Shakespeare's Tragedies and an Acting Lesson: Crash Course Theater #16

Crash Course: Theater
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Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Theater, and today the bodies hit the floor: We're talking about Shakespearean tragedy.

Remember how the Greeks left the violence offstage? Well, Shakespeare goes another way, with poisoning, stabbing, strangling, and baking people into pies.

Get in line, Sweeney Todd. There are already a couple of Crash Course Literature episodes about "Hamlet" and that Scottish King whose name I could totally say right now if I felt like it, but I'm just not going to, so we'll be looking at "King Lear". And to set it all up, we'll look at the staging conventions of Elizabethan drama, and how all those soliloquies and storm scenes were acted.

Macbeth! OK FINE IM SORRY IM SORRY INTRO Because of changes in vagrancy laws, actors organized themselves into companies named after some royal patron. They mostly performed at purpose-built playhouses, but when those were closed—looking at you, bubonic plague—they would tour around the country.

A company would be made of 8–12 shareholders, 3–4 boys, a few hired players, some musicians, and a couple of stagehands, who ran around with whatever the Renaissance equivalent of headsets and clipboards were. Actors tended to specialize. There were king types, queen types, lover types, and even a few different types of fool—like slapstick fools and clever fools ... like Yorick here.

Shakespeare was an actor. We don't know the roles he played, though there's a rumor he played the ghost in "Hamlet." [[[From offscreen, ghost's lines: "Swear… swear… swear."]]] Who said that!? But even specialized actors had to do more than just act.

They also had to sing and dance and sword fight. And boy did they have to memorize. Actors would spend their mornings learning a new play and their afternoons performing an old one.

Because plays ran in repertory, there could be several plays on the go in any given week, and many actors had several parts within them. The boys in the company played the women's roles—and some of those women have a lot of lines. With a schedule like that, actors didn't spend a lot of time sitting around speculating about themes and motivations.

Especially because actors didn't get copies of the full script, just pages of lines and cues. The goal was to learn the lines and recite them without too much overacting. We don't know if Shakespeare hated overacting, but Hamlet sure does.

Here's his speech to the traveling players: Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue: but if you mouth it, as many of your players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines. Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently; for in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, the whirlwind of passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness. Hamlet is telling the actors don't yell, don't gesticulate wildly.

Just get the words out, and if you need to emote, do it with some elegance. No mouthing! No sawing!

Wait… am I an overactor? As we mentioned last time, the outdoor Elizabethan playhouse was a smaller, chintzier version of the Greco-Roman amphitheater. It had an acting area backed by a tiring house--the place where players got changed --overlooked by tiers of semi-circular seating and a pit, the area where workingmen who had paid a penny could stand and watch.

Plays were performed in the afternoon, to take advantage of natural light. And since this was an era before wireless headset mics, actors had to project so they could be heard above all the chit-chatting groundlings. The stage was bare except for big-deal furniture like a throne or maybe a bed.

So to make things visually interesting, actors relied on sumptuous costumes and hand props. But this isn't the Japanese theater. If an actor held a fan, he was probably just using it to fan himself.

There were only a few special effects, but a couple of those were fire-based, which is not the greatest idea in a theater made of wood. On that flammable stage, actors performed some of the most fire tragedies ever written. Many written by Shakespeare who borrowed from Greek tragedy and the medieval morality play and earlier Elizabethan forms to create a whole new genre.

Seneca, who we met in our episode on Roman drama, is also an influence, especially on Shakespeare's first tragedy, "Titus Andronicus." Still, let's remember that in terms of genre, tragedy is a flexible term. As we mentioned last time, it was the editors of the posthumous First Folio who decided to group his plays into Comedies, Histories, and Tragedies. In Shakespeare's life there was a lot more slippage.

A quarto of "Hamlet" was published as "The Tragicall Historie of Hamlet," which seems clear enough. But the history play "Richard III" was published in quarto as "The Tragedy of King Richard III," so that's confusing. More confusing? "King Lear" appeared in quarto as the "True Chronicle Historie of the life and death of King LEAR and his three Daughters," which makes it sound like a history play, but its not.

So we propose a shortcut: When it comes to Shakespeare, a tragedy is a play that ends unhappily and is not about a recent king. Like the other plays, the tragedies are mixtures of prose and verse, though they tend to go heavy on the verse, and the language is typically more ornate than in the comedies. As in Greek tragedies, they are action-packed.

What with all the prophecies and soothsayers and vengeful ghosts—[[[Offstage: "Swear… swear… swear"]]] shush it up! I don't wanna hear it anymore!—Shakespeare sets up related conflicts between fate and free will, individual desire and public good. Reversal and recognition?

They're here, too. Mostly. So is the idea of hamartia, or mostly good characters missing the mark, like when Hamlet gets caught up in his father's revenge story, or Brutus joins the conspirators, or the Scottish characters in the play I could totally name if I wanted to … agree to kill the king.

