan and Zulaiha watching me. Am I doing theater? Do you guys want to hear my "To be or not to be?" Yorick" Do you wanna - aw.

They say no every time! A plague on both your houses.

What is and isn't theater is the kind of question that can make your head spin. We're gonna come back to it a couple of time, especially when we talk about political theater and protest theater and immersive theater, but for now we're gonna use a more narrow definition. Theater is a deliberate performance created by live actors and intended for a live audience, typically making use of scripted language. We may meet some exceptions along the way - lookin' at you, robo-actors - but this'll work for now.

And, before we get too far, let's confront the perennial controversy: should you spell with an -RE or an -ER. And the short answer is, both of them are fine. -RE is more common outside of the US, but for some folks, this spelling acts as a shibboleth. You may have heard someone say "a theater is a building, but the theatre is an art!" OR "theater is a destination, but theatre is a journey."

Here at Crash Course, we don't mind either, but we've chosen to stick with -ER for consistency.

There's no origin story for theater that everyone agrees on, but there are some theories that we can explore. In the West, at least, up until the sixth or seventh century BCE, we didn't have theater as we know it today, but we did have religious ritual, which can get pretty theatrical.

Rituals are often ways of mediating between the human and the supernatural. They can serve to enact or re-enact significant events in the human or supernatural worlds - births, marriages, deaths, harvests. In ritual, according to the mythology scholar Mircea Eliade, "The time of the event that the ritual commemorates or reenacts is made present." So, ritual represents, literally re-presents, old stories or idea and makes them happen now, which is a lot like what theater does.

This doesn't mean that ritual is identical with theater. Ritual is sacred, and theater is usually secular (though not always, as we'll see). Theater and ritual can draw on similar mythological sources, but ritual typically treats those sources as fact and theater as fiction. In ritual, the audience often participates; in theater, they usually sit politely. Unless there's audience participation, which is universally adored.

In the late nineteenth century, a group of classical scholars decided to search for the origins of theater. They took an anthropological approach and saw theater as a direct evolution of religious ritual. This theory really got going with James Frazer, whom we also discuss in the Crash Course Mythology episode on Theories of Myth.

In *The Golden Bough*, written between 1896 and 1915, Frazer and his contemporaries, the Cambridge Ritualists - which, by the way, this is obviously the name of my new band - tried to take a "scientific" approach to the question of theater's origin. He looked around at so-called "primitive" societies in Africa and Asia, societies he didn't really "know that much about" and decided that theater had emerged as a sophisticated refining of ritual.

According to Frazer, here's how it goes: You start out worshipping some kind of god or practice, and that worship gets distilled into rituals to attract the attention of that god or guarantee good fortune. Once your primitive society really gets going, those rituals generate myths and those myths get transmuted into theater. So eventually you arrive at jazz hands and sequins.

As the media theorist Marshall McLuhan puts it, in this view, "Art became a sort of civilized substitute for magical games and rituals...art like game became a mimetic echo of and a relief from old magic of total involvement."

For an example of the (sometimes questionable) evidence that the Cambridge Ritualists drew on to support their idea that ritual evolved into theater, let's look at the Greek historian Herodotus, writing in the 5th century BCE, describing a ceremony he witnessed in Egypt. Thought Bubble, take the stage:

This ceremony occurs at sunset in a temple. Some priests attend to a statue of Ares, but most of the people involved are doing something very different: "The majority of them hold clubs made of wood and stand at the temple's entrance while others make vows, more than a thousand men, all holding clubs. And those few left behind with the statue pull a four-wheeled wagon carrying the

shrine and the statue which is in the shrine, and the others standing at the front gates do not let them enter."

If things seem tense to you, very perceptive! Probably the clubs that tipped you off, right? Herodotus says, "Those who vowed to defend the god strike those resisting...As I understand, many even die from their wounds." The ritual continues all through the night. And, as you might if you were Herodotus, he asks some locals why the poundings? And they tell him:

"There lived in this temple Ares' mother, and Ares who was raised elsewhere came - after having become a man - wishing to lay with his mother, and the servants of his mother, for not having seen him before, did not look the other way when he entered, rather, they fended him off, and he fetching men from another city handled the servants roughly and went inside to his mother. For this reason, this fight in behalf of Ares at the festival has become a tradition, they say."

