Realism Gets Even More Real: Crash Course Theater #32

Crash Course: Theater
https://youtube.com/watch?v=sDIvfEJ59XY
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/sDIvfEJ59XY

Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Theater, and did you think we'd finished with French realism? Au contraire, because remember that whole revolution in playwriting that we looked at last time? Well, it kicked off revolutions in acting and stage-craft, too. We're gonna move between France and Germany, looking at a few of the most influential theater companies. There will be chainmail and halberds and actual bleeding sides of beef today, mes amis. Also, a gruesome Thought Bubble. Bon appetit. That's basically all the French I know, so you'd better roll the title sequence.

(Crash Course Theater intro)

Many European courts had a resident theater troupe. The (?~0:45) Duchy of Sax-Meiningen was one of them. In 1866, Georg II came to the throne, or whatever you call the chair that a Duke sits on, and looked around at his resident company, the Meininger Hoftheatertruppe, AKA the Meiningen Court theater troupe and he was like, hmm, what if you were better?

You see, Georg had traveled around Germany and he'd seen a lot of players, including the traveling company headed by Charles Keane that had attempted some historically accurate Shakespeare plays. Georg decided that a group of actors rigorously rehearsed and meticulously outfitted with period appropriate props and costumes would create more realistic and exciting work. That's how he nickname "Theater Duke". Yeah, that's right, Theater Duke. Huh? No. I'm much more of like, a, theater esquire. Yeah, I mean, you--yes, you can be a theater gentleman, that's fine with me, you're just gonna have to start acting like one.

Anyway, Theater Duke Georg fired the main director and asked the Ludwig Kronig to head the troupe. The Duke was also assisted by his third wife, Ellen France, an actress who served as the troupe's literary manager and vocal coach. Because the theater was fully patron supported, box office was not a concern. The troupe could choose whatever plays they wanted: Shakespeare, romantic tragedy, a few modern works. They could rehearse them for months and perform them only a couple times a week.

The Meiningen troupe also pioneered rehearsal techniques that are common now. The actors used actual props and actual costumes almost from the beginning. And all of the director's decisions were written down in a prompt book so that the actors wouldn't deviate from the blocking once it was set.

You know, you can also thank the Theater Duke for theatrical supply shops. Georg and his assistants spent a ton of time researching the setting of each play. They made sure that the actors wore historically accurate clothes and used historically accurate props. When this caught on with other troupes, shops sprang up to supply the theaters.

The Duke took costumes and props seriously. Really seriously. The actors wore actual armor and chainmail, and carried actual swords and axes. Not gonna lie, pal, I would prefer to remain in the dark concerning your prominence. Every detail of set and lighting was integrated into the whole of a play and the Duke, trying to replace schlocky stage paintings with realistic set design and real furniture.

At a time when most of the major theaters in Europe were beholden to a star system, the Meiningen troupe explicitly worked without stars. All of the actors in the troupe were expected to participate in every play, even as spear carriers, for example, if there wasn't a speaking part available, and while most directors didn't bother to rehearse supernumeraries, which is sorta like a fancy word for extras, the Duke considered them crucially important. Each body was placed on stage in a significant way. Each movement was choreographed. The composer Richard Strauss who got his start working for the Duke was dazzled by "the direction of the crowd scenes in which every move was plotted with the greatest care and the stylistic verisimilitude of the staging." Maybe that wouldn't have mattered so much if the troupe had just stuck around the Dutchy, but the Duke sent them out on tour where they were a huge influence on Andre Anton, who we'll meet in a minute, and Constantine Stanislavsky, the Moscow art theater guy who will show up in a couple episodes.

Madames, messieurs, and sentient skulls, allow me to introduce Andre Antoine, a Mininger fanboy who became one of the most influential theater directors of the late 19th century. Antoine began his career as a clerk at a gas company but he loved the theater so much that he used to moonlight as part of the claque at the Comedy Francais. Claques were paid groups of spectators who were hired by the theater management or by individual writers or actors to come to the show and applaud vigorously, unless actors and writers were in a fight, in which case they might be hired to come to the show and boo vigorously. I know, and you thought YouTube was tough.

Antoine was also heavily involved in an amateur troupe and one day he came to them and he was like, guys, I think we should do Zola, and they were like, man, nah, so Antoine was like, fine. I'm just gonna go ahead, found my own incredibly influential and daring theater company and I'm just gonna do whatever I want. And he did! He rented a room in a pool hall and carted over most of his mom's furniture, opening the Theatre Libre in 1897 in Paris. It was subscription-based, which meant he didn't need the approval of the censor. The group specialized in plays that other theaters couldn't or wouldn't get licensed.

