



essay

# The Development of Theatre in Europe

by Neeman A Sobhan

## Greek Beginnings.

Once upon a time, actually two and a half thousand years ago, on a hillside in Athens, the drama as an art form was born. Before this, theatre was embedded in the womb of ancient ritual. The Athenian theatre's roots were in harvest rites, particularly in the dithyramb—a religious chant sung and danced by a chorus of some 50 male celebrants in honour of the god of fertility and harvest, Dionysus. This ceremonial ritual was performed to the music of the pipe, and was led by a soloist, or choral leader, whose part alternated with the chorus. Thus an early form of chanted dialogue was inherent in the ritual itself. The dithyramb was performed on a circular dancing or threshing floor called the orchestra. These then, were the prenatal circumstances leading to the actual birth pangs of the Greek theatre. In 535 B.C. Pisistratus invited the actor-dramatist Thespis of Icaria to take part in the Athenian dramatic contests which were held twice a year to celebrate the festival of Dionysus. These contests took place in the theatre, which we can still see today on the south-eastern slope of the Acropolis. We know little about Thespis, except that he is said to have written many plays, that he first introduced the actor in addition to the leader of the chorus, and that he invented the tragic mask to cover the actor's face. Legend relates that he may have had a cart which he used to raise the actor above the chorus. Thespis is the first actor for whom we have a name and his distant descendants are still called Thespians. In 499 B.C. the dramatic contest was won by the first dramatist whose plays are extant: Aeschylus. Out of his 90 plays, 7 complete texts are still preserved. According to Aristotle, it was he who introduced the second actor, thus decisively expanding the possibilities of dramatic conflict by allowing interplay between individual characters. Aeschylus divided up the chorus of 50 in 4 groups of 12, and later 12 became the standard size of a chorus. The introduction of the second actor also marked the declining importance of the chorus. By dramatising the ancient Greek mythology as told by Homer, Aeschylus pointed the way for all succeeding playwrights. In 468 B.C. when Aeschylus was at the height of his fame, the prize was wrested from him at a dramatic contest, by a playwright 30 years his junior: Sophocles. Between the two of them, they created the dramatic form of tragedy. But even their achievements were to be questioned, rebelled against and transformed. A third dramatist of towering gifts appeared: Euripides. He played little part in public life and rebelled against established values and beliefs. He seems to have wanted to reduce the legendary heroic past to a human scale. The fictional characters he created were to be recognizable mortals. Of his 92 plays, 17 have come down to us. Comedy was a latecomer to the Athenian stage, and the most popular writer of comedies was Aristophanes. He was fundamentally a satirist, and comedies were mainly concerned with public affairs and political figures. Later as Athens became a province under Macedonia and started to lose its prominence, topical satire was no longer possible. Menander and other dramatists began to turn to the events of everyday life and universal themes like love.

## Roman Flowering.

From Menander onwards the spotlight passes from Greece to Rome, for in 270 B.C. the Roman legions conquered the Greek city of Tarentum, opening the gates of Rome to the influence of Greek art. It would however, be a mistake to attribute the origin of Roman theatre solely to Greek influence. Among the Romans, there was a kind of farce acted by performers known as Phlyakes, which means gossips. They parodied gods, tragic drama and everyday life. Stock characters or stereotypes were used and humour was improvised. In the beginning, improvisation was common to all drama, but this fell into disrepute with the rise of the individual playwright. In comedy, however, it persisted, and has continued to do so. In the city of Rome and around it, there also existed another strong comic tradition, a particularly Italian type of farce, from the city of Atella. As a form it was rustic and probably obscene, and its themes were cheating, trickery, tomfoolery. But like the phlyakes, its most interesting feature were stock characters. These crude Atellan mimes, though they have little literary or dramatic value today, are significant in the story of the Roman theatre. These mimes were essentially popular drama, belonging to the market place rather than to theatre buildings, and as such, less subject to social and political upheavals: when Rome fell and her great

theatres were pulled down by the Vandals and Goths, the little Atellan mimes lived on, wending their way all over Europe, handing their colourful and earthy traditions to later ages as the Commedia dell'Arte.

