Modern Theatre and Realism

Changes in philosophy and religion that began in the mid-1800s had a great impact on theatre in the late 1890s and early 1900s. Influenced by writers such as Darwin and Marx, people began to question their religious, political, and economic beliefs. This questioning led to a wider variety of opinions, and the art of the period began to reflect the conflicting beliefs. The neoclassical rules for drama were being applied in fewer and fewer productions, even though more theatre was being produced than ever before. The theatre of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century can be roughly divided into two broad types, realism and departures from realism. The realists wrote plays in which characters spoke, dressed, and behaved just as people did in everyday life. Scenery began to look like rooms in which many of the audience members lived. The playwright who is often considered to be the first realistic writer was Henrik Ibsen, a Norwegian playwright.

The realists, like Ibsen, believed that plays should be as close to lifelike as possible. These attempts at realism sprang from the playwrights’ beliefs that theatre had the power and responsibility to instigate change. These playwrights believed that if the audience members recognized an injustice in society and became emotional about it as a result of seeing the play, the audience would try to bring about changes. Therefore, realists dealt with subject matter that had been taboo on the stage before this period—topics such as social injustice and unhappy marriages. Plots were not clearly resolved at the end of the plays as they had been in previous periods. Instead, the future of characters seemed to depend upon the forces of heredity and environment, two forces that the character could not control. Characters in realistic plays have several notable characteristics. First of all, they are not stereotypes. None of them are clearly evil, nor are they clearly good. Instead, they are a mixture of complicated impulses and motivations, just as people are in real life. These characters are revealed to the audience in great detail, in such a way that the audience understands what forces, such as heredity and environment, made them the way they are. These characters speak in everyday speech patterns rather than verse. And the setting that the audience sees them moving through is usually a very thoroughly detailed room, filled with all of the items that one might find in one’s own home. Other
playwrights who provide wonderful examples of early realism are August Strindberg and Anton Chekhov.