**Famous Historical Playwrights**

# Ancient Theatre

**Aeschylus** (525­546 B.C.) is often called the Father of Tragedy. His plays dealt with the interaction between gods and men, with emphasis on inevitability of suffering. His most famous play was *Agamemnon*; it was the first in a trilogy. It was followed by *The Libation Bearers*, and finally *The Furies*.

**Sophocles** (497­406 B.C.) was also a great writer of tragedies, who was also responsible for the addition of the third actor to the stage. He wrote over 100 plays; however, only seven have survived the fire of the Alexandria Library. These include a trilogy which begins with *Oedipus Rex,* continues with *Oedipus at Colonus* and finally *Antigone*.

**Euripides** (480­405 B.C.) wrote plays dealing with psychological motivation and social consciousness. He wrote plays such as *Medea*, and *The Trojan Women*.

**Aristophanes** (445­380 B.C.) Only eleven of his plays survive today and are examples of Old Comedy. He poked fun at public figures such as Socrates in *The Clouds* and Euripides in *The Frogs*.

# Medieval Theatre

The medieval period was a time of intellectual and cultural stagnation. The Catholic Church became the unifying force. It was however, ironic that the church – which ended theatre – was responsible for the rebirth of theatre in the late medieval period. Around the ninth century, the church began using elements of drama and theatre as additions to its celebration of Mass. These small plays were called *tropes*, and were probably developed in order to make it easier for the congregation to learn and appreciate the message of the church.

Three different types of plays were developed:

1. **Mystery Plays**: Stories from the Bible.
2. **Miracle Plays**: Stories of the saints.
3. **Morality Plays**: Stories that taught right from wrong.

# Renaissance Theatre

**William Shakespeare** (1564­1616) wrote 37 plays and 154 sonnets. His plays can be divided in up to four categories: comedies, tragedies, histories, romances. Several of Shakespeare’s plays are famous; they include *Hamlet, Romeo and Juliet, Othello, Macbeth, A Midsummer Night’s Dream,* and *Julius Caesar.*

**Christopher Marlowe** (1564­1593) established blank verse as the standard for later plays. His most well known play is *Doctor Faustus*.

**Ben Jonson** (1572­1637) was an English Renaissance dramatist, poet and actor. He is best known for his satirical plays, particularly *Volpone, The Alchemist*, and *Bartholomew Fair*. Jonson had a strong influence on several playwrights and poets.

**Miguel De Cervantes** (1574­1616) was a Spanish playwright who wrote thirty plays. His best known is *Don Quixote*.

**Moliére** (1622­1673) was a French playwright who wrote several comedies. Moliére is a pseudonym used by the author to protect his family by those offended by his work. His most famous plays include *Tartuffe, The Misanthrope,* and *The School for Wives*.

# Romanticism

**Oscar Wilde** (1854­1900) was an Irish writer whose works include the play *The Importance of*

*Being Earnest* and the novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray* which was later adapted into a script. He is also one of the Victorian era's most famous people, and was jailed for homosexuality. He was convicted and spent two years in jail, after which he went into self­imposed exile in France, bankrupt and in ill health. His other works include the comedies *Lady Windermere's Fan*, *A Woman of No Importance* and *An Ideal Husband*.

**Anton Chekhov** (1860­1904) wrote both plays and short stories. He is generally listed in the first rank of Russian playwrights and in the high second rank (a notch below Pushkin and Tolstoy) as a writer of prose. His most famous plays include *The Seagull*, *Uncle Vanya*, and *The Cherry Orchard*. Chekhov had a famous love affair with the actress Olga Knipper; they married in 1901.

**Sean O’Casey** (1884­1964) Irish dramatist, one of the great figures of the Irish literary renaissance and was active in various socialist movements and in the rebellions for Irish independence. All of O'Casey's plays exhibit an unsentimental sympathy for the poor. His plays include: *The Shadow of a Gunman*, *Juno and the Paycock*, and *The Plough and the Stars*.

# Realism

**Henrik Ibsen** (1828­1906) A Norwegian is among the most famous modern playwrights, the author of such dramas as *Peer Gynt*, *A Doll's House* and *Hedda Gabbler*. During his lifetime he earned an international reputation for his psychological dramas that frequently commented on social issues of the day. He gained recognition as “The Father of Modern Drama.” His plays are still among the most frequently performed in the world.

