The Theatre Experience

The Theatre Experience

FIFTEENTH EDITION

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The City University of New York

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THE THEATRE EXPERIENCE, FIFTEENTH EDITION

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About the Authors

Edwin Wilson attended Vanderbilt University, the University of Edinburgh, and Yale University, where he received an MFA and the first Doctor of Fine Arts degree awarded by Yale. He has taught theatre at Vanderbilt, Yale, and, for over 30 years, at Hunter College and the Graduate Center of the City University. Wilson has produced plays on and off Broadway and served one season as the resident director of the Barter Theatre in Abingdon, Virginia. He was the assistant to the producer on the Broadway play ***Big Fish, Little Fish*** directed by John Gielgud and starring Jason Robards and of the film ***Lord of the Flies*** directed by Peter Brook. On Broadway, he co-produced ***Agatha Sue, I Love You*** directed by George Abbott. He also produced a feature film, ***The Nashville Sound***. He was the moderator of ***Spotlight***, a television interview series on CUNY-TV and PBS (1989–1993), 91 half-hour interviews with outstanding actors, actresses, playwrights, directors, and producers, broadcast on 200 PBS stations in the U.S. Selected interviews can be seen on YouTube.

For 22 years he was the theatre critic of the ***Wall Street Journal***. A long-time member of the New York Drama Critics Circle, he was president of the Circle for several years. He was on the board of the John Golden Fund for 45 years and served a term as president of the Theatre Development Fund **(TDF)**, whose board he was on for 23 years. He has served a number of times on the Tony Nominating Committee and the Pulitzer Prize Drama Jury. He is also the author or co-author of two other widely used college theatre textbooks in the United States. The fourteenth edition of his pioneer book, ***The Theater Experience***, was published by McGraw Hill. The seventh edition of the theatre history textbook, ***Living Theatre*** (co-authored with Alvin Goldfarb), published previously by McGraw Hill, has been published by W. W. Norton. He is also the editor of the volume ***Shaw on Shakespeare*** and his well-received memoir, ***Magic Time,*** a chronicle of his years in and around theatre, was published by Smith and Kraus in 2020.

Alvin Goldfarb is president emeritus and professor emeritus of Western Illinois University. Dr. Goldfarb has also served as provost, dean of fine arts, and chair of the Department of Theatre at Illinois State University. Throughout his administrative career, he continued to teach theatre courses. Dr. Goldfarb is most recently an adjunct professor at the Chicago Conservatory for the Performing Arts at Roosevelt University. He holds a PhD in theatre history from the City University of New York, a master's degree from Hunter College of CUNY, and a bachelor's degree from Queens College of CUNY, graduating Phi Beta Kappa.

Dr. Goldfarb is the co-author of ***Living Theatre*** as well as co-editor of ***The Anthology of Living Theatre*** with Edwin Wilson. Dr. Goldfarb is also the co-editor, with Rebecca Rovit, of ***Theatrical Performance During the Holocaust: Texts, Documents, Memoirs,*** which was a finalist for the National Jewish Book Award. He has published numerous articles, reviews, and annotated bibliographies in scholarly journals and anthologies, many of which focus on theatre during the Holocaust and its representation in post–World War II drama and theatre. Currently, Dr. Goldfarb serves as the lead scholar for the online ***Holocaust Theatre Catalog***, which is hosted at the University of Miami's Sue and Leonard Miller Center for Contemporary Judaic Studies. His interest in this area was inspired by his parents, who were survivors of the Holocaust.

Dr. Goldfarb has served as a member of the Illinois Arts Council and president of the Illinois Alliance for Arts Education. He also served for six years as a member and treasurer of Chicago's Joseph Jefferson Theatre Awards Committee, which recognizes excellence in the Chicago theatre, as well as a board member of the Arts Alliance of Illinois. He currently is a member of the board of Congo Square Theatre in Chicago.

Dr. Goldfarb has received service awards from the Illinois Theatre Association and the American College Theatre Festival. He also received alumni awards from the CUNY Graduate Center's Alumni Association and Hunter College, CUNY.

To the memory of my wife, Catherine.

To my children Deborah Goldfarb
and Jason Goldfarb

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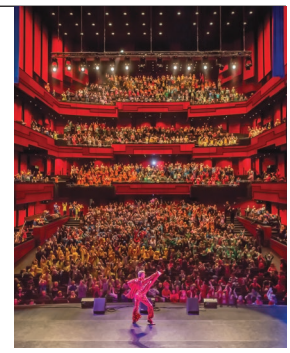

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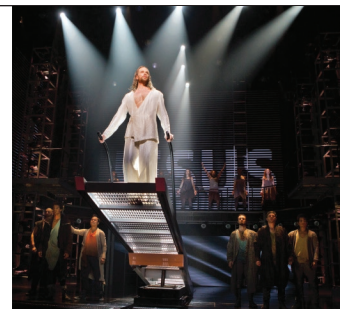

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Preface

ACTIVE AUDIENCE PARTICIPANTS, ACTIVE CLASS PARTICIPANTS

The Theatre Experience prepares students to be well-informed, well-prepared theatre audience members. With an audience-centered narrative that engages today's students, a vivid photo program that brings concepts to life, and features that teach and encourage a variety of skill sets, students master core concepts and learn to think critically about theatre and the world around them. As a result, students are better prepared for class, and better prepared for theatregoing.

Engage with Your Role

- True to its original vision—to focus on the audience's experience of attending a live theatre performance—the 15th edition of *The Theatre Experience* **opens with three chapters that focus on the student as an audience member**. Topics include the difference between being at a live performance and watching a dramatic performance on film, TV, or an electronic device; the enhancement of the experience aided by the proper preparation and background; and the awareness of the role of the audience in live theatre.

(VisitBritain/Eric Nathan/Getty Images)

- **Play Links** allow you to read many of the plays mentioned in the text online. Any play referenced in the text that can be found online is highlighted in blue typeface when first mentioned in a chapter. Should you want to read one of these plays, you can refer to the list that precedes the Glossary at the end of the book and find its URL. Titles are listed alphabetically.

