Realism and Naturalism Theatre Conventions

The two schools of thought and subsequent movements in the theatre were distinct and separate, though blurred with historical time lines and similarities in style. As a result, the move towards a more authentic form of drama on the stage in the mid-late 19th century is often considered one period. If realism and naturalism in the theatre were two movements, which one came first? Well, that depends on who you read. One thing is for sure though; the over-the-top melodramas full of spectacle in early to mid-19th century were to be no more. In terms of style, the words realism and naturalism are frustratingly used interchangeably to mean the same, yet they are not. They are similar, yes, but have many differences.

Realism

Realism is the artistic attempt to recreate life as it is in the context of an artistic medium. Realism began as an artistic movement in the 18th Century in Europe and America and a late 19th Century movement for drama and the stage. Drama was to involve the direct observation of human behaviour; therefore there was the need to use contemporary settings and time periods, and it was to deal with a temporary life and problems has subjects. Also, the common man and common situations were subjects for drama, not just the upper classes, kings, and queens. Focus on: psychological reality, people trapped in social situations, hope in hopeless situations.

- Characters are believable, everyday types
- Costumes are authentic
- The realist movement in the theatre and subsequent performance style have greatly influenced 20th century theatre and cinema and its effects are still being felt today
- Triggered by Stanislavski’s system of realistic acting at the turn of the 20th century, America grabbed hold of its own brand of this performance style (American realism) and acting (method acting) in the 1930s, 40s and 50s (The Group Theatre, The Actors Studio)
- Stage settings (locations) and props are often indoors and believable
- The ‘box set’ is normally used for realistic dramas on stage, consisting of three walls and an invisible ‘fourth wall’ facing the audience
- Settings for realistic plays are often bland (deliberately ordinary)
- Dialogue is not heightened for effect, but that of everyday speech (vernacular)
- The drama is typically psychologically driven, where the plot is secondary and primary focus is placed on the interior lives of characters, their motives, the reactions of others etc.
- Realistic plays often see the protagonist (main character) rise up against the odds to assert him/herself against an injustice of some kind (e.g. Nora in Ibsen’s A Doll’s House)
- Realistic dramas quickly gained popularity because the everyday person in the audience could identify with the situations and characters on stage
- Norwegian playwright Henrik Ibsen (A Doll’s House, Hedda Gabler) is considered the father of modern realism in the theatre
Naturalism

The trend during the 19th century to present reality in as convincing and natural a way as possible, so that the external details of scene setting and of character portrayal were emphasised. Much importance was given to costumes, props and make-up - getting it to look just right. But by seeking to portray the world 'naturally', however, mainstream naturalism often got tied up in the details, and lost track of the content. Structure and storyline were very important, with a focus on character allowing the audience to become emotionally involved rather than detached.

- In terms of style, naturalism is an extreme or heightened form of realism
- As a theatrical movement and performance style, naturalism was short-lived
- Stage time equals real time – e.g. three hours in the theatre equals three hours for the characters in the world of the play
- Costumes, sets and props are historically accurate and very detailed, attempting to offer a photographic reproduction of reality ('slice of life')
- As with realism, settings for naturalistic dramas are often bland and ordinary
- Naturalistic dramas normally follow rules set out by the Greek philosopher Aristotle, known as 'the three unities' (of time, place and action)
- The action of the play takes place in a single location over the time frame of a single day - jumps in time and/or place between acts or scenes is not allowed
- Playwrights were influenced by naturalist manifestos written by French novelist and playwright Emile Zola in the preface to Therese Raquin (1867 novel, 1873 play) and Swedish playwright August Strindberg in the preface to Miss Julie (1888)
- Naturalism explores the concept of scientific determinism (spawning from Charles Darwin's theory of evolution) – characters in the play are shaped by their circumstances and controlled by external forces such as hereditary or their social and economic environment
- Often characters in naturalistic plays are considered victims of their own circumstance and this is why they behave in certain ways (they are seen as helpless products of their environment)
- Characters are often working class/lower class (as opposed to the mostly middle class characters of realistic dramas)
- Naturalistic plays regularly explore sordid subject matter previously considered taboo on the stage in any serious manner (e.g. suicide, poverty, prostitution)

Sources:

http://www.learn.co.uk
http://www.newberry.edu/theatre