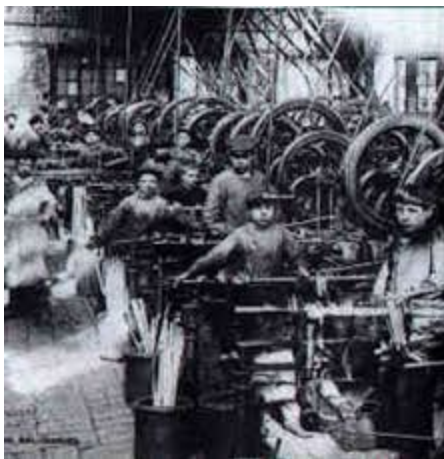


# Melodrama

Melodrama was one of the most popular forms of theatre in the 1800's. The aim of Melodrama was to entertain audiences through the use of music, stock characters, exaggerated acting style and comedy. They were a mixture of violence, romance and sentimentality, with short scenes full of action. They used spectacular settings, music, exaggerated acting and encouraged audience interaction to promote its popularity (hissing, booing, cheering etc.).

There were many reasons (contexts) for the popularity of Melodrama. In 19th Century Europe the Industrial Revolution had started. Many people worked very long hours in noisy and dangerous factories. These people did not have much money, and many were illiterate. Life was hard.



([taapworld.wikispaces.com](http://taapworld.wikispaces.com))



([industrialrevolutionforkids.wordpress.com/](http://industrialrevolutionforkids.wordpress.com/))

One of the only forms of escape was the theatre. Tickets were cheap, there were many theatres in every town, and a good show helped people to forget their worries and problems. They wanted adventure, romance and excitement. They wanted to see the good guys win, and the bad guys punished. They wanted to see the hero and heroine fall in love and live happily ever after.

Because theatre was so popular, venues got bigger and bigger. Some theatres could hold up to 3,000 people. Because the stages were so big, every effect on stage needed to be exaggerated (especially for the poorest people who had the cheapest seats; furthest from the stage). Therefore, movement and gesture became exaggerated and larger than life and spectacular effects were introduced, such as explosions and lightning. The over the top acting style helped to create an action packed and dramatic evening of entertainment!

The word Melodrama comes from melody and drama – there is a key link to music. The actors would act in an over the top fashion showing their characters and emotions clearly according to the tone of the music. For example fast, scary music would mean the characters would move quickly, show sorrow and fear etc.

Melodrama is still a common genre in film and theatre today. Melodrama has influenced many other genres such as Silent Movies, British Pantomime and even soap operas. You can see stock characters in all of these forms, alongside exaggerated acting, sensational storylines and lots of romance, action and violence. Melodramas are also often satirised (mocked, or used for comedy purposes). Here is a great example!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Gw-W48n06Lw>

Here is another example. This is a modern version of a melodrama, and features some of the stock characters that we will explore during this unit.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eP80qzRsCLw&index=1&list=PLv5yO47avaPOScipzeoMqc5MtaXE2YH5B>

## Stock Characters

Melodrama characters were not meant to be particularly life-like. Instead they were stereotypical and easily recognisable to everybody. They are 'stock characters' and include:

**A hero.** Handsome, strong, brave, honest and reliable.

**A heroine.** Beautiful, courageous, innocent and vulnerable.

**A villain.** Cunning, without morals, dishonest, cruel and evil.

**A villain's accomplice.** Usually provides comic relief because he is a bumbling sidekick.

**A faithful servant.** Also provides comic relief, and also does the dirty work. He/she usually discovers evidence against the villain.

**A maid servant.** A female character who is lively and who flirts with the faithful servant.



(prezi.com/uax9p\_ngcefz)

Actors would train through apprenticeship; by joining an established company of actors and watching the leads (whilst doing lots of other small jobs). An actor would specialise in playing one stock character, and some became very famous for this, earning lots and lots of money.

## Movement and Gesture

There were very particular movements and gestures used to show emotions in Melodrama. Here are some examples.