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So, the Ritualists look to stories like this to illustrate their idea that worship becomes ritual. Ritual becomes myth. And myth becomes performance. Someone writes a few songs to go along with the skull-splitting, someone else turns the battle into a dance, let it all simmer for a millennia or two, and voila, *West Side Story*!

This ritualism theory is useful in some ways and as we'll see in the next episode, it fits very nicely with Greek drama, mostly because the whole theory was pretty much based on Greek drama. That's a welcome fix to how preview generations of scholars viewed Greek drama - as something pure and stately, not as something that might have evolved from passion and magic - but this theory causes problems when you try to apply the history of Greek drama to other dramatic traditions.

Frazer and his colleagues didn't actually know all that much about the so-called "primitive" societies whose theater they wanted to study; the rich and sophisticated cultures the Ritualists encountered throughout Africa and Asia were lost on the Cambridge types...because Euro-centrism.

So they did a lot of pretty non-scientific guessing, working backward from what they knew about classical theater and hypothesizing about what kind of rituals may have produced it. Frazer also operates with the underlying belief that all societies basically evolve in the same way and that even though, in his view, so-called primitive societies are inherently inferior, given enough time and care they'll get more and more sophisticated until they too can produce *Cats*.

Okay, Frazer didn't talk about Broadway musicals, but maybe you're starting to understand a couple of the major problems with this theory and the assumption that all societies are on a trajectory toward Western civilization, which in this view is just getting better and better all the time. This view, by the way, is know as "positivism."

Another theory that gets going after Frazer is the idea that people create myths out of a desire to explain and rationalize the world around them. In ritualism, myths and theater emerge as a response to pre-existing rituals. But in this other theory, known as functionalism, myths serve an etiological function, a way of explaining how and why things came to be the way they are.

According to one of the lead functionalist theorists, Bronislaw Malinowski, myth "is a statement of primeval reality which lives in the institutions and pursuits of a community. It justifies by precedent the existing order."

Unlike the Ritualists, the functionalists didn't assume that all societies operate and evolve in the same way or will create the same kinds of myths. Malinowski didn't really discuss theater, but some of his followers did, and they locked on to the idea that many early Greek dramas have their origins in myth and some of those myths are etiological. The *Oresteia* explains the legal system, *Prometheus Bound* explains that liver is tasty. Just kidding, it explains how we get fire and technology.

So, if myths explain the world, and theater is based in myth, we can think about theater as a way of explaining the world to ourselves. But such a view does have some drawbacks. Take one of the very earliest recorded plays, Aeschylus's *The Persians*. That was based on contemporaneous historical events, not in myth.

Besides the Ritualists and the Functionalists, there are a few other theories too. One is that theater derives at least in part from the clown figure - who's sort of the secular equivalent of the shaman in early societies. Their job was to make fun of the headman and other establishment figures and practices. We can maybe see this influence in satyr plays, which we'll visit in the next episode. And it's linked, at least a little, to the idea that theater may originate from games and the playful instincts of humankind, a phenomenon called the ludic impulse.

Another related theory, which really gets going with Aristotle, is that human beings have a "mimetic impulse": humans have a in-built desire ot imitate, to act, and to pretend - and that's how we learn. According to Aristotle, this desire eventually gets refined and codified into theater.

So, to sum it up: ritual, myth, clowning, playing games, playing pretend. Somehow out of all of this, or maybe out of none of it, we get *Hamilton*.

And now, let's turn to our last question for today: Why should we care? Everybody's favorite question. In other words, why does theater matter? Well, that's a question we'll be coming back to throughout the series as we see how and why people make theater, and the impact it has throughout history.

But let me leave you with one idea borrow from Percy Bysshe Shelley: "The highest moral purpose aimed at in the highest species of the drama, is the teaching the human heart, through its sympathies and antipathies, the knowledge of itself."

Thanks for watching and curtain.

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Thanks for watching.