Expressionist Theater: Crash Course Theater #38

Crash Course: Theater
https://youtube.com/watch?v=B99H6Ygnzgw
https://nerdfighteria.info/v/B99H6Ygnzgw

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

Greetings! I'm Mike Rugenetta. This is Crash Course Theatre and today we'll explore another controversial 20th-century movement. This one revolted against the confining form of realism in favour of a form that more adequately portrayed the experience of the human soul in the midst of an increasingly violent and mechanistic world.

Ladies, gentlemen, sentient skulls, I give you Expressionism. We'll look at its origin, its literature, its stagecraft, and its impact on American Modernism.

Can we get like a little bit more light in here?

===== Theme (?~0:41) =====

Expressionism is a less often talked often about 20th-century "-ism" because it doesn't really have a principal advocate or even a manifesto.

Yorrick, you wanna work something up?

The term was first used in 1901 to describe new trends in visual art. Basically what makes Monet's "Water Lilies" different from Van Gogh's "Sunflowers". Well, Monet's "Water Lilies", very Impressionistic, are an attempt to capture the feel of a moment through the depiction of an object. Impressionists were very focused on light and place. Not portrayals of moments but, impressions of them, you might say.

Van Gogh's "Sunflowers" are one important precursor to Expressionism, where artists attempted to capture their own emotional experience and internal state, rather than objects or situations. Van Gogh wasn't an Expressionist but, he was a huge influence on them. Following his work, the expression of emotional experience in the visual arts became increasingly abstract because no amount of realism can ever capture the truth of the modern world and its horrifying lived experience.

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

There wasn't a lot of impressionistic theatre, mostly painting and music, but when expressionism started, as a reaction to impressionism, it impacted theatre in a big way. Expressionists were interested in bringing about a new, better, braver world, but most of their plays were dark, and the new world never arrives because everyone is busy being murdered.

As movements go Expressionism was more serious than Dada and less dreamy than Surrealism. It was actually not that different from Symbolism but with darker lighting, more screaming, and way more emotion. If Symbolism was about trying to determine a universal truth, Expressionism concerned itself with one artist's weird individual perspective. Expressionism's radical focus on the self made it a bit like Romanticism. But Expressionism also had an urban focus, no mountaintops, no crags, and focus wasn't really on character but on ideas and feelings. Most of the characters were just archetypes.

The term Expressionism shows up in theater just before World War One, but it definitely has theatrical precursors like Georg Buchner's "Woyzeck," the savage fragmentary play based on an actual murder. This one was left incomplete at the time of Buchner's early death from Typhus in 1837. And what is it with these playwrights and early death. The play is based on Johann Christian Woyzeck, a schizophrenic soldier who murdered his common-law wife. The play reflects Woyzeck's chaotic mind. No one knows what order the scenes can go in which makes them even more hallucinatory, and fun to rearrange. try it at your next nerdy theater party, or don't.

Another Proto-Expressionist play is Frank Wedekind's 1891 "Spring Awakening", which many of you will know from the Broadway musical version. It's a story of adolescent pain and desire and how the old generation harms the younger one. Wedekind's version is much more violent and less naturalistic, full of mysterious and creepy symbols and figures, like the masked man who appears in the final graveyard scene…*whispered* creep.

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

And there's also a definite whiff of Expressionism in some of August Strindberg's late plays like "To Damascus". In a 1907 essay "Truth in Error" Strindberg offers an early definition of Expressionism "The world is a reflection of your interior state and of the interior states of others". The movement really got going in Germany after World War One. some people argue that Oskar Kokoschka's, "Murderer, The Hope of Women", first performed in 1909, is the first full-on Expressionist play, while other people argue that it's Walter Hassenclever's, "Der Sohn" or "The Son" performed in 1916. Hassenclever describes "Der Sohn" as, "The expression of a soul swollen with tragedy". I'm gonna describe it as an intergenerational conflict. The greatest German playwright that Expressionism produced is probably Georg Kaiser. His Gas Trilogy, "The Coral", "Gas", and "Gas II" explicitly connects the Expressionist worldview to the devastations of the First World War, a war that Kaiser didn't actually serve in, he had a nervous condition. The other German Expressionist to know is Ernst Toller a playwright who was also president of the Bavarian Soviet Republic for a red hot second. Toller wrote, "Humanity seeks in art the solution of various miseries and conflicts… Art is betrayed when the terrible story of humanity is misinterpreted in insignificant niceties." Toller's 1927 play, "Hoppla, We're Alive" is about a man who spends eight years in an insane asylum. When he leaves he discovers a politically transformed world that's just as chaotic as a madhouse. Erwin Piscator, a guy we'll meet when we discuss epic theater, directed the Berlin premiere in 1927. He used sophisticated projection design that included newsreels from the Russian Revolution to give the play a more explicitly political feel.

A new theater also required a new style of acting.

