Questioning the Past

When approaching the assignment of evaluating how a non-theatre person had influenced theatre, I wanted to pick a figure that was also non-traditional. In class, we had studied about political leaders and famous artists who had impacted the theatre world, so I wanted to choose someone who was a little bit more outside of the box. Science and theatre are not usually thought of as overlapping very much, so I wanted to delve deeper into the subject. I chose Charles Darwin because I was interested in him as a historical figure and scientist, and I wondered if his life and research had ever reached over to also influence the theatre, as well. I liked the idea of doing research on a person who is not usually associated with the arts and seeing how far the link between any influential person and how it impacts fine arts could reach. I began to ask myself, “If it wasn’t for Charles Darwin, what in the theatre would be different?”

Exploring the Sources

I began by looking at the scientists work in general. If I was going to research his impact, I needed to know exactly what his work was. I read about On the Origin of Species and how the public and scientific community reacted. Then, I began looking up Darwin’s theatre history test books to see if there was any mention of the evolutionary scientist. A few mentioned him being an influential figure for the Naturalist Movement, so I went from there. I went through a variety of theatre texts describing Naturalist Movement characteristics and then related them back to see how they could be related to Darwin’s own text. From there, I moved on to research about movements that had come out of Naturalism, because if Darwin had influenced that, then it became clear his influence reached down the line of movements that came after. A text I found was very interesting and that is how I became interested in theatre texts. I looked at how evolutionary theory related to the roles of directors and different acting styles. I studied individual playwrights that cited Darwin as an inspiration and then looked on from there to find other connections. I then began to research plays that had been written about the evolutionary scientist and his life and work. I collected information about the 200th anniversary of his life and because many theatrical pieces had been produced in honor of it.

Finding the Answers

By researching this topic, I was surprised to find what an impact Darwin’s life had on modern theatre. His work influenced so many different areas of the theatrical world and continues to do so even today. His work inspired everyone from directors to leaders of movement to modern-day actors, directors, and designers to react to his theories. No matter what his impact was, it was substantial. Even though he may not be studied in theatre history courses, or may not even be thought of as influential at all for theatre, Darwin’s contributions to theatre stretch from the nineteenth century when his first book was published to present day.