One of the actors of the mimes called Plautus, turned from acting to writing comedies. He borrowed from Menander, as did another dramatist called Terence. Both Plautus and Terence act as a bridge between Greek comedy and the later comedies of the European theatre, for in England and France it was Latin rather than Greek that was studied. Less popular in his own day, but destined to be influential in the future was the only significant Roman tragic playwright: Seneca. It must be noted that his plays were never acted but read out in salons. Another thing to remember is that the characteristic theatre of Rome was not the theatre of literary dramatist but the theatre of spectacles and farce. In that sense, Dario Fo, this year's Italian Nobel laureate is the successful culmination of this tradition.

## Medieval Regenerations.

The Christian church was always hostile and disapproving towards the theatre. After Rome fell and Christianity became the dominant religion, the theatre was suppressed. By 6th century A.D. Roman theatres were closed and for 400 years it lay dormant, or dead. But the same religious ritual through which theatre was born would resurrect it again. Christian churches started to use drama to reach the illiterate masses, and to propagate its teachings. It was first used in the 10th century, during an Easter Mass, to illustrate the message of the Resurrection. Later, other incidents from the New Testaments were illustrated. Then stories of the Old Testament, "Creation", "Fall", "Deluge" were also dramatized to accompany the masses. At first they were simple, then slowly and inevitably dramatic elements crept in, as well as costume, spoken dialogue, characterisation, comedy. By 12th century, religious drama was no longer semi-dramatic, semi-liturgical but a highly organized show.

A very popular drama developed in England known as the Corpus Christi to celebrate the festival of Corpus Christi. These were a series or cycle of short plays known as Mystery or Miracle plays. One dealt with biblical stories and the other with the lives of saints. This was happening not just in England but throughout Europe. In France it was called mystere, in Germany Mysterienspiel, in Spain autosacramental, in Italy the sacra rappresentazione. But only in France and England, these Passion Plays evolved into secular theatre. At first these plays were performed by the priests, then it went out of the church and into the hands of the citizens of the community, particularly the Trade Guilds which were powerful and wealthy organizations. Each profession or Craft, like fishermen, grocer, goldsmith, tiler, dyer, were responsible for financing and staging a particular incident or cycle. In these early liturgical dramas, action was symbolic but the sets or mansions were elaborate. Garden of Eden, Noah's Ark, Heaven and Hell, Crucifixion, stable of Bethlehem, all were contrived and built with great skill and realism. Music, choir, and professional dancers were used. There were two ways of staging these plays. One was a moveable pageant, which was to mount the mansions on a wagon and draw them like modern floats and carry them to certain points in the town and enact them. The other was to set the mansions in static stages like stalls in a market place, and the audience moved from one set to another with the performance. By the end of the 15th century, the spirit of Puritanism had begun to appear. Tension between the Roman Catholic church and what was to be Protestantism was beginning. Religious plays with their popish practices and access to masses was regarded as dangerous and seditious. Around the same time, another type of theatrical entertainment was growing parallel to religious cycles. These were compact entertainment performed by professional actors in the great halls of the nobility. The origin of these professional strolling players can be traced back to the troupes of minstrels, jugglers, conjurers, dancers and jesters banded together under a Troubadour who performed variety entertainment to aristocratic audiences on special occasions, like a marriage, the visit of an important person, Christmas or some other festival. In their programmes they performed short plays as interlude. This was of a religious character. Slowly it became less biblical more moralistic and secular. These were called Morality plays. Its characters were abstractions of vices and virtues surrounding a central figure who represented mankind—Eve-

ryman.

As reformist zeal spread, acting was becoming increasingly hazardous. These were performers constantly in search of an audience, and protectors, for without the protection of a nobleman, the players and his company were constantly being hounded. The feudal system was slowly waning and wealth and learning was becoming concentrated in London, Oxford and Cambridge. The strolling players also began to look to London for their source of income.

