

THE CONSERVATIVE LIMELIGHT: Stage and Screen in the 1980s

Theatre

Theatre took a turn for the commercial with larger-scale shows, bigger budgets, and more stars than in 60s and 70s. By the end of the decade, the typical cost for a show was one million dollars; by 1990, this cost had increased fivefold. Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Cats* initiated a trend toward large-scale musicals, many of which featured catchy show tunes and elaborate set pieces. The opening of numerous other big-budget musicals followed the success of *Cats*, including Webber's *The Phantom of the Opera* and *Evita* and Cameron Mackintosh's *Les Misérables*. Also popular were musical revivals, including a particularly successful run of *West Side Story*. Peter Shaffer's plays *Equus* (1973) and *Amadeus* (1979), and David Mamet's *Glengarry Glen Ross* (1983) are among the period's most notable dramas; however, the popularity of musicals in general did not spread over to plays.



Television



Cable television became a mainstay in American homes. In the seventies, more than 90% of prime time viewers were tuned in to broadcast networks such as ABC and CBS; by 1989, viewership had decreased to only 67%. Furthermore, only about 8% of American households had basic cable in 1970, versus 60% by the end of the Eighties.

VCRs became a common household item during this decade (from 1% of American households to 68%), bringing films to people's personal television sets. Popular programs included *The Simpsons*, *MacGyver*, *Miami Vice*, *General Hospital*, *Knight Rider*, *Full House*, *The A-Team*, *Magnum, P.I.*, and *Saved by the Bell*.



Film

Many new trends came into film in the 1980s, including blockbusters, movie sequels, and fantasy films. A great number of science fiction, horror, and action films were made in light of the advances in special effects. The top four grossing films were *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial*, *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), *Return of the Jedi* (1983), and *Batman* (1989)--all sci-fi/action films. Special effects appeared in these movies and others, such as *Back to the Future*. These films pulled TV watchers into movie theatres because these trends signified something new and not something that was readily available everyday on a regular TV sitcom.



There was also a rise in movies targeted towards teenagers. Many of these films were deemed unsuitable for young kid, but appropriate for older children. Because of this, the PG-13 rating came into effect on July 1, 1984 to serve as a middle ground for PG and R ratings. Popular movies such as John Hughes' *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986), Tim Burton's *Batman*, and Steven Spielberg's *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) were among the first movies to be rated PG-13.

Bibliography

- i. TV Reviews – TopTenREVIEWS, "Television Through The Decades and the Ways It Changed Our World." Accessed June 4, 2013.
- ii. Encyclopaedia Britannica, "The Era of the Miniseries." Accessed June 4, 2013.
- iii. History.com, "This Day in History – PG-13 rating debuts." Accessed June 4, 2013.
- iv. Filmsite.org, "Box Office Hits by Decade And Year." Accessed June 4, 2013.
- v. Encyclopedia.com, "The Theater Boom." Accessed June 4, 2013.