

# The changing purpose of drama: From cultural expression to economic commodity?

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## Abstract

Drama has long been a vehicle for artistic expression, cultural reflection, and social critique. From ancient Greek tragedies to 19th-century realist plays, it has engaged audiences in political discourse, moral dilemmas, and societal debates. However, in the 21st century, the rise of commercialization, corporate sponsorship, and digital media has reshaped its purpose. This study examines whether contemporary drama remains a tool for cultural engagement or has become primarily an economic enterprise.

Using a comparative historical approach, this research explores drama's transformation across different eras. Case studies from ancient Greek theater, Renaissance drama, 19th-century realism, and modern Broadway and digital productions highlight shifts in artistic integrity, audience engagement, and economic priorities. Particular attention is given to corporate sponsorship, high-budget productions, and digital streaming, which have redefined accessibility and creative choices.

Findings suggest that while drama retains its artistic and intellectual potential, financial imperatives increasingly dictate production and reception. Commercial success often takes precedence over artistic risk-taking, while digital platforms expand audience reach but reduce the communal experience of live theater. However, socially conscious productions continue to challenge dominant narratives, preserving drama's role in cultural discourse.

This study concludes that while economic forces have altered drama's landscape, its cultural and intellectual significance endures. The future of drama depends on whether it can balance financial sustainability with its fundamental purpose as a space for artistic exploration and social commentary.

**Keywords:** Drama; Digital Transformation; Commercialization; Artistic Integrity; Corporate Sponsorship; Audience Engagement

## 1. Introduction

Drama has long been a powerful and dynamic medium for storytelling, reflection, and social critique. It has allowed societies to explore human nature, challenge political ideologies, and establish cultural identity across different historical periods [1]. From the grand performances of ancient civilizations to the sophisticated productions of modern theater, drama has continuously evolved to resonate with audiences.

Throughout history, the function of drama has shifted in response to social, economic, and technological changes. In ancient Greece, drama was deeply embedded in civic and religious life, often serving as a communal event that addressed moral dilemmas and philosophical debates [2]. Playwrights such as Sophocles, Euripides, and Aristophanes used theater to critique societal norms and political structures, with public funding reinforcing drama's cultural significance over financial gain. Similarly, during the Renaissance, theater became a commercial enterprise while

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maintaining its role as a space for artistic expression and intellectual engagement. Shakespeare's works, for example, balanced entertainment with complex explorations of power, ambition, and human nature [3].

By the 19th and early 20th centuries, drama had become a significant platform for social critique, with playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw using their works to challenge established ideologies. Ibsen's *A Doll's House* (1879) confronted gender roles and societal expectations, while Shaw's *Major Barbara* (1905) examined class struggles and capitalism. Although financial success was a consideration, these plays were primarily driven by intellectual and artistic contributions [4].

In contrast, the 21st-century landscape of drama has been significantly shaped by globalization, commercialization, and digital media. The rise of corporate sponsorships, high-budget productions, and streaming services has altered the priorities of dramatic storytelling. While drama still serves as a medium for artistic and social expression, it increasingly operates within a profit-driven framework where financial sustainability dictates creative decisions [5]. Major theatrical institutions now prioritize commercially viable productions, such as long-running musicals and film adaptations, often at the expense of experimental or politically challenging works.

This paper examines the shift in drama's purpose from a medium for cultural engagement and artistic exploration to an industry increasingly influenced by economic imperatives. By comparing historical and contemporary perspectives, this study explores the tensions between artistic integrity and financial sustainability. The central question guiding this research is whether drama in the 21st century has become primarily an economic enterprise or if it still upholds its historical role as a platform for social discourse, intellectual engagement, and artistic expression.

While drama has historically reflected economic and political realities, its primary focus was often on artistic integrity, social messaging, and audience engagement rather than profit [4]. However, the contemporary theater industry, influenced by corporate sponsorships, high-budget productions, and digital streaming, has reshaped its priorities [5]. This study evaluates how these financial and technological shifts have impacted the balance between drama's artistic function and its commercial viability, ultimately assessing whether modern drama remains a tool for cultural discourse or has become primarily an economic enterprise.

