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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 were 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 twenty 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 barriers.

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.

Some critics liken the masks of *Commedia dell'Arte* to the use of masks in Greek theatre. The masks represented the 'type' characters clearly and facial features 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 the 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.

The most featured characters were the lovers, servants 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, placing the emphasis upon movement and the visual and taking the focus away from words.

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 the Middle Ages. In the early days of the *Commedia*, the masks for the Harlequin personified the stupid servant. However, this later became more complex and the mask and performance of the Harlequin changed over time. It soon came to represent the lazy busy



body, with ingenious cunning. Perhaps the twenty first Most audie made from material. The most physi characters, skilled in m physical fe comedy in

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

RESTORATION THEATRE:

THE ROLE OF WOMEN

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

On the whole, the reaction of the public to the introduction of women on stage was positive. However, as the rules of the theatre changed, so too did the role of women. The general public seemed to form a stereotype of actresses and their occupation was often 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 desirable stereotype that had been applied to the profession. One example of this was Mrs Betterton, who successfully managed the Duke's Company.

Orange Girls

Before women were permitted to act, the only role for women within London's theatres was as 'orange girls'. Mary Meggs, who was known as 'Orange Moll' was in charge of the 'orange girls' at the King's Theatre. They were licensed to sell oranges, lemons, sweets and confectionary 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 many orange girls, like Nell were then introduced to the theatre world and London's high society. Many orange girls acted as messengers between the men in the audience and the actresses 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.



Nell Gwyn

Nell Gwyn is often thought to best represent the spirit of Restoration England. She was one of the earliest successful English actresses and she was the mistress of Charles II.

It is thought that Nell had a poor upbringing. She is believed to have begun her links with theatre by working as an 'orange girl' within theatres. When she

singing voice and use of wit. Her first recorded role was in John Dryden's play *The Indian Emperour*.

was fourteen she then became an actress, admired for her singing voice and use of wit. Her first recorded role was in John 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 stook 'gay couple' often seen within Restoration comedies. The 'gay couple' usually consisted of witty, argumentative lovers. Critics believe that the enduring use of these stook characters was largely thanks to the talents of Nell Gwyn.

Charles II had watched Nell 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 1668. 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 any production featuring Nell. Nell had a son by the King, and as the mother of a royal child, her continued acting was viewed unfavourably by many. Her career gradually slowed down and as Charles continued to take more mistresses, Nell spent less time with the King.

She did however, enjoy several properties, paid for by the King, and still entertained the King at these properties. Nell stopped acting at the age of twenty one and she lived in a town house in London, paid for by the Crown. She went on to have a second son with the King. She later complained to the Crown that the house was merely leased to her, and eventually the property was given to her.

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

Following two strokes, Nell died in 1687 at the age of thirty seven.

20TH CENTURY THEATRE: THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

Samuel Beckett *Waiting for Godot*

Samuel 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 and the main characters' dialogue is fragmented and often meaningless. The play has very little action and it ends just as it begins, with little change.

Throughout the play, the characters seem to be waiting for 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 futility of human life. The lack of events seem to imply that we are merely existing, with no real purpose.

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



Followers of absurdism believe that, although as humans, we constantly seek to find a meaning to life and the universe, there is no such meaning.

They believe that we spend much of our lives finding a meaning or point to the universe that isn't there. Some absurdist 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 and pointless.

Many absurdist 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 lives.

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, who they are, how they are related etc. His plays seem to lack explanation. Many of his play disrupt an ordered environment.

Pinter's play *The Dumb Waiter* is an absurdist play. The play involves a basement room. The audience's function is. There is a set of dumb waiters, but other points in the play possibly be hit men. Whilst the characters are to be awaiting orders to do so, they are never explicitly explained. A character mysteriously begins working, two men, requesting food.

Like many absurdist plays, there is no clear purpose. There is no clear reason for their being there. Again, like Pinter's, the men are waiting for something, but they are given very little information.

21ST CENTURY THEATRE: POSTMODERN THEATRE

The literal translation of **postmodern** is 'that which follows modernism'. The postmodern movement is thought to be a reaction to the modernist movement of the twentieth century. The movement includes art, theatre, literature, political and social ideas etc. Whereas many other such movements have seemed to focus upon the art world, postmodernism encompasses anything within **society** and culture. One of the underlying values behind modernism was rational thought and logic. Postmodernism has become well known for encompassing **contradictions**, juxtapositions, contrasts, **ambiguity** and lack of structure or organisation. Postmodern performances go against all the traditions of theatre. In some performances, 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 against the conventions of the Impressionist style of the day. Since then, the term has been used to describe anything which goes against the conventions of **modernism**.



An example of postmodern masks

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.
- Unconventional characters and unconventional ways of presenting such characters.
- Accepted social norms and ideas are challenged and presented in a new way.
- The audience may be included in some way.
- More emphasis upon improvisation than script.
- An unreal setting or time. The action appears to take place in the play's own, unique world.

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.