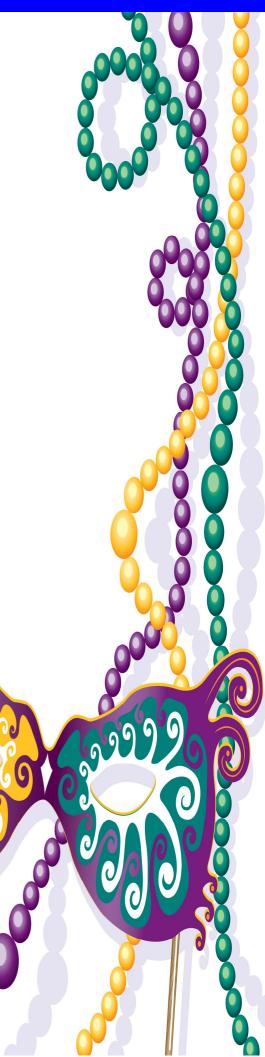
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RENAISSANCE THEATRE:

RESEARCHING COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE

The Commedia dell'Arte began in the middle of the sixteenth century and experienced success in most of Europe. In its early beginnings, it was played by a troupe of professional actors, and it was known as 'improvised comedy'. It was also known as 'the Italian Comedy' from its country of creation and it featured greatly in the theatre of the sixteenth century. Many critics believe that the Commedia dell'Arte was developed in opposition to the scripted comedy of the Renaissance. Others believe that the Commedia dell'Arte was a satire which was reacting against the Commedia erudite, which was the formal, written comedy of Italy in the early sixteenth century.

The comedy was performed by various troupes of highly professional Italian actors who toured Europe during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The troupe varied between 10 and 20 in number, and the actors vere skilled in jokes, acrobatic feats, comedy, improvised speeches and mime. Much of the dialogue was improvised and this was the element which held much appeal amongst the audiences. The Elizabethan audiences were particularly amazed by the spontaneity of the performers. Audiences and directors in the twe first century have a great admiration for improvised theatre, and recent interest in this skill has seen a resurgence of interest in the Commedia dell'Arte

Many of the characters appeared masked, with bright costumes. The actors were known for their daring use of acrobatics and their expert use of voice. The theory behind the Commedia dell'Arte was that actions were more significant than words, and so the actors were renowned for their use of mime. This proved an invaluable skill, particularly when performing to audiences of different nationalities. The actors' movements, actions and facial expressions had to be of the highest standard in order to break down language

So as to appeal to many different audiences, and to help make the action clear, music, song and dance featured greatly in the performances. Much of the humour was satirical, using burlesque character sketches to poke fun at politics and the issues and beliefs of the time.

me critics liken the masks of Commedia dell'Arte to the use of masks in Greek theatre. The masks represented the 'type' characters clearly and facifeatures such as the size of the nose, the shape of the eye brows, the type of hair etc could send messages to the audience about each particular character.

The plays of the Commedia dell'Arte were based upon a set of widely known 'type' characters. Types of character included the doctor, the amorous, the aged,

the coward, the lovers and the deceitful. The use of such contrasting characters and themes, as well as t actors' use of different dialects helped to break down barriers between social classes, thus appealing to a wider audience than many other types of theatre.

and old men. The actors used such characters to satirise universal themes such as love and hatred and also to ridicule notions of intelligence and status.

The masks and the costumes were used by the actors to help portray clear messages to the audience, again, cing the emphasis upon movement and the visual

taking the focus away from

The Harlequin was one of the most famous and most popular 'type' characters from the Commedia dell'Arte. One of the most famous mask designs was that of the Harlequin. There are various ideas as to the exact origins of this character. One idea is that it came from the legends of devils and demons of th Middle Ages. In the early days of the Commedia, th masks for the Harlequin personified the stupic ervant. However, this later became more complex and the mask and performance of the Harlequin changed ove time. It soon came to

body, with cunning.

twenty first Most audie made fron material. most phys characters physical fe



During the Restoration, Charles II allowed women to become actresses and this huge change had a significant impact upon English theatre, the role of actresses and the role of women in society.

The Reputation of Actresses
the whole, the reaction of the public to the oduction of women on stage was positive, wever, as the rules of the theatre changed, too did the role of women. The general pilic seemed to form a stereotype of resses and their occupation was often ted to an immoral, sexually irresponsible style.

linked to an immoral, sexually irresponsible lifestyle. Many actresses became mistresses of rich men and a lot of women became actresses suffering the poor wages, hoping that they would attract the attention of a rich gentleman. One very famous example was Nell Gwyn, an actress who then became the mistress of Charles II. It is important to note however, than other actresses did go on to have successful careers, managing to avoid the less desirat stereotype that had been applied to the profession. One example of this was Mrs Betterton, who successfully managed the Duke's Company.

Orange Girls

efore women were permitted e only role for women within s theatres was as 'orange London's treatres was as orange girls. Mary Meggs, who was know 'Orange Moll' was in charge of the orange girls at the King's Theatre. They were licensed to sell oranges, lemons, sweetmeats and confection to the audience members inside the theatre. Usually women such as orange Moll' would have to pay a charge to the theatre for the privilege of selling within the building.

