The English Renaissance and NOT Shakespeare

Crash Course: Theater
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===== (00:00) to (02:00) =====

Hey there, I'm Mike Rugnetta, this is Crash Course Theater, and today we're taking on the theater of Renaissance England. Which means Shakespeare, right? Wrong, unfortunately. It'll be a little bit before we know of poor Yorick. Get thee to the ceiling, pal.

Believe it or not, there are Renaissance English plays and playwrights and theatres and troupes that existed totally independent of Shakespeare. Well, mostly independent of Shakespeare.

Today we'll discuss historical context, introduce the English playhouse, and meet some early plays and playwrights. And we're not going to talk about Shakespeare! Not at all. It's gonna be much ado about something... else.

[Crash Course Theater intro]

The Renaissance arrives in England... late. Really late. Like 150 years later than Italy late. Why? Well, there are a bunch of reasons, but mostly England spent a lot of the late Middle Ages embroiled in the Hundred Years' War with France, which obviously lasted one hundred and sixteen years. And then thirty two more years fighting the Wars of the Roses, a series of civil wars for control of England, which involved far fewer actual roses than you may expect. Once the Tudors took the throne, things got more stable. Humanism and the scientific method and madrigals really took off.

The Tudors liked theater. They liked it a lot. Henry VII, the first Tudor king, paid for court entertainments. His son, Henry VIII, the one with all of the wives, established an independent Office of the Revels, managed by a Master of Revels whose job it was to arrange plays and masques for the nobility.

There were definitely some plays that the Tudors didn't like. England had been Catholic and then Protestant and then Catholic and then Protestant again, and sometimes plays could be used to fan the flames of religious discord. So in 1558, Henry's daughter, Elizabeth I, cracked down on religious and political plays.

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

This pretty much ended the cycle plays. She also passed a law classifying actors as vagrants who could be fined for going from town to town. The solution? Troupes of actors hooked up with nobility and licensed themselves as servants under names like "The Lord Chamberlain's Men" and "The Lord Admiral's Men". Jeez, man. Actors just, throughout history, cannot catch a break. And if these laws seem restrictive, it's because they are, but the crackdown on the cycle plays pushed the theater in new and more innovative directions, while that whole vagrancy thing encouraged actors to professionalize.

The earliest plays of the English Renaissance predate all of this licensing and vagrancy. Two of the first English Renaissance plays were comedies written in vernacular English. They were modeled on the work of, surprise surprise (?~2:51). But morality plays were an obvious influence too, and maybe also medieval farces. Neoclassicism didn't catch on in England the way that it did in Italy and France, so these English plays tended to be looser and more episodic.

The earliest one is Ralph Roister Doister, which was written in the 1540s by a schoolmaster named Nicholas Eudall. The title character is a braggy dolt, kind of like the captain from the (?~3:15). He falls in love with a virtuous widow, Christian Custance and tries to win her over while egged on by Matthew Merrygreek, a clever trickster type who owes a lot to the vice character from the morality plays. Ralph gets tricked, beaten, and a rape almost happens, but then the widow marries her rich, honorable suiter, (?~3:35) Goodluck, and it all ends happily.

Another early play is Gammer Gurton's Needle, by an unknown author. It was first performed in the early 1560s and it also derives most of its humor from bodily harm. Gammer Gurton has lost her sewing needle. Dicken of Bedlum, a wandering fool and another vice type, tries to stir up trouble by claiming that her next door neighbor, Dame Chat took it. Everyone gets beaten up, including a (?~3:59), which is sort of like a priest's assistant, and the needle is discovered when a servant is stabbed in the butt.

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

Hilarious. It was a simpler time. Wise guy, eh? I'm sorry.

Another early play tried to be all genres to all spectators. It was called Cambises for short. Why for short, you may ask? Well, the full title goes "A Lamentable Tragedy Mixed Ful of Pleasant Mirth, Conteyning the Life of Cambises King of Percia, from the Beginning of His Kingdom Unto His Death, His One Good Deed of Execution, After That Many Wicked Deeds and Tirannous Murders, Committed By and Through Him, And Last Of All, His Odious Death By Gods Justice Appointed, Doon in Such Order As Foloweth." I would love to see the poster for that one. Cambises was written by the schoolmaster Thomas Preston and most likely performed sometime in the 1560s. The episodic structure and the focus on good vs evil link it closely with morality plays, but also history plays.

The first tragedy on an English subject is "The Tragedie of Gorboduc," a play by Thomas Norton and Thomas Sackville, first performed in 1561. Because it's a tragedy, Seneca is the big influence but there's some morality play elements, too. It's written in blank verse, a meter that he-who-shall-not-be-named-until-the-next-episode uses, and it's also got the title "Ferrex and Porrex". The story goes like this: Gorboduc is an ancient king of Britain who decides to divide the realm between his two sons: Ferrex and Porrex. They fight; Porrex kills Ferrex, and so the queen stabs Porrex while he's sleeping. Then, the people rebel, killing both Gorboduc and the queen. Nobles rise up and kill most of the people. Everything is a huge mess and the succession is still unclear. Now that is what I call a tragedy, and yes, this obviously sounds a lot like King Lear, but of course we aren't discussing King Lear unless what I'm saying right now counts. Dang it!

Early English Renaissance plays weren't staged in theaters because freestanding permanent theaters didn't exist yet, not in England anyway. These plays were staged in gardens, banquet halls, in yards and schools.