But hey, there's new stuff, too. For one thing, Shakespearean tragedies have a lot of funny bits. The actors in Shakespeare's company who played fools were big crowd-pleasers, so Shakespeare wrote parts for them even in the sad plays.

So, if you like your tragedy extra-depressing, too bad! As Samuel Johnson said, Shakespeare's work is defined by "an interchange of seriousness and merriment, by which the mind is softened at one time, and exhilarated at another." Kinda like a marvel movie! Another important difference—sin!

These plays inhabit a Christian moral landscape, at least in part. It's not enough for characters to worry about what an action will mean on earth, they have to wonder whether or not it will damn in the afterlife. His construction of tragic heroes, though, is where Shakespeare made his biggest innovation.

Greek tragic heroes are mostly good people who whiff it, but

Orestes, Oedipus, Pentheus aren't as ... complicated .. as Hamlet, Othello, Antony and Cleopatra! The philosopher Hegel said that Shakespeare's big innovation was to put thesis and antithesis into a single character. So it's not Orestes versus Clytemnestra, or Pentheus versus Dionysus.

It's Hamlet versus ... Hamlet. Deep, yo.

Basically, no one does radical psychological interiority like tragic Shakespeare. This sets him apart from, well, everyone… but also his contemporaries. In most Elizabethan revenge tragedies, the revenger becomes more evil the more evil he does.

Makes sense, right? But Shakespeare never lets the heroes of his revenge tragedies become dehumanized. They're thinking; they're questioning; they're trying to figure out if what they're doing is right and if there are alternatives.

We never stop feeling for the heroes of Shakespeare's tragedies, and this emotional engagement is a lot of what makes them so sad, and terrible, and great. To see this in action, let's explore one of Shakespeare's greatest tragedies, "King Lear." A play set in some fairy tale, hurricane-ravaged version of ancient England, that was first performed at the Palace in 1606 and probably written the year before. Adjust your screen brightness, ladies and gentlemen, because things are about to get dark.

Light the way, Thoughtbubble: King Lear decides to retire, which is not something kings do. But first he makes his daughters stand up before the court and praise him. His older daughters, Goneril and Regan, make kissy faces.

This disgusts his youngest, Cordelia, who says nothing, so her father takes away her inheritance and banishes her. He also banishes the loyal courtier Kent. Meanwhile, Edmund, the bastard son of the Duke of Gloucester, is hatching a plan to frame his half-brother Edgar.

It works. Even though Lear is retired, he still wants to live like a king, but his older daughters are like, what if you didn't? They refuse to house his retinue of soldiers, so Lear walks out into a terrible storm, followed by the disguised Kent and the fool, who soon goes missing.

They meet up with Edmund, who is pretending to be a crazy beggar called Tom o' Bedlam until he can unframe himself. The older daughters decide they'll have to fight Lear, and when they learn that Gloucester is trying to help him, they have his eyes plucked out, saying, "Out vile jelly!" They give Gloucester's land to Edmund, who they are both obsessed with. Because Edmund is hot.

Edgar, the non-hot, non-sociopathic one, finds his father and promises to help Gloucester commit suicide. But it's a weird trick. Gloucester lives.

Cordelia has come back from France to help her father, who has gone mad. There's a fight. Lear and Cordelia are taken prisoner and Cordelia is strangled before Edmund, suddenly overcome with remorse, can free her.

Edgar kills Edmund. Goneril poisons Regan. Goneril kills herself.

Lear dies of a broken heart. Gloucester dies for no reason. They try to make Kent king, but he says he's going to die, too.

Everyone is sad, the fool is still missing, and… scene! Thanks, Thoughtbubble. I may never feel happy again.

So at the beginning, Lear makes a couple of wrong calls. He's wrong to give up his kingship and expect to live like a king. He's wrong to ask his daughters to perform their love rather than to honestly feel it.

But throughout the rest of the play, we see him wrestle with and regret his bad decisions. He's never depicted as a monster or a sinner who can't be redeemed. He's a sad and increasingly crazy old man who asks for our sympathy and probably gets it.

There are a couple of exciting reversals: Lear's team is going to win. No, it isn't! Oh wait, yes it is, but ... everyone we care about is dead.

One of the really clever things Shakespeare does, is withhold recognition. There's some discrepancy between the quarto and folio versions, but in his last moments, Lear seems to imagine that Cordelia might still be alive. Shakespeare asks us to decide whether it's better to live with this comforting illusion or to accept the harsh, unvarnished truth.

We made it. And now maybe we better understand what it is to be human and to fail and suffer and… [[swear, swear, swear]] what is? Stan?

Has that been you the whole time? You're not my dad's ghost! Okay.

Next time is going to be a little more cheerful as we look at Shakespeare's comedies and a genre that critics went on to call the romances or the problem plays. Because—spoiler alert—there are some problems. Until then… curtain!