Now a new type of play was required to meet the taste of this city audience. There was less emphasis on Catholic philosophy; the effect of the Renais-

Actors in Eighteenth-century Europe



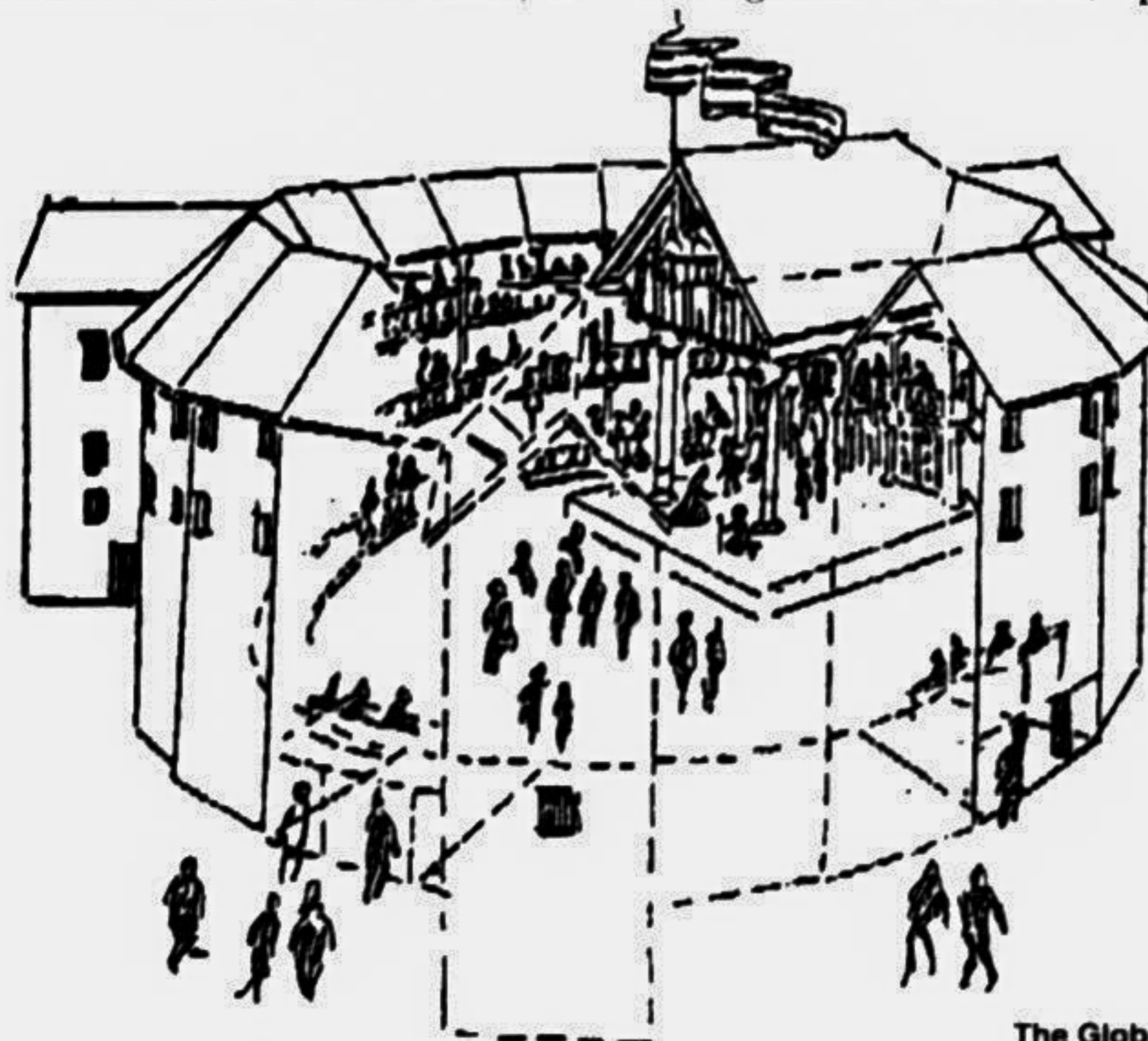
sance was felt in the increased interest in secular literature, study of Roman history, Latin and the classics. Plautus, Terence, Seneca were being read and imitated. By now society was less homogeneous and divided into factions. Thus the repertoire of the player was also confused. The staging of plays, however, was still simple. The bare essentials were a platform raised on trestles, served as a stage backed by a curtained booth which was both a dressing room and its curtain served as the backdrop. Furthermore, with the help of a ladder, actors could come up from the top using it as a balcony. On special occasions when they performed at court or in a nobleman's home more elaborate sets and scenery was used. So far, actors had not had a permanent theatre. In 1576, James Burbage conceived the idea of a permanent London playhouse, and following the pattern of a cart in the open yard surrounded by balconies, he built 'The Theatre'. Soon, other playhouses were erected, between 1577-1600., of