  The plays can be used to highlight key concepts and to complement the discussions found in *The Theatre Experience,* 15th edition. In addition, many of the new "Thinking about Theatre" and "Experiencing Theatre" exercises can also be supplemented and enhanced with examples from these plays.

Master the Basics

Parts Two, Three, and Four cover the important elements of theatre: acting, directing, design, and playwriting. The authors' efficient structure and succinct style set up students for a clear understanding of the basic concepts, freeing up valuable class time for deeper discussions and more personal engagement with course concepts.

Photo Essays and a dynamic art program allow students to visualize the core theatrical concepts introduced in each chapter. Topics include modern domestic drama (Chapter 11), forms of comedy (Chapter 11), costumes and masks (Chapter 7), uses of stage lighting (Chapter 8), and others.

Think Critically and Engage Actively

Based on feedback from instructors and students, the 15th edition of *The Theatre Experience* offers both time-tested and newly revised text features that help students deepen their understanding and appreciation of the theatrical experience.

- **"Playing Your Part"** is a feature in each chapter that includes two distinct sets of questions and activities that emphasize thinking and engaging critically.
  - **"Experiencing Theatre"** activities help students actively engage with the concepts of the text. These exercises ask students to undertake activities within the classroom or to understand how aspects of their everyday lives connect to core concepts discussed in the text.

PLAYING YOUR PART: EXPERIENCING THEATRE

1. If you were to write a play about your life, what would you choose as your opening scene? What would some of your complications be? Would there be a climactic moment?
2. If you were to write a play about a family you know (your own or another), what point of view would you take? Why? Are there strongly opposed forces or balanced forces in this family?
3. If you were told you were going to have to attend a play that lasted over four hours, what would your reaction be? Why? What are your traditional expectations about the space and time of a play?
4. After watching a popular film, describe how the opening scene aids in setting the action. Describe one or two of the complications in the film. Can you discuss the film's point of view?

- **"Thinking about Theatre"** questions challenge students to analyze and examine elements of a theatre experience.

PLAYING YOUR PART: THINKING ABOUT THEATRE

1. Think of a play you have read or seen where the main character encounters one impediment or roadblock after another. Describe the various obstacles that must be overcome before the end of the play.
2. Think of a play or musical you have seen or read where two major characters are in conflict with one another. Describe the two characters and explain the source of their conflict. How does it play out?
3. Think of a situation some people saw as very serious, but another person viewed as humorous. Explain what you believe led different people to see it so differently. What was your own feeling—was the incident funny or sad?

- **"In Focus"** boxes, also appearing in every chapter, help students understand and compare different aspects of theatre. They address historical perspectives on theatre, contemporary applications of technology, issues of theatrical structure, and global and other current issues in theatre, such as color-blind and nontraditional casting. Theatre artists such as Peter Brook and Josef Svoboda are also featured.

WHAT'S NEW IN THE 15TH EDITION OF *THE THEATRE EXPERIENCE*

The 15th edition of *The Theatre Experience* has been updated, taking note of new talent that has appeared on the scene as well as new approaches to writing, directing, acting, and design presented in previous editions. New plays, new productions, new approaches, and new subject matter have all been recognized and explained. At the same time, well-established forerunners in the theatre universe, whether Greek, Roman, Elizabethan, or later, have been looked at anew. All of this has been reviewed in light of the COVID-19 pandemic and, following the murder of George Floyd, the recognition of the need for diversity, inclusion, and equity in the contemporary theatre and the need to confront systemic racism.

The most significant changes in the 15th edition is moving all of the design chapters to Part Three of the book so that all of the production elements are discussed before turning to plays and playwriting. Part Four, now focuses on the playwright and the play with discussion of musical theatre being added to the chapter on genres. In addition, two new chapters use previous historic material in the context of playwriting and plays. Chapter 12 focuses on experimental and alternative forms of drama and theatre. Chapter 13 reviews diverse and inclusive playwrights, plays, and theatre artists.

Selected Chapter-by-Chapter Changes

For greater inclusivity, all gender-specific terminology and references have been removed as appropriate throughout the eleventh edition of *The Theatre Experience*.

Part One: The Audience

- Added new paragraph on COVID-19 and Theatre.
- New discussion on how COVID-19 impacted other audience events, including sports and the Biden inauguration.

Chapter 1: The Audience: Its Roles and Imagination

- New section header "The Contrast between Theatre, Film, Television, and Streamed Media."
- Added coverage on streamed and Zoomed[WU3] performances during COVID-19.
- Updated examples of shows filmed for TV or film, including *Hamilton* and *The Prom*.
- Added research on how audiences' hearts beat in rhythm during parts of shows.
- New material on the 2020 production of *Boys in the Band* done by Chicago's Windy City Playhouse in an immersive fashion.
- Added new box "In Focus: The COVID-19 Pandemic and Theatre."
- Added a new coverage on "Distinguishing Stage Reality from Fact" using *Fairview* by African American playwright Jackie Sibblies Drury.

Chapter 2: Background and Expectations of the Audience

- Added new coverage of August Wilson and his ten-play cycle.
- Added material on how marginalized peoples are underrepresented or stereotyped in certain theatres.
- Added coverage of *Slave Play* as an example of a contemporary play and the marginalization of underrepresented peoples in the theatre.
- Added a new section "Diverse and Global Theatres."
- Updated and revised "The Audience, Critic, Reviewer, and Blogger" to include new online forms.

Chapter 3: Theatre Spaces

- Added new coverage of alley or traverse theatre spaces.
- Added new section on site-specific and immersive spaces.

Chapter 4: Acting for the Stage

- Updated the "In Focus: The Profession of Acting and Technology" box to include coverage on new apps that allow actors to work on auditions and scheduling.
- Provided new example in "In Focus: Puppetry Around the World box."
- Added a new section "Diversity and Inclusion in Acting Training."

