Victorian Theatre

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Victorian Theatres

- 19th century is the age of truly popular theatre
- Victorians built some of the very large theatres:
  - Drury Lane: 3,600 seating capacity (only West End theatre of that size)
  - Britannia 3,900
  - Pavilion 3,500
- Licensing Act allowed only 2 theatres in London to actually perform plays
Drury Lane Theatre
Changes in the Theatre

- placing backs on benches
- introduction of chairs in the pit
- orchestra stalls (1828)
- boxes remained but became fewer in number
- Lavish decoration of auditorium
Audience

- Audience: lower, middle and upper class
- people dressed up (expensive dresses, jewelry etc....)
- were primarily not interested in play, only in presenting themselves
- division of audience into box, pit and gallery
- box: aristocracy & the fashionable
- pit: lawyers, critic, students and tradesmen
- gallery: servants, apprentices and journeymen
Conditions in the Theatre

- atmospheric: very hot, dry, smelly, lacking oxygen
- seats jammed closely together
- foyer space sacrificed to bar space
- dressing rooms and other facilities for performers quite inadequate, sometimes downright dangerous
- every theatre in Britain had become a potential death trap
On Stage

- introduction of orchestra stalls
- forestage was shortened
- final Victorian form: picture frame stage
- as it looks today
On Stage

- desire for greater artistic consistency in setting and costume
- urge to wrap stage and players in historically authentic clothing
- stage was fully and handsomely furnished
- three dimensional scenery
Machinery

- gridiron: at the very top of the backstage space, high above the stage
- for everything that had to be raised, lowered and hung out of sight of the audience
- machinery beneath the stage responsible for everything appearing from beneath the stage or sinking through it
- Flying, not only of scenery but also of actors
Lighting

- within 2 generations from candles and oil lamps to electricity
- 1st: use of wax candles
- 1817: Drury Lane used gas lighting for stage and auditorium
- blacking out the auditorium while play is in progress
- might be lowered for special effects: ghostly vision, moonlit scene
- 1881: Savoy Theatre was the first to be lit entirely by electricity
Victorian Melodrama

- Became fashionable during 1780s and 1790s
- Grew out of burletta (comic opera), retained musical elements- therefore no play.
- Basic character stereotypes (recognizable immediately): spotless hero, black villain, maiden in white, motley fool.
- Sensational, special effects (train crash, explosions, fire, balloon ascent, underwater scenes, star traps...)
- Became so popular that they were even produced in patent theatres.
Shakespeare

- Victorian people loved costume dramas
- "good theatre": historical intrigue in 5 acts, accurate costuming, lavish scenery
- Edited older dramas to fit this format, especially Shakespeare.
- Changed settings, endings and dialogues that seemed unfitting to them.
Cup and Saucer Drama

- Also: 'Drawing room comedy'
- Stage: real room with doors, sofas tables.
Cup and Saucer Drama

- 1879 instigated by Squire Bancroft & Marie Wilton in Haymarket theatre
- Dealt seriously with issues of the day, actors spoke, instead of declaiming. Not much action on stage, instead conversations.
- In „The Vicarage“ an actor made tea- gave name to the genre
Music Halls

- Competition to the theatre, opened in 1852, developed from saloon entertainment and all-male drinking clubs
Music Halls

- Audience seated at tables, food and drinks served, performances on platforms at the side.
- Primarily drinking houses with added entertainment
- No real plays performed, but songs, comic acts and all kinds of weird acts.
Gilbert and Sullivan

- comic operas of William Gilbert and Arthur Sullivan are some of the best loved, and most well-known works in the history of musical theatre
Gilbert and Sullivan

- Sullivan composed the music
- Gilbert wrote and directed the operas
- Between 1871 and 1896 they wrote fourteen comic operas
- Were most successful when working together, e.g.: *Thespis; Trial by Jury; H.M.S. Pinafore*