

CULTURE OF GREAT BRITAIN

GENERAL FACTS

English culture tends to dominate the formal cultural life of the United Kingdom, but Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland have also made important contributions, as have the cultures that British colonialism brought into contact with the homeland.

Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland share fully in the common culture but also preserve lively traditions that predate political union with England.

British art has had a tremendous impact on world culture. Writers from every part of the United Kingdom, joined by immigrants from parts of the former British Empire and the Commonwealth, have enriched the English language and world literature alike with their work.

British studios, playwrights, directors, and actors have been remarkable pioneers of stage and screen. British comedians have brought laughter to diverse audiences and been widely imitated.

British composers have found devoted listeners around the world, as have various contemporary pop groups and singer-songwriters. British philosophers have had a tremendous influence in shaping the course of scientific and moral inquiry.

From medieval time to the present, this extraordinary flowering of the arts has been encouraged at every level of society. Early royal patronage played an important role in the development of the arts in Britain, and since the mid 20th century the British government has done much to foster their growth.

The independent Arts Council, formed in 1946, supports many kinds of contemporary creative and performing arts. The United Kingdom contains many cultural treasures. It is home to a wide range of learned societies, including the British Academy, the Royal Geographical Society, and the Royal Society of Edinburgh.

The British Museum in London houses historical artifacts from all parts of the globe. London is also home to many museums and theatres. Cultural institutions also abound throughout the country.

Among the many libraries and museums of interest in Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland are the Royal Museum, the Museum of Scotland, and the Writers' Museum in Edinburgh, the Museum of Scottish Country Life in Glasgow, the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff, and the Ulster Museum in Belfast.

Theatres of Great Britain

THE ENGLISH DRAMA

Drama of the Middle
Ages

Through practically a thousand years while the European theatre was “dark” the Christian Church was unable to stamp out completely the festive element among the common people that manifested itself particularly at the spring planting time and the harvest season.

It is probable, had not the church itself responded to the primitive desire of people to “act out” the stories of their lives that secular drama would have sprung up in the place of the Mystery (Miracle) and Morality plays of the Middle Ages.

At first only the priests took part acting out the events from the lives of Christ and the saints and the portrayal took place in the Church proper. Later as the performances grew more elaborate and space became an important item the Mysteries and Miracles were pushed out into the courtyards of the churches and laymen began to take part in the acting.

Both the Mystery and the Morality plays were often long winded and frequently dull. To relieve the tedium “interludes” were presented which were nothing more nor less than slapstick farces as a rule more distinguished for their vulgarity than their humour.

Most of these farces came originally from France or Italy and dealt either with the subject of sex or digestion. At their best, however, they carry on the true tradition of the Greek comedy writers and the Roman Plautus and Terence.

From these “interludes” (literally “between the games”, which was their actual use in Italy) developed a swift moving farce that was acted independently of any other performance. The best and most famous of these farces of the Middle Ages is the French *Farce of Pierre Pathelin*.

16th Century English Theatre

ELIZABETHAN THEATRES

The theatre as a public amusement was an innovation in the social life of the Elizabethans, and it immediately took the general fancy. London's first theatre was built when Shakespeare (1564-1616) was about twelve years old; and the whole system of the Elizabethan theatrical world came into being during his lifetime.

The great popularity of plays of all sorts led to the building of playhouses both public and private, to the organization of innumerable companies of players both amateur and professional, and to countless difficulties connected with the authorship and licensing of plays.

Companies of actors were kept at the big baronial estates of Lord Oxford, Lord Buckingham and others. Many strolling troupes went about the country playing wherever they could find welcome. They commonly consisted of three, or at most four men and a boy, the latter to take the women's parts. They gave their plays in pageants, in the open squares of the town, in the halls of noblemen and other gentry, or in the courtyards of inns.

Regulation and Licensing of Plays

The control of these various companies soon became a problem to the community. Some of the troupes, which had the impudence to call themselves “Servants” of this or that lord, were composed of low characters, little better than vagabonds, causing much trouble to worthy citizens.

The sovereign attempted to regulate matters by granting licenses to the aristocracy for the maintenance of troupes of players, who might at any time be required to show their credentials. For a time it was also a rule that these performers should appear only in the halls of their patrons; but this requirement, together with many other regulations, was constantly ignored.