Chapter 5: The Director and the Producer

- Reorganized and revised "The Director's Collaborator: The Dramaturg" and provided a longer section on other collaborators.

- Revised the "In Focus: Color Conscious, Color Blind, and Nontraditional Casting box.
- Revised coverage of "The Director's Collaborator: The Stage Manager."
- Revised coverage of "The Director's Collaborator: The Choreographer."
- Updated material on "The Director's Collaborator: The Fight Director and the Intimacy Director."
- Added new box "In Focus: Technology for Directors and Their Collaborators."
- Moved boxed material on color conscious casting into the main text as part of a new section "Diversity and Inclusion in Directing: Inclusive Casting."

Chapter 6: Scenery

- Replaced as far as possible the term "nonrealistic" to "departures from realism."
- Replaced older example of a design concept with the 2019 Broadway production of *Oklahoma*.
- Revised coverage of the central image and metaphor.
- Added coverage of hand held technology in scene design.
- Updated the box "In Focus: New Design Materials: Video and Projection Design."
- Added a new box "In Focus: App Technology for Scene Design."
- Added a new box "In Focus: Scene Design in Film and Television."

Chapter 7: Stage Costumes

- Added new example (*Frozen*) of on-stage costume change.
- Revised examples of prosthetics.
- Revised coverage of wigs. Provided new example.
- Provided new example of the use of masks.
- Added new box "In Focus: Costume Design in Film and Television."
- Added new box "In Focus: Touch Tours and Audio Description."
- Revised box "In Focus: Technology and Costume Design" to include the use of apps and hand held devices.

Chapter 8: Lighting and Sound

- Updated text when referring to technology to include "tablets" or "hand held devices" when referring to computer-controlled light and sound.
- Added text with examples in "Sound Creates the Environment."
- Added new box "In Focus: Lighting and Sound Design in Film and Television."
- Added new box "In Focus: Inclusivity and Sound Technology" that addresses the needs of the hearing impaired.
- Added new box "In Focus: App Technology for Lighting and Sound Design."

Chapter 9: Creating the World of the Play

- Added coverage of Luis Alfaro's adaptations of *Electra, Oedipus Rex, and Medea* that focus on contemporary immigrant community issues.
- Included reference to Matthew Lopez's *The Inheritance* and Marsha Norman's '*Night Mother*, as contemporary examples of creative usage of theatrical time.

- Added new example of Troy Maxson, in *Fences*, to the coverage of incentive and motivation.
- Added August Wilson's work to the discussion of family dramas.
- Updated the section "Point of View" with coverage of Jeremy O' Harris's *Slave Play*.
- Revised coverage of the enlightenment and age of progress with a critique of white privilege, colonialism, and the enslavement of Africans.

Chapter 10: Dramatic Structure and Dramatic Characters

- Added new section "Diversity and Inclusion in Dramatic Structure: Feminist Structure."
- Updated the section "People, Places, and Events Proliferate" with a new example: Tony Kushner's *Angels in America.*
- Updated the section "Combinations of Climactic and Episodic Form" with coverage of August Wilson's ten-play cycle about Black life in the United States.
- Expanded coverage of "Structure in Musical Theatre" with a new example: *Hamilton*.
- Updated the section "A Narrator or Chorus" with reference to *Fairview* by African American playwright Jackie Sibblie Drury.
- Expanded and revised the section "Orchestration of Characters" by adding August Wilson to the exiting discussion of Chekhov.

Chapter 11: Theatrical Genres

- Added new section on musical theatre.
- Updated examples used to explain genres.

Chapter 12: Alternative and Experimental Dramatic and Theatrical Forms

- New chapter that focuses on all of the alternative and experimental forms of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, including surrealism, expressionism, theatre of cruelty, epic theatre, happenings environmental theatre, postmodernism, performance art, political theatre, and documentary drama.

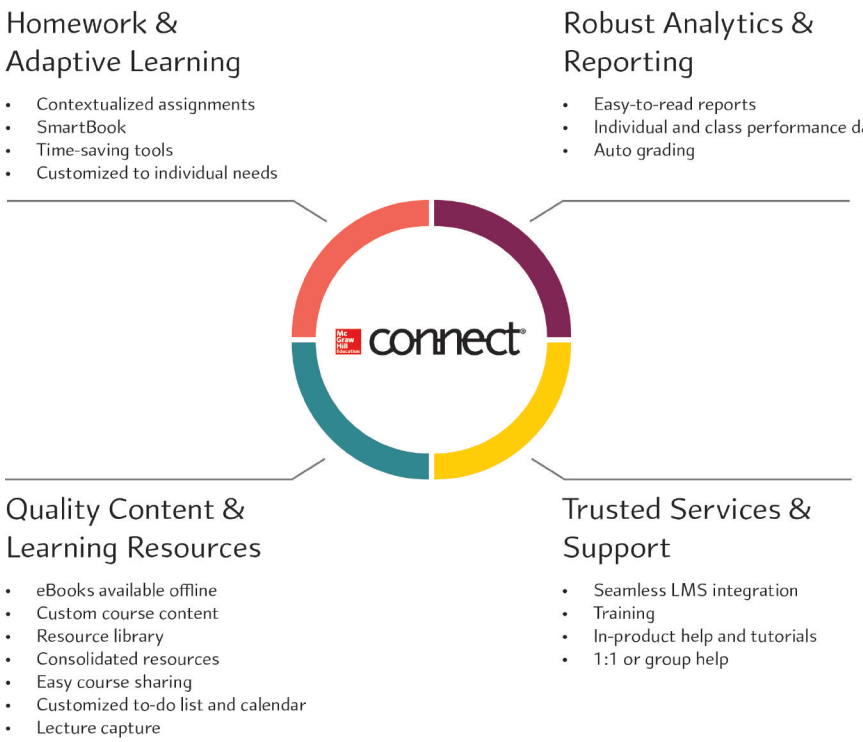
Chapter 13: Diverse and Inclusive Plays, Playwrights, and the Theatrical Forms

- New chapter that focuses on diverse playwrights, theaters, and theatre artists, including African American theatre, Latinx theatre, Asian American theatre, indigenous theatre, Feminist theatre, and LGBTQ theatre. In addition the chapter concludes with a brief discussion of global theatre.

