



HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT STAGES OF ENGLISH THEATRE: FROM THE MIDDLE AGES TO THE MODERN ERA

Kaljanova Tazakhan Kalbaevna

Lecturer, Department of Art Studies, Nukus
Branch of the Uzbekistan State Institute of Arts and Culture

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the stages of the formation and development of English theatre from the Middle Ages to the twenty-first century. It provides a scholarly analysis of medieval religious theatre, Renaissance dramaturgy, the rise of Elizabethan theatre, the Restoration period, theatrical reforms of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as well as modern theatrical movements of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. The study also explores the contribution of English theatre to the development of world theatre art and analyzes its role in contemporary cultural processes.

English theatre is regarded as one of the richest and most continuously developing theatrical traditions in the history of world theatre. Its evolution originated from religious rituals and later led to the formation of professional dramaturgy, acting traditions, and schools of theatrical direction. The historical development of English theatre has been closely connected with political, religious, and cultural transformations within the country, with each historical period influencing the content and form of theatrical art.

Today, English theatre is recognized not only as an essential component of British cultural heritage but also as an influential artistic tradition that has made a significant contribution to the development of world theatre. In particular, Elizabethan dramaturgy, the works of William Shakespeare, and the innovative explorations of contemporary English theatre remain among the most important areas of research in theatre studies. The earliest forms of English theatre emerged during the tenth–twelfth centuries in connection with church rituals. Initially, liturgical dramas were performed during religious ceremonies in order to recreate biblical events and make them accessible to worshippers. Over time, these performances moved from church buildings to public squares, transforming into theatrical productions involving broader segments of society. During the thirteenth–fifteenth centuries, **mystery plays** (dramatic works based on biblical stories), **miracle plays** (performances devoted to the lives of saints), and **morality plays** (allegorical dramas promoting ethical ideas) became the principal genres of English medieval theatre. These works served not only religious purposes but also fulfilled important moral and educational functions by conveying ethical values and social teachings to audiences.

The second half of the sixteenth century marked a fundamental transformation in English theatre with the emergence of the Renaissance in England. The individual, human

emotions, and the role of people within society became central themes of dramatic literature. During this period, permanent theatre buildings were constructed in London, and professional theatre companies began to operate. The reign of **Elizabeth I** became known in history as the “Golden Age” of English theatre. It was during this period that English dramaturgy reached an exceptional level of artistic development. Playwrights such as **William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, and Thomas Kyd** established English theatre as a major force on the world stage. Shakespeare elevated tragedy, comedy, and historical drama to new artistic heights. His works, including *Hamlet, King Lear, Othello, Macbeth, and Romeo and Juliet*, explore profound philosophical questions related to human psychology, power, love, justice, and moral choice. The most famous theatre of this period was the **Globe Theatre**, which played a significant role in the development of English theatrical culture. In 1642, theatres were closed during the period of the English Civil War. After the restoration of the monarchy in 1660, theatrical activity was revived, marking the beginning of the **Restoration theatre** period. The main characteristics of this era included the appearance of women actors on the stage, the development of new forms of comedy, the expansion of court theatres, and the improvement of stage design and theatrical technology.

Restoration comedies presented social life, aristocratic manners, and human weaknesses through a satirical perspective. During the Enlightenment period, the educational and moral significance of theatre became increasingly important. Playwrights such as **Richard Sheridan** and **Oliver Goldsmith** made significant contributions to the development of comedy as a dramatic genre. In the nineteenth century, the Industrial Revolution also influenced theatrical culture. New theatre buildings were constructed, and innovations such as gas and electric lighting systems were introduced. Melodrama and historical drama became increasingly popular. By the end of the century, the movements of Realism and Naturalism had entered theatrical practice. The comedies of **Oscar Wilde** and the social dramas of **George Bernard Shaw** brought English dramaturgy to a new stage of development. In particular, Shaw interpreted theatre as an intellectual platform capable of addressing and examining social issues.

The twentieth century became a period of stylistic diversity in English theatre. The First and Second World Wars had a profound impact on perceptions of human existence and society. As a result, Theatre of the Absurd, experimental dramaturgy, and psychological drama developed significantly. **John Osborne, Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, and Caryl Churchill** emerged as leading representatives of modern English dramaturgy. Their works explored themes such as the individual and society, politics, freedom, loneliness, and identity. Today, English theatre widely employs modern technologies, multimedia tools, and innovative approaches to directing. London's **West End** theatre district remains one of the world's largest centres of theatrical art, attracting millions of spectators each year.

English theatre has made an enormous contribution to the development of world dramaturgy and stage art. The works of Shakespeare have been translated into almost all major languages of the world and remain among the most frequently performed dramatic works in international theatre practice. The professional theatre system, acting schools, stage technologies, and principles of dramaturgy developed in England have influenced the formation of theatrical cultures in many countries. The experience of contemporary English

theatre continues to be widely applied in international theatre festivals and theatrical education.

The historical development of English theatre demonstrates a continuous evolution from religious theatrical traditions to modern experimental stage art. Each historical period introduced new forms of dramaturgy, acting, directing, and stage culture. In particular, Elizabethan dramaturgy established a strong foundation for the development of world theatre theory. During the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, movements such as Realism, Modernism, and Theatre of the Absurd further expanded the artistic possibilities of English theatre.

English theatre has undergone a long historical journey, beginning with medieval religious performances and extending to contemporary experimental stage practices. Throughout this process, theatre developed not only as an artistic and aesthetic phenomenon but also as an important social institution reflecting the political, social, and cultural life of society. Elizabethan dramaturgy led by William Shakespeare, Restoration comedies, Enlightenment theatre, Realism, and modern dramatic movements have determined the significant position of English theatre within world culture. Today, English theatre continues to make a valuable contribution to the development of global theatrical art through its rich historical experience and innovative approaches.

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