**Eclectic Theatre**

**Eclectic Theatre**

Eclectic Theatre promotes artistic freedom, seeking to produce art that is exciting, engaging and relevant to the world around us. It essentially brings material together from a variety of sources, and is the combination in a single work of a variety of stylistic influences.

When eclectic theatre was beginning to emerge, many dramatists were rejecting the concepts of naturalism and realism. They were looking for something more modern and experimental, yet still incorporated elements of styles of the past from Epic Theatre, Absurdist Theatre and Theatre of the Oppressed. It uses movement rather than dialogue to tell a story, for example, dance, sound and light as the ‘primary expressions of language’, spacial movement, gymnastics, acrobatics and mime, as well as Asian ideas and techniques.

Essentially equate to what teachers in other states of Australia or countries may refer to as non-realistic or anti-realistic theatre. And as we all know, contemporary theatre is often eclectic; a mix of both realistic/naturalistic and non-realistic/non-naturalistic styles and associated conventions. Indeed, the VCE Drama course acknowledges non-naturalistic theatre can include elements of realism/naturalism (for example, believable characterisation mixed with breaking the fourth wall).

**Max Reinhardt**

As a theatrical form, practitioner, Max Reinhardt particularly developed eclecticism in theatre. Reinhardt was a director always in search of the ‘right’ theatre for each play, using small cabaret theatres for intimate productions, and arena style theatres for more spectacular plays, for the intimate actor audience relationship in the smaller spaces. He was not only an innovator and experimenter with space, but stage techniques as well. As an eclectic director, Reinhardt broke with those who favoured realism, and tried his hand at symbolic drama, impressionism and naturalism. He also rejected the limitations of the proscenium stage, favouring the Elizabethan stage, where the actor was in close contact and the stage can be used with flexibility.

He believed in fluid use of set, and symbolic use of lighting and was among the first to use the revolve for quick scene changes. He experimented repeatedly with the concept that a dramatic work was a total work of art, on that depended on mixing of the arts – visual, aural, scenic, and musical elements in drama.

Reinhardt also believed that the most important factor in the play was the actor. He was at the centre of the art and of the theatre. Theatre was at its best when the director, writer, designer and composer had all imaginatively assumed the actor’s part. While it is the case that Reinhardt held the actor in high regard, and was one of the first directors to develop repertory companies, he was such a formidable force in the theatre that he greatly enhanced the role of the director. His talent and accomplishments contributed to the modern idea of the director as the creative artist and a person capable of making aesthetic decisions. He represented a controlling intelligence that guided the entire production in a vital and peculiarly identifiable manner.

**Professional Theatre and Playwrights**

Commercial theatre, except for low attendance in the 1980s, had a rise in audience, but amount of new productions decreased. Revivals became very popular, as well as turning books or movies into a play. Non-for-Profit theatre became very popular in the 1960s. This style mainly used arena theaters and thrust stages.

There isn’t just the one playwright in eclectic theatre, but a notable one is Tennesse Williams (1911-1983), who shaped southern US dialect into evocative poetry. He won the Drama of Critics Award for his first major Broadway production, The Glass Menagerie, in 1945. Arthur Miller (1915-2005) is another one to note, for his harsh, expressionistic, survival against the odds, and burden of guilt focuses in his theatre. He won the DCA for his work, The Death of a Salesman, even though his works were not performed much during his time. Edward Albee (1928-) was another eclectic writer. He has written 30 plays so far, and won Best Academy Picture for his 1966 film adaptation of Who’s Afraid of Virginia Wolf. Finally, Neil Simon (1927-), who won the Pulitzer Prize for Lost in Yonkers in 1991 and worked as an uncredited ‘play doctor’, to help clarify the plot and add jokes to the scenes. He had 35 Broadway premiers of comedies and musicals.

**Vsevolod Meyerhold and Bio Mechanics**

Vsevolod Meyerhold was the first to come up with what he labeled, ‘bio mechanics’. He had experimented with furthering Stanislavski’s approach. Both believed that the one approach could not work for every play, and together, they ‘modernised’ Stanislavski’s method of acting. The efficiency of bio mechanics is the ‘reflex action’ to the industrialised society. Movement became more significant and much more emphasis was placed on gesture rather than dialogue.

Bio mechanics were often unrealistic and mechanical, calling on gymnastics, circus skill, ballet, dance and acrobatics. Yet, it was not for the show. The employment of such things was to trigger emotion in the performer to add the emotional impact on the audience. Bio mechanics became very dissimilar to Stanislavski’s work, as Meyerhold believed that ‘movement was superior to speech’.

**Symbolist Drama**

Movement in symbolist drama helps define relationships, as well as emotional and symbolic opinions. It becomes a ‘world in which reality and dreams mingle’. Actions are often disconnected and alter between that of a realistic and dream-like state, much like the actual quality of a dream. Often, movement is dehumanised to add emphasis on the surreal element of symbolist drama, but are then smooth, and flow freely in a dreamy fashion. It is a world in which transformations and a strong relationship between the extremes is crucial.

**Political Avant-Garde and Artistic Avant-Garde**

Guerilla Theatre, or, street theatre, involves political performance that goes to the audience. The reason behind this approach to staging was if one only performed political acts in a theatre, only people who believed the same ideals would attend. By interrupting an unsuspecting audience, political theatre might be more shocking and mind altering for the audience, much like the aim and ideals of Theatre of the Oppressed.

Artistic avant-garde strove to change the art of theatre, through exploration, either alone or in combination. This differed profoundly from both the previous art theatres, and political contemporary theatres. It can be hard to differentiate between the avant-garde styles of political and artistic at times though. Artistic avant-garde explores the nature of theatre, and its relation to other kinds of performance and media, its arrangement for productions, and the role of both script and audience in a performance.

**Identity Theatre**

Identity Theatre is theatre of African Americans, women, gays and lesbians, and Latinos/Latinas. For African Americans, this dates before the Civil War, but was unknown to mainstream theatres. They studied the politics and economics of life, and once moved to Broadway, won a Tony award. This eventually moved into mainstream theatre around the 1980s. Women in Identity Theatre had plays and musicals that were 18% more profitable, and was a phenomenon in the 70s, which soon started springing up everywhere. Women were banned from, or had very limited allowance in theatre work, but attempted to serve different audiences in different ways. As for gays and lesbians, homosexual acts were illegal and punishable under law. This theatre was dated in 1976, but in the 80s, lesbian theatre companies began to surface. A few years later, gay plays grew common in mainstream theatre, and this begun rapid acceptance of gay and lesbian plays in commercial theatre. Finally, Latinos/Latinas only moved towards mainstream theatre in recent years. Nilo Cruz won a Pulitzer Prize for Annan in the Tropics in 2003. Cruz’s plays were produced at many leading non-for-profit theatres.

**Absurdism, Performance Art and Post Modernism**

Absurdism shares an emphasis on life’s meaninglessness and art’s irrelevancy; surrealism, or, ‘without meaning’, and often in these style plays, what happened on stage contradicted what was said.

Performance art has non-linear structure, often unified by images rather than plots, with emphasis on the visual elements, rather than the literary elements of theatre. This mixes techniques of several arts, especially music, dance, painting and theatre.

Post modernism doubts the concepts of objectivity, and the concept of absolute meaning. There is belief in bottom-up participation, rather than top-down dictation, and belief in different shades, rather than black and white alone.