Drama

Overview of Melodrama

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A brief history of Melodrama

Melodrama developed in the 19th century in France, thanks to the work by French playwright Rene de Pixerecourt. Melodrama quickly became a favourite theatrical form around the Western World for the next century, and thousands of plays have been written in this style. They were a mixture of violence, romance, and sentimentality, with short scenes full of action keeping a fast-paced tempo. They used spectacular settings, music, exaggerated acting and encouraged audience interaction to promote audience engagement.

Conventions of Melodrama

Plot and Structure

Melodramas have simple moral plots that are easy to follow and enjoy; generally, the story would show a battle between good and evil and would finish with the restoration of a morally correct and just society. The plays relied heavily on opposites, to capture the audience's attention and ignite reactions, such as justice and revenge, honesty and dishonesty, or innocence and corruption. A traditional melodrama plot would include the following the following elements:

- **introduction** – the first scene that introduces characters and establishes time and place
- **provocation** – the initial cause for the narrative/journey to begin, for example jealousy or greed forces an evil character to steal
- **pangs** – the suffering caused to the good and innocent characters who are impacted by the evil action of the villain
- **penalty** – a twist of fate in which the evil villain has their plans foiled and receives a punishment for their actions

Stock Characters

Melodrama characters were not meant to be particularly life-like. Instead they were intended to have identifiable types of personalities – these types were referred to as 'stock characters' and are known as:

- **a hero.** Handsome, strong, brave, honest and reliable.
- **a heroine.** Beautiful, courageous, innocent and vulnerable.
- **a villain.** Cunning, without morals, dishonest, cruel and evil.
- **a villain's accomplice.** Usually provides comic relief because he is a bumbling sidekick.
- **a faithful servant.** Also offers comic relief, and also does the dirty work. He usually discovers evidence against the villain.
- **a maidservant.** A female character who is lively and who flirts with the faithful servant.

Acting Style

- **Exaggeration** – this acting style requires intense facial expressions, large movements and gestures, and clear and well-projected delivery of lines. Melodrama actors concentrated more on showing emotions rather than feeling them. The actor also overemphasised words or syllables they thought essential to their character.
- **Audience interaction** – actors encourage audience interaction by improvising lines and telling topical jokes, and would help the audience to boo or hiss at the villain. Cue cards were also used to get the audience involved as it prompted a clear response.

- **Asides** – an aside is where any character speaks directly to the audience to reveal a thought or plan that is kept secret from the rest of the other characters. The actor's delivery of the aside should instill a feeling of secrecy and draw the audiences focus away from the other action and onto their 'secret.'

Elements of Production

Melodrama's used spectacular settings, elaborate costumes and music to increase their impact and appeal. The plays were always accompanied by music to heighten mood and atmosphere; hence, the name "melo", short for melody.

Learning tasks

Answer the following questions in your logbook:

1. In which century did melodrama develop?

2. Why is it called 'melodrama'?

3. Why was melodrama so popular?

4. List the segments of a standard melodrama plot. What action does each segment involve?

5. What are some conflicting themes a melodrama would usually explore?

6. Are the characters in melodrama life-like or stereotyped?

7. List three (3) stock characters and describe each of their qualities.

8. What is the difference between the faithful servant and a maidservant?

9. What is an 'aside'?