

# DRAMAS WHICH SPAN 2000 YEARS

**THE TROJAN WOMEN** by Euripides was produced in 415 B.C. when the author was nearly 70 years of age. The presentation was in the vast open-air Theatre of Dionysus fashioned in a natural semi-circular scoop of the rocky slopes of the Acropolis at Athens.

## THE TROJAN WOMEN

The audience would number somewhere about 20,000, and the back rows of seats would be about three times the length of a cricket-pitch distant from the stage. The actors must have been very highly-trained declamatory speakers to make themselves heard at such a distance, although they were aided a little by the megaphone-shaped mouths of the masks they wore. In the front row sat the priests of the god Dionysus, for of course these dramatic festivals were of a religious character and had their origin in the early ritual associated with the worship of the god.

The members of the audience would be thoroughly familiar with the general lines of the story in the same way as the citizens of medieval England were familiar with the Bible stories which were dramatised in the Miracle plays. To assist our listening, therefore, it is necessary that we should know something of the story too.

The god of the sea, Poseidon, first appears by way of "narrator," brooding over the famous city of Troy (or Ilium) which has just been captured and sacked by the Greeks after a 10-year siege. The old queen Hecuba, the young virgin-prophetess Cassandra, and other unhappy Trojan women who act as chorus, lie waiting for the dawn when they will be told what fate had been meted out to them by the Athenian commanders. The goddess Athena, who had aided the Greeks in their victory, appears to Poseidon, and now declares her anger at her favourites, who in their pride of victory desecrated the shrines of the gods. She seeks Poseidon's aid to punish them by raising a devastating storm when the Greek fleet is well out to sea on its way back home across the

THIS is the second of two articles written for "The Listener" by PROFESSOR JAMES SHELLEY, Director of Broadcasting, to introduce the BBC's "WORLD THEATRE" series of major dramatic works in radio form. The series, which is to be heard over the main National stations, will begin at 2YA on September 5, and background notes to the five plays are given here, their purpose—and that of our illustrations—being to give listeners some understanding, particularly in the case of "The Trojan Women" and "Doctor Faustus," of the conditions under which the plays were first presented.

Aegean sea. Poseidon and Athena vanish, and the day dawns.

The play proper begins with Hecuba, the old Trojan queen, rising from the cold ground where she has slept the night, and lamenting with the chorus over the possible fate of the captive women. A herald, Talthybius, enters and announces the decisions of the Greek commanders. As the play develops we learn that Cassandra is to become Agamemnon's concubine, Andromache, who was Hector's wife, falls to the lot of Achilles' son, Hecuba herself is to be a slave to Ulysses, king of Ithaca, and so on. Cassandra, the prophetess, is happy in her degradation because she foresees that it will ultimately bring about the murder of her despoiler. Hector's little son Astyanax is to be killed by being thrown from the ramparts, and the scene where Astyanax parts from his mother Andromache is regarded as one of the most moving in all drama. The dead body of the boy is brought back to his grandmother, Hecuba, and we feel that this broken little body is a symbol of what the glorious victory of the Greeks ultimately means in terms of human flesh and blood.

Troy is set on fire and the trumpet sounds as a signal to go down to the ships, which we know will be battered and wrecked by Poseidon's storm.

Euripides was greatly daring in presenting this play a year after the Athenians had been guilty of their dastardly crime at the island of Melos, which they had attacked without any justification beyond their own aggressive pride, putting all the men to the sword and making slaves of the women and children. Added to this the Athenians were at the time of the production of the play gathering a great fleet together to sail to the conquest of Sicily.



BBC photo.

Euripides must have been a very unpopular prophet to his audience, for that Sicilian expedition brought disaster to Athens.

CHRISTOPHER MARLOWE'S *Doctor Faustus* was produced in a theatre as different as it could possibly be from the vast theatre of ancient Athens, although it, too, must have had something of the same sort of religious reference to the Londoners of the late

## DOCTOR FAUSTUS

1580's as *The Trojan Women* had to the Athenians 2,000 years before. The theatre which first staged *Doctor Faustus* was a square wooden building with three galleries round three of the sides covered with a thatched roof, with the central part—the pit—open to the sky.

