The Rise of Melodrama: Crash Course Theater #28

Crash Course: Theater
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===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Theater, and today we'll be talkig about brave heroes, scheming villains, scorching fires, convulsing earthquakes, spooktacular ghosts, and grave robbing. Oh, wait, no, that's just grave robbing. Yep, today is all about melodrama, the form that bodyslammed 19th century theater and still dominates entertainment culture today. Melodrama is crude, it's exciting, it's funny and sad and morally simplistic. Its endings are satisfying and the scenery is off the hook, and wow, is there a lot of musical accompaniment. That's the law. Literally. So sit back, grab a meat pie, and try to not get hit by any runaway chariots. Lights up.

(Crash Course Theater intro)

Melodrama gets going right at the turn of the 19th century--about a decade after the French Revolution and a few decades after the American one. It borrows from sentimental comedy and bourgeouis tragedy but is way more about showing the audience a good time. Sometimes that good time includes dogs. That's right, there is a whole sub-genre of dog melodrama.

What kickstarts melodrama? Well, cities are getting bigger faster, which creates a newly urbanized working class, and that urbanized working class wants to go to the theater, and what's more, they want a theater that's not especially literary, because they're not especially literate. What they want is melodrama. It's not highbrow. Highbrows at this time mostly stick to closet drama, because I guess going out is for the poors? Regardless, melodrama is an incredibly successful and well-attended form, then and now. What do you think 90% of Hollywood movies are? Well, yeah, I mean, I guess they are bourgeous tragedies, but, you know, very different sense.

It's significant that melodrama starts in a period between revolutions, after the 18th century ones but before most of the 19th century ones. Melodrama has all the emotional fervor of revolutionary art, but it dulls and contains that fervor with comforting moral sentiments.

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

Basically, it's a conservative form that feels like a radical one. It's some sound and fury signifying not much. As the 19th century playwright Charles (?~2:20) wrote, "It reminds people that even here on Earth, virtue is never without recompense. Crime is never without punishment."

Melodrama begins in France. The father of melodrama and the first to introduce dogs is, and I'm sorry about this, Rene-Charles Guilbert de Pixerecourt. Again, I'm very sorry. A guy who describes himself as having a soul in flames, a tender heart, a fiery imagination, and a proud and independent temperment. I'm sure his friends were shocked at his melodramatic works. Anyway, he was a minor aristocrat who fled during the revolution, probably because of an anti-Jacobin play that he wrote. After returning, he starts writing less controversial plays including "The Dog of Montarges", a story of a hound who brings suspicion upon his master's murderer and who, at the king's order, fights the killer. This play makes Goethe so mad that he asks to be dismissed from the theater that stages it.

Pixerecourt may or may not have said that he wrote his plays for those who cannot read, but he definitely pioneered the combination of moral instruction and man vs. dog trial by combat. Pixerecourt's plays are eventually exported to England and melodrama really takes off. Blame the Lord Chamberlain. As you'll remember from our episode on sentimental drama, the Licensing Act of 1737 means that only two theaters in London are licensed to provide serious drama, with a third in the summer months. That's not enough theater. People want more theater, and the easiest way to get around the Licensing Act and thus stage more performance is to put on alternatives to spoken drama.

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

Alternatives like opera or musicals or maybe you just take a normal play and stuff it with some incidental music? That's what people do and voila! Melodrama. No license required. Eventually, melodrama becomes so popular that the licensed theaters basically have no choice but to produce it as well.

Of course, melodrama isn't just a play with music. I mean, literally it is, 'melo' is Greek for 'music' and 'drama' from the Greek 'dran' is Latin for 'play' but melodrama has more to it than that. These plays tell exciting stories that almost always have a happy ending where good characters get rewarded and bad characters get punished and all of the doggos get treats. Or revenge as the case may be. There are six stock characters in melodrama: The mean villain, the sensitive hero, the persecuted heroine, the clown, the faithful friend, and the villain's accomplice. Audiences were encouraged to cheer and boo where appropriate and musical accompaniment helped them out.

The contour bass accompanied the villain, the trumpet played for the hero, the flute signaled the heroine, and the clown got stuck with the bassoon because bassoons are hilarious. At certain moments, the actors would pause while music played so that audiences could have a moment to appreciate just how exciting the situation was and how awesome the actors looked. These moments, called tableau, were kind of like the held poses in kabuki. Acting in melodrama was exaggerated, designed to appeal to the emotions, and it had to be, because we're gonna make 3,000 distractable people listen in an age before microphones.

Early melodrama often borrowed from gothic stories and had strong supernatural elements. Heroes and heroines were often virtuous working class types and the villains were squires and landlords. That had to feel pretty good for urban workers stickin' it to the (?~5:46) class right there on stage. The style became more domestic in the 1820s and 1830s when there was a craze for true crime melodramas and there were all sorts of melo-subgenres, too. Dog melodramas, of course, but also equestrian dramas with horses running on treadmills and nautical dramas and battle dramas and a whole subgenre devoted to gravedigging.