greater intimacy of a limited audience, drama began to reflect the taste of a more class conscious society. Greater stimulus was also required to entertain this audience. Sensational, crime filled plays came to the fore, as did the beginnings of a comedy of manners by Ben Jonson where the society of the day was satirized. Meanwhile, Queen Elizabeth had died in 1603 and James I had come to the throne. Amateur theatricals had always been a pass time of the aristocracy. Now this was further encouraged by James I and his queen who participated in the court entertainment which was slowly going to revolutionize English stage craft. The old 'disguisings' were now called Masques. In the hands

of the scenic artist Inigo Jones and Ben Jonson, masques evolved into a highly spectacular theatrical entertainment combining scenery, lighting, elaborate costumes, poetry, dancing and music. In France and Italy, court masques were even more elaborate, and from them sprang opera and ballet. The new emphasis on scene and lighting was to affect the new indoor theatre to be born under Charles II. By now, however, James I had died and Charles I was on the throne. In 1642, quarrels between the parliament, dominated by Puritans, and the King broke out into civil war. Puritan opposition to theatre and actors had been growing steadily over time, and now with the Puritans in power, they openly persecuted the theatre. Old playhouses were pulled down and for 18 years the theatre in England lay dormant.

FRANCE: We now turn to France where Renaissance had brought the age of reason to it as well as a burst of creative genius in the arts, specially in

the scenic artist Inigo Jones and Ben Jonson, masques evolved into a highly spectacular theatrical entertainment combining scenery, lighting, elaborate costumes, poetry, dancing and music. In France and Italy, court masques were even more elaborate, and from them sprang opera and ballet. The new emphasis on scene and lighting was to affect the new indoor theatre to be born under Charles II. By now, however, James I had died and Charles I was on the throne. In 1642, quarrels between the parliament, dominated by Puritans, and the King broke out into civil war. Puritan opposition to theatre and actors had been growing steadily over time, and now with the Puritans in power, they openly persecuted the theatre. Old playhouses were pulled down and for 18 years the theatre in England lay dormant.



The Globe Playhouse

which the most famous was to be The Globe. Now that audience was brought together in one place, and actors had to draw an audience every day, there was a great demand for new plays. So professional playwrights were required and hired. Christopher Marlowe was perhaps, the first significant dramatist of the British stage. With him came other playwrights, and from 1576 to the end of the century, the professional English theatre grew up from childhood to maturity at a rate unprecedented in dramatic history. It was inevitable that its full flowering would result in a genius. And so the stage was set for the glory that was Shakespeare.