CONNECT: ENHANCING THE THEATRE EXPERIENCE

Connect combines the content of *The Theatre Experience* with award-winning adaptive tools that help students prepare for their time in class with you. The tools in Connect help students understand and retain basic concepts: parts of the theatre, the creative artists and technicians who make it happen, and the tradition and historical background from which theatre springs. When students successfully master

concepts using McGraw Hill's Connect, you can spend more class time discussing theatre and theatrical performances, fostering a greater appreciation for the course and inspiring students to become lifelong audience members. Connect is reliable, easy to use, and can be implemented on its own or paired with your school's learning management system. Contact your McGraw Hill Higher Education representative to learn more or to speak with an instructor who already uses Connect for his or her theatre courses.



Connect for *The Theatre Experience* now includes two ways to read: an eBook and SmartBook. The eBook provides a simple, elegant reading experience, available for offline reading on a tablet. SmartBook creates a personalized online reading experience by highlighting the most impactful concepts that a student needs to learn. Students periodically test their knowledge as they read, and SmartBook adapts accordingly, highlighting content based on what the student knows and doesn't know. Real-time reports quickly identify the concepts that require more attention from individual students—or the entire class.

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Support for Instructors and Students

The Theatre Experience offers a wealth of supplemental materials to aid both students and instructors, including the Instructor's Manual and both computerized and print versions of the Test Bank.

For students, resources keyed directly to this edition include:

- The Theatre Goer's Guide, which is an excellent introduction to the art of attending and critiquing a play. This guide will assist students in everything from making theatre reservations and knowing when to applaud to evaluating a performance and doing web research.
- Detailed explanations and examples of major theatrical forms and movements.
- Synopses of plays.

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The original author, Edwin Wilson, would like to thank Professor Alvin Goldfarb for his invaluable and indispensable contribution to this and the previous edition of *The Theatre Experience.* As coauthor on *Living Theatre* and *Theatre: The Lively Art,* Al's ideas, his research and writing skills, his originality and imagination, and his persistence have been indispensable in completing this, the first volume on which he serves as co-author. Both authors believe this is the most audience-oriented and concise version of *The Theatre Experience* of the entire series.

Professor Wilson first developed many of the ideas in this book while teaching a course in Introduction to Theatre at Hunter College of the City University of New York. To his former students and colleagues at Hunter, he expresses his continuing appreciation. Also, to those professors and other experts who have contributed importantly to prior versions, he expresses his continuing appreciation. They include Alexis Greene, Naomi Stubbs, Susan Tenneriello, Donny Levit, and Frank Episale.

In addition, Professors Wilson and Goldfarb express our gratitude to Professor Jeff Entwistle for his prodigious contribution to the chapters on design, and we also thank Professor Laura Pulio for her helpful suggestions on acting. We extend our appreciation to Shanesia Davis who provided input to our acting chapter and suggested the additions on alley theatre spaces and touch tours. A special thanks also to Professor Oliver W. Gerland and his fellow teachers at the University of Colorado. We would also like to thank Professor Scott Walters, University of North Carolina–Asheville, for developing the first teacher and student study guide materials for *The Theatre Experience,* and Professor John Poole, Illinois State University, for his revisions that are now found in the instructor resources.

We'd also like to thank the following reviewers who have contributed to this edition:

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Jeannine Russell, Wichita State University

Through twenty-six editions of our three textbooks published by McGraw Hill, including the previous edition of this text, our colleague Inge King, the incredible photography expert, discovered every photograph that appeared in every edition of every text. Inge is amazing as well as being an irreplaceable colleague and there is no way adequately to acknowledge her taste and abiding loyalty, as well as her creativity.

At the same time, a new photography editor, Emily Tietz, has taken over the duties of researching and obtaining permission for illustrations in this and the previous edition of *The Theatre Experience.* Emily has proved to be resourceful, energetic, and persistent in these endeavors as well as a person with excellent taste. We are most grateful to her.

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Design Elements: Audience Sitting in Theatre (theatre): Ron Chapple/Photodisc/Getty Images; Studio Light (spotlights): Exactostock/SuperStock

Part One

The Audience

THE AUDIENCE

The basic encounter in the theatre is the exchange, the chemistry, the electricity between the audience and the actors performing onstage. The presence of the audience sets live theatre apart from all other forms of dramatic entertainment. Here the audience is gathered for a production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Shakespeare's Globe Theatre on the South Bank of the River Thames on July 16, 2013, in London, England. (Oli Scarff/Getty Images)

Part One | **The Audience**

We may not realize it, but when we attend the theatre, we, as spectators, are essential to the experience. To be complete, each one of the performing arts—opera, ballet, symphony concerts as well as theatre—requires an audience. Whether watching a classic, like *Romeo and Juliet,* or a modern family play, like *Fences,* for most of us, it is likely that our first encounter with the dramatic work was on film, television, computer, or a handheld digital device. No matter how impressed we were with seeing a play or a musical in this format, however, it must be remembered that the experience of watching television or a movie is quite different from attending the theatre. With electronic or digital media, we are looking at a screen on which there are no live people but only images of people. And the experience of being in the presence of a living, breathing person makes all the difference. Another way of putting this is to say that the audience is not an incidental factor in a theatrical performance; if we are audience members, we become an indispensable element in what is occurring.

At a theatrical performance, we become keenly aware of the actors onstage. What we may not realize is that the actors are just as aware of our presence. Laughter at a comedy or a deep silence at a tense moment in a serious drama is communicated directly to the actors and has a very real effect on their performance.

