The Death and Resurrection of Theater as...Liturgical Drama: Crash Course Theater #8

Crash Course: Theater
https://youtube.com/watch?v=kX0jHv05FYM
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/kX0jHv05FYM

Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta. This is *Crash Course Theater*, and today we're looking at the disappearance of theater during the late Classical period and its reemergence hundreds of years later in a pretty unlikely place. No, not New Jersey. Here's a hint, though: it has high ceilings and it usually involves a bunch of men wearing fancy robes. No, not the Jedi Counci. Close, though.

[*Crash Course Theater* intro]

As you may recall from our episode on Roman theater, drama had to compete with nude dancing, wild animal acts, and elaborate naval battles in flooded coliseums where people actually died. In the early centuries of the common era, these performances became increasingly popular and elaborate – sort of like Michael Bay films – while classically-derived theater receded in importance.

Of course, not everyone was a fan of these more extreme types of performance, especially early Christians. In fact, Romans developed a repertoire of acts expressly designed to mock and punish early Christians. There were scenes that made fun of baptism, and, just in case that was too subtle, they also just straight up fed Christians to wild animals while the audience cheered.

Sometimes mimes would conclude performances with the great crowd pleaser, actual crucifixion. So just remember that the next time you want to diss on mimes, Yorick. There were torture mimes.

Christianity was more or less outlawed in the Roman Empire. Christians weren't allowed to pray in public, or really at all. But it was totally cool to go to a theater and hear actors speaking those same prayers as a mockery. This led Christian critics like Tertullian to complain, "Why should it be lawful to hear what we may not speak?"

But in 312 CE, the emperor Constantine had a dream about Jesus, and he legalized Christianity the next year. His conversion may not have been totally visionary, though. Maybe he was thinking that a new religion might be a good way to unify a divided empire... that he could then lead. Convenient.

Either way, by the end of the century, Christianity was the only legal religion in the Roman Empire. This produced a chilling effect on performance, which had long been associated with pagan gods. Sorry, Dionysus. By 404, gladiatorial fights were outlawed, and wild animal acts ended a century later.

And as it turns out, Christians hated actors just as much as Romans hated actors. Maybe more. Remember how Romans basically disbarred them from society? Well, the same goes for Christians, who mandated that sinful, sinful actors couldn't be baptized, and that anyone who married one would have to be excommunicated.

An exception was apparently made for the emperor Justinian, who fell in love with Theodora, a sexy mime who he made empress. So just remember that also the next time you want to diss on mimes. There were empress mimes.

Christianity alone didn't kill theatrical performance, though. Invading tribes had a hand, too. The Empire began to lose territories in the middle of the 4th century CE, around the same time that emperors were trying to raise morale by rallying the people behind Christianity.

The Empire split into western and eastern sections, and the western section was particularly vulnerable. Rome was sacked in 410, and the western arm of the Empire was devastated by the end of the 5th century, when the Visigoths took over. Western Rome fell in 568.

533 CE is the date of the last recorded theatrical performance in Rome, 35 years before its fall. But there may have been a few performances after that that no one wrote about.

And Roman mimes seemed to have reinvented themselves as strolling players and taken to traveling up and down the countryside. I mean, I guess someone has to entertain all of those Huns and Goths and Visigoths. I hope they liked lewd jokes, because that's it for theatrical performance in the West for a couple hundred years.

But okay, mime holding a phone. Because remember how the Empire also had an eastern wing? Well, it was called the Byzantine Empire, and it was a lot more stable, hanging around until 1453 and the fall of Constantinople. Theater continued to thrive there... probably.

You may be shocked to learn, evidence is on the scant side. No scripts from the Byzantine theater have survived, so most of what we know is from people who wrote screeds complaining about the theater. And there are a few paintings and sculptures that appear to depict theatrical events.

Mostly, the Byzantines liked the decadent, semi-theatrical stuff that Western audiences were into. Constantinople had a hippodrome, and the hippodrome hosted gladiators, chariot races, and wild animal fights.

But there were also two Roman theaters, one of which survived into the Middle Ages and likely produced the comedies of Menander.

Still, most of the entertainment was probably given over to mimes and variety shows. These were still going strong as late as 692 CE, which we know, because around then a group of churchmen lobbied to have them banned.

So just remember that also also, the next time you want to diss on mimes: doing their best to keep theater alive in some form for centuries. Mimes.

In the West, fools and jugglers and singers persisted, but nothing you could call a play. So then, what did people do for fun in the Middle Ages?

Well, they went to church. Because Christian ritual, especially as it became fancier and more formalized, ticked a lot of the boxes we associate with theater: costumes, props, songs, and movement up and down the aisles that maybe looks a bit like dance if you squint really hard.

While no one is exactly sure how we get from the medieval mass to the large-scale cycle plays and passion plays, which we'll talk about in a bit, most scholars believe that the resurgence of drama began as part of the Easter service, some time in the 10th century CE.

This began with an exchange known as the Quem Quaeritis, which is the Latin for "Whom do you seek?", or, in a slightly more casual translation, "Hey, who you Christian ladies lookin' for over in that there sepulcher?"