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## 2. Materials and Methods

This study employs a comparative historical analysis to examine the evolution of drama from the pre-digital age to the 21st century. This method is particularly suited for understanding how drama's purpose has shifted in response to changing social, economic, and technological contexts. By analyzing historical and contemporary examples, this research evaluates whether drama has transitioned from a medium for artistic and social expression to a primarily commercial enterprise.

A qualitative research approach is used, incorporating an extensive review of scholarly literature in theater studies, cultural history, and media analysis. Primary sources include key dramatic works that illustrate historical and contemporary trends. These works were selected based on their impact on theatrical traditions, their engagement with social and economic issues, and their representation of artistic innovation across different periods.

### 2.1. Case Studies and Source Selection

- **Historical drama:** Ancient Greek tragedies (Sophocles, Euripides) [2], Renaissance theater (Shakespeare) [3], and 19th-century realist plays (Ibsen, Shaw) [4]. These works were chosen for their role in shaping drama's historical function as a tool for cultural critique and engagement.
- **Modern drama:** High-budget Broadway and West End productions (*The Lion King*, *Wicked*) [5], experimental contemporary theater (*Hamilton*, *Slave Play*) [6], and digital adaptations (National Theatre Live, BroadwayHD) [7]. These case studies reflect the increasing commercialization of drama and its adaptation to new media platforms.

Additionally, this study examines scholarly analyses of theater economics, audience engagement, and the impact of digital platforms on performance arts [5, 8]. By comparing these aspects across different eras, this research highlights the evolving tension between artistic integrity and financial sustainability, providing a framework for assessing whether modern drama remains a tool for cultural discourse or has become primarily an economic enterprise.

This methodological framework allows for a thorough evaluation of drama's transformation over time. By integrating literary analysis, economic trends, and case studies of theatrical productions, the study assesses how artistic integrity

and commercialization interact, determining whether the balance between creative freedom and financial sustainability has fundamentally changed in the 21st century.

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### 3. Results

Drama has undergone a profound transformation from its historical origins as a communal and ideological platform to its modern role in digital and commercial entertainment. This section explores how drama's purpose has evolved, highlighting the shift from artistic and social engagement to economic prioritization.

#### 3.1. The Purpose of Drama in the Pre-Digital Age

Historically, drama functioned as a means of storytelling, civic engagement, and social critique. Ancient Greek theater, particularly during the 5th century BCE, was deeply tied to religious and political life. Playwrights such as Sophocles and Euripides used tragedy to explore themes of human suffering, divine justice, and moral dilemmas [2]. Dramatic festivals, funded by the state and wealthy patrons, reinforced theater as a public good rather than a commercial venture.

Similarly, during the Renaissance, drama balanced entertainment with intellectual pursuits. Shakespearean theater in Elizabethan England was both commercially viable and thematically rich, engaging audiences with narratives that examined power, ambition, and human nature [3]. While ticket sales played a role, artistic expression remained central to theatrical productions. By the 19th and early 20th centuries, realism and social drama emerged, with playwrights such as Henrik Ibsen and George Bernard Shaw using theater to challenge societal norms. *A Doll's House* (1879) and *Major Barbara* (1905) addressed issues of gender roles, capitalism, and moral integrity [4], positioning drama as a medium for ideological discourse rather than financial gain.

#### 3.2. The Rise of Commercialization in the 21st Century

With the expansion of global capitalism and digital entertainment, drama has increasingly prioritized profitability. Broadway and West End productions exemplify this shift, as commercial appeal often dictates what is staged. Productions such as *The Lion King* and *Wicked* have evolved into multi-billion-dollar franchises, extending beyond theater into film adaptations, merchandising, and global branding [5]. Corporate sponsorship and investor-backed productions have reshaped the industry, making high-budget performances more common while experimental or politically challenging works struggle to secure funding.

Additionally, rising ticket prices have made live theater less accessible, further emphasizing its shift from a communal art form to an exclusive entertainment industry. Independent and avant-garde productions often lack the financial backing needed to compete in this highly commercialized space, limiting the scope of innovative and risk-taking storytelling.

