England's Sentimental Theater: Crash Course Theater #26

Crash Course: Theater
https://youtube.com/watch?v=DenEXMVt0gU
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===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

(PBS Digital intro)

Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is CrashCourse Theater, and Yorick brought tissues today, because we are taking on a sentimental tragedy, which is gonna make you cry, and we're also taking on sentimental comedy, which will also make you cry. We are back in England, too, and I'm sorry to tell you that after all that restoration (?~0:19) the 18th century theater had a moral crisis. Good characters should be rewarded, they said, and bad characters should be punished, they claimed. Adultery and venereal disease--not cool, they griped. Also, Parliament was like, maybe what we need is a lot more censorship and fewer theaters. Have they learned nothing? Well, it was lewd while it lasted, friends. Lights up.

(Crash Course Theater intro)

Before we get to the really sad stuff, we're gonna look at sentimental comedy, the only kind of sad genre that replaced restoration comedy. Today, sentimental means corny or sappy, overly emotional in a bad way. 18th century writers used it to mean all of that same stuff but in a good way. By exciting emotions like pity or sorrow, playwrights thought that they could encourage an audience to make better moral choices, so yeah, pretty different from restoration comedy, which was witty, rascally, and deeply cynical about human nature and society, and I mean, when you've just come through an intensely horrible and bloody civil war, you might be feeling a wee bit disillusioned, but sentimental comedy is all about reillusionment. Which illusions, you might ask? Well, I'm glad you did.

Sentimental comedy promotes the enlightenment idea that people are mostly good, unless they encounter bad influences. In plays by Richard Steele and his contemporaries, good people triumph over adversity and bad people get their comeuppance. Funny stuff is reserved for servants. Marriage is once again the happy ending. The best known sentimental comedy is Richard Steele's 1722 play, "The Conscious Lovers", which is based on a comedy of Terrance, I'm sure you are shocked to learn.

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

In this comedy, the poor but virtuous Indiana isn't able to marry the man she loves, because she's a dowry-less orphan. There are a lot of couples and a lot of complications and a lot of interfering relatives, and then at the end, Indiana drops a bracelet and it turns out she's rich after all. Then it's conscious coupling for everyone.

So okay, it's a comedy, but is it funny? Not really. Steele wrote in a preface that he wanted to create, "a pleasure too exquisite for laughter." How English. Also, for the record, Steele's own idea of pleasure included drinking and dueling, so maybe not the best dude to be writing for yuks. Oliver Goldsmith would later criticize sentimental comedy for not being fun enough, but still, these plays allowed audiences to have a good cry and do some serious virtue signaling. If you were moved, it meant that you had a good and tender heart. People with good and tender hearts don't giggle.

Sentimental plays aren't hilarious, though some of the funny is restored when sentimental comedy evolves into the laughing comedies or the comedies of manners that Oliver Goldsmith and Richard Brinsley Sheridan wrote. You wanna know what was even less funny than a pleasure too exquisite for laughter? Bourgeois tragedy. The sad ending version of sentimental comedy. Greek tragedy and Shakespearean tragedy weren't all that invested in teaching moral lessons, unless those lessons are that the universe is cruel and players gonna play, so just get on with it, Hamlet.

Bourgeois tragedy is all about using recognizable characters and situations to school the audience in appropriate behavior, mostly by showing them that inappropriate behavior gets you hanged. Bourgeois tragedy did this by encouraging the audience to identify with the tragic hero. As Adam Smith writes in the 1759 *Theory of Moral Sentiments,* "My thesis is that our fellow-feeling for the misery of others comes from our imaginatively changing places with the sufferer, thereby coming to conceive what he feels or even to feel what he feels."

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

The audience was urged to imaginatively change places with the sufferer and feel all of his difficult feelings. This move would prompt the audience to make better moral choices, avoiding miserable feelings in real life. To help with the place changing, writers of sentimental tragedies often looked to newspapers and ballots instead of myths and legends. They wanted their tragedies to relate directly to the middle class people watching them, so they wrote about contemporary merchants and tradesmen instead of ancient nobles and Gods.

The playwright George Lilo defended this choice, which was controversial at the time, saying, "It is more truly great to be the instrument of good to many who stand in need of our assistance than to a very small part of that number." Let's look at Lilo's most famous tragedy, the 1731 play "The London Merchant". Lilo based his play on a real 17th century murder which had become the subject of a popular ballad. On opening night, the crowd was like, writing a tragedy based on a ballad about an apprentice? So lame. They came to laugh at his play, but by the end, they were in tears. Get your tissues ready. Here's the Thought Bubble.

