Rules, Rule-Breaking, and French Neoclassicism: Crash Course Theater #20

Crash Course: Theater
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Hey there!

I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Theater, and today's episode will take place in one location, in one revolution of the sun, and involve only one plot. Because we're in early modern France.

And if there's one thing the French love, it's raw milk cheese, and rules. [[YORICK DROPS IN WEARING A PROFOUNDLY AHISTORICAL BERET]] OH, right, and fashion. Good one, Cue Ball. Today we'll be looking at the French embrace of neoclassicism, the playwrights who rocked it, and Le Cid, the play that scandalized France by following neoclassical rules in weird, absurd and possibly immoral ways.

Allons-y! INTRO The Renaissance arrived pretty late in France. After political upheaval and religious wars, the country finally settled down in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries with the help of the boy kings Louis XIII and Louis XIV alongside their ministers, Cardinal Richelieu and Cardinal Mazarin.

All were enthusiastic proponents of the theater. Yay! Still, French playwriting had a slow start.

Editions of Terence appeared late in the fifteenth century, followed by translations of Greek tragedies and Aristotle's Poetics. A few playwrights tried out some Latin dialogues, and a couple of Seneca adaptations began to circulate. Turns out, authors and intellectuals needed about a century to think about Classical Drama before they began writing Neoclassical drama.

And the result of all that thinking? That's right: rules. The French framework for neo-classical drama first arose around 1550, when a group of seven French authors called Le Pleiade set up some rules for writing.

Many of their ideas were absorbed by the Academie Francaise, founded in 1636, which created more rules. Following Le Cid—which we'll talk about in a moment—the Academy standardized their system, and articulated five main rules for plays, allegedly based on classical models. Here are your neoclassical must-haves: Number

One: Verisimilitude. This means that the action onstage must be believable. No gods cruising through to solve everything, no ghosts, no monsters, or satyrs with enormous phalli. And Yorick, I hate to break this to you, but no soliloquies. Breaking the fourth wall and talking directly to the audience? That is UNBELIEVABLE. So instead we start getting a lot of friends and maids as sounding boards. Plays are still in verse, though and still depict some pretty outrageous situations. But they don't violate spectators' sense of what should happen. Which brings us to NUMBER TWO, Decorum. From Horace, the Academy takes the idea that drama has to teach and please. And not from Horace, that plays should uphold and promulgate French morals. Good people have to be rewarded. Bad people have to be punished. No defaming people a la Aristophanes. And no violence. It's tacky. NUMBER

THREE: No mixing of dramatic styles. Comedies are funny. Tragedies are sad. That's that. No fools for comic relief. No somber moments in the middle of some celebration. Shakespeare: I'm looking at you. Serious plays have to be about serious people, which basically means: the nobility. And comedies about unserious middle class and lower class people falling in love. Just stay in your lanes, everybody. NUMBER

FOUR: Unities. The French rule makers decided that what was good enough for Aristotle was good enough for France. So plays had to embrace the three unities: Unity of time, unity of place, and unity of action. Plays had to take place in one revolution of the sun. In a single location. And follow only one plot. To be clear, though, Aristotle only makes a big deal about unity of action. He does say in the Poetics that when compared to the epic, "tragedy tends to fall within a single revolution of the sun or slightly to exceed that," but he's just making an observation. And unity of place, he doesn't mention that one at all. The French were out-Aristotling Aristotle! But in a country that finally had a strong centralized monarchy after a long stretch of ugly religious wars, it isn't hard to imagine why unity was attractive. And Number

FIVE: Five acts. Each drama had to follow a five-act structure. Why? Because that's how Seneca did it. And do you know better than Seneca? Didn't think so. In the late 1500s and early 1600s, there were some popular plays—early attempts at secular tragedies and a lot of nymphy, shepherdessy pastoral comedies—but no truly great works.

Maybe the mystery play and medieval farces were still strong influences; maybe playwrights didn't have the hang of neoclassicism yet. Maybe all those rules make playwriting a little weird and unwieldy. But by the middle of seventeenth century, two men had done it: Jean Racine and Pierre Corneille. Also Molière, but we're going to get to him next time.

Let's start with Racine, because he follows the rules scrupulously and elegantly. He was born in 1639, orphaned young, and educated by Jansenists who taught him a lot of Greek and Latin. Like most classical French playwrights, Racine wrote in a metrical line called an alexandrine, a twelve-syllable line of iambic hexameter. That's a dodecasyllabic line if you're feeling fancy. And I mean, this is French theater so you probably are. The line has a pause, called a caesura, right in the middle. So a perfect twelve-syllable line is composed of linked six-syllable thoughts.

As lines of verse go, the alexandrine is just two syllables longer than Shakespeare's iambic pentameter, but it's a lot less hurtling. It feels… stately. But, a genius like Racine can harness that stateliness and turn it into something awesome, and pure and furious. Racine's diction is formal and his vocabulary much narrower than Shakespeare's, but this gives his plays a feeling of concentration and force.

Most of Racine's plays are simple stories focused on tormented women. They include long, wrenching speeches where women explain to their maids just how tortured they are. And not much else happens: they're about intensely observed feelings that overwhelm the characters. Racine's characters feel compelled to act on their feelings even when they know better. They can't escape their emotions or their fates.