Between 1587 and 1613, Shakespeare wrote nearly 30 plays. In 1597 Shakespeare's company acquired the roofed-in building of Blackfriars which required some artificial lighting and greater scenic illusion than was possible in the open air theatres. Prices of admission was higher and in the

Drama. The French tragedies of this age, though they treated classical themes, were products of their own age and society. They were refined, elegant and concerned with psychology. French tragedy was not popular entertainment but an elegant, intellectual exercise, which could only be appreciated by a very educated society. Comedy, on the other hand was influenced by the folk trends of the Commedia dell'arte from Italy. The great classical dramatist of France were Corneille and Racine. Corneille gave direction to the form of tragedy and dramatic action. The unities of action, time and place was invented by them. Unity of action had been demanded by Aristotle but the other two were invented by the French rationalists. The ideal was one locale, possibly within 24 hours. This influenced subsequent drama. The Romanics were to cast it away and the Realists to take it up again. Moliere was the brilliant comedy writer of his age. He was pre-eminently a satirist. He took

liberally from the Commedia dell'arte the intrigue filled plots and scenes and above all, the stock characters like Arlecchino, Pulcinella, Pantelone, Brighella etc.= The stage craft of the time were highly developed, but stylized and not realistic.

RESTORATION ENGLAND: For 18 years the public theatres of London remained dark. In 1660, Charles II issued patents to Thomas Killigrew and Sir William Davenant to establish 2 playhouses. These new playhouses of Lincoln's Inn field and Dorset Garden were patronized by a small section of society. English theatre was effectively dead. And it was to France that the actors and dramatists turned to for models. The shape of the English stage was now more continental too, with the Proscenium arch, orchestra, pit, wings, shutters and backcloth. So now the French and Italian indoor theatre of illusion took the place of the old English Inn yard stage. Tragedy borrowed the worst from France, and the only real achievement of the period was the development of the comedy of Manners of Congreve, Dryden and Wycherly.

GERMANY: The scene now shifts to Germany from where the next great burst of theatrical energy was to come. During the last decades of the 18th century, the cultural movement called Sturm und Drang had started. This literally meant storm and stress, and was a reaction against the over refinement of French classicism, and a return to the vitality of nature as espoused by Rousseau. The movement glorified individual freedom and a passionate, vigorous attitude to life. The words of Goethe and Schiller inspired the romantics to assault Racine's fortress of Reason. In theatre it produce a bombastic, expressionistic style of acting, a brute vitality. The unities of time and place were cast off. Scene followed scene, years rolled by in hours. Rebellion, rape, murder, the supernatural all rampaged through plays like 'Faust' and 'The Robbers'. The movement spread through Europe, and even in France Victor Hugo and Alexandre Dumas shook the Comedie française with their melodramas. The Romantic actor abandoned formal declamation, and performed with terrifying passion. Of Edmund Kean, famous English actor of the period, Coleridge said, "To see Kean act is to read Shakespeare by flashes of lightning."

THE MATERIALIST THEATRE: By now, the French Revolution and then the Industrial Revolution had changed the face of European society. During the first 75 years of the 19th century the British theatre also underwent a profound change, and sank to a very low level. The Industrial Revolution offered opportunities of wealth to new sections of the community; it brought into the cities a vast working population who wanted easy entertainment at a low intellectual level. In all ages the theatre has embraced showmanship, but in no age was theatre given over exclusively to vulgarity as it was during the early and mid-Victorian period. Reminiscent of the present state of commercial film making in the Indian sub-continent, plays of Victorian England were tasteless and banal fares, heavy on sensationalism, with at least 6 incidental songs to the action. From this, in fact came the word melodrama: literally melody + drama. It was not until 1843 that the Act for regulating Theatre was passed. But by now, theatre was no longer an art but a show. Playwriting had become a formula in which the same ingredients were repeated. Thus the best writers of the day found no place in the Theatre. Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Keats, Byron and later, Browning, Tennyson and Swinburne wrote poetic plays for the study, and the British theatre lost playwrights who, had they worked for the theatre, might have provided a new golden age. The major influence on Drama came from France where playwrights like the younger Dumas and Victorien Sardou were creating the 'well-made' bourgeois plays which reflected a money conscious, conventional middle class. Despite its lack of ideas and artistic integrity, these plays were to become the beginnings of the realistic theatre.

