Aristotle’s Theory of the Poetics: A timeless theory

What comes to mind when you hear the term, theatre? Many of us associate theatre with big budget Broadway type musicals such as Andrew Lloyd Webber’s Cats or Wicked the musical. Many theatre fans in today’s society look for huge spectacle and want each show to become bigger and better than the last. Although theatre has not placed such an emphasis on spectacle in the past and has evolved greatly over time, Aristotle theory of the poetics is still relevant in the world of performance today. In this essay I will explore the roots of this theory and describe the practical applications of this theory and how theatre practitioners utilize Aristotle’s theory of the poetics in today’s society.

Imitative artist represent men in action, and men who are necessarily either good or of bad character, these men must be represented either as better than we are, or worse or as the same kind of people as ourselves...This is the difference that marks the distinction between
tragedy and comedy; for comedy aims at representing men as worse than they are nowadays, tragedy as better (Howland).

This quote discusses the way Aristotle looked at tragedy and comedy and gives a sense of where he is coming from in terms of the Poetics. In this paper I will first discuss the basic theory and the roots behind Aristotle’s Poetics. I will then discuss how Aristotle’s theory has both qualities of a Social Scientific and an Interpretive theory. Finally I will take a look at elements of what Aristotle defines as tragedy and site references of how Aristotle’s theory of the poetics is relevant in theatre performances today and how many modern productions have evolved from this theory.

First of all, Aristotle’s theory of the poetics is the earliest cited critical written piece of work that deals with comedy and tragedy and poetry. (Olson). Poetry is defined as encompassing all forms of literature and performance (Worth). Therefore Aristotle was a pioneer in evaluating what made up great literature and performance. Aristotle’s written theory working with comedies and tragedies was based on work by Greek poets. Aristotle’s work on the Poetics looked at these Greek poets because they were the available means of critique at the time and
possessed qualities Aristotle saw as relevant to society. Although he looked at tragedy in Greek poetry, Aristotle’s analysis of the Poetics can be relevant to drama in general. Aristotle’s theory of the Poetics is in many ways a response to the fact that Plato, who was Aristotle’s instructor, felt that poetry was not relevant to society. As a result, Aristotle is the first to label the ultimate purposes of both comedy and tragedy (Skeets). Aristotle felt that poetry was about emotion, and he saw that emotion was something at core of importance to society. Aristotle was also more realistic than Plato, in the sense that he saw what was important to people and therefore took an interest in Greek Poetry. Aristotle felt that poetry was interesting and relevant in the sense that it evaluated the truths about how human beings and the way they acted in real life (Skeets). Furthermore, The Poetics essentially looks at dramas and comedies and establishes what essentially defines them. It is also concerned with what elements are necessary in each which this paper will discuss in further detail.

In addition, Aristotle’s theory of the Poetics has qualities of both a Social Scientific and Interpretative theory. Although the Poetics has factors of both theories, it most likely leans towards being a Social Scientific
Theory. The Poetics lists what characteristics a tragedy or a comedy must possess (Else). Aristotle’s Poetics categorizes what a comedy and tragedy should essentially be, but it also discusses what makes a comedy or tragedy quality or not. Aristotle’s theory of the Poetics is ultimately a tool to evaluate comedies and dramas that has been relevant in the world of theatre for hundreds of years. Today we still use Aristotle’s definition of what makes a comedy and tragedy. Despite this, in today’s society we have often combined elements of both comedy and tragedy. This is evident in many of the melodramas and tragicomedies we see in today’s theatre. Aristotle’s theory also discusses that different genres produce different kinds of pleasure. As Plato saw that poetry was not useful in society, Aristotle felt that both comedy and drama brought audiences to different emotions and delight (Reinelt). As far as context of a drama was concerned, Aristotle highly stressed Pathos. Once again, Unlike Plato, Aristotle most likely stressed pathos as a result to the fact that he felt that person’s emotional appeal was highly relevant. Aristotle mainly focused on elements of tragedy that will be discussed next in the paper.

Aristotle’s Theory of the poetics discusses what is necessary for a poem, tragedy or comedy to succeed. Most of
all Aristotle was highly concerned with elements of tragedy.

*Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; with incidents arousing pity and fear, wherewith to accomplish its katharsis of such emotions. . . . Every Tragedy, therefore, must have six parts, which parts determine its quality—namely, Plot, Characters, Diction, Thought, Spectacle, Melody.*

(Else)

As stated above in the translation of Aristotle’s theory of the Poetics, it states that every tragedy therefore must have the following: Plot, Character, Diction, Thought, Spectacle and Melody (Rudall). As a result this proves the fact that the Poetics has elements of a Social Scientific theory. It lays out what must occur for a tragedy to exist, but as stated before Aristotle also defines what makes a good tragedy or not. Aristotle has also placed each of these elements of tragedy in order of importance. Each of the elements is evident in plays that have been performed for hundreds of years, but the order of
importance has changed along the way. The first element that Aristotle places most important is plot. Plot is defined as a sequence of action (Skeets). Many theatre practitioners in today’s society disagree with Aristotle because they feel that character is the strongest element to tragedy. Aristotle on the other hands feels that there are many tragedies that are not successful in characterization, but are defined as tragedies because the pathos or emotional affect on the audience comes from the sequence of action within the story. A great example of this is, the *The Trojan Women* translated by Euripides. I would argue that the sequence of actions in this show create the emotion for the audience rather than the characters created. Although I feel the audience can sympathize with the characters; I ultimately feel that they receive the emotional affect from what is happening within the show itself.