'Orange Moll' hired Nell Gwyn as an orange girl and it is believed that mar orange girls, like Nell were then introduced to the theatre world and introduced to the theatre world and London's high society. Many orange girls acted as messengers between th men in the audience and the actresset backstage. They received tips for this work, helping them to increase their poor wage. It is also believed that several of the orange girls became prostitutes through this role.

as fourteen she then became an actress, admired fi nging voice and use of wit. Her first recorded role w ohn Dryden's play The Indian Emperour.

Nell gained fame and popularity through her performance in comedies. She became well-known for her portrayal of the stock 'gay couple' often seen within Restoration comedies. The 'gay couple' usually consisted of witty, argumentative lovers. Critics believe that the enduring use of these stock characters was largely thanks to the talents of Nell Gwyn.

Chanes II nad watched Neu in several performances and she had spent some time acting within theatrical pieces for the King's court. It is believed that their relationship began in 1608. Their affair was well-known and as a result, her popularity as an actress grew. Playwrights began writing parts specifically for her as audiences were attracted to production featuring Nell. Nell had a son by the King, and as the mother of a royal child, her continued acting was

On his death bed, it is believed that Charles said 'Let not poor Nelly starve' and his brother James II followish. He ensured that Nell's debts were paid o mortgage on one of her properties and gave her a pension

Charles II had watched Nell in several perform

The booklet is comprised of photocopiable sheets that cover all the major periods of theatre history.



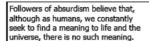
20TH CENTURY THEATRE: THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

Samuel Beckett Waiting for Godot

amuel Beckett is one of the most famous absurdist playwrights and his play Waiting for Godot is considered to be one of the best examples of the absurdist movement. Written in the 1950s, the play follows a circular narrative an the main characters' dialogue is fragmented and often meaningless. The play has very little action and it ends just

Throughout the play, the characters seem to be w something, but the audience are never told what it is they are waiting for. Critics have suggested that the play serves to explore the meaningless and fulfilly of human life. The lack of events seem to imply that we are merely existing.

Abourdist theatre usually includes techniques such as comedy combined with tragedy, characters in hopeless situations carrying out repetitive tasks, nonsense dialogue, Minimalist design and parody



They believe that we spend much of our lives finding a meaning or point to the universe that isn't there. Some absurdists also believe that many of us try to fill the void of purpose by having a faith in religion or a higher being or God and that this belief is also absurd

Many absurdists think that we should merely reconcile the fact that we live in a world without purpose or meaning and then we would be free to live our

The Theatre of the Absurd is generally used to describe absurdist plays which were largely written between the 1940s and the 1960s.





Harold Pinter

Harold Pinter is widely viewed as one of the best absurdist playwrights of the twentieth century. Within most of his plays, the characters are merely presented to the audience with little information being given as to their background, wi they are, how they are relai

explanation. Many of his pla

nter's play *The Dumb W*a absurdist play. The play invo basement room. The audien-their function is. There is a si waiters, but other points in the possibly be hit men. Whilst it to be awaiting orders to do so never explicitly explained. A mysteriously begins working,

ike many absurdist plays, th lear purpose. There is no cl their being there. Again, like plays, the men are waiting fo seem to know what they are given very little information.

21ST CENTURY THEATRE: POSTMODERN THEATRE

The literal translation of postmodern is 'that which interal translation or positional in its mat which was modernism. The postmodern movement is thought a reaction to the modernist movement of the twentielt ury. The movement includes art, theatre, literature, coal and social ideas etc. Whereas many other such ements have seemed to focus upon the art world, odernism encompasses anything within Society and culture. One of the underlying values behind moderni was rational thought and logic. Postmodernism has beco rell known for encompassing contradictions,

xtapositions, contrasts, ambiguity and lack of juxtapositions, contrasts, attribiguity and lack of structure or organisation. Postmodern performances go against all the traditions of theatre. In some performance for example, characters may not interact with each other. This may be used to portray a message about the pointlessness of language.

It is difficult to know exactly when modernism ended and postmodernism began. In fact, the term 'postmodern' was used as early as the 1870s. A French artist's work was described by critics as 'postmodern' because it went aga the conventions of the Impressionist style of the day. Si then, the term has been used to describe anything which es against the conventions of modernism.



Characteristics of Post-Modern Plays

Different styles and forms, e.g. A combination of art, literature, film etc.

A broken, incomplete or illogical narrative. Action may be fragmented.

entional characters and ntional ways of presenting such

Post-Modern Theatre: A Fact File

- It is difficult to know exactly when postmodernism began. Some critics even suggest that it has not begun yet!
- Postmodern playwrights and directors experiment and react against the traditional, accepted form of drama.
- Postmodern performances may be staged in an unconventional way, they may combine contrasting styles, they may use a disjointed narrative, they may experiment with dialogue etc.

The booklet looks at the earliest periods of drama and then brings students right up to date with modern drama styles and eras.