**Fear:** Face turned to one side. Hand to the mouth, with the fingers curled in.

**Horror:** Eyes wide open. Mouth open. Hands on cheeks.

### **Love:**

Female - Head on one side. Hands under chin. One leg 'kicked up'

Male - One hand on chest, the other gesturing to the 'object of his affection' with palms open

**Overwhelm:** Looking up. One hand at side, the other on the forehead

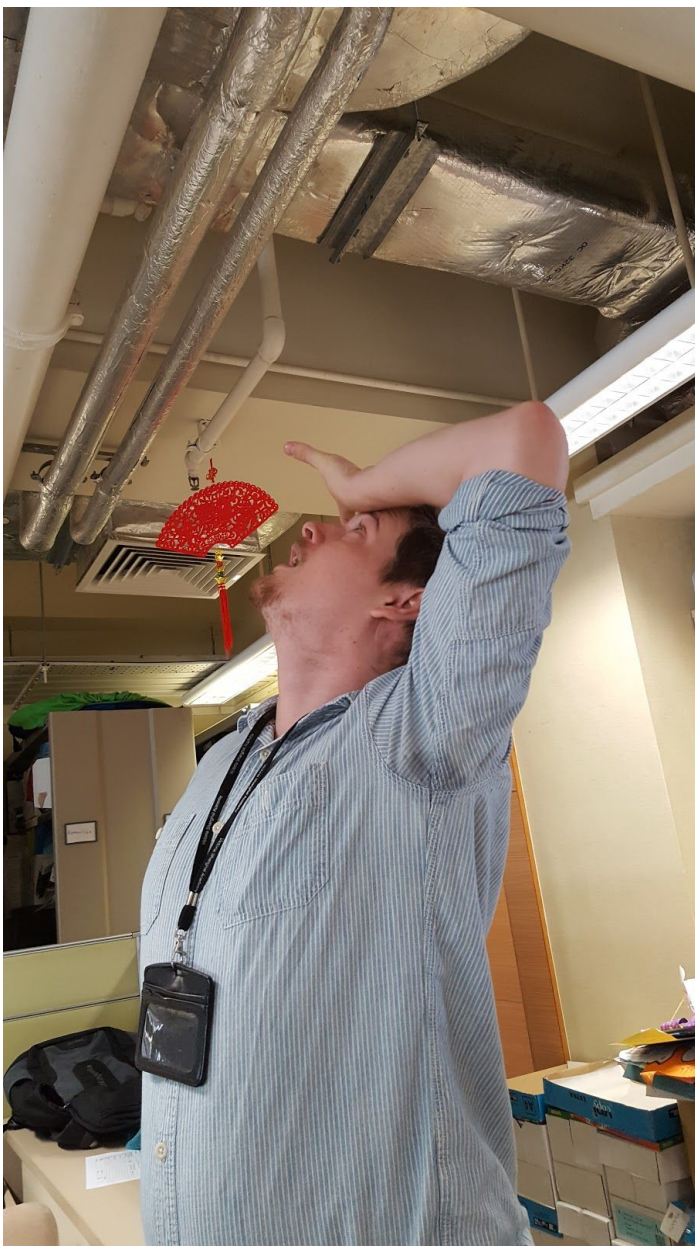
**Pride:** Chest puffed out, hands on hips, chin slightly raised, legs slightly open

**Evil plotting:** Sneaky/villainous facial expression on. Rubbing hands together, or twiddling fingers.

**Evil sneaking:** Shoulders hunched, sneaks across stage with hands twiddling (as if creeping up on someone)

**Anger:** Angry facial expression. Fists clenched.

Which melodramatic emotion is Mr Binge showing?