#### 3.3. Digitalization and the Changing Nature of Drama

Streaming platforms such as National Theatre Live and BroadwayHD have transformed how audiences consume theater [7]. While these services increase accessibility, they also shift drama from a live, communal event to a digital commodity. Furthermore, television series such as *Succession* and *The Crown* integrate theatrical storytelling techniques into serialized narratives, raising concerns about whether traditional theater is being overshadowed by on-screen drama, which is often more financially sustainable [8].

Although digitalization has expanded global access to theater, it has also changed audience expectations, favoring productions designed for mass appeal rather than those that push artistic boundaries. The financial sustainability of live theater remains in question as more consumers opt for digital alternatives.

#### 3.4. Drama as Social Commentary: A Declining Role?

Despite commercialization, some productions continue to engage in social critique. Plays such as *Hamilton* (2015) and *Slave Play* (2018) address historical injustices, racial identity, and cultural narratives while achieving financial success [6]. However, such cases remain exceptions rather than the norm, as commercially successful productions tend to prioritize broad audience appeal over political engagement.

Smaller theater companies and politically radical works often struggle to survive without financial backing, limiting theater's role as a space for societal debate and dissent. Without state funding or alternative financial models, avant-garde and activist-driven theater remains marginalized.

#### 4. Discussion

While drama in the 21st century retains elements of storytelling and social critique, its dominant function has shifted toward economic sustainability. Unlike earlier periods when drama was primarily driven by civic engagement and cultural discourse, modern theater operates within a commercial framework dictated by audience demand and financial imperatives [5, 7].

The tension between artistic integrity and economic viability remains unresolved. Some productions successfully balance commercial success with meaningful narratives, yet financial constraints continue to dictate theatrical programming. As digital transformation reshapes entertainment consumption, the future of drama will depend on whether it can reconcile economic sustainability with its foundational role as a medium for intellectual and artistic exploration.

A critical question remains: Can drama adapt to these commercial pressures while preserving its role as a platform for cultural critique? If theater institutions and digital platforms can strike a balance between financial imperatives and artistic risk-taking, drama may continue to evolve as both a commercial product and a force for social commentary.

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#### 5. Conclusion

The evolution of drama from the pre-digital age to the 21st century illustrates a significant transformation in its purpose and function. Historically, drama served as a platform for cultural expression, political critique, and communal engagement, with financial concerns playing a secondary role. However, contemporary drama operates increasingly within an economic framework, where commercial interests dictate creative decisions. Corporate sponsorships, high-budget productions, and digital streaming have redefined the priorities of theatrical storytelling, often favoring mass appeal over artistic experimentation.

Despite these changes, drama continues to be a powerful tool for storytelling and societal reflection. Some productions successfully balance financial sustainability with cultural depth, proving that artistic integrity and commercial success are not mutually exclusive. However, the growing dominance of mass-market productions and rising ticket prices have made theater less accessible, limiting opportunities for experimental and politically charged works. The financial pressures of the entertainment industry continue to shape which narratives are told and who has the platform to tell them. If left unchecked, these commercial forces may further marginalize avant-garde and socially critical drama, reducing the diversity of voices in theatrical expression.

As digital media reshapes audience engagement, drama faces a decisive moment. The future of theater depends not only on the adaptability of artists and institutions but also on the willingness of policymakers and audiences to support diverse, risk-taking productions. Alternative funding models, increased public investment in the arts, and innovative hybrid approaches combining live and digital theater may offer solutions to sustain drama's role as both an economic enterprise and a medium for intellectual and cultural discourse. If these challenges are not actively addressed, drama risks being fully absorbed into the commercial entertainment industry, losing its historical function as a space for critical thought and social transformation.

Ultimately, the preservation of drama as a meaningful artistic force will require a conscious effort to balance financial viability with artistic depth. A commitment to funding and fostering experimental, thought-provoking theater is essential to ensuring that drama remains not just a profitable spectacle but also a platform for cultural engagement, reflection, and innovation.

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#### Compliance with ethical standards

*Disclosure of conflict of interest*

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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