REALISTIC THEATRE: Under the surface of the commercial degeneration were the seeds of important changes that was to lead to theatre as we know it today. Improvement in the techniques of production, scenery and lighting were to bring about a more life like performance. To this end, the introduction of gaslight in the London theatres in 1817 had far reaching effect, for not only could the auditorium lights be extinguished but the stage lights could be regulated in intensity. And further, because the light could be adjusted to cover any given area of the stage, the movement of the actor became more flexible. At the same time as these light-

ing improvements were increasing the realism of movement, the stage itself was being altered. The apron stage was no longer required, the stag could now be a box with a proscenium arch, and the actors could act in the scenery and not in front of it. Thus scenery now became an integral part of the action instead of a background to it, as a result of which this too became more real. With the increasing emphasis upon scenery and lighting, an authority was required to make the decisions and weld together all the elements. Thus, now the Director emerged not only as someone to give overall direction, but also to formulate the way a play was to be interpreted. Duke George of the Saxe-Meiningen company was the first stage director, and he influenced the future development of the European theatre, not least in London, which his company visited in 1861, but also in Moscow where he greatly influenced Stanislavsky.

NATURALISTIC THEATRE: In 1898, Stanislavsky formed the Moscow Art Theatre, in which the techniques and Philosophy of modern realism and naturalism were developed. Theatricality and stage mannerisms were swept away, and the actor, together with all the appurtenances of the stage—scenery, furniture, off stage noises—were brought as close to life as the stage would allow. This illusion of actuality was aided by the invention of electric light as well as by the development of 3-dimensional scenery. The stage became a solid room. Acting was no longer an idealization of life, it was as Zola put it 'a slice of life', with all its vulgarities included. No playwright of this objective Naturalism ever equalled Chekhov (1860-1904). And I Stockholm, Strindberg (1849-1912) was creating his own naturalist theatre which also included Surrealism.

DRAMA TODAY: The new movement, to ally the theatre more closely with real people, was finally brought to its logical conclusion by marrying it to social issues. The master-builders of the realistic theatre were the two giants, Henrik Ibsen (1828-1906) and G.B. Shaw (1856-1950). Neither was an innovator of stage techniques, but they were concerned with plays whose subject matter treated the living social issues of their time. Ibsen treated these issues as an artist, and Shaw as a critic. The concluding years of the 19th century and the opening of the 20th saw a confusion of stage styles and techniques. Drawing room plays and social dramas, musical comedies, farce and detective plays continued to be written and staged. The plays of ideas slowly returned masked as drawing room comedies, of which Noel Coward's plays were highly successful in the '20s and '30s. But as a new generation grew up under a more wide spread educational

system, a large intellectual audience developed. Shakespeare again attained popularity. The Old Vic with its opportunities for serious acting attracted the best actors and actresses like John Gielgud, Lawrence Olivier, Ralph Richardson, Sybil Thorndike. The modern theatre is evolving, and its final shape is difficult to foresee. Theatre has always been a mirror to its society, reflecting the changes in its structure and values. When the surface of existence is chaotic, then imagination breaks out in distortions of reality. The well made plays are no longer an appropriate expression of a way of life which itself appears haphazard. Increasingly, serious modern drama is following the road of experimentation; the plays of Bertolt Brecht, Ionesco and Samuel Beckett showed the way by deliberately exaggerating and distorting certain parts of life in order to produce a new, more startling interpretation of 'ordinary' life. These expressionistic plays resemble the old moralities in being concerned not with men but wit mankind. How we view these experiments and what answers we get from them are all a part of this total experience that we call theatre. And today, the theatre is free to be either controversial or conservative, subversive or merely entertaining, or better still all of the above. But one thing that all good plays have in common today, as much as in time out of mind, is that they must put at the center the audience and their lives. The most important role in any drama or performance is that of the people who view it. Each is part of the magic, and even if in reality he sees his life as "... but a walking shadow, poor player/ That struts and frets his hour upon the stage/ And then is heard no more", in the theatre he must be made to believe that the illusions live on, exploring the eternal questions, eternally.

About the writer: Neeman A Sobhan holds an M.A. and a B.A degree in English and Comparative Literature, from the University of Maryland, U.S.