During the reign of Mary, the rules were strict. Elizabeth granted the first royal patent to the Servants of the Earl of Leicester in 1574. These “Servants” were James Burbage and four partners. Under Elizabeth political and religious subjects were forbidden on the stage.

Objections to Playhouses

Respectable people and officers of the Church frequently made complaint of the growing number of play-actors and shows at the Elizabethan epoch. They said that the plays were often lewd and profane, that play-actors were mostly vagrant, irresponsible, and immoral people;

that taverns and disreputable houses were always found in the neighborhoods of the theatres, and that the theatre itself was a public danger in the way of spreading disease. The streets were overcrowded after performances; beggars and loafers infested the theatre section, crimes occurred in the crowd, and prentices played truant in order to go to the play.

Elizabeth's comedy was to compromise. She regulated the abuses, but allowed the players to thrive. One order for the year 1576 prohibited all theatrical performances within the city boundaries; but it was not strictly enforced.

Players were forbidden to establish themselves in the city, but could not be prevented from building their playhouses just across the river, outside the jurisdiction of the Corporation and yet within easy reach of the play-going public.

Companies of Actors

In 1578 six companies were granted permission by special order of the queen to perform plays. They were the Children of the Chapel Royal, Children of Saint Paul's, the Servants of the Lord Chamberlain, Servants of Lords Warwick, Leicester and Essex.

Soon the professional actor gained something in the public esteem, and occasionally became a recognized and solid member of society. Theatrical companies were gradually transformed from irregular associations of men dependent on a favor of a lord, to stable business organizations; and in time the professional actor and the organized company triumphed completely over the stroller and the amateur.

Playhouses

The number of playhouses steadily increased. Besides the **three** already mentioned, there were in Southwark the Hope, The Rose, the Swan, and the Newington Butts. Most famous of all were *the Globe*, built in 1598 by Richard Burbage (1567-1619), and *the Fortune*, built in 1599.

At the end of the rein of Elizabeth there were eleven theatres in London, including public and private houses. Various members of the royal family were the ostensible patrons of the new companies. The boys of the choirs and Church schools were trained in acting.

England was the last of European countries to accept women on the stage. In the year 1629 a visiting company of French players gave performances at Blackfriars, with actresses.

Composition and Ownership of Plays

The plays were the property, not of the author, but of the acting companies. Aside from the costly costumes, they formed the most valuable part of the company's capital. The parts were learned by the actors, and the manuscript locked up.

If the piece became popular, rival managers often stole it by sending to the performance a clerk who took down the lines in shorthand. Neither authors nor managers had any protection from pirate publishers, who frequently issued copies of successful plays without the consent of either.

Performances

Public performances generally took place in the afternoon, beginning about 3 o'clock and lasting perhaps two hours. Candles were used when daylight began to fade. The beginning of the play was announced by the hoisting of a flag and the blowing of a trumpet. There were playbills, those for tragedy being printed in red.

The house itself was not unlike a circus, with a good deal of noise and dirt. Servants, grooms, prentices and mechanics jostled each other in the pit, while more or less gay companies filled the boxes. Women of respectability were few, yet sometimes they did attend; and if they were very careful of their reputations they wore masks.

Court Comedies

There were two groups of plays in the 16th century, which belonged neither to the democratic, popular class, nor to the Pseudo-classical species fostered by the academic circles.

One of this was the court comedy, designed especially as a compliment to the queen; the other was the masque, in which the aristocracy and royalty itself took part as actors. The court comedy was in a sense, a variation, or the specialization of the pastoral, brought into England from Italy chiefly by John Lyly (1553-1606).

Court Masques

The success of the masque depended upon the architect, the scene painter, decorator and ballet master. In the course of time considerable importance was given also to singing and instrumental music. Among the poets engaged to write masque librettos were Jonson, Beaumont, Fletcher, and most of the other talented writers of the day.

The king and queen, each,
provided the masque at
Christmas. There remain more
than thirty examples of this sort of
play written during the reign of
Charles I and James I.

The Old English Pantomime

The old English pantomime was modeled with certain modifications upon the masque of the Elizabethan and the Stuart days.

The story was usually founded upon a classical subject, was illustrated with music and grand scenic effects, and to this was later added a comic transformation after the Italian style. Harlequin was turned into a magician, who, by a touch of his bat, could transform a palace into a hut, men and women into wheelbarrows and chairs.

