

Renaissance Theatre

By Emma Smith

When John Brayne built the Red Lion Theatre in London's Whitechapel in 1569, he could hardly have known what a powerful cultural and social force he was unleashing on Elizabethan society. Purpose-built theatres in London came quickly to dominate the entertainment market, even as they had to position themselves beyond the reach of disapproving Puritan civic authorities. Theatre historian Andrew Gurr suggests that 'well over fifty million visits were made to playhouses' in the time between Brayne's new enterprise and the closing of the theatres by the parliamentary authorities who took control of London in 1642, early in the civil war.

Theatre was primarily a place of recreation and enjoyment. Anti-theatrical commentators tried to suggest it taught people how to misbehave: the dramatist-turned-preacher Philip Stubbes railed that the theatre was the place to go 'if you will learn falsehood; if you will learn cozenage; if you will learn to deceive; if you will learn to play the hypocrite, to cog, to lie and falsify; if you will learn to jest, laugh and flear, to grin, to nod, and mow; if you will learn to play the vice, to swear, tear, and blaspheme both heaven and earth; if you will learn to become a bawd, unclean and to divirginate maids, to deflower honest wives; if you will learn to murder, slay, kill, pick, steal, rob, and rove: if you will learn to rebel against princes, to commit treasons, to consume treasures'- and the list goes on. Pro-theatrical commentators tried to argue the opposite: that the theatre provide positive moral examplars. One such was the story of a Norfolk woman watching a play about an adulterous wife who murders her husband, and 'suddenly screeched and cried out Oh my husband, my husband! I see the ghost of my husband fiercely threatening and menacing me'. It transpires that the woman had herself poisoned her husband, and after her 'voluntary confession', prompted by the play, she is condemned to death (*Hamlet* [1] seems to suggest something similar when he puts on a murder play at Elsinore 'to catch the conscience of the king?.'

These debates recall inconclusive commentary in the modern day about our equivalents of the early modern theatre - film, television, and the internet. Like the theatre in the Elizabethan period, these technologies change our access and relation to the material represented: like us, they were not sure what the consequences might be. And like the modern forms, theatre changes and develops rapidly over this period. As the examples in this section show, the theatre has a keen sense of fashion - in plot and themes - of genre - similar kinds of play - and even retro taste - the revival or writing of self-consciously old-fashioned plays.

The theatre was not only a leisure activity, however. Its procedures - pretence, acting, being watched, recognizing an inner self that cannot be easily displayed - provided Elizabethans with a metaphor for life itself. Jacques' famous 'All the world's a stage' (*As You Like It*) [2] echoes the fact that one of the major Elizabethan theatres was called the Globe, and Walter Raleigh's poignant short poem develops the theme:

What is our life? A play of passion.
Our mirth the music of division.

Our mother's wombs the tyring houses be,
Where we are drest for this short Comedy.
Heaven the judicious sharp spectator is,
That sits and marks still who doth act amiss,
Our graves that hide us from the searching sun,
Are like drawn curtains when the play is done.
Thus march we playing to our latest rest,
Only we die in earnest, that's no jest.

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[1] <http://writersinspire.org/content/tragedie-hamlet-prince-denmarke>

[2] <http://writersinspire.org/content/you-it>