Ancient Greek Roman And Elizabethan Theatres Essay, Research Paper

Of the many types of entertainment and past times we have today, theatre is still one

of the most loved. For this we have to thank the very earliest forms of ancient Greek

and Roman theatre. These ancient time plays were staged often in honor of a god and

have paved the way for theatre as we know today. A particular aspect that has had a

remarkable effect on the way theatre has evolved is the architecture of ancient

theatres. The architecture of ancient Greek and Roman theatres have had a

remarkable effect on future theatre designs including the architecture of the great

Elizabethan theatres.

The Elizabethan time period in England was ever so popular and well accepted that

specialised theatres were having to be built to cope with the large audiences. Before

this plays were being held in grape cellars and old farm houses, and so were not able

to provide a large enough venue or provide the larger than life atmosphere play

houses needed. By the time Elizabethan theatre was in the British mainstream the

plays were being held in two types of theatre, the public and private.

The public Elizabethan theatres were much larger than the private ones and were the

preferred theatre of Shakespeare and other great playwrites to stage a production.

The first such theatre was built by James Burbage in 1576 and was called simply the

theatre. Soon after other public theatres were built, including Shakespeare?s own The

Globe which was built in 1599. They could appear round, square or many sided and

where built surrounding a central courtyard. Performances were only during daylight

because there was no artificial lighting, even though many plays had night scenes. In

most theatres it consisted of three levels of viewing galleries and stood about 10

metres high. As well as being viewer platforms the part of the upper two galleries

that went behind the stage were used as a balcony to give the play vertical action as

well as horizontal. The courtyard, called the pit, measured about 17 metres in

diameter. Those wishing to watch the show from the pit could do so for a minimal

amount of money. People viewing a play in the pit surrounded the stage from three

sides, thus giving the audience a sense of being right in the action. For those that

were willing to pay a bit more there were the galleries with seats. But although these

galleries provided a seat to sit on they also stank of urine and sweat since there were

no toilets and people those days didn?t bath much. These rather large theatres could

hold as much as 5600 people and were generally the choice of theatre for poorer

people, but built around an attractive courtyard with an open roof these theatres were

far from something shabby intended for lower class citizens. Proof that the public

theatre was not a cheap alternative for poorer people is the fact that Shakespeare and

other well known play writers wrote almost all their plays specifically for the public

theatres and often despised performing a play in the smaller rich persons private

theatre.

The Private Elizabethan theatres charged higher admission prices and were designed

to attract upper class citizens. Although these theatres were often owned by royalty

and attracted rather rich people to view plays they quickly went out of fashion and

eventually ceased to excist because Shakespeare wrote all his plays for public

theatres. Because of the unpopularity of these theatres not much is known about their

architecture except that they were small, had little equipment or basic machinery to

assist behind the scenes work and had artificial lighting in the form of petrol lanterns.

In typical Ancient Greek tradition, where grander and bigger was better the

architecture of ancient Greek theatres truly were traditional, in that they were huge

and grand. During the time that drama competitions were beginning to take place in

ancient Greece large ampitheatres were needed to be built in order to keep up with

the massive popularity of such drama competitions. Three major theatres were

constructed, notably the theatre at Delphi, the Attic Theatre and the Theatre of

Dionysus in Athens. The Theatre of Dionysus, built at the foot of the Acropolis in

Athens, could seat 17,000 people and during their heyday, the competitions drew as

many as 30,000 spectators. It was common for these large audiences to be noisy,

lively, emotional and unrestrained. They hissed, applauded, cheered and sometimes

broke out into a riot if they were unhappy with a play. These huge open air theatres

were always built where a steep hill met flat ground so that the tiers of seating could

be on the hill and the stage on the flat. The stage and stage wall were elaborate

structures made of wood and sandstone that provided a large set for actors to move

and dance in. Although scenic sets weren?t created and no props were used to

indicate a particular setting there was one permanent structure on the stage that

represented a temple and served as the door through which actors entered the stage.

There was no curtain and the play was presented as a whole with no act or scene

divisions.

Dionysus the wine god of which Greek tragedy originated to worship was at the

centre of every play around the time of the great tragedy era and so was included in

the architecture of ancient Greek theatres. At every theatre in ancient Greece there

was a statue of Dionysus the god of wine and tragedy at the centre of the stage. It was

common for a temple of Dionysus to be adjoined to the theatre and a procession

would occur from the temple to the stage of the theatre in honor of the god. This god

of Greek tragedy and wine was paid homage to during plays by actors acting out a

human sacrifice at the altar on stage.

The architecture of ancient Roman theatres were typically Italian in that they were

large, elaborately decorated and extremely tasteful to an artistic eye. The theatres of

the Roman world were quite different from those in Greece. They were built on flat

ground, not a hillside, with a large round surrounding wall of masonry that was well

decorated with pictures of gods and battle scenes. The focal point of the Roman

theatre was the high stage, with an elaborately decorated stage wall two stories high.

Seating started at the front of the stage and went back to a standing area were people

could stand and watch for free. It can be concluded from the many paintings on walls

and stage curtains that many plays of the time were based on the adventures of Zeus

and Hercules.

As the popularity of Roman theatre began to rise so did the number of Roman

theatres being built around Italy and the World. Roman theatres had been built all

over Italy, in Spain, France and North Africa. The overly garnished theatres included

a curtain which disappeared into a trough at the front of the stage, vividly painted

inner walls and a amazingly decorated stage wall. Spectators could indulge under the

shade of an awning while eating fruit that was sold at the theatre and if hot enough go

for a shower in perfumed water. The plays witnessed in these truly majestic

playhouses could not be compared with those seen in the simpler less visually

appealing theatres of the ancient Greek kind.

Technology has become one of mans best friends and for all the reasons in the world.

It has affected us in ways that make our life easier, more enjoyable and more

bareable. There isn?t anything on this earth that has remained unaffected by it. And

no exception is the modern theatre as we know it today which has undergone changes

through various technology advances since ancient Greek and Roman times. In

particular the architecture of ancient Greek, Roman and Elizabethan theatres have

paved the way for the modern theatre buildings we have become to enjoy today.