

Primitive Theater

Humans have always had a basic need to imitate. We acquire most of our learning by imitating others. Infants learn language by imitating the sounds made by those around them. Children's play often involves imitations of things they have seen or stories they know.

Imitation is the basis of all theater. One definition of theater is *a person or persons (the actor(s)) imitating the actions and words of others (the play) for the benefit of others (the audience)*.

We know little for certain of how the theater evolved during primitive times. This lack of knowledge is due to the absence of written records. To find answers, anthropologists have studied artifacts and drawings in caves. They have also visited with and recorded the activities of primitive tribes still in existence. Though proof is scarce, anthropologists have developed several theories to explain the birth of theater.

Here is one popular theory of how theater developed. Some members of the tribe went out to hunt. The hunts had to be successful to provide necessary food for survival. The rest of the tribe stayed to protect the camp site. When the hunters returned, the most important question was, "Did the hunt go well?" The hunters may have answered "Let us show you."

They then re-enacted the hunt. This showed the others what happened. Some of the hunters portrayed the animals. They may have used animal skins as costumes. Others portrayed the hunters. Together they showed the story of the hunt. This re-enactment of the hunt was theater. Actors (the hunters) wearing costumes (animal skins) imitated other characters (the animals) to tell a story (what happened during the hunt) to an audience (the non-hunters).

As years passed, changes in the acting out of the hunt occurred. Perhaps this is the way things evolved. The primitive tribes decided to act out a successful hunt *before* they went out to search for the animals. They believed this would create magic that would bring them success. The primitive people used magic to explain things they did not understand. They also used magic in attempts to protect themselves and control nature. They repeated this "magical theater" performance before every hunt. It soon became a ritual. A ritual is something performed repeatedly in exactly the same way.

The hunting ritual and others like it continued to increase. The tribe chose one member to oversee the rituals. This was the shaman. The shaman was also the religious leader of the tribe. The rituals became the religious celebrations of the tribes.

In these primitive times, religion and theater were the same. In many civilizations that followed, it was hard to separate theater from religion. Theatrical performances were an important part of almost all religious ceremonies.



Theater may have begun with primitive man's re-enactment of the hunt.

Name _____ Date _____

Questions for Consideration

1. Why do we know so little about primitive tribes?

2. How have anthropologists discovered what they do know about primitive tribes?

3. Describe a popular theory about how theater started.

4. What did primitive people use for costumes?

5. Why did they begin acting out a hunt before it occurred?

6. What is a ritual? Why did theater become a ritual to ancient tribesmen?

7. How many people oversaw the rituals?

8. What were people who oversaw rituals called?

9. What was the shaman's position in the tribe?

10. Why was it difficult to separate theater and religion in many primitive civilizations?

Name _____ Date _____

Vocabulary

The following is a list of words used in the story of primitive theater. Look each of them up in a dictionary and copy the meaning on this sheet. After the meaning, write a sentence using the word appropriately.

1. acquire _____

2. imitate _____

3. primitive _____

4. anthropologist _____

5. artifact _____

6. theory _____

7. ritual _____

8. evolve _____

9. shaman _____

10. portray _____

11. heritage _____

Name _____ Date _____

Word Search Puzzle

Find the words listed below and circle them in the puzzle. The words may be printed forward or backward, horizontally, vertically, or diagonally.

I	F	H	O	H	B	S	M	D	S	O	T	I	R	C	A	N	G	A	P
K	O	F	E	H	R	K	N	P	O	R	T	R	A	Y	V	N	C	S	S
C	I	S	M	O	I	G	W	U	H	U	N	T	E	R	S	E	V	Y	E
R	R	R	T	Q	S	S	Q	I	Y	D	O	Y	M	F	R	L	K	A	I
F	N	C	I	W	M	H	G	I	W	R	E	T	A	E	H	T	M	N	R
F	A	F	P	T	T	A	K	U	W	T	U	D	M	Q	L	Z	T	T	O
A	Y	K	U	M	U	M	Q	C	T	Z	Y	O	W	I	A	F	G	H	E
V	A	Q	I	S	Q	A	D	R	P	I	N	V	P	X	C	V	D	R	H
S	E	R	V	E	E	N	L	R	E	I	J	K	I	B	I	X	V	O	T
K	R	V	T	U	C	M	R	S	E	L	M	D	Z	W	G	U	J	P	D
O	Y	E	I	I	P	N	U	S	K	A	I	M	V	T	A	A	J	O	F
S	W	U	T	T	F	X	A	T	J	I	U	G	C	Q	M	I	J	L	T
S	E	V	A	C	I	A	W	M	S	C	F	D	I	O	V	N	D	O	P
V	Y	Y	T	E	A	M	C	Z	R	O	J	T	I	O	H	Q	F	G	A
R	J	C	W	M	H	R	I	T	L	O	C	N	E	E	U	R	U	I	C
T	W	Y	Y	E	E	B	A	R	S	E	F	G	J	C	N	S	O	S	Q
K	Y	A	C	O	B	D	Z	H	P	P	Y	R	I	O	B	C	U	T	K
I	P	L	Q	U	I	B	Z	Y	C	B	J	A	E	W	E	P	E	K	P
R	W	E	Y	W	R	A	S	I	D	Z	B	J	S	P	W	N	K	Y	L
G	J	J	P	K	T	Z	I	M	I	T	A	T	E	D	D	L	Y	D	L

WORD LIST

actors
audience
characters
imitated
portray
rituals
theories

anthropologist
caves
costumes
magical
primitive
shaman
tribe

artifacts
ceremonies
hunters
performance
religious
theater