English Theater After Shakespeare: Crash Course Theater #17

Crash Course: Theater
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Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta. This is Crash Course Theater and believe it or not, theater in England doesn't end with Shakespeare.

Nope, it's going to take some buzz-kill Protestants to shut down that iambic-pentama-party. But, we're going to meet them next time. Today we're going to look at English drama after Shakespeare, explore the work of Shakespeare's contemporary, Ben Jonson, and check out some disturbingly violent Jacobean and Caroline revenge tragedies.

We'll end with a visit to the Caroline Court Masques, which were created because nobles were like, "theater is amazing! We want to act too!" Ugh, amateurs. You're making me look bad!

We ended our last episode with Ben Jonson's tribute to his old pal Shakespeare. Jonson belongs with Shakespeare and Christopher Marlowe as one of the big-deal playwrights of the English Renaissance. But his plays are harder to love.

They're very witty, but also very wordy, which is funny because that's pretty much what he said about Will. Elizabethan burn. Jonson was born in 1572.

His father died before his birth and his mother married a bricklayer. So when it came time to go to university, Jonson had to become an apprentice bricklayer instead. He was not psyched.

Eventually he went off to the Netherlands to become a soldier but then got tired of windmills and killing people, so he came back to London to work as an actor and a playwright, though apparently he wasn't much of an actor. He wrote some tragedies and some comedies and his plays got him into trouble a lot as he tended to fill them with racy political passages and personal attacks. Unlike Shakespeare, Jonson specialized in city comedies with plenty of contemporary references.

Like Shakespeare, and everyone it seems, his work is deeply indebted to Ploutus and Terence. Jonson is best known for his Comedies of the Humours. The theory of the four humours said that bodies were composed of black bile, yellow bile, blood and phlegm and that illness resulted when the humours were out of balance.

Bring on the leeches and the purgatives. But even in a healthy body, it was thought one or two humours predominated and these determined someone's personality which could be bilious, choleric, sanguine or phlegmatic. Yorick is a phlegmat through and through, well, except for the parts of him that are hollow.

Anyway, if you read Jonson, you'll find that his vision of humanity is a lot less expansive than Shakespeare's but he's still a lot of fun. Let's look at one of Jonson's greatest plays: Volpone, first performed at the Globe by Shakespeare's company, The King's Men. It's a comedy that takes an intensely skeptical view of human nature.

Volpone is about humans behaving like animals if animals behaved really poorly and then lawyered up. You can think of it as the crass menagerie. Volpone, whose name means fox, comes up with a hilarious prank He's going to fool a bunch of his friends into thinking he's on his death bed.

LOL. So with the help of his servant Mosca, which means fly, he pretends to be violently ill. Voltore, vulture, Corbaccio, raven, and Corvino, crow, all come to his house in Venice, bringing lavish gifts because they're hoping Volpone will bequeath them all his stuff.

Corbaccio disinherits his son just to impress Volpone. Corvino agrees to let Volpone sleep with his young beautiful wife. The beautiful wife resists, and Corbaccio's disinherited son rescues her.

They accuse Volpone of attempted rape, but Voltore, a lawyer, has the wife and the son imprisoned instead. What a fowl move. Thinking like a fox, Volpone then decides it will be even more hilarious if he pretends to be dead, and makes everyone believe he's left his fortune to Mosca.

The bird dudes go to court to contest Volpone's will. Mosca tries to keep Volpone's money. Volpone shows up in court and tells everyone what jerks the bird guys are.

I mean, he's not wrong? The judge punishes them, but because it's finally time for a little moral authority, he also punishes Volpone and Mosca and I mean, he's not wrong either. By the end, Volpone has lost his money and his health, and he's going to prison, maybe forever.

I'm never going to look at a fox the same way again. Thank you Thought Bubble! I guess that was funny?

As you can see, this is a comedy that feels very different from the comedies of Shakespeare. It's compact and elegantly plotted, but the psychology is a lot less nuanced. The morality is a lot less ambiguous, and characters are more stereotypical and thin stand-ins for animals.

We laugh with Shakespeare's characters, but we laugh at Jonson's characters as they basically try to out-terrible one another. And whereas women are the center of Shakespeare's comedies, in Jonson's comedies, they hardly matter at all. In Volpone, Corvino's wife Celia is only present as a potential rape victim.

Her own thoughts and desires don't matter, which is ugly. And where Shakespeare's tone is fairly hopeful in the comedies, Jonson's is not. Does Jonson seem dark?

