

Neoclassical Theatre

Unit Objectives:

- Students will expand their vocabulary of Neoclassical theatre.
- Students will understand the impact of Neoclassical theatre on modern society through analysis of historical trends from the period.
- Students will acquire the appropriate skills to accurately and consistently perform Neoclassical theatre within the specific historical and cultural context of the era.

CA Theatre Content Standards:

Artistic Perception
• 1.1

*Historical/Cultural
Context*
• 3.1
• 3.2
• 3.3

Aesthetic Valuing
• 4.1

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Overview – Neoclassical Theatre

Neoclassicism was the dominant form of theatre in the eighteenth century. It demanded decorum and rigorous adherence to the classical unities.

Classicism is a philosophy of art and life that emphasizes order, balance and simplicity. Ancient Greeks were the first great classicists - later, the Romans, French, English and others produced classical movements. The Restoration period marked a Neo-Classical movement, modeled on the classics of Greece and Rome.

Origins

The development of the French theatre had been interrupted by civil wars in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. Stability did not return until around 1625, when Cardinal Richelieu, Louis XIII's prime minister, set out to make France the cultural center of Europe.

Richelieu believed that the French stage needed drastic reform and looked to Italy for guidance. He advocated adoption of the proscenium stage and perspective scenery and a drama that would adhere to theoretical principles articulated in Italy during the sixteenth century. These

Genres

The French word genre, meaning "type", was employed to narrowly describe theatre. The neoclassicalists recognized only two legitimate forms of drama – tragedy and comedy. Moreover, these two types of drama were referred to as **'the heroic tragedy'** and **'the comedy of manners.'**

Neoclassical theatre as well as the time period is characterized by its grandiosity. The costumes and scenery were intricate and elaborate. The acting is characterized by large gestures and melodrama.

Dramatic unities of time, place, and action; division of plays into five acts; purity of genre; and the concepts of **decorum** and **verisimilitude** were taken as rules of playwriting, particularly by French dramatists.

principles make up what came to be called the neoclassical ideal.

The transition to the new ideal also required that the theatre structure be altered. To set an example, Richelieu in 1641 had the first theatre in France with a proscenium arch erected in his own palace. By 1650, all of the Parisian public and court theatres had been transformed into picture-frame stages of the Italian type. Thus by the mid-seventeenth century, the Italian order had replaced the medieval heritage.

They believed that tragedy could be written only about kings and nobles, whereas comedy should deal with the middle or lower classes. Tragedy was to be resolved with death, and comedy with happiness. The Neoclassic thought it most important that the two forms were never to be mixed.



Painting depicting a
Neoclassical Staged Play

*Neo-
classicalists
believed
that the
purpose of
all drama is
to teach and
to please.*



Portrait from the
Neoclassical Era

Characteristics/Ideals

During this time, Neoclassical ideals emerged. The first ideal was Decorum, which deals with the behavior of characters on stage. This ideal stated that the characters had to behave in a manner suiting the station of life they were portraying. The behavior had to be consistent with the age, profession, sex, and rank of the character. A king had to act like a king, a servant had to act like a servant, etc.

The next important ideal was verisimilitude, which means "true to life." In fact, things that were not apparent in life like ghosts, apparitions, and supernatural events were forbidden. Consequently, situations had to ring true to life. Indeed, much like the modern realists, the action, location, and characters had to be realistic.

Controversy

Although Richelieu and others favored the aforementioned ideals, these rules were not widely known or accepted in France until 1636, when *The Cid* by Pierre Corneille (1606-1684) became the most popular play written in France.

Despite its popularity, the play was viciously attacked because it failed to adhere to some of the neoclassical rules. This controversy, which was heated and dragged on for some time, focused attention in France on the neoclassical rules.

Richelieu asked the recently formed French Academy (whose membership was restricted to the forty most eminent literary figures of the day) to deliver a verdict on the play. The Academy responded with praise for the play and many of its qualities but faulted it whenever it deviated from the, so-called, "Neoclassical rules."

The next ideals were that of Time, Place, and Action. These were ideals first introduced by Aristotle during the Greeks Golden Age over 1,000 years earlier.

Furthermore, Neoclassicalists thought that all plays should be written in five acts, that plays should observe the unities of time (all the action should occur within twenty-four hours), place (all the action should occur in the same place), and action (there should be only one plot), and that the endings of plays should uphold "**poetic justice**" (that is, punish the wicked and reward the good).

There were other demands, but these were most important. In addition, Neoclassicalists believed that the purpose of all drama is to teach and to please.

It was ridiculed because, though the unity of time had been observed, too many events, including an entire war, had occurred within a twenty-four-hour period. The play, unlike tragedy, ended happily because the heroine agreed to marry the man who had killed her father a few hours earlier.

This controversy is a watershed event in French theatre, because it effectively legitimized the neoclassical view. After 1640, Corneille adopted the new mode, which was later perfected by Jean Racine (1639-1699), especially in his *Phaedra*.