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

Are we that far away from the late Roman theater? We are not, though there is less nudity and people don't actually die on stage on purpose.

Melodrama became even more spectacular with playwrights trying to outdo one another to create sensation scenes: moments of plot and stagecraft that would leave the audience gasping. This is when you get avalanches and erupting volcanoes and exploding steamboats. Melodrama was an opportunity for set designers to really strut their stuff and plays called for ruined castles, desolate mountains, frothing waterfalls, prisons, caverns, tombs, tombs, Yorick! Tombs!

But here's a funny thing about melodrama: even though the plays are wildly unrealistic, they're actually a precursor to realism. Melodrama demanded an unprecedented level of authenticity from its set designers, because audiences wanted the plays to look as real as possible, even if the stuff that was happening was, well, melodramatic, so they built and used all kinds of flats and treadmills and revolves just in case the play called for a rail crash or a chariot

race, and this raised the bar for productions of serious drama, too.

Also, the plays themselves dared to show all kinds of people in all kinds of situations. Because they were written quickly and often mirrored real life scandals and contemporary novels, they tended to be highly topical. Yes, they were (?~7:35) by Christian morality and had to end happily, but these were some of the first plays to take on racism, sexism, crime, and urban poverty.

The genre's MVP is an Irishman named Dionysius Boucicault, who churned out melodrama after melodrama and sensation after sensation. The exploding riverboat? That was him. Boucicault wrote quickly and he wrote topically. His plays are witty and sentimental and totally spectacular and he was a savvy businessman.

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

He franchised his plays, rewriting "The Poor of New York" as "The Poor of London" and "The Poor of Paris", but he didn't want other people doing any rewriting and his lawsuits helped inform the international copyright agreement of 1886, because he wanted to make sure he got his royalties. Did this stop him from stealing from other playrights, though? It did not. (?~8:24) eventually landed in America so we'll be seeing him again in our next episode but we're gonna take a sneak peak at American theater now, exploring one of the most popular and iconic melodramas of the 19th century: Augustin Daly's 1867 play, "Under the Gaslight".

Daly was a successful theater manager and one of theater's first directors. Remember all of those cartoons where they tie some lady to the tracks just as the train is coming? That starts here. Take it away, Thought Bubble.

Lovely and pure, Laura Courtland is engaged to the dashing Captain Ray Trafford, but turns out, Laura is adopted and was at one time a child pickpocket. Instead of being like, hey, cool backstory, Captain Trafford is like, maybe I need a wife who's not a daughter of obscurity and crime. Laura runs away from home and ends up supporting herself by hand-coloring photographs. She's brave and good so she managers, but her birth parents, Byke, a criminal, and Judas, a drunk, find her. Byke drags her to the court, though it's not really clear why, and the judge agrees that she acknowledge Byke as her father. Then, Byke tries to kidnap Laura and take her to, oh no, New Jersey. But Snorkey, a good-hearted, one-armed Civil War veteran foils Byke's plans. Byke retaliates by tying Snorkey to the train tracks, but Laura hacks her way out of a nearby railway shed, which is conveniently full of axes, and rescues Snorkey just in time. Pretty good gender reversal. Snorkey says, "And these are the women who ain't to have a vote."

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

The two of them go off to stop Byke from murdering Laura's snooty adopted sister Pearl and in the last scene, we find out that, hey, Laura was switched at birth with Pearl, so she really is a lady and now she and Captain Trafford, the guy who ran out on her when he thought she was poor, can get married. Oh, and old Judas falls off a horse and dies and Byke is forced to emigrate. The end. Thank you, Thought Bubble.

America is bananas, huh? And maybe Laura should just choose herself, or good old Snorkey, but either way, this passes for a happy ending and underneath all the sensationalism of the play and obviously there's a lot of it, there is some realism.

Most of the settings here are real, from Del Monico's famous restaurant in Manhattan to Central Courts to a Hudson River pier, it's sort of a travel guide to 1867 New York, but it also reveals the anxieties of 1867 New Yorkers. They're worried about money, they're worried about class, they're worried about how close the criminal world was to polite society, and how living in a big city means that all sorts of people kinda just jostle up against each other, and clearly, they're also worried about trains.

Thanks for watching. Try to not let any cow-catchers hit you on the way out. We're gonna stay in America for the next episode when we explore how this great big nation got a theater in the first place. Take that, Puritans. Oh, and also, Canada beat us to it. But did Canada have a theatrical riot that killed more than 20 people and injured 100 more? No. That one is all ours. Typical. Until then, curtain.

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===== (12:00) to (12:07) =====

Thanks for watching.