In a number of events other than the performing arts, spectators often play a key role. For example, most sports contests—football, baseball, basketball, soccer, tennis, NASCAR races—elicit huge interest from fans. This is true whether the sports event is at the high school, college, or professional level. In other spheres as well, the participation of viewers is crucial. Political conventions and political rallies depend on large, supportive crowds to be considered successful. A good example is a national nominating convention. The hall where the event takes place becomes a giant stage set, with a stagelike platform, backdrops, and carefully arranged positions for entrances and exits. The programs are carefully scripted to build to a climax, with a finale consisting of stirring music and

Fans cheering at the NASCAR Sprint Cup Series auto race in Martinsville, Virginia. (Don Petersen/AP Images)

Seen here is a group of people gathered to watch the August 21, 2017, eclipse of the sun. (Volkan Furuncu/Anadolu Agency/Getty Images)

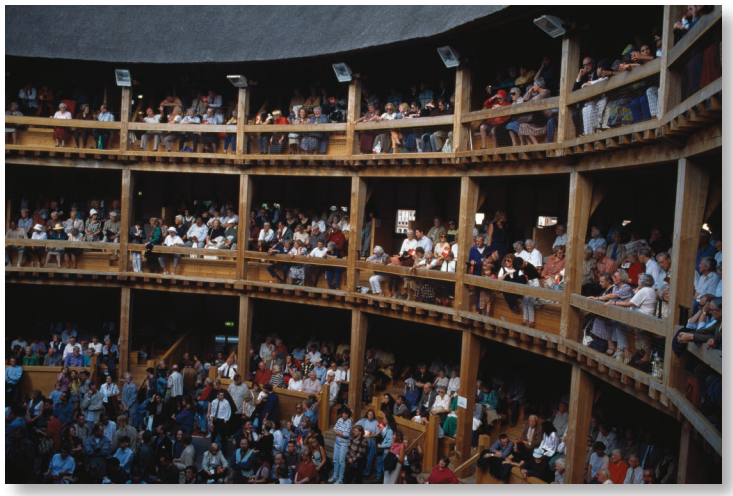
literally thousands of balloons dropping from the ceiling.

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and 2021, we clearly saw how the absence of fans and supportive crowds impacted sporting events, political conventions, and the 2021 inauguration of President Joe Biden. In many instances, there were attempts to simulate the presence of spectators. For example, televised football games were accompanied by digitally created background spectators sounds. However, we were always aware that there was a missing element: live fans.

Despite the similarity between theatre events and sports events, there is one unmistakable difference. Theoretically, a sports contest could take place in an empty stadium (as many did during the COVID-19 pandemic) and still be considered complete: though the thrill and the excitement would be missing, the results would be entered in the record book, and the won–lost statistics would be just as valid as if the game had taken place before a large crowd.

This is not true for the performing arts. Each theatre, ballet, or opera performance, each musical concert is intended specifically to be presented in the presence of an audience, which is an absolutely essential part of the event. Of course, any of these can be recorded digitally or otherwise (again as was done with Zoom readings and recordings during the pandemic), but listening to or viewing one of these is not the same as attending a live event. In a very real sense, a theatre performance at which no audience is actually present is *not* a performance. It may be a rehearsal of some kind, but the performance occurs only when the actors perform in the presence of a live audience.

In Part One we will explore who makes up the audience, how audiences are created, how they differ from one another, how they respond to what is happening onstage, and how they interact with performers.



The audience at a performance of *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* at Shakespeare's Globe in London. (Gideon Mendel/Getty Images)

The audience watching a 3D movie. (Image Source/Getty Images)

1

The Audience: Its Role and Imagination

Live theatre: The performance of a dramatic event by a group of actors in the presence of their counterparts, the audience members.

The title of this book tells us that attending the theatre is an experience. It is an experience, but more than that, it is a *unique* experience. Along with the other performing arts—music, dance, and opera—it occurs only in the presence of an audience. Music can consist of a concert by a symphony orchestra, a pop concert before thousands, or an intimate cabaret performance: the key factor is that there is a live audience in attendance. The same would be true of dance: it could be a formal ballet in a concert hall or a modern dance group in a small, intimate setting. However, it occurs only when there is a live audience present. A presentation by any performing arts group involves a different dynamic from the appreciation of other artworks such as painting, sculpture, literature, or a filmed or digitally captured and distributed performance. A live theatre production, for instance, changes from moment to moment and night to night, as the audiences encounter a series of shifting impressions and stimuli. It is a kaleidoscopic adventure through which the audience passes, with each instant a direct, immediate experience.

The transitory nature of the performing arts sets them apart in other ways from literature and the visual arts. A painting, a piece of sculpture, a novel, or a collection of poems is a fixed object. When it leaves the artist's hands (or, in the case of a book, when it leaves the printer's shop), it is complete. In a world of change and uncertainty, these objects remain the same. Today, the statue of the *Winged Victory* at the Louvre Museum in Paris is the same majestic figure that was fashioned 2,200 years

◀ **THE ROLE OF THE AUDIENCE**

The audience and the performers are the two essential elements of theatre: both are required for theatre to occur. The presence of the audience sets theatre apart from the experience of watching a theatrical presentation on film, on television, or in any other electronic medium. A comparison can be made to the theatricality of a rock performance and the impact on the audience by the performers. Here the audience watches and reacts to the performance of Pall Oskar, an Icelandic pop singer, songwriter, and disc jockey, performing in Harpa Concert Hall, Reykjavik, Iceland. (Arctic-Images/Corbis Documentary/Getty Images)

ago on the island of Samothrace in Greece. When we see this statue, we are looking at a soaring figure, facing into the wind, which is essentially what the Greeks saw at the time it was created. A theatre production changes from performance to performance because of differences in audience responses or in slight changes in the interactions among the cast members. And once a specific production is over, that production no longer exists.