The tragedies of Corneille and Racine were to set the standard for serious playwriting throughout Europe until the nineteenth century. On the European continent, these French tragedies were, until around 1800, thought superior to those of Shakespeare.

Stage Characteristics

The other notable influence of the Neoclassical movement was the theatres built during this time.

Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza, is the oldest surviving theatre constructed during the Italian Renaissance. The Olimpico was patterned after the Roman stage with curved seating, an open orchestra, and a scaena, or stage house, with a large facade. Five alleyways or entrances came from the facade. This stage was indoors and marked the creation of the proscenium arch. The proscenium-arch means "picture-frame" or peephole".

This new approach to the stage also prompted a new approach to scenery design. Perspective became an important element to renaissance painting, and the new taste in art carried to the stage.

Although large sets were constructed, most were painted backdrops. Scene shifting was advanced with the wing and groove idea and the invention of the pole and chariot shifting system. Sets could then be changed magically "**a vista**" or in full view of the audience. Torelli (1608–1678) was the creator of this shifting method.



A Model of a Neoclassical Stage

The Neoclassicalists emphasized spectacle in production and devised several ingenious special effects like flying machines called "**glories**", trapdoors, and sound effect machines to create thunder, rain, or wind.

And, since the theatres were now indoors, stage lighting was now needed. Candles were placed as footlights along the front of the stage and up the sides of the proscenium. The "house" or audience area was lit as well with large chandeliers.



The greatest, or most popular playwright was undoubtedly Jean-Baptiste Poquelin or **Moliere** (1622–1673) (*see portrait to the right*)

Moliere's Comedies were popular among all classes, depending on whom the subject matter happened to be about. Furthermore, Moliere insisted on truthfully depicting the vices and follies of all people.

He used the same keen eye for human foibles that many standup comics use to create memorable characters. His comedies have elements of commedia, but are more realistic than the stereotyped characters of commedia.

Moliere, unlike Shakespeare, has enjoyed a larger following after his death. He was popular, but did not enjoy the economic success of Shakespeare.

Timeline

- 1610** -1643, Reign of Louis XIII
 - Power is wielded by Cardinal Richelieu
- 1625** French theatre somewhat established
- 1629** The Academie Française established by Richelieu, to institute the regulation in the arts
 - An acting company is permitted to perform in Paris
 - A second troupe Théâtre du Marais presents Corneille's *Mélite*
- 1634** Mairet's *Sophonisba* first tragedy to observe neo-classical 'rules'
- 1637** Corneille's *Le Cid*, presented by the Théâtre du Marais
- 1642** Death of Richelieu
- 1643** Death of Louis XIII
 - Molière joins a group of actors to form the Théâtre Illustre.
- 1648** Rebellion of the nobility, known as La Fronde, fails
- 1643-1715** Reign of Louis XIV
- 1660-73** Molière's company takes over the Palais Royal
- 1673** Death of Molière
- 1679** Formation of the Comédie Française
- 1682** Louis XIV moves the seat of government to Versailles
- 1697** Commedia dell'arte troupe expelled from France by order of Louis XIV
 - Paris now possesses only two theatre companies
- 1715** Death of Louis XIV

Significant Artists/Works

Pierre Corneille (1606-1684)

- Mélite*, 1629
- 'Illusion comique*, 1636
- Médée*, 1635
- le Cid*, 1637
- Horace*, 1640
- Cinna*, 1641
- Le Menteur*, 1643

Moliere (1622–1673)

- The School for Wives*, 1662
- The Impostor, (Tartuffe)*, 1664
- Don Juan*, 1665
- The Misanthrope*, 1666
- Tartuffe*, (revised), 1667
- The Miser*, 1668
- George Dandin*, 1668
- The would-Be Gentleman*, 1670
- The Imaginary Invalid*, 1673

Jean Racine (1639-1699)

- La Thébaïde*, 1664
- Alexandre le Grand*, 1665
- Andromaque*, 1667
- Les Plaideurs*, 1668
- Britannicus*, 1669
- Bérénice*, 1670
- Bajazet*, 1672
- Mithridate*, 1673
- Iphigénie*, 1674
- Phèdre*, 1677

Vocabulary/Key Terms

“A Vista” – In full view of the audience; the way scene changes would happen

Decorum - ideal which deals with the behavior of characters on stage; characters had to behave in a manner suiting the station of life they were portraying

“Glories” – flying machines

Neoclassicism – a philosophy of art and life that emphasizes order, balance and simplicity.

Poetic Justice - The rewarding of virtue and the punishment of vice, often in an especially appropriate or ironic manner.

‘the heroic tragedy’ – the term for a Neoclassical tragedy; believed to be one of only two genres

‘the comedy of manners’ - the term for a Neoclassical comedy; believed to be one of only two genres

Verisimilitude – ideal which means "true to life"; situations had to ring true to life