

# The Rise and Fall of the Well-Made Play: A Literary Excavation of a Theatre Form

The well-made play, a genre that dominated the theatre landscape from the late 19th to the mid-20th century, was renowned for its meticulous craftsmanship, intricate plots, and heightened emotional stakes. This article delves into the fascinating history of this theatrical form, examining its origins, conventions, and the factors that led to its eventual decline.

The well-made play emerged in the 1860s as a reaction to the perceived excesses and melodrama of earlier Romantic theatre. Playwrights such as Eugène Scribe and Victorien Sardou sought to create a more realistic and technically proficient form of drama.

The well-made play was characterized by a number of key conventions:



## The Rise and Fall of the Well-Made Play (Routledge Revivals) by John Russell Taylor

★★★★★ 5 out of 5

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Screen Reader : Supported  
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Word Wise : Enabled  
Print length : 176 pages

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- **Tightly Constructed Plot:** The plot was typically a complex web of interlocking events, driven by a central conflict or mystery.
- **Naturalistic Dialogue:** The dialogue was generally colloquial and realistic, aiming to reflect the speech patterns of everyday life.
- **Clear Characterization:** Characters were well-developed and psychologically complex, often driven by specific motivations and desires.
- **Emphasis on Setting:** The setting played a crucial role in establishing the atmosphere and tone of the play, often reflecting the social and cultural context of the characters.
- **Cathartic Climax:** The play typically built to a climax that was both emotionally intense and cathartic, providing a sense of resolution or closure.

The late 19th and early 20th centuries were the golden age of the well-made play. Playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov, and George Bernard Shaw wrote enduring classics that adhered to the genre's conventions.

Ibsen's "Hedda Gabler" (1890) is a prime example of a well-made play, featuring a complex female protagonist, a tightly woven plot, and a tragic climax. Chekhov's "The Cherry Orchard" (1904) explored the changing social landscape of Russia through the lens of a decaying aristocratic family. Shaw's "Mrs. Warren's Profession" (1898) tackled controversial social issues such as prostitution and women's rights.

In the mid-20th century, the well-made play began to decline in popularity. Critics argued that it had become formulaic and predictable. Playwrights such as Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco began to experiment with new theatrical forms that challenged the conventions of the well-made play.

World War II and the subsequent rise of modernism also contributed to the decline. The horrors of war and the questioning of traditional values made the well-made play's focus on realism and social commentary seem inadequate.

Despite its decline, the well-made play continues to exert a significant influence on theatre today. Many contemporary playwrights still employ some of its conventions, such as complex plots, naturalistic dialogue, and well-developed characters.

Furthermore, the well-made play has had a profound impact on other art forms, such as film and television. Its emphasis on structure and dialogue has shaped the way stories are told on the screen.

The rise and fall of the well-made play is a fascinating chapter in theatre history. From its origins in the late 19th century to its dominance in the early 20th century and eventual decline, the well-made play has left an enduring legacy on theatre and art as a whole. Its emphasis on craftsmanship, realism, and catharsis continues to influence playwrights and filmmakers today.

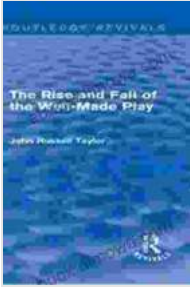
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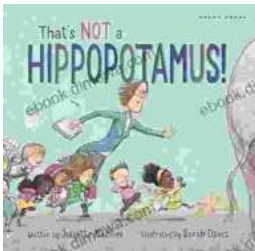
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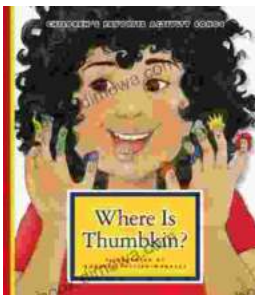
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