Beyond the transitory nature of theatre, a second point to be made is that theatre alone among the performing arts centers entirely on human beings and their behavior, a point that we will discuss in more detail later in this chapter. A case could be made that opera focuses on people as well, but it should be remembered that though opera deals with human beings and their actions, it does so primarily through the medium of music. Confirmation of this fact is that operas are invariably identified by the name of the composer, never the playwright or librettist. It is always Mozart's or Verdi's opera, never the writer's opera. Music, of course, is sound: the notes produced by a singer or instrumentalist bringing alive a musical score. And dance is motion, the graceful, sometimes incredible movements made by performers in ballet, modern and popular dance, or tap.

THE MEDIATED ARTS: FILM AND TELEVISION

mediated arts The mediated arts, which include radio, film, television, digital streaming, and the like, are performances captured or recorded through the use of other types of media.

Standing between the performing arts and the fixed arts (painting, sculpture, literature) is a third art form: the ***mediated arts*** (radio, film, television, digital streaming, and the like), that is, performances captured or recorded through the use of other types of media. Whereas the other art forms have been with us for thousands of years, this third art form is relatively new. Ever since the inception of these various media, there have been dire warnings that each one would make the performing arts—especially live theatre—obsolete. Beginning in the early years of the twentieth century, mechanical and electronic inventions came fast and furiously. First there was radio, then black-and-white cinema, followed by movies in color; after that, television, again first in black and white and then in color and later, in quick succession, an electronic smorgasbord of digital devices (such as microcomputers, smartphones, and tablets) that now allow for the streaming of performances (recorded and even live), and so forth.

At every step of the way it was argued that live theatre could not possibly withstand this onslaught of rivals that were so readily accessible and so much less expensive. Why go to the theatre when we could see the same thing so much more easily in our neighborhood or at home and at such a sharply reduced cost? Surely this overwhelming electronic competition would lead to a sharp diminution of theatre attendance. Oddly enough, however, the falling off of live theatre has not happened; in fact, theatre attendance has noticeably increased. Live theatre today takes place at varying levels of professionalism in more locations across the United States (and the globe, for that matter) than at any time in its history. In the chapter "Background and Expectations of the Audience," we will discuss in detail the breadth and depth of live theatre across the United States and our global theatre. In the meantime, we

should examine why live theatre can thrive in the midst of what appears to be unbeatable competition. The answer lies in the nature of a dramatic performance by actors in the presence of a live audience.

The essence of live theatre is that it is immediate and spontaneous; it happens at a given moment before our very eyes. We are there watching it; more important, we are actually participants in the event. The twentieth-century critic Walter Kerr (1913–1996), for whom a Broadway theatre is named, explained what it means for audience and actors to be together:

> It doesn't just mean that we are in the personal presence of performers. It means that they are in *our* presence, conscious of us, speaking to us, working for and with us until a circuit that is not mechanical becomes established between us, a circuit that is fluid, unpredictable, ever-changing in its impulses, crackling, intimate. *Our* presence, the way we respond, flows back to the performer and alters what he does, to some degree and sometimes astonishingly so, every single night. We are contenders, making the play and the evening and the emotion together. We are playmates, building a structure. This never happens at a film because the film is already built, finished, sealed, incapable of responding to us in any way. The actors can't hear us or feel our presence; nothing we do, in our liveness, counts. We could be dead and the film would purr out its appointed course, flawlessly, indifferently.[1]

THE CONTRAST BETWEEN THEATRE, FILM, TELEVISION, AND STREAMED MEDIA

As Walter Kerr suggests, one way to explain the special nature of live theatre is to contrast a drama seen in a theatre with one shown on film, television, or streaming. Both present a story told in dramatic form—an enactment of scenes by performers who speak and act as if they were the people they represent. The same actor can play Juliet in *Romeo and Juliet* by William Shakespeare (1564–1616) on both stage and screen. Not only the dramatization and the acting but also other elements, such as scenery and costumes, are often similar on stage and screen. In fact, many films and television specials have been based on stage productions: *A Chorus Line, The Phantom of the Opera, The Importance of Being Earnest, Les Misérables, The Prom*, *Hamilton*, and numerous plays by Shakespeare. Also, one can learn a great deal about theatre from watching a play on film, television, or streamed, which can also give us many of the same feelings and experiences that we have when watching a theatre performance.

Moreover, the accessibility of film, television, and streaming means that they play a crucial role in our overall exposure to the depiction of dramatic events and dramatic characters. During the pandemic shutdown of the theatres in 2020 to 2021, audiences turned to these media as the only means to have theatrical experiences.

As important as the similarities are, however, there is a crucial difference between experiencing live theatre or watching it on television, film, or streamed. We are not speaking here of the technical capabilities of these media, the ability to show outdoor shots taken from helicopters, cut instantaneously from one scene to another, or create special effects such as those in science fiction films like the popular Marvel superhero films.

No, the most significant—in fact, the overriding—difference between films and theatre is the *performer–audience relationship.* The experience of being in the presence of the performer is more important to theatre than anything else. With a film or with television, we are always in the presence of an *image,* never a person.

The American playwright Jean-Claude van Itallie (b. 1936) has explained the importance of the performer–audience relationship in theatre, and how theatre differs from films and television:

> Theater is not electronic. Unlike movies and unlike television, it does require the live presence of both audience and actors in a single space. This is the theater's uniquely important advantage and function, its original religious function of bringing people together in a community ceremony where the actors are in some sense priests or celebrants, and the audience is drawn to participate with the actors in a kind of eucharist.[2]

The Irish playwright Conor McPherson (b. 1971), who has had great success in theatre and film, also points out how the two art forms are distinct by comparing the difference between a rock band playing a live performance and its recorded music:

> Ultimately the difference between making films and putting plays on is analogous to the band of musicians who go into the studio to record an album and the completely different world of performing the music live to an audience. If you want to play live, you'd better be able to play well. . . . It's a great feeling to see a talented person perform live in front of you. Curiously, the live experience both demystifies the performer and at the same time creates a whole other set of mysteries: "How do they do that?"[3]

THEATRE IS TRANSITORY AND IMMEDIATE

As noted earlier, live theatre performance changes from moment to moment as the audience encounters and impacts a series of shifting impressions and stimuli. Each instant is a direct, immediate experience.

