Melodrama

The term "melodrama" originated from a combination of the Greek *melos* meaning "melody" or "song" and the French word *drame* meaning "drama." Melodramas were originally theatrical stage plays combining music and dialogue. Melodrama is a type of drama in which the plot, characters, and events are sensationalized to evoke strong emotions in the viewer.

The first authentic English melodrama is generally acknowledged to be Thomas Holcroft's *A Tale of Mystery* (1802), an adaptation of French playwright Pixér Génourt. Dion Boucicault's *Octoroon* (1859) and *The Colleen Bawn* (1860) are two of the most well-known and exemplary melodramas that are popular in both England and the United States.

(Image of *The Colleen Bawn* by Dion Boucicault from wikipedia)

Characteristics of a Melodrama

- Stereotypical characters

- Exaggerated situation

- Sensationalized and emotional plots

- 'Melo' means music or song, so it may e a part of it

- Good vs bad (moral struggle)

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

1. 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 rely 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.

2. 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.

3. 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 instil a feeling of secrecy and draw the audiences focus away from the other action and onto their 'secret.

4. 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.

References:

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