Antoine favored an ultra-realistic style. He encouraged the actors to sometimes turn their backs on the audience. He was cool with mumbling, and he worked to make their gestures look natural. The actors he worked with were either too young and inexperienced or too old to be attractive to the major troupes but he did remarkable things with them. What people really remember Antoine for, though, is the crazy realism of his sets. Antoine wanted sets that looked and felt like places in real life. He had designers create four walled sets and then decided which wall should be removed, and his sets went far beyond just the walls. For the play "The Butchers", he hung dripping beef carcasses on the stage space and littered the ground with intestines. For the play "Old Heidelberg", the set called for a dorm room, so he went out to an actual dorm room and bought it and put it on stage.

Some audience members were annoyed by the dark subject matter and the upstage facing actors, but most of Antoine's plays were huge successes, but each of them ran for three nights at most and beef carcasses don't come cheap, so maybe this wasn't the all-time greatest economic model? The theater closed in 1894, though Antoine would go on to lead the Theater Antoine and the Odion. For a closer look at the kinds of plays that were upsetting and exciting audiences, let's take a look at one of Antoine's great successes: Leo Tolstoy's "The Power of Darkness". Light the way, Thought Bubble.

Antoine had been discouraged from doing "The Power of Darkness". Tolstoy had written the play in 1886 based on an actual murder, but the tsar banned it immediately. Antoine's production would be the world premiere, but as an influential critic told him, the play was way too much of a downer. The play centers around an irresistible farmhand named Nikita. First, he impregnates a young orphan girl. Then, instead of marrying her, he marries Anisa, who has murdered her rich husband in order to make herself available. Nikita then seduces Anisa's stepdaughter, who has his baby, but Nikita murders and buries the baby so that he can get the stepdaughter married off. On her wedding day, Nikita tries to hang

himself and then confesses his sins. Yikes.

Antoine played Nikita's virtuous father. The rest of the characters were played by clerks, salesmen, an architect, a pharmacist, a dressmaker, and a book binder. Instead of adapting the play, Antoine commissioned a word for word translation and then hired a Russian speaker to make sure that the slang they were using was correct.

He borrowed costumes and props from the local Russian emigre community. Here's a review of opening night: "The audience was enraptured. I never noticed an instant of relaxation or inattention during the whole four hours. For the first time, a setting and costumes truly borrowed from the daily customs of Russian life appeared on the French stage without comic opera embellishments and without that predilection for tinsel and falsity that seems inherent in our theatrical atmosphere." Thanks, Thought Bubble.

Accurate representation of Russian life. Four hours of rapture. Good job, book binders. Antoine wasn't the only guy gutsy enough to produce controversial stuff, though he probably was the only guy gutsy enough to cast dressmakers as actors. Die Freibuhne in Berlin and the Independent Theater Society in London were also subscription houses working to bring realistic drama to the people who need more plays about child murder and syphilis, I guess? Can't argue with the public.

Die Freibuhne or "Free Stage" was founded in Berlin in 1889 by a bunch of writers, including the writer/director Otto Brahm. It performed mostly on Sunday afternoons, when actors would be free from their other engagements. It never managed to attract any set troupe, but it gave censored plays a hearing. The company started with Heinrich Ibsen's "Ghosts" and produced several works by future Nobel winner Gerhardt Halpmen. It disbanded a few seasons later.

In London, the Independent Theater Society was founded by the Dutch drama critic J.T. Grein. The Society also performed on Sunday afternoons and also started with Heinrich Ibsen's "Ghosts". The Independent Theater Society also produced Zola and Tolstoy and were the first company to produce George Bernard Shaw. They disbanded in 1897.

Now, maybe you're thinking that all these realistic plays in realistic settings are gonna demand a realistic style of acting, and you would be right, kind of. Francois Delsarte who was born in France in 1811 thought that it was time to take all of these fun and new scientific theories and apply them to the theater. While working as an opera singer, he became dissatisfied with how arbitrary most theatrical gestures were, so he came up with the Delsarte Method, a method of actor training which stipulated that each internal emotion could be connected to and conveyed by a specific outward gesture, and if you're like, wait a minute, wait, wait, wait, wait, Sanskrit performance got there first, you're right, but Delsarte's method was a little different.

To create his system, he undertook a thorough study of people, noting how they moved and spoke according to the mood that they were in. "Gesture is the direct agent of the heart," he wrote. He even made trips to asylums to observe people undergoing emotional extremes. Once he'd collected all of his data, he systematized it into what he called The Laws of Expression and maybe this seems kind of stage-y, that idea that each emotion has only one expression, but this system was one of the first attempts to apply scientific methods to acting.

Here's what one of his disciples writes, "There is no Delsarte walk, no Delsarte standing position, no Delsarte way to sit down. The only way Delsarte sought is nature's way. Man can no more make natural things than can he create truth. At best, he can discover nature's way and live and express correctly the truth." What do you think that conveys?

If you guessed that it conveys we're at the end of this episode, you nailed it. Next time, we're gonna look at the famous rivalry between two of Northern Europe's most renowned playwrights: Heinrich Ibsen and August Strinberg. But until then, a very realistic curtain.

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