The second element of concern in evaluating tragedy through Aristotle’s theory of the Poetics is Character. Aristotle feels that Character ultimately supports the plot of the story. In term of the protagonist Aristotle sees that this element must develop a character fall and result from “good to bad”. ‘Such a plot is most likely to generate pity and fear in the audience...fear by the misfortune of a
man like ourselves (Howland).” The writer of a tragedy must allow the characters to stand for their moral behavior through the speeches that are written for the character. In other words, the words in which the characters say in a tragedy represent what they stand for as individuals.

The third element of tragedy according to Aristotle’s theory of the Poetics is Thought. This element can be better referred to as the theme of the show. Aristotle views the element of thought as dealing with everything that is important within a tragedy. The element of Thought is concerned with everything that is actually said by the characters and should stick out to give a central theme to the play. Aristotle saw plot as something that is proven to happen or not to happen (Skeets). In one sense, theme is the message that is being displayed. Each character must create an effect to the audience that is given in the speech. Looking once again at the Trojan Women the element of thought is often prevalent in works of tragedy. In this show the character of Poseidon gives a lengthy speech in the introduction of the show. The speech was written by the Dramatist to give the audience effect of what the central theme is about. Greek playwrights often wrote tragedies to give a political message about what was happening in society and or history. Therefore the playwrights write
dialogue in speeches within a play to give the effect they want to portray in the show. This is what Aristotle describes as the element of Thought within a tragedy. An excellent example of this written in the Trojan Women is found in the opening speech given by Poseidon. The Greeks have robbed this city of its wealth, are loading gold into their ships...after ten long years, they will laugh again in the arms of their wives, their children, I will leave...I am defeated (Euripides). This speech is an excellent example of how thought is being used to create the underlying theme of the show. The theme of Trojan Women has often been looked at as the people of Troy blaming the Greeks for destroying the lives they once knew. As a result Aristotle created the Thought of the characters as a way to speak the theme of the show.

The fourth element of tragedy of Aristotle’s theory of the poetics is Diction. This is often defined as the “expression of the meaning in words which are proper and appropriate to the plot, characters and then of the tragedy (Cooper)”. The element of thought can often be seen as what is being said, while Diction concentrates more on the lines of how it is being said. Also considered in diction, is how the lines are constructed. Aristotle had an ideal that words in which are spoken in the play must work along with
the central plot and the characters that are speaking them. Aristotle felt that the use of metaphors and unique phrasing of words was often effective in drama. In theatre there are often many ways to say a certain line and Aristotle looked at how Diction can be successful at helping a character tell the story or theme of a tragedy.

The Fifth element of tragedy is song or melody. Aristotle saw the element of melody within a tragedy as an accessory to drama. Often in many tragedies a Greek chorus is established to further tell the story (Rudall). Although Aristotle felt this one of the least important aspects of tragedy, he felt that it could be effective in terms of telling a dramatic story. Aristotle also felt that a chorus had to merge into the show to contribute to the harmony of the plot. Often in today’s big musicals are chorus is provided to simply allow for transitions between big scenes. Aristotle on the other hand, felt that in a tragedy a chorus should be used as if it were an essential part of the story. Aristotle believed that the chorus should be integrated into the plot (sequence of action) within the play. Aristotle did not agree with the usage of a Greek Chorus in plays written by Euripides. He felt that the Greek chorus was not involved with the action, but rather sat in the back and sole purpose was to provide interludes
between the action of the show (Rudall). *Trojan Women* was written by Euripides and is an excellent example of how Aristotle did not see the element of melody within a tragic drama. In this particular show the Greek Chorus does what many directors refer to as, “a lot of nothing.” Aristotle saw this as a using the element of melody with the wrong intentions.

Finally the last element of tragedy in Aristotle’s theory of the poetics is Spectacle. In today’s society with many of the big budget Broadway musicals, Spectacle has become one of the most important aspects of 21\textsuperscript{st} century theatre. Aristotle viewed Spectacle as the staging of the play. Although this was the least important element to Aristotle in terms of dramatic tragedy, he felt that the staging of a play must me utilized in a similar manner to melody. Aristotle felt that Spectacle should work in conjunction with the style of the show (Reinalt). The element of Spectacle is where theatre today has evolved the most since the documents of Aristotle. Spectacle has often become the only aspect of theatre that audiences are concerned with. As a result, instead of developing solid character, plot, diction, and thought, playwrights develop fascinating spectacle that does not quite support the theme of the show, but rather provides an eye pleasing stage
show. A good example of this is Andrew Lloyd Weber’s *Cats*. Although *Cats* the Broadway Musical does not qualify as a tragedy it is work of theatre. In addition, it is probably safe to say that if Aristotle where to view a production of *Cats*, he would surely role over in his grave. As stated before, Aristotle’s most important element of theatre is Plot. Most theatre-goers would agree that the Plot in *Cats* is probably the weakest element in the show. *Cats* essentially lacks a storyline and works completely on the platform of character. Each song/story in the show is told by a different *Cat* and quickly moves on to the next.