The essence of literature and the visual arts is to catch something at a moment in time and freeze it. With the performing arts, however, that is impossible because the performing arts are not objects but events. Specific objects—costumes, props, scenery, a script—are a part of theatre, but none of these constitute the art. Bernard Beckerman (1921–1985), Shakespeare scholar and director, explained the difference:

> Theater is nothing if not spontaneous. It occurs. It happens. The novel can be put away, taken up, reread. Not theater. It keeps slipping between one's fingers. Stopping, it stops being theater. Its permanent features, facets of activity, such as scenery, script, stage, people, are no more theater than the two poles of a generator are electricity. Theater is what goes on between the parts.[4]

Plays are often printed in book form, like literature, and many novels and short stories contain extensive passages of dialogue that could easily be scenes in a play. But there is an important difference between the two forms. Unlike a novel, a play is

written to be performed. In some respects a script is to a stage production as a musical score is to a concert, or an architectural blueprint is to a building: it is an outline for a performance.

Drama can be studied in a classroom in terms of imagery, character, and theme, but with drama, study of this sort takes place *before* or *after* the event. It is a form of preparation for or follow-up to the experience; the experience is the performance itself. Obviously, we have more opportunities to read plays in book form than to see them produced; but when we read a play, we should always attempt to visualize the other aspects of a production in our mind's eye.

HUMAN BEINGS—THE FOCUS OF THEATRE

Books often focus on people, but they can also focus on science or nature; music focuses on sound; abstract painting and sculpture focus on shapes, colors, and forms. Uniquely among the arts, theatre focuses on one thing and one thing only—human beings. This is true even though different plays emphasize different human concerns, from profound problems in tragedy to pure entertainment in light comedy. And even when the performers play animals, inanimate objects, or abstract ideas, theatre concentrates on the human concerns involved.

In the modern world, human beings have lost the central place they were once believed to occupy in the universe. In the Ptolemaic view of the universe, which prevailed until the sixteenth century—when Copernicus theorized that Earth revolved around the sun—it was assumed that Earth was the center of everything. In science, we have long since given up that notion, particularly in light of explorations in outer space and other transformative discoveries regarding our universe. The human being has become seemingly less and less significant, and less and less at the center of things. But not in theatre, where the preoccupations of human beings are still the core, the center around which other elements orbit.

THE CHEMISTRY OF THE PERFORMER–AUDIENCE CONTACT

The fascination of being in the presence of a famous person or observing firsthand a special occasion is difficult to explain but not difficult to verify. No matter how often we have seen a favorite star in the movies or have seen a singer on television or listened to his or her songs on a handheld device, we will often go to any lengths to see the performer in person. Probably, at one time or another, each of us has braved bad weather and shoving crowds to see celebrities at a parade, a political rally, or a concert. Even a severe rainstorm will not deter many of us from seeing our favorite star at an outdoor concert. The same pull of personal contact draws us to the theatre. At the heart of the theatre experience, therefore, is the performer–audience relationship: the immediate, personal encounter whose chemistry and magic give theatre its special quality.

As suggested earlier, during a stage performance the performers can hear our laughter, can sense our silence, and can feel our tension as audience members. In short, we, as audience, can affect, and in subtle ways change, the performance. At the same time, as members of the audience, we watch the performers closely, consciously or unconsciously asking ourselves questions: Are the performers convincing in their roles? Will they do something surprising? Will they make a mistake? At each moment, in every stage performance, we, as fully participating audience members, should be looking for answers to questions like these. Actually two experiences are occurring almost simultaneously: our individual experience, which is highly personal; and the group experience, which we will discuss below.

THEATRE AS A GROUP EXPERIENCE

Certain arts—such as painting, sculpture, and literature—provide solitary experiences. The viewer or reader contemplates the work alone, at their own pace. This is true even in a museum: although many people may flock to look at a single painting and are with each other, they respond as individuals, one by one. In the performing arts, however, including theatre, the group experience is indispensable.

The performing arts share this trait with other communal events such as religious services, spectator sports, and celebrations. Before the event can take place, a group must assemble, at one time and in one place. When people are gathered together in this way, something mysterious happens to them. Though still individuals, with their own personalities and backgrounds, they take on other qualities as well, qualities that often overshadow their independent responses.

Psychology of Groups

Not all crowds are alike. Some are aggressive, such as an angry mob that decides to riot or a gang that terrorizes a neighborhood. Others are docile—a group of spectators on a sidewalk observing a juggler, for example. A crowd at a football game is different from a congregation at a religious observance; and a theatre crowd is distinct from any of these. In spite of being different, however, the theatre audience shares with all such groups the special characteristics of the *collective mind.* Becoming part of a group is a crucial element of the theatre experience. For a time, we share a common undertaking, focused on one activity—the performance of a play. Not only do we laugh or cry in a way we might not otherwise; we also sense an intangible communion with those around us. When a collection of individuals respond more or less in unison to what is occurring onstage, their relationship to one another is reaffirmed. If there is a display of cruelty at which we shudder, or sorrow by which we are moved, or pomposity at which we laugh, it is reassuring to have others respond as we do. For a moment we are part of a group sharing an experience; and our sorrow or joy, which we thought might be ours alone, is found to be part of a broad human response. There have even been physiological studies that prove audience members' hearts beat in similar ways during specific moments in productions.

IN FOCUS: THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND LIVE THEATRE

The worldwide COVID-19 pandemic caused economic hardships globally in 2020 and 2021. People were forced to shelter in place in many countries, including China, Italy, and the United States. Social distancing became the norm as governments asked its citizens to help stop the spread of the virus, which was particularly deadly for elderly populations and those with preexisting health conditions.

The pandemic took a toll on theatres and theatre artists, since productions and playhouses had to be closed across the world, in the same way that theatres were forced to close during Shakespeare's time in England due to the plague. In 1593, the plague caused the London theatres to shut down for 14 months. From 1603 to 1613, the theatres were closed for a total of 78 months due to the raging disease.