Where does the Quem Quaeritis come from, and why does it get going at all? Unclear. It seems to be a mashup of sections from the Gospel of Luke and then a couple of apocryphal gospels: the Gospel of Peter and the Gospel of Mary.

It appears in the Regularis Concordia, a sort of rule book for Benedictine monasteries compiled by Ethelwald, Bishop of Winchester, in around 970 CE. We can guess that it was adopted to heighten excitement and suspense at a key moment of the Easter service, just before the discovery of the Resurrection.

In the Quem Quaeritis, the three Marys speak to some angels. These are the Virgin Mary, the Magdelene Mary, and Mary the sister of Lazarus, the Mary that everyone forgets about.

The parts were probably first undertaken by two sections of a choir using antiphonal singing, and then later by individual monks or clerics. It goes like so:

Angels: Whom do you seek in the sepulcher, O followers of Christ?

Marys: Jesus of Nazareth, the Crucified, O heavenly ones.

Angels: He is not here; he is risen, just as he predicted. Go, announce that he is risen from the sepulcher.

And that gripping dialogue is what probably restores theater to the West. Here's ol' Ethelwald describing a typical staging, in the Thought Bubble.

"While the third lesson is being read aloud, four of the brothers should dress themselves. One of them, wearing an alb, should come in as though intent on other business and go stealthily to the place of the sepulcher.

"Then, while the third response is being sung, the three remaining brothers, all of them wearing copes and carrying thuribles, with incense in their hands, should walk slowly and haltingly, making their way to the place of the sepulcher as if they are seeking something.

"For these things are done in imitation of the angel seated on the tomb and of the women coming with perfumes to anoint the body of Jesus. When, therefore, the one sitting there sees the three drawing near, he should begin to sing sweetly in a moderate voice, 'Whom do you seek?'

"The three should answer together in one voice, 'Jesus of Nazareth.' He to them: 'He is not here. He has risen, as he predicted. Go, tell the news that he has risen from the dead.'

"And then, having said these things, he should stand up and raise the veil, showing them the empty place where the cross had been laid, where there should be nothing but the linen bands in which the cross had been wrapped.

"Seeing this, they should put down the thuribles, which they have carried into the sepulcher, and, taking up the linen cloths, they should hold them out toward the assembled clergy as though showing them that the Lord has risen and is now no longer wrapped in them. And they should sing this antiphon: 'The Lord has risen from the tomb.' "

Thanks, Thought Bubble.

There you have it, the first liturgical drama, so called because it emerges out of the Christian liturgy, or service. And now, maybe you're thinking, "Wow, that is just... super exciting. Definitely much preferable to naval battles and nude mimes."

But hang on a second. This exchange may not sound thrilling now, but then it was. Before this, you just have a priest reciting passages from the Bible. But this moment where other members of the clergy step out and answer, this is a really big deal.

Remember the origins of ancient Greek theater, when Thespis got the bright idea to step out from the dithyrambic chorus and actually imitate some of the action instead of just singing about it? Well, this is like that, even down to the religious context.

So really, it's not so different from the Dionysian celebrations, though this is a comparisons that most church fathers of the Middles Ages would not have appreciated. I may wager there wasn't much that they would appreciate, to be quite h, though.

What's most important about the Quem Quaeritis is that even if it sounds heckin' dull, it really catches on. Parishioners enjoyed a break from the usual church service, and the trend spread, both throughout the liturgical year and throughout Europe.

At first, these brief dramas were always in Latin and always in prose, but later were written in vernacular language and sometimes in verse. Gradually, different areas of the church were used, and the clerics made increasing use of costumes and props.

But in the 12th and 13th centuries, liturgical drama had moved away from the life of Jesus and was being used to tell favorite Old Testament stories and recount the lives of saints, often with troubling streaks of antisemitism, though.

As we'll see in a few episodes, in due time these small liturgical dramas flower into much longer, larger spectacles, increasing staged – get this! – outside the church.

It's been a whirlwind day here at *Crash Course*. In the first centuries of the Roman Empire, Romans hate Christians and Christians hate theater, probably because Roman theater hated Roman Christians. Then the Roman Empire endorses Christianity, but Christians still hate theater because it's not Christian.

Then barbarian hordes overrun the western part of the Empire and destroy theater. But late-ish in the medieval period, theater reappears in pretty much the last place you would expect to find it: the Latin mass. But it's not going to stay there. Oh, no.

Next episode, we explore an alternate hypothesis for the reappearance of drama, this time through the work of one Terence-loving nun.

Until next time, curtain.

Crash Course Theater is produced in association with PBS Digital Studios. Head over to their channel to check out some of their shows, like *The Art Assignment* and *Eons* and *It's Okay to Be Smart*.

Crash Course Theater is filmed in the Chad and Stacey Emigholz Studio in Indianapolis, Indiana, and is produced with the help of all of these very nice people. And our animation team is Thought Café.

Crash Course exists thanks to the generous support of our patrons at Patreon. Patreon is a voluntary subscription service where you can support the content you love through a monthly donation and help keep *Crash Course* free for everyone forever.

Thanks for watching.