Other playwrights twist themselves into knots trying to observe the unities, but Racine makes it look easy. He sets his plays right before an emotional crisis and most of his conflicts are internal, so upholding the unities of time, place and action isn't a struggle. Voltaire called him "indisputably our best tragic poet, the one who alone spoke to the heart and to reason, who alone was truly sublime without being overdone." Man these guys REALLY knew how to compliment one another.

Racine's most famous play is the five-act tragedy Phèdre, from 1677, based on the Greek myth of, well, Phaedra. Phaedra is married to the great hero Theseus. But while Theseus is away, she develops an overpowering passion for her stepson, Hippolytus. She would rather die than act on it, but when she gets word that Theseus is dead, she confesses her love. Hippolytus is freaked out, because duh, but also in love with another woman. So he rejects her. Phaedra wants to die. She wants to die even more when it turns out Theseus is alive and almost home. Trying to save Phaedra's life, her maid makes up a story that Hippolytus tried to rape Phaedra. Theseus banishes Hippolytus and curses him. He

dies, offstage, with some help from a sea monster. Phaedra's maid kills herself. Phaedra confesses everything and then kills herself. Theseus adopts the woman that Hippolytus loved. So maybe that seems like a lot–because it is–but in Racine's hands, the compressed action works, and actually doesn't seem ridiculous. The unities of time and place feel like natural choices.

Racine has an incredible gift for entering into extreme psychological states. And Phaedra's long speeches about her passion, horror and self-disgust are breathtaking. But when Phèdre first premiered, it wasn't a success. Probably because audiences were so hyped up about Racine's rival Corneille.

Born in 1606, he trained as a lawyer before moving on to playwriting. Corneille had his first successes with comedies before moving into tragedies. While he was aware of the neoclassical rules, Corneille never adhered to them as carefully, or as elegantly, as Racine did. And sometimes that got him into trouble. Corneille's most famous play is the 1636 tragicomedy Le Cid. Remember how Racine is sublime but not overdone? Well, Corneille has overdone on lock. Le Cid is based on the youthful adventures of a medieval Spanish military figure, and hoooo boy did it cause some controversy.

Before it pops off, let's take a look at the action in the Thoughtbubble: Chimene, a noblewoman in medieval Seville, likes Rodrigue. Rodrigue likes Chimene. Unfortunately, their fathers quarrel: one slaps the other, and Rodrigue is forced to duel Chimene's father. Rodrigue kills him. WHOOPS. Chimene is understandably upset. Oh, and also: the Moorish navy is about to attack. There's a lot going on. Crushed, Rodrigue goes to Chimene's house and tells Chimene's maid, Elvire, that he wants Chimene to kill him. Elvire tells him to chill out, and he hides while Chimene confesses that she both loves and hates him. Her plan: Kill him and then kill herself. French neoclassical drama is real big on suicide. Rodrigue reveals himself and is like, great plan, here's my sword. But Chimene can't do it, and Rodrigue has to leave to go defeat the Moors. Which he does. Offstage. Very quickly. Even the Moors are impressed, naming him Le Cid, or the Lord. But Chimene's like—hey, great, way to save Spain, but hello? We both still have to kill ourselves? The other nobles are like, nuh-uh, and they set up another duel—have they learned nothing!—and force Chimene to agree to marry the winner. Rodrigue tells her he's not even going to try to win. But Chimene's like, I know I keep saying you have to die, but I really don't want to marry the other guy, so make it happen my dude. The other guy comes back all bloody, and Chimene believes that Rodrigue is dead. She tries to become a nun, but it turns out that he's alive! And now she can marry the man who killed her dad! After he kills some more Moors. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

So all of that supposedly happens in twenty-four hours! That is one busy day. Right away we can see how Corneille is different from Racine. Corneille focuses on men with free will; Racine is interested in women doomed by fate. Racine likes simple plots and complex characters, and Corneille is the other way around. Le Cid was an immediate success and an immediate scandal, launching a thousand angry pamphlets—the seventeenth-century equivalent of a tweet storm. "This play betrays the unities!!!!", the cranky pamphlets said. The battle is too short, they griped. There are multiple locations in Seville, they groused. It's mostly about Rodrigue and Chimene, but other action happens! It ends happily! A woman can't marry the man who killed her dad! French intellectuals were in a pamphleteering uproar. So Cardinal Richelieu turned to the newly created Academie Francaise and asked them for a verdict. The Academy said look, we know people really like this play, but it violates pretty much all of our rules. It's implausible, it's immoral, it takes a bunch of shortcuts with the unities. But Corneille was like, also look: I've created awesome, virtuous characters and I made the audience feel pity and fear just like Aristotle wanted, so back off, Academy. Mic drop. But then he stopped writing plays for four years, and, when he returned, he followed the rules pretty closely. So I guess… mic pick back up.

Neoclassicism in France held sway for more than a century, and its austere style helped make France the dominant European cultural center of the day. Neoclassicism is persnickety, and it's hard to adhere to. But when it's done well, the plays are incredibly forceful. And if all you're reading from this period are the plays of Racine and Corneille, you'd be forgiven for thinking the French Renaissance had no sense of humor. But, ah ha mon cher, you'd be mistaken as well..

Next time: jokes, but French. Until then… curtain.