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

Remember all that cool stuff about mumbling and turning your back on the audience, Expressionism…not into it. Actors were encouraged to create mechanical shapes with their bodies and to use exaggerated gestures and declamatory modes of speaking or screaming. Screaming I say! As the Czech playwright Paul Kornfeld wrote, "Let him dare to stretch his arms out wide and with a sense of soaring speak as he has never spoken in life…In short, let him be not ashamed of the fact that he is acting. Let him not deny the theater to try to feign reality." Ugh, reality, have you seen reality, why bother?!

Expressionism also helped continue a revolution in set design that favored abstraction and symbolism over realism. This revolution, like a lot of revolutions, started earlier with the game-changing designs of Adolphe Appia and Edward Gordon Craig. Appia is maybe best known as a lighting designer. He thought that lights, scenery, costumes, and the actors' bodies should be merged into a seamless whole, the mis-en-scene. Some of his most influential designs were for Wagner's operas in the 1880s and 1890s. His sets were simple, sometimes sinister, assemblages of wide shallow steps and narrow columns. The sets were stark and uncluttered, the better to emphasize the bodies of the actors and shifts in lighting. Gordon Craig wasn't a big fan of actors. He preferred designs in which the actors were strictly subordinate. He pioneered the use of mobile screens as a design element, using them in famous Moscow Art Theatre productions of Hamlet. His sets often had an emotive

quality, and he actually got mad when he thought that the actors were tainting them with their own emotions. Also, he hung the lights above the stage for the first time.

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

Robert Edmund Jones was another leading expressionist designer. He adopted Gordon Craig's idea of a continuous mis-en-scene, creating bold and simple stage spaces for playwrights, especially for Eugene O'Neill and his theatre company The Provincetown Players. Jones thought that since movies have a lock on realism, theater should strive for something stranger, more abstract, and more beautiful.

The United States was late to a lot of cultural things and the theatrical Avant-Garde was one of them. But America went for Expressionism in a big way. Something about the movement's concern with industrialization really spoke to American writers. Confronted with so many new technologies, they saw increasing mechanization as soul-killing, a kind of death in life, and they created plays about people who rage against the machine, literally, but also unsuccessfully. One of the first major expressionist works in the U.S. was Eugene O'Neill's 1922 play, "The Hairy Ape", a fragmented story of dehumanization. We're saving O'Neil for our episode on American Moderns though, so you're gonna have to wait for that one. Instead we'll take a closer look at American Expressionism's high-water mark Sophie Treadwell's 1928 play, "Machinal". Based on an actual murder case that featured Ruth Snyder, the first woman to die in the electric chair…because technology. Take it away, Thought Bubble.

The play is divided into nine fragmentary scenes. First a young woman shows up late to her secretarial job at the George H. Jones Company because she had a panic attack on the subway. The woman's mother tries to get her to eat potatoes, while the girl reveals that George H. Jones himself has proposed marriage. Her mother tells her to marry him, even though the woman likes him about as much as she likes potatoes. The young woman is then on her honeymoon actively repulsed by her husband's sexual advances. The woman is in the maternity ward, she hasn't bonded with her baby and she's deep in what we'd now call postpartum depression. She refuses to eat, rejecting the advice of the paternalistic doctors.

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

A visit from her husband only makes things worse. She goes out dancing with a girlfriend and meets a man, Roe, who describes how he escaped from bandits in Mexico. The woman is like "Oh wow, freedom!" she's also like "Hey, someone who doesn't repulse me!" She slept with Roe but it's clear that she wants more from the affair than he does. She's home with her husband, her disgust and sense of confinement have only grown. The woman is on trial for her husband's murder. After Roe sends a damning letter supporting the prosecution the woman confesses to the killing. The judge asks, "Why?", "To be free", she says. She's brought to the electric chair while a priest harangues her with passages from the Bible. Thanks Thought Bubble

Treadwell wrote that she wanted to reach into spectators still-secret places and show them their own entrapment in an increasingly industrialized world. She suggested an elaborate lighting design and soundscape including typing, telephones, the subway, to enhance the oppressive qualities of modern mechanized life that the woman tries unsuccessfully to break away from.

Expressionism is deeply critical of mechanism and its effects on the human soul. But next time we're gonna meet some movements that are into it. We're gonna explore Futurism a fun Italian movement that was also, um, full of fascists and uncomfortably pro-war. And we're also gonna look a,t Constructivism a Russian movement that wanted to transform the actor into a beautiful machine. Until next time, wait, do Avant-Garde theatres even have curtains? Okay, yes, sometimes. All right, so, curtain, but a weird one.

Crash Course Theater is produced in association with PBS Digital Studios head over to their channel to check out some of their shows like The Art Assignment. The Art Assignment is a biweekly series hosted by curator Sarah Urist Green. Sarah highlights works, artists, and movements throughout art history and travels the world exploring local galleries and installations.

===== (12:00) to (12:15) =====

Crash Course Theater is filmed in Indianapolis, Indiana and is produced with the help of all of these very nice people. Our animation team is Thought Café. Crash Course exists thanks to the generous support our patrons at Patreon.