**George Bernard Shaw** (1856­1950) is perhaps better known for his famously large ego and sometimes prickly personality: Shaw was a vegetarian, a radical socialist and social reformer. Among his most famous plays are *Arms and the Man*, *Mrs. Warren’s Profession*, and *Pygmalion*. The last was adapted 50 years later into the Broadway musical *My Fair Lady*.

# Naturalism

**Johan August Strindberg** (1849­1912) Strindberg began to experiment with visual effects and other aspects of dramatic form, initiating changes that still remain living influences in the modern theater. Expressionist dream sequences and symbolism were combined with realism and with religious mysticism, to form naturalism. Major works in this vein are *The Dream Play*, *The Father*, and *Miss Julie*.

**Eugene Ionesco** (1909­1994) A Romanian playwright and author who wrote most of his plays in French. A founding member of the Theatre of the Absurd, his plays dramatize the absurdity of life, the meaninglessness of social conventions, and the futility of modern civilization. His plays build on bizarrely illogical or fantastic situations using such devices as the humorous multiplication of objects on stage until they overwhelm the actors. Some famous works include *Rhinoceros* and *The Bald Soprano.*

# Early Modern Theatre

**Luigi Pirandello** (1867­1936) His fame rests primarily on his intellectual and grotesquely humorous plays. He has written more than 40 dramas and they have been performed in most of the great cities of the world. His most famous play is *Six Characters in Search of an Author.* The grim humor of his plays flows from their central theme—the shattering search to distinguish between reality and illusion. Pirandello's works are influential models for later existential drama.

**Thornton Wilder** (1897­1975) often employed nonrealistic theatrical techniques such as: scrambled time sequences, minimal stage sets, characters speaking directly to the audience, and the use of a narrator. He has won the Pulitzer Prize for *Our Town* and *The Skin of Our Teeth*. He also wrote *The Matchmaker* was later adapted into a musical called *Hello Dolly!*

**Bertolt Brecht** (1898­1956) was a German playwright whose outspoken Marxism, and his revolutionary experiments in the theater have made him a controversial force in modern drama. Some of his expressionist plays caused riots at their openings. He began to develop the epic theater, in which narrative, montage, self­contained scenes, and rational argument were used to create a shock of realization in the spectator. In order to give the audience a more objective perspective on the action, Brecht promoted a style of acting and staging that created a distancing effect. Brecht’s most famous plays are *Galileo* and *Mother Courage and Her Children*.

**Samuel Beckett** (1906­1989) Much of his work, focuses on the absurdity of human existence. His best­known play, *Waiting for Godot* is a comic study of philosophical uncertainty. Another play, *Endgame*, examines how pointless life would be surviving a nuclear war. Never exactly mainstream, Beckett is nonetheless considered one of the most important European writers of the 20th century for his influence on modern literature and for his ability to impress shock and confound.

**Tennessee Williams** (1911­1983) One of America's foremost 20th­century playwrights and the author of more than 70 plays, he achieved great successes with the productions of *The Glass Menagerie,* *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*. Williams explores the intense passions and frustrations of a disturbed and frequently brutal society. Williams is perhaps most successful in his portraits of the hypersensitive and lonely Southern woman.

**Arthur Miller** (1915–2005) wrote *Death of a Salesman* and *The Crucible*. Miller's plays addressed social and political issues and helped establish the American tradition of the "common man" as tragic hero. *Death of a Salesman* won three Tony awards and the Pulitzer

Prize and made Miller internationally famous. In the 1950s Miller ran afoul of U.S. Senator Joe McCarthy's House Un­American Activities Committee, and in 1957 he was convicted of contempt of Congress for refusing to name communist sympathizers (the conviction was later overturned). During his long career, Miller wrote novels, essays and short stories and was one of the most celebrated playwrights in America. He was also married to Marilyn Monroe (195661).

# Contemporary Theatre

**Neil Simon** (1927 ­ ) His plays, nearly all of them popular, are comedies treating recognizable aspects of modern middle­class life. Particularly adept at portraying the middle­aged, Simon builds up his characters through funny lines rather than plot, although he does often attempt serious themes. His many other plays include *Come Blow Your Horn*, *The Odd Couple*, *Brighton Beach Memoirs*,and *Biloxi Blues*. Many of his plays have been adapted into films.