In 2020 and 2021, some theatres streamed productions at the same time they would have been presented live and sold "tickets" for online access codes. Still, these performances were digitally recorded so never changed from night to night. In addition, audience members watched on computers or tablets, or streamed to TV sets by themselves and could pause the events to leave and return.

Even when watching live streamed events on Zoom or other social media, audiences were limited to those family members at home or to individuals. While a noble attempt to keep theatre alive during a worldwide crisis, streaming could not replace being in the presence of live performers and in the presence of other audience members.

But we could see the ongoing appeal of theatre, ironically, during the shutdown of theatres across the globe due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The shutdown illustrated the resilience of live theatre and how much audiences missed live performances. As noted earlier, theatres streamed previously recorded productions and even staged some new ones via Zoom and other online media. A recorded version of the hit musical *Hamilton* was presented on Disney+ streaming channel earlier than expected due to audience demand. The National Theatre in London streamed several of its past productions.

Some theatres opened as soon as they could for actual performances, using very limited casts, social distancing for actors and backstage personnel, and reduced audience seating. Australia was able to reopen a production of the musical *Come From Away* in January 2021 after theatres there were closed for over 300 days. In April 2021, 378 days after Broadway shut down, a Broadway theatre reopened for a 36-minute show with two stars and only 150 audience members, all wearing masks and socially distanced. Broadway theatres, as well as theatres around the United States, reopened for full productions by the fall of 2021.

During the COVID-19 pandemic theatres were initially forced to shutdown to prevent spread of the virus. In 2021, some theatres attempted to open again using masking and social distancing for performers and audience members. Shown here is a COVID-safe production of the musical *Kiss Me Kate* staged at Western Illinois University. *https://www.facebook.com/wiutheatredance/photos/a.195941867112610/5428105970562814/?type=3*
(Photo provided courtesy of Western Illinois University Visual Production Center. Costume Design by Jeannie Galioto. Scenic Design by Gerald "Andy" Trusley. Lighting Design by Joshua Wroblewski.)

The closing of theatres during the pandemic reminded audiences everywhere how unique the live theatre experience is and how much theatre is and always will be part of our lives and our history. As one audience member said after the reopening of the first Broadway theatre: "I think I was smiling every second, just feeling being in a room with people again and having a shared human experience was incredible."[1]

1. "First Broadway Theatre Opens Its Doors Since the Covid-19 Pandemic Began." https://www.cnn.com/2021/04/03/us/broadway-st-james-theatre-ny-popsup-first-performance-trnd/index.html

THEATRE AS A GROUP EXPERIENCE
In theatre, the size, attitude, and makeup of the audience affect the overall experience. The theatre can be large or small, indoors or outdoors, and the audience can be people of similar tastes and background or a collection of quite varied individuals. Shown here is a production of *Pride and Prejudice*, a play being performed to a large audience at the Regents Park Open Air Theatre in London. (VisitBritain/Eric Nathan/Getty Images)

How Audience Composition Affects the Theatre Experience

Although being part of a group is an essential element of theatre, groups vary, and the makeup of a group will alter a theatrical event. Some audiences are general—for instance, the thousands who attend outdoor productions such as the Shakespeare festival in Ashland, Oregon, and *Unto These Hills,* which is a play about the Cherokee Indians presented each summer on a Cherokee reservation in western North Carolina. General audiences include people of all ages, from all parts of the country, and from all socioeconomic levels. Other audiences are more homogeneous, such as spectators at a high school play, a children's theatre production, a Broadway opening night, a political play, or a performance in a prison.

Another factor affecting our experience in the theatre is our relationship to the other members of the audience. If we are among friends or people of like mind, we feel comfortable and relaxed, and we readily become part of the group experience. On the other hand, if we feel alien—for example, a young person with an older group or a liberal with conservatives—we may feel estranged from the group as a whole. The people with whom we attend theatre may strongly influence our response to the total event. But theatre might also have the capacity to bring us together as an audience and performers to explore, respect, and discover our differences and similarities.

IN FOCUS: GLOBAL CONNECTIONS

Augusto Boal: The Theatre of the Oppressed

If ever there were an international theatre figure in recent times, it was Augusto Boal (1931–2009). Born in Brazil, Boal (pronounced "Bo-AHL") attended Columbia University in the United States. Returning to Brazil, he began working in the Arena Theatre in São Paulo. At first he directed conventional dramatic works, but Boal was a man with a powerful social conscience. During his early years he began to develop his philosophy of theatre. He concluded, for example, that mainstream theatre was used by the ruling class as a soporific, a means of sedating the audience and inoculating it against any impulse to act or revolt. In other words, conventional theatre oppressed ordinary citizens, especially the underprivileged.

Boal also became fascinated with the relationship of actors to audience members. He established a partnership between them, and he felt strongly that spectators should participate in any theatre event, that a way must be found for them to become performers, and a part of the action. In putting these theories into practice, he began to present *agitprop* plays, that is, plays with a strong political and social message. He experimented with several versions of such plays. One was the Invisible Theatre, in which actors, seemingly spontaneously, presented a prepared scene in a public space such as a town square or a restaurant. Another was his Forum Theatre, in which a play about a social problem became the basis of a discussion with audience members about solutions to the problem.

Considered an enemy of the authoritarian government in Brazil for his work in the 1960s, he was jailed in 1971 and tortured. Released after a few months, he was exiled from his native land. Following that he lived in various countries: Argentina, Portugal, and France. He decided along the way that his approach should be less didactic than it had been, that he would be more effective if he engaged audiences in the theatrical process rather than confronting them. This was the basis of his Theatre of the Oppressed, which became the cornerstone of his lifework from then on. He wrote a book by that title, which appeared in 1974.

Augusto Boal (Sucheta Das/AP Images)

In 1985 Boal returned to Brazil. From that point until his death, for the next quarter century, he traveled all over the world directing, lecturing, and establishing centers furthering the Theatre of the Oppressed. He also wrote other