

AIRDRIE ACADEMY
DRAMA DEPT

MEDIEVAL DRAMA

Drama in Britain began in the middle ages or MEDIEVAL period. The first "plays" were performed in the churches and were really just a few lines from the Bible acted out by priests. This helped to make the service more interesting and also helped the congregation, the people in the church, understand what was happening in the stories. In those days the church service was usually spoken in Latin which very few ordinary people could understand so it really helped to have little scenes acted out.

These church "plays" became very popular and soon the ordinary people joined in and started acting out scenes from the Bible. This was not in the church, but in the streets and courtyards of the town. Of course, not all Bible stories are very interesting so the people began to change bits here and there. They added in more comedy as well as more dramatic scenes with the Devil.

Acting and plays became a very popular part of everyday life in Britain. At this time it was also normal to see street performers doing acrobatics, singing songs or playing music.

Eventually the powerful people in each town, the "guilds", decided to have proper acting groups. They donated money towards this to make sure that the performances were much larger and better than the street theatre. The most famous of these plays were called the Mystery Cycle plays. It soon became the case that the guilds of each town were competing against each other to see who had the best plays. They started to spend more money on the theatre groups so that the plays produced were more elaborate with costumes and scenery. The plays also started to change and develop and included mime, dance, comedy and acrobatics. This made them more entertaining for the audience.

DIFFERENT TYPES OF PLAY PERFORMED IN MEDIEVAL BRITAIN

- CHURCH PLAYS -** Earliest plays in Britain. These were very short and the story was simple. These plays were performed by monks, priests and choirboys. They acted out short scenes from the Bible.
- STREET PLAYS** Ordinary people acted out the scenes from the Bible that they had seen in church in the streets. At this time it was also normal to see acrobats, musicians and clowns performing in the street.
- MYSTERY CYCLE** Many of the scenes from the Bible were put together to form one long play. These plays were performed on horse drawn carts which passed through the narrow streets in the correct order. The carts all showed a different scene and people watched from their houses as the carts passed by. By the last cart the people had seen the full story. Different trades were responsible for each scene. The fishermen in the town would tell the story of Noah's Ark and shepherds would act out the nativity. There are still Mystery Cycle plays performed today in York, Coventry and Chester. These performances are still popular.
- MIRACLE PLAYS** These were very short plays which told the story of miraculous events in the lives of favourite saints.
- MORALITY PLAYS** These were plays that were written to show man's weakness. These plays showed man being tempted by evil and the Devil. At the end of the play, man is always saved by Good. In other words, these plays had a "moral" or message to help the audience live better lives. "Everyman" is an example of a Medieval morality play that has survived through the centuries and is still performed today.

QUESTIONS ON MEDIEVAL THEATRE

Answer in sentences in the space under the question.

1. Where were the first plays in Britain performed?
2. When plays became very popular who took over control of the plays and the actors?
3. What were the first type of plays about?
4. How did people make religious stories more interesting?
5. When the Mystery Cycle plays were performed, what was used as the stage?
6. Where did people watch the Mystery Cycle plays from?
7. Mystery Cycle plays are still performed today. Name TWO places where this happens.
8. What happened in the Morality plays?
9. Name a character you might expect to see in a Medieval play.