Early in 1723 the managers of **Drury Lane**, in rivalry with **Rich**, produced a pantomime which may be considered as the first English pantomime. Not to be outdone, in December of the same year, Rich brought out his famous *Necromancer* or *Harlequin Executed*, which far surpassed in splendor all that had yet been seen.

Chamberlain's Men

Chamberlain's Men, a theatrical company with which Shakespeare (1564-1616) was intimately connected for most of his professional career as a dramatist and the most important company of players in Elizabethan and Jacobean England.

In 1594 their London home was for a time a theatre in Newington Butts (a village not far south of London Bridge) and after that most probably at the Cross Keys Inn in the city itself.

Later, they presumably used the theatre, situated in Shoreditch, since this was owned by the father of Richard Burbage, their leading actor. In the autumn of 1599, the company was rehoused in the Globe Theatre; this was their most famous home.

Shakespeare was the company's principal dramatist (he also acted with them), but in addition to his plays, works by Ben Jonson, Thomas Dekker, and the partnership of Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher were also presented. The company ceased to exist when, at the outbreak of Civil War in 1642, the theatres were closed and remained so until the Restoration 18 years later.

***FAMOUS ENGLISH
PLAYWRIGHTS AND
ACTORS OF THE 16TH
CENTURY***

Francis Beaumont (1584 – 1616)

John Fletcher (1579-1625)

Robert Greene (1558-1592)

Ben Jonson (1573 – 1637)

Thomas Kyd (1558 – 1594)

Christopher Marlowe (1564 - 1593)

William Shakespeare (1564-1616)

17th CENTURY ENGLISH
THEATRE

The Restoration

Charles II (1660 – 1685) recreated the London theatre. He made it over in the image of Paris. Yet there were only 4 things about it that were new to England. The king was legally responsible for the introduction of actresses.

The managers deserted the repertory system that had given the English such a variety of drama, and they put on plays for long runs. Their playwrights gave the audience “classic” tragedies after the pattern of the French.

When the producers turned away from the Elizabethan type of public playhouse and installed proscenium arches and scenic devices in roofed-over theatres, they were following the pattern of the English court masque, whose technique was Italian.

Famous English Actors
and Playwrights of the
17th Century

Thomas Betterton (1635? – 1710)

John Dryden (1631 -1700)

Nathaniel Lee (1653-1692)

William Congreve (1670-1729)

Famous English Actors
and Playwrights of the
18th Century

David Garrick (1717-1779)

Oliver Goldsmith (1730? -1774)

Edmund Kean (1787-1833)

William Macready (1793-1873)

Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751-1816)

Sarah Kemble Siddons (1765 – 1831)

Famous English Actors
and Playwrights of the
19th Century

Lewis Casson (1875 – 1969)

Henry Irving (1838-1905)

Tom Taylor (1817-1880)

Oscar Wilde (1854 – 1900)

20th CENTURY ENGLISH THEATRE

The English stage of the 20th century has produced on the whole theatrical rather than literary drama. It was Bernard Shaw who lifted the realistic drama to its highest potentiality by making it primarily intellectual drama, the intellectual brilliancy of which is ultimately enjoyable.

His plays are conspicuous for abundantly witty dialogue. John Galsworthy, who enjoyed the widest vogue at the time, was another flare-up. His utterly serious and emotional plays, such as *The Silver Box*, *Strife*, *Justice*, *Loyalties* and *Escape*, were the best of their kind and gave the most complete picture of English bourgeois society in the 20th century.

The 1930-s saw a new upheaval of democratic culture in Great Britain, its main feature being the mass character and vigorous protest against war, fascism and reaction in ideology. The working class theatre was at its height. They had their own theatre and drama groups, the Unity Theatre in London and Theatre Workshop in the East End being the most famous.

Center 42 is the most recent development in the working class theatre. It was founded by Arnold Wesker, a well-known dramatist, and was supported by the trade unions. It awakened the interest of the audiences in genuine culture.

Famous English Actors,
Playwrights, and
Directors of the 20th
Century

Peter Brook (1925-)

Vivien Leigh (1918 – 1967)

Laurence Kerr Olivier (1907 – 1989)

John Osborne (1929-1994)

Harold Pinter (1930-2008)

John Boynton Priestley (1894-1984)

Tom Stoppard (1937-)

Arnold Wesker (1932-)

Famous English Actors,
Playwrights, and Directors of the
21 Century