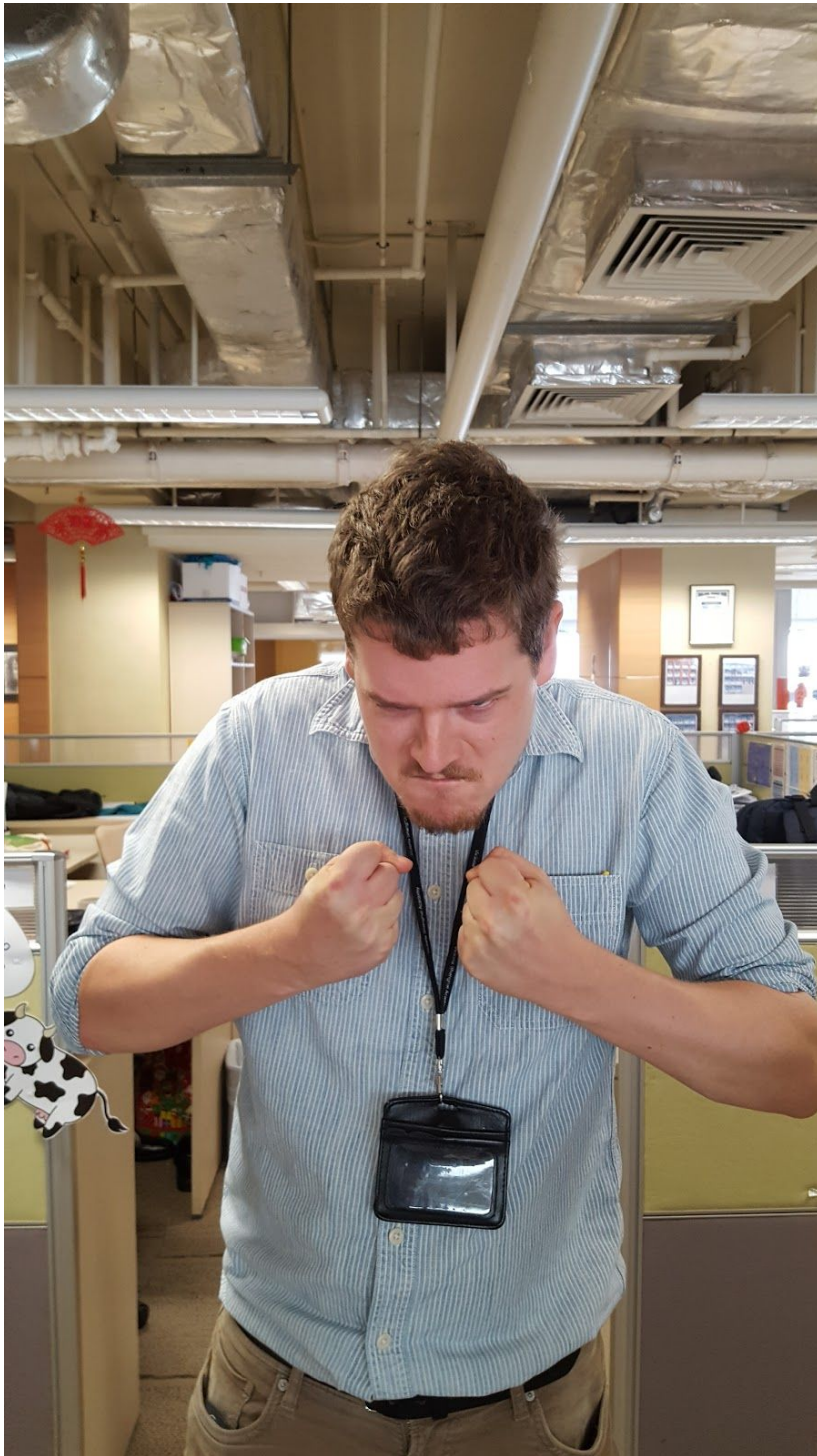
And here?



This one?



And this?





## **Plot**

Melodramas often follow a 'stock' plot as well. This is an example.

The hero and heroine meet and fall in love

The villain wants to spoil their happiness

He plots to blackmail the heroine by kidnapping her aged aunt, and threatens to kill her unless the heroine will marry him

The heroine refuses, and the villain captures her. The hero tries to help, but the villain sets a trap for him, catches him and locks him up.

The heroine is about to be forcibly married to the villain, when the hero escapes and rescues her

The villain is arrested, the hero and heroine live happily ever after.