George Barnwell is an apprentice to Thoroughgood, a London merchant. He falls under the sway of Millwood, an evil prostitute. She invites him to...dinner and then tells him that because of their...dinner, she's being evicted. So George steals a bunch of money from his master to pay her rent, because George is a good guy when he's not being led astray by evil prostitutes. He confesses and runs away. This makes Millwood grouchy, but then she remembers that George has a rich uncle whom she convinces George to rob and murder. That must have been some...dinner. George arrives in disguise and murders his uncle. With his dying words, the uncle asks forgiveness for both his nephew and his murderer, and George is like, they're both me, and with more dying words, the uncle is like, it's okay.

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

So George is too sad to rob him. When George shows up at Millwood's without the money, she has him arrested, but then her servants have her arrested and they're both sentenced to death. Millwood doesn't repent because, evil, but George does, and he goes to his death peacefully. Then, his friends come out to remind everyone to learn from George's mistakes.

The play upholds basic sentimental beliefs. People are mostly good, but can be led astray by evil influences. We should learn from the moral errors of others. Don't rob or kill people. Especially rich people. Which probably explains why, for almost a century, London apprentices were sent by their bosses to see this play every year. You know, just like, as a friendly reminder. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

Sentimental comedies and bourgeois tragedies weren't the only kinds of theater on offer in early modern England. Remember how every so often, governments decide that theater is dangerous and needs a lot of regulating? Well, this is one of those times. In the 1730s, regulation of the theaters was divided up haphazardly

among the Lord Chamberlain, the treasury, and the occasional judge, which means it wasn't being regulated much at all. There were a bunch of political satires mocking Parliament and the King, most of them written by Henry Fielding. In response, some ministers were like, hey, remember when the master of revels could just censor stuff? Let's bring that back.

Robert Wallpole convinced them to pass the Licensing Act of 1737, by taking one of the most offensive plays, The Golden Rump, and reading it aloud in Parliament. Worth noting though, that no manuscripts of The Golden Rump exist, and it doesn't appear to have ever been performed in public. How suspicious. One theory is that Wallpole commissioned it himself for political purposes.

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So tricky. So effective. The Licensing Act said that only two London theaters, Drury Lane and Covent Garden, could present spoken drama, though Parliament later gave license for the summer months to Samuel Foote at the Haymarket, as repayment for a prank the Duke of York pulled betting that Foote couldn't ride an unrideable horse. It turns out, he couldn't, and then they had to amputate his leg. The Licensing Act also said that no plays could be performed "for gain, hire, or reward" without the prior approval of the government.

Of course, a lot of theaters got around this. They'd charge for a concert or a beer or an auction and then accidentally stage a play. Whoops! But sometimes theaters were caught and many of them closed. The closure of the New Wells theater led its proprietor, William Hallum, to send a troupe of players to America and, as we'll see, that helped get American theater going. Another workaround was to avoid presenting spoken dramas by dancing them, miming them, or using puppets. A rule known as the Burletta Rule said that a drama wasn't spoken as long as there were five pieces of incidental music in it, so suddenly there was a lot of musical theater. A version of (?~9:11) also appeared in this period, now called Pantomime.

Acting also underwent some changes in the 18th century. The main style of the period was declamatory. Actors faced front and loudly orated, even when the characters were supposed to be talking to each other. But just as bourgeois tragedy was taking baby steps towards realism, acting likewise inched towards the lifelike. The trend started with the Scottish actor Charles Macklin, but its biggest proponent was David Garrick, the most famous and versatile actor of his day.

Like other actors, Garrick delivered his speeches facing front, but he departed from the sing-song style of verse speaking and tried to make his lines sound natural and conversational. One of his techniques was to make his characters stammer in moments of great emotion. It's natural, right?

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

At the time, actors would only rehearse a new play three hours per day for two weeks, but Garrick extended that rehearsal period and asked the other actors to actually act during rehearsals instead of just marking cues and blocking. Man, what an actual acting taskmaster.

Theaters had become very big, swelling to accomodate more than 3,000 spectators, because if you're one of two licensed theaters in the city, you're gonna pack 'em in. By the later half of the 18th century, they had big, elaborate scenery to match too. The whole situation became even more theatrical when Garrick kicked the audience off the stage.

Scenic innovations were becoming more realistic as well. While sets used to be generic--every theater would have a go-to temple or a go-to palace or garden, some theater managers started to insist on specific settings for each production and hired scene painters to realize them.

Today, sentimental comedy and bourgeois tragedy don't seem especially realistic and 18th century acting would strike us as ridiculous, but these were some of the first actors trying to close the gap between drama and real life, so to speak, and some of the first serious plays to focus on middle class characters, insisting that real conflicts and emotions don't belong to the nobility alone and that was a big deal. As the 18th century became the 19th, theatrical changes abound. Next time, (?~11:20) clouds on the horizon, (?~11:23) weather and a (?~11:25)front a comin'. We'll head to Germany for the first time since we discussed the morality plays and we'll check in on (?~11:30) and romanticism. Things aren't looking so moral this time.

But until then, curtain!

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===== (12:00) to (12:11) =====

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