On the fourth side was the dressing room and a back stage with a trap-door through which Mephistopheles appeared. The main stage jutted out from this end well into the pit, so that the "penny" audience stood round the stage on three sides. It was therefore a very "intimate" theatre where soliloquies, rapid dialogue, and facial expressions naturally formed part of the show.

The play is a dramatic adaptation of a German Volksbuch story published in 1587 and soon after translated into English as *The History of the Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Dr. John Faustus*. The idea of a man selling his soul to the devil was, of course, older than this, and has always had a certain fearful fascination for the popular mind. The great Goethe once thought of translating Marlowe's



BBC photo.

Above: Alec Guinness who plays the name part in "Doctor Faustus," and (left) James McKechnie who plays the Duc de Reichstadt in "L'Aiglon"

play, but instead he used the story as a framework for his splendid philosophical dramatic poem, with the first part of which we are so familiar at second-hand though Gounod's opera.

Marlowe's play was added to and adapted for all sorts of purposes, and there is much in the version as we have it which is certainly not Marlowe's.

IBSEN'S *Hedda Gabler* (1890) belongs to the present-day "picture-frame" type of stage where the audience is regarded as more or less "spying" on other people's lives. Ibsen used the

## HEDDA GABLER

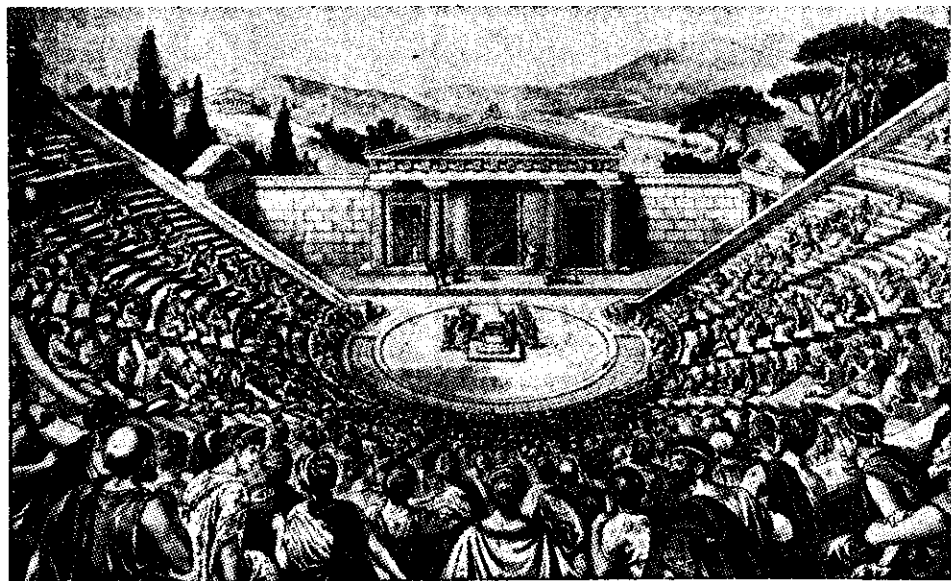
theatre for serious purposes—as a sort of surgeon's operating-theatre where the malignant diseases of society and of individuals were exposed by his dramatic scalpel. With *Hedda Gabler* he had passed into a psychological stage of clinical practice. The play is a study of an individual—a woman who was the daughter of a distinguished father, General Gabler, and has married an undistinguished student named Tesman out of sheer fear of becoming an old maid after her father had died and left her with expensive tastes and no money. She has no aim in life—the society in which she lived did not expect such a thing in the daughter of a General. She has no capacity but for boredom. She is afraid of herself and jealous of everybody else. The only way in which she can feel she has any power is by destroying the work and happiness of others. The play should be very suitable to the medium of radio, since it is all worked out by intimate dialogue.

SHAW'S *Man of Destiny*, which was written in 1895, is a typical piece of Theatre-à-la-Shaw—that is, of course, the early Shaw who was busy producing

## THE MAN OF DESTINY

material for an English revival of drama heralded by the Independent Theatre. The play has the usual brilliance of Shavian dialogue and the very typical

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THE THEATRE as the audiences of classic Greece knew it—"the back row of seats would be about three times the length of a cricket pitch distant from the stage"