

Drama in the Renaissance

By Sharon Fabian

Do you like to watch plays acted out on stage? Many people do. This combination of literature and entertainment has been popular off and on for hundreds of years.

The ancient Greeks are often given credit for starting the tradition of presenting plays for an audience to enjoy. In the 5th century BC, Greeks in their togas and sandals enjoyed evenings in an outdoor theatre. There they could sit in a semicircle around an open-air stage and watch the performance. The performances would include a chorus that sang or chanted and perhaps three actors who took on all of the speaking parts.

Ancient Romans had a dramatic tradition of their own. In the first century AD, Seneca, the Roman philosopher, wrote dramas full of action, revenge, and heroics. These dramas were meant to be read, rather than performed on stage, and were known as closet dramas.

The time of the ancient Greeks and Romans later became known as the classic era. It was a time of great progress and creativity. It was also the time before the art of theatre was nearly lost during the Middle Ages.

With the Renaissance in Europe, people once again became interested in classical drama. Manuscripts of classic plays were rediscovered. Plots and characters from the classics were borrowed and updated into new dramas of the Renaissance. Dramatic styles including comedy and tragedy were rediscovered.

Renaissance drama included classical elements like the use of a chorus. Stage ghosts like those in Seneca's scary plays reappeared, too. Stock characters like the mischievous servant made a second appearance. Renaissance drama, similar to the drama of classic times, was very poetic. The language was very expressive since the plays relied on the spoken language to express emotions and to present images. The plays included more long speeches and less action than dramas of today.

The Globe Theatre and the Rose Theatre were two places in England where people went to enjoy a play during the Renaissance. On one of these large stages, they might see a performance by the Admiral's Men. Or they might catch a play by the Chamberlain's Men, the company that William Shakespeare wrote for.

Some of the theatergoers would be seated in the tiers of seats that partly surrounded the stage. Others who hadn't spent the money for expensive seats would stand on the lower level in front of the stage. These theatre fans were known as groundlings, and there were many of them. In London, as many as 15,000 people might attend the theatre in a week.

Shakespeare wasn't the only playwright that people came to see. Christopher Marlowe was another favorite. And there were many others.

Today, we no longer hear the names of many of them, but in their time they were popular entertainers. When they wrote plays, they always kept their audience in mind. They knew that the audiences liked to see bad guys as well as heroes. They knew that their audiences liked to laugh. Sometimes their audiences even liked to be scared. The plays that these playwrights offered to the public during the Renaissance often combined comedy and tragedy. They were all about human nature. Audiences never got tired of that topic - not in classical times and not during the Renaissance. In fact, Renaissance plays like *Hamlet* and *Romeo and Juliet* are still popular today.



Name _____



Date _____

Drama in the Renaissance Questions

- _____ 1. This article is about _____ during the Renaissance.
- A. romance
 - B. plays
 - C. crime
 - D. videos
- _____ 2. The first plays were performed during the Renaissance.
- A. true
 - B. false
- _____ 3. The Renaissance occurred during the 5th century BC.
- A. true
 - B. false
- _____ 4. Classic Greek plays included performances by a chorus.
- A. false
 - B. true
- _____ 5. All of these types of characters are mentioned in this article except _____.
- A. ghosts
 - B. heroes
 - C. teachers
 - D. mischievous servants
- _____ 6. During the Renaissance, classic Greek _____ were rediscovered.
- A. sandals
 - B. togas
 - C. manuscripts
 - D. costumes
- _____ 7. A _____ is a play that is meant to be read aloud rather than acted out.
- A. drama
 - B. closet drama
 - C. playwright
 - D. theatre
- _____ 8. _____ was a Renaissance playwright.
- A. Chamberlain
 - B. Marlowe
 - C. both
 - D. neither