Well, theater is actually about to get a lot darker with incest, werewolves, poisoned incense, poisoned pictures, poisoned swords, poisoned everything, basically, including poisoned skulls. I wonder if there's something Yorick is keeping from me. Anyways, yes, it's revenge tragedy, one of the most decadent forms of English renaissance drama.

When our boy Ben Jonson was just back from the Netherlands, he played the lead role in one of the first examples, Thomas Kyd's "The Spanish Tragedy" from 1587. Revenge tragedy borrows its form from Seneca, but where Seneca is extremely interested in moral choice, these plays are much more interested in lurid forms of murder. Though to be honest, Seneca was interested in that, too.

As Vindici says in the 1606 play "The Revenger's Tragedy," which was probably written by Thomas Middleton, "When the bad bleed, then is the tragedy good." So yeah, there's a lot of blood. Many tragedies also have meta-theatrical elements like plays inside plays or scenes of intentional disguise, or characters performing madness. Shakespeare writes an on-the-nose revenge tragedy in "Titus Andronicus," which owes a huge debt to Seneca, then elevates the genre with "Hamlet" by making us feel very deeply for the revenger and having Hamlet constantly question the morality of his actions.

Until the play's final scenes, he's still debating the righteousness of revenge and wondering if there's a way to escape the tragic cycle. He kills a lot of people but he never becomes a complete villain and even in the end, we still side with him. Most playwrights weren't that high-minded.

John Ford's "Tis Pity She's a Whore" is a Romeo and Juliet story except Romeo and Juliet are brother and sister. There's a lot of random murder and lewd dancing and in the climactic scene the brother kills his pregnant sister and comes back into the banquet hall with her heart on the end of his sword. Remember when you thought "Cymbeline" was intense?

Seems a little quaint now, don't it? There's also "The Duchess of Malfi," in which a woman's brothers drive her mad by making wax statues of her dead children because she marries below her station. And "The Revenger's Tragedy," in which a duke makes out with a poisoned skull and then gets stabbed while he watches his wife betray him with another man.

But here's a surprise. though God doesn't tend to go for anything as fancy as lunatics performing dance numbers. Other critics, though, insist that Jacobean tragedies are so extreme because they are a radical form that is deliberately flouting restrictive social codes and accepted norms of behavior. They show the stark problems of sex and class underlying Jacobean complacency.

Still others think they're mostly interested in acting out sadistic fantasies and delivering just shocks, thrills. The last genre we'll discuss today is the court masque, a very fancy kind of theater that was performed by and for nobles with professional actors taking on the comic roles because as everyone knows, nobles are not funny. Why were the court masques so popular?

Well, they affirmed existing power structures and they put the royals in some really mind-blowing doublets. Work it nobles. Masques have their roots in the Middle Ages, and derive from the pageants, processionals and tableau vivants that were created to celebrate royal occasions like births, marriages.

In court masques, a mix of professional performers and nobles, or if you were unlucky, just nobles would act out some allegorical scene backed by sumptuous scenery and attired in knockout garb. Most of the action was set to music. Often, the men of the court would present a masque and then the women of the court would answer it with another.

The masques themselves were often preceded by comic or grotesque anti-masques, showing a disruption of the social order, like say, a couple of rogue satyrs up to no good. Maybe making trouble in the neighborhood, which would be magically fixed by the arrival of the kings' representatives onstage. Most Jacobean and Caroline playwrights wrote a masque or two but the foremost masque maker was, fanfare please, Mr.

Ben Jonson, who managed to put those badly behaved animals aside long enough to dream up confections about nymphs and goddesses and constellations. What a job. Jonson's partner was Inigo Jones, the absolute genius of renaissance set design and one of the crucial figures in the transition of theater construction toward the proscenium arch that we know and sometimes love today.

Jones had spent some time in Italy and absorbed the innovations in Italian stagecraft. He introduced perspectival staging to England and invented all sorts of awesome stage machinery like clouds that would carry nobles to the stage floor. The court masque bromance of Jonson and Jones eventually broke up, though, because Jonson thought the words were more important and Jones thought the pictures were more important and well, I suppose the tragedy is that they were both right and wrong.

Maybe they'd exhausted the nymph genre anyway. So, do all of these revenge tragedies seem excessive? They are.

Do all these court masques sound really expensive? They were.

And that's going to make some Puritans very unhappy.

So enjoy your poisoned incense and majestic scenery while you can because pretty soon the Puritans are going to make like those goths and visigoths and tank theater for a while We've seen this cycle before in Western theater, from simplicity to virtuosity to decadence to bye-bye theater. Maybe we'll see it again. It's almost like history does this thing where it repeats itself?

Anyway, thanks for watching. It's been sanguine. Curtain.

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