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

As acting became increasingly professionalized and plays became increasingly popular, troupes started to raise funds to build permanent structures. They couldn't build them in the city of London itself because there was a belief that playgoing spread plague. Plays and players were basically outlawed in the city proper by the 1570s.

The first theater was probably The Red Lion, which was built in Whitechapel just outside the center of London in 1567. We don't know much about it except that it had a pretty big stage, some kind of turret, and that it was very badly constructed. One of the only surviving documents about The Red Lion is from a complaint by the owner, John Braine, against the carpenter who built it. The lawsuit over its poor construction dragged on until 1578, which may have been longer than The Red Lion itself survived.

A longer lasting theater was called, drumroll please, The Theatre. It was built in 1576 by the actor and businessman James Burbage in a neighborhood full of gambling dens and brothers, because as we'll discuss in our episode on the closing of theaters, they were considered pretty immoral as far as structures go. For a look at the theater, The Theatre, the most important Elizabethan playhouse, let's look at the Thought Bubble.

The Theatre borrowed its design from inyards or maybe bear-baiting pits, which is exactly what it sounds like. In Elizabethan England, deciding what you wanted to do for the evening was like, do I feel like watching a bunch of dogs try to kill a bear or do I feel like seeing a play? The Theatre had a three-level gallery structure on most sides, surrounding a thrust stage and a bare, as in empty, space in the middle where penny-paying ticket holders could stand. If you paid another penny, you could move to the galleries, and if you had three pennies, you got a stool. Fancy. The Theatre was associated with The Lord Admiral's Men and a bunch of the early plays by ol' what-lights-through-yonder-window-Shakes.

===== (08:00) to (10:00) =====

Eventually, a dispute with the landlord led Burbage to dismantle the theater and move it across the river where it became--dramatic pause--The Globe.

These early theaters were open air, public arenas. They could seat as many as 2500 people, everyone from slumming nobles to working men to the poor. Women came too, although it wasn't considered respectable so some wore disguises, but there were no women on stage. Boys played the female roles. Scenery wasn't as advanced as it was in Italy. Scenes were set with some hanging cloths in the back and maybe a few props. Plays were held in the afternoon to take advantage of the natural light. A lot of snacks were sold and beer too, and if the audience didn't like the play, those snacks would be thrown. Thanks, Thought Bubble.

Youl wouldn't throw snacks at me if you didn't like a Thought Bubble, would you, Yorick? Oh, come on, aw, come on, bad skelly. I suppose I deserve this from the eye poking earlier.

In 1576, the first indoor private theater appeared: Black Friars' Theater. It was located on the grounds of a former Dominican monestary. It fell into disuse and in 1596, a second, fancier theater was built nearby, also by James Burbage. These indoor theaters seated about 750 people and since seats were more expensive, they drew a ritzier crowd, whether or not that meant Ritzier crackers were tossed at the talent, I'm not sure.

The plays they put on were thought to be wittier and more sophisticated than those in the public theaters, though, and they were initially performed by companies of boys, because the Renaissance and child labor. Who wrote those sophisticated plays for those child laborers? Well, they were written by a group of playwrights who were later called the University Wits, because unlike Billy Wiggleharpoon, they all went to Oxford or Cambridge. These snobs wrote sophisticated plays for grown-up actors, too, including many that are still performed today. Basically, these guys started with and improved the early dramas that we looked at, making them better, truer, livelier, with more awesome poetry.

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

They prepared the way for, okay, fine, Shakespeare. William Shakespeare. Though they didn't always like him. One of them called him an upstart crow. Yeesh. Get thee some milk of the poppy to relieve the scorch from that Renaissance burn. Among the University Wits were Thomas Kidd, John Lily, Robert Green, and Christopher Marlowe. Thomas Kidd is best known for "The Spanish Tragedy" that borrows from Seneca, helps kick off the craze for revenge tragedy, and has a strong influence on Hamlet. John Lily wrote charming pastorals which probably inspired As You Like It. Robert Green wrote comedies and pastorals and is best known for "Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay" which is a history play and a love story and also a morality play wtih magicians and a talking head. Yes, you are also that, except you are pretty quiet.

And then there's Christopher "Kit" Marlowe, who led a very busy life before dying in a tavern brawl before he was 30. He went to Cambridge, where he earned a Master's degree. He also worked for the Elizabethan government in some secret capacity, maybe as a spy. His plays are long and intense and full of gorgeous, vivid blank verse, which heavily influenced Shakespeare. Marlowe's characters are ambitious, really ambitious. They wanna conquer the world or change it or as in the case with Dr. Faustus, his most famous play, "Make a deal with the devil that guarantees you a couple decades as the smartest and most powerful person on Earth." His tragedies are tragedies of over-reaching, of characters who want too much and usually get it, with disastrous consequences.

Since he is a big ol' deal, we're going to be devoting our next three episodes to Shakespeare. Also, Yorick insists, so try to remember that Shakespeare doesn't come from nowhere. Okay, yes, Stratford-upon-Avon is kind of nowhere but he doesn't arise ahistorically, or come from nowhere artistically. He arrives in a theatrical culture that's already professionalized and thriving, in a London of established troupes, competing theaters, and eager, beer-swilling snack-throwing audiences who we'll see plenty of next time.

===== (12:00) to (12:52) =====

Until then, compost those tomatoes and curtain.

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