Roots of Theatre - Ancient Greece

- Roots of theatre most likely in ritual and magic
- Three things necessary for theatre as we understand it today
  - Actors speaking independently
  - Element of conflict conveyed in dialogue
  - Emotionally involved audience
- According to Aristotle, a play is an imitation of an action, and not the action itself
- First great theatrical age in the history of Western civilization is that of Greece in the 5th century BC
- Greek theatre had religious origins

Roots of Theatre - Ancient Greece

- Origin of the theatre as we know it linked to Thespis
- Great innovation was to detach himself from the chorus - Actors speaking independently
  - Also first unsanctified person to assume the role of a god.
  - Introduced the mask which became a staple in Greek drama.
- Design of Classical Greek Theatre
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Roots of Theatre - Ancient Rome

• Roman Theatre
• Focus was on a raised stage
• Subject matter diverted from religious roots
• Usually obscene and cheap humour
• Became a vulgar form of entertainment
• Actors not as respected as in ancient Greece

Roots of Theatre - Medieval Theatre

• Roots of medieval theatre lay in wandering entertainers, such as acrobats, dancers, mimics, animal trainers.
• Church became a central organizing force
  – Liturgical dramas
• By 1500s however, theatres were relatively sophisticated
  – Most realistic touches involved special effects
    – Flying, sudden appearances, fire, rain, transformations
• Machinists second to directors in importance
Roots of Theatre - Italian Renaissance

- Rediscovery of works in Classical drama
- Theatre architects applied the ideas of Vitruvius (16-13BC) Liturgical dramas:
  - Introduction of the proscenium arch and the development of painted scenery
- Also the development of opera. Lead to even more advances in scenery technology
- Commedia dell’arte
  - Entirely improvised
  - Formulaic plot structures
  - Actors were their characters

Teatro Olimpico, Florence, 1580
Roots of Theatre - Elizabethan Theatre

• Shakespeare: first modern playwright of the same stature as Classical authors
• Instrumental for the development of theatre in England was the establishment of permanent theatre buildings
  – Introduction of the proscenium arch and the development of painted scenery
• At the turn of the century many plays were being written for indoor or private theatres
• After the age of Shakespeare there was a decline. Civil war in 1642.

19th Century

• As an age, very self-conscious about technology and science
• Applied scientific knowledge and method to stage production
  – Stage machinery and special effects
  – Goal to create perfect illusions
• Major innovations: revolving stages, stage lighting, spot lights, use of electricity, acoustics
• Emphasis on unity and artistic integrity. Restore the theatre as it was in Ancient Greece

“There is no science without principles, which give a reason for its facts. Hence to teach and to learn (this subject) it is necessary 1. to understand the general law which controls the movement of the organs: it is simple this general law to the movement of each particular organ. 2. to understand the nature of these organs. 3. to apply the meaning to the various states of the soul. From The Delsarte System... with the Literary Remains of François Delsarte (New York, 1887).”
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19th Century - Richard Wagner

- 1813-1883
- Rejected contemporary theatrical trends toward realism
- Dramatists should be myth makers. True drama concerned with the real world
- Need to control all elements of a production. Gesamtkunstwerk - the total work of art
  - Unify all elements of the art work to achieve a totalizing effect. Combine different arts into an aesthetic whole
- Wagner influenced theatre design
- Resulted in the Bayreuth Festival Theatre, 1876

Robert Lepage, 1957 -

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Elsinore, 1995-97

The Busker’s Opera, 2005