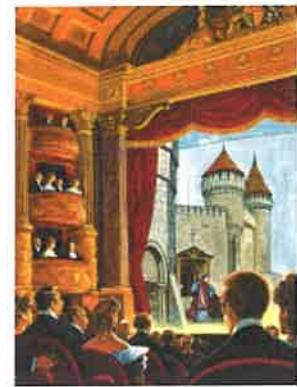


S2 Melodrama

Unit 2

Worksheet Victorian Theatre



Before the Victorian age it was mostly the rich people who could afford to go to the small theatres to watch famous actors like David Garrick (1717 – 79) and Sarah Siddons (1775 – 1831) perform in well-known plays like those of Shakespeare. Performances were held in the afternoon or as early as 5.00pm, when people would still be at work in the factories or shops.

During the Victorian period, however, both the theatres themselves and their audiences changed dramatically. London suddenly acquired a lot of theatres all competing with each other. Playbills and posters advertised their performances. Old theatres which had burnt down through using candles as lighting were rebuilt to hold larger audiences and to include better and changeable scenery, huge painted backcloths and different levels of staging. Lighting was now by gas-light. By burning a stick of lime in the gas jet one could direct a single soft beam on to one particular actor or part of the stage and later produce some special lighting effects. This was the beginning of modern stage lighting and explains the saying, 'being in the limelight'.

Shopkeepers, butchers and other tradesmen joined the queues for the cheapest seats in the theatres while, at the same time, many of the rich upper classes began to turn away from the theatre as opera, ballet, poetry and novels became more fashionable.

So, as the theatre became more popular entertainment among the masses and audiences included the working classes as well as the wealthy, so the times of performances were also changed. The theatres would open at about 6.30 and performances would go on for many hours, including several different plays, so that workers who finished at, say, 8.00pm could still go to the theatre to watch the second or third play of the evening.

The Victorian public wanted to be entertained with something spectacular, something with songs and plenty of action that roused their emotions without having to be 'thought' about. They also loved a happy ending.

The new 'melodramas' did exactly that. They told very simple stories usually involving a youthful hero, a damsel in distress and a wicked person of some kind. The acting was greatly exaggerated and needed little real skill. The plays were written in verse and gave plenty of scope for singing and dancing and lots of stage effects to produce the vivid spectacle the public wanted.

The earliest melodramas provided plenty of excitement, were set in exotic places and included ghosts and bandits. Later, melodramas were set in the country, in the present times, with rustic hero and wicked squire. When one actor decided to play the character of a young sailor there was a sudden fashion for nautical melodramas and then later the dramatists turned to sensational crime stories such as Sweeney Todd and the murder of Maria Marten in the red barn as a basis for their plays. Even some of the popular Dickens novels were simplified and staged as crude melodramas.

The Victorian audience loved these lively melodramas. They could boo and hiss at the wicked villain, feel pity and concern for the poor maiden, laugh at the funny bits and finally rejoice in the happy ending. Melodramas continued to be the most popular theatre entertainment throughout the Victorian age and even today melodramas are still performed. Some are produced as examples of Victorian melodrama, while others are twentieth century versions, maybe no longer called by this title, but still using the same basic stories and flamboyant acting styles.

When the theatres decided eventually that the audiences might be getting bored with melodrama they began to produce plays that had a more interesting storyline and more thoughtful characters. Romances, comedies and a few serious plays were shown but these always included at least one sensational scene to satisfy the audiences' continued demand for 'spectacle'. Simplified versions of Shakespeare's plays were still being performed because of the very dramatic and spectacular scenes they often include.

One writer, Planché, created several fantasy extravaganzas including 'The Sleeping Beauty' and 'Beauty and the Beast' which used music, dancing and visual effects to the full. These were the forerunners of our modern pantomimes and for the first time an actress played the leading man.

Other dramatists of this time wanted to produce more realistic plays. Drawing room scenes were designed, using a lot of real furniture with several stage flats joined together and decorated to create walls, thus making the whole scene look as real as possible. The introduction of electric lighting in theatres at this time also helped considerably. Costuming was also given more thought.

Despite all these new plays, however, melodramas remained unchallenged as the most popular Victorian entertainment until the introduction of the 'Music Hall' in the latter half of the century.

The Music hall became the place where the working classes could go to relax after a hard day's work. Here they could sit and drink while being entertained by a variety of popular acts.

With the rougher elements of their audiences being removed to the Music Halls, the theatres hoped that the upper classes would return to the theatre and plays would become respectable again. Smaller theatres were now built and the evening's performance was reduced to one 'good' play. The introduction of little changes, like a detailed programme instead of a cut down playbill, providing a matinee performance which meant only those not working could attend, and serving tea or coffee during the interval, helped persuade the polite society to return.

The new Gilbert and Sullivan operas proved especially popular with these new audiences and more refined social comedies and dramas were now shown. Henry Irving was the first to decide that the auditorium should be in darkness so that all lighting could be concentrated on the stage. General acting standards also improved.

The theatre gradually became not only respectable again but also fashionable. The witty plays of Oscar Wilde brought the very best of society circles back into the theatres and seats were not booked in advance. The advance of the railways also meant that famous actors and actresses could take the well-known London plays on tour of smaller towns.

Playwrights began to have their plays printed so that the more intellectual could read them as well as see them performed. One famous playwright called George Bernard Shaw wanted his plays to contain a message. He wrote about poor people living in slums and generally showed up the evils of his time. Although such controversial content meant many of his plays were at first banned from the stage, those who read copies of his plays began to realise the truth of what he wrote and finally persuaded theatres to show them. Although they contained a serious message, Shaw's plays were also written in an interesting way and were often amusing to watch. So, by the time of his death, George Bernard Shaw had become famous. Other serious plays were being produced as well as the polite society dramas and comedies.

The Victorian theatre, therefore, presented us with much of the theatre we know today. Theatre lighting was established, scenery and staging was much improved, new plays were written in a variety of styles – many still being performed today – and theatre had extended to towns outside London. Many of the original Victorian theatres still remain, particularly in London, where their names remind us of famous Victorian theatre people. Music Halls, too, continued to provide entertainment for the working classes for a long time after the end of the Victorian age.





1. Use the information about Victorian Theatre to answer the following questions:-

a. What changes were made in stage lighting during the Victorian times?

b. What type of play proved the most popular in Victorian Theatres? Why was it so popular?

c. What made the working classes move away from the theatres toward the end of the century?

d. Name any two things that helped bring the upper classes back into the theatres.

e. Why were Shaw's plays at first banned on the London stage?