Spectacle is also a very prevalent element in any production of *Cats*. Aristotle felt that the staging of show and set construction shouldn’t be created to entertain the audience, but rather assist in telling the story of the show. *Cats* on the other hand utilizes Spectacle as a way to get viewers excited and to buy tickets to the show. Although *Cats* and many other Broadway productions of today’s society often go against Aristotle’s six elements of theatre, many productions today maintain to work off the Poetics in some way or another.

After further explaining Aristotle’s theory of the Poetics by talking in depth about the six elements of tragedy, I will finally discuss how Aristotle’s theory of
the Poetics has been relevant to theatre history and remains relevant. The Poetics continues to be relevant in theatre performances today and many modern productions have evolved from this theory. In addition, Aristotle’s theory of the poetics has been a benchmark of evaluating tragedy and theatre for Western playwrights for hundreds of years (Skeets). Although many theatre scholars disagree with many of the base elements of Aristotle’s theory of the Poetics, there is not doubt that it is a useful theory that was a pioneer in evaluating works of theatre. Many playwrights such as William Shakespeare attempted to write their works in the image of Aristotle’s theory of Poetics (Else). Shakespeare’s Hamlet is a perfect example of how this is applicable. The character of Hamlet has many tragic flaws and deals with a struggle that ends disastrously. This in essence is the ideal protagonist that Aristotle refers to in his theory of the poetics. The character of Hamlet’s character flaw ultimately ends in death, and Aristotle would view this as an ideal situation that is essential to the element of tragedy in order of the audience to weep and fear these tragic emotions. Shakespeare is arguably one of the greatest playwrights of all time. His work is has been performed for hundreds of years around the globe. This as a result is evidence of how pertinent and essential
Aristotle’s theory of the Poetics is applicable to tragedy and the world of Western theatre in general. Other works such as Oedipus Rex written by Sophocles are examples of how Aristotle has evaluated timeless tragedies that have become some of the most well known dramas of all time. Aristotle viewed Oedipus Rex as the perfect model of what tragic drama should entail (Else). Furthermore, Oedipus Rex is seen as a great piece of work and is studied by theater scholars across the world.

In conclusion, in this paper I have discussed the roots of Aristotle’s theory of the Poetics. I have also described the practical applications of this theory and how theatre practitioners utilize Aristotle’s theory of the poetics in today’s society. After analyzing each of the elements of Aristotle’s theory of the Poetics I have had the chance to understand why Aristotle’s Poetics is one of the most important theories in the study of theater performance. Directors and performers alike must understand Aristotle’s theory of the Poetics to understand the tragic elements of what makes a drama or comedy work. Although many do not agree with certain concepts brought forth by Aristotle in the theory of the Poetics, it is undebatably relevant for theatre actors, directors, technicians, etc. I personally have studied the work of
Aristotle’s Poetics in a number of courses during my college career. I also had the opportunity to be involved with a production of Euripides’, Trojan Woman. Although Aristotle did not define the work of Euripides as a perfect example of a tragic masterpiece, Trojan Women contained a number of the elements including spectacle, song and character. As stated before, Aristotle’s theory of the Poetics is essentially Social Scientific but it also examines what qualifies a play to be a successful tragedy or not. Although, Aristotle felt that Trojan Women did not utilize each element effectively, He did not deny the fact that each element was present. There is numerous proof how Aristotle’s theory of the Poetics is relevant in today’s society. The theory of Poetics originated circa 330 BCE and has stood the test of time (Cooper). Aristotle took the courage to seek answers beyond the work of his teacher, Plato and as a result created one of the most important theatre theories of all time. Finally, Aristotle saw that emotion was important and felt that audiences wanted to learn ethical lessons by often relating experiences with that of the “tragically flawing” protagonist. I feel this quote from Gadamer’s study titled Truth and Method sums up what Aristotle was trying to reach in terms of the Poetics.
What is experienced in such an excess of tragic suffering is truly common. The spectator recognizes himself (herself) and his (or her) finiteness in the face of the power of fate. What happens to the great ones of the earth has exemplary significance...to see that “this is how it is” is a kind of self-knowledge for the spectator who emerges with new insight from the illusions in which he (or she), like everyone else lives (Gadamer’s).

Finally we live in a world where theatre has evolved in a number of different ways over the years. From the days of Greek tragedy to Vaudeville, to Broadway as we know it today, theatre is an ever-changing spectrum of the arts, but no matter how theatre and tragedy may change the importance of Aristotle’s theory of the poetics will remain significant for numerous years to come.