**Edward Albee** (1928 ­ ) Much of his most characteristic work constitutes an absurdist commentary on American life. Albee is a playwright who has been connected with The Theatre of the Absurd. In practice, The Theatre of the Absurd departs from realistic characters, situations and all of the associated theatrical conventions. Albee has received three Pulitzer Prizes for drama — for *A Delicate Balance* (1966), *Seascape* (1974), *Three Tall Women* (19901991)

**Lorraine Hansberry** (1930–1965) grew up on Chicago's South Side. In 1959 she became the first black woman to have a play produced on Broadway when *A Raisin in the Sun* opened to wide critical acclaim. Hansberry died of cancer at 35. A collection of her writings, *To Be Young, Gifted, and Black,* was published in 1969.

**Harold Pinter** (1930 ­ ) is one of the most important English playwrights of the last half of the

20th century and the most influential of his generation. Pinter writes what have been called “comedies of menace.” Using apparently commonplace characters and settings, he often creates tension from the long silences between speeches. Some of his most famous plays are *The Birthday Party, The Dumb Waiter,* and *The Homecoming*.

**Caryl Churchill** (1938­ ) British playwright whose work frequently deals with feminist issues, the abuses of power, and sexual politics. Influenced by Bertolt Brecht, her early plays fell into the realm of ‘Epic theatre.’ Some of her plays include *Vinegar Tom, Cloud Nine* and *Top Girls.*

**Sam Shepard** (1943 ­ ) combines wild humor, grotesque satire, myth, and a sparse, haunting language to create a subversive pop art vision of America. His settings are often a kind of nowhere land on the American Plains, his characters are typically loners and drifters caught between a mythical past and the mechanized present, and his works often concern deeply troubled families. His many plays include *Buried Child*, *True West* and *The God of Hell*. Shepard has also written several screenplays including *The Right Stuff*, in which he played the part of Chuck Yeager.

**August Wilson** (1945–2005) Born Frederick Kittel, Wilson’s greatest accomplishment has been the Pittsburgh Cycle. His cycle of ten dramas written over a period of more than 20 years include various overlapping characters and themes. Acclaimed as landmarks in the history of black American culture, these works focus on the major issues confronting African Americans during each of the decades of the 20th century. Some of these works include *The Piano Lesson* (1990 Pulitzer Prize), *Seven Guitars,* and *Fences* (1987 Pulitzer Prize.)

**Steve Martin** (1945 ­ ) is known for his acting on screen. However, in his later years his focus has turned toward writing. Though he has written books, children’s stories, and screenplays, his most famous stage plays are *Picasso at the Lapin Agile,* and *The Underpants*.

**David Mamet** (1947 ­ ) is a playwright and film director. His work, often dealing with the success and failure of the American dream, is noted for its sharp, spare, compressed, often profane, and insightful dialogue. He came to public attention with such plays as *Sexual Perversity in Chicago*, *Glengarry Glen Ross*, and *Oleanna*. He also wrote screenplays for *The Postman Always Rings Twice*, *Hoffa* and many others.

**Christopher Durang** (1949 ­ ) is a member of the Dramatists Guild Council, and is co­chair of the playwriting program at Juilliard. His work often deals critically with issues of child abuse, Roman Catholic dogma and culture, and homosexuality. Famous works include: *Sister Mary Ignatius Explains It All For You, The Actor's Nightmare,* *Beyond Therapy,* and  *Baby with the Bathwater.*

**Wendy Wasserstein** (1950­2006) was an American playwright, an Associate Professor at Cornell University, and a single mother. She received the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1989 for her play *The Heidi Chronicles*. Other famous plays include *The Sisters Rosensweig* and *Third.*

**Paula Vogel** (1951­ ) An American playwright and professor at the Yale School of Drama. Won a Pulitzer Prize for the play *How I Learned to Drive*. Other plays include *The Mineola Twins* and *The Baltimore Waltz*.

**Tony Kushner** (1956 ­ ) Kushner's best known work is *Angels in America* (a play in two parts:

Millennium Approaches and Perestroika), a seven­hour epic about the AIDS epidemic in Reagan­era New York. THis play earned him a Pulitzer Prize for Drama. Not only does he have several other plays, he also writes screenplays, books, and essays often dealing with politics.

**David Henry Hwang** (1957 ­ ) writes on the concerns of race, gender, and culture. His breakthrough play, *M. Butterfly*—a complicated story of espionage and mistaken sexual identity—received a Tony Award in 1988 and a Pulitzer Prize in 1989. Other plays include *The Dance and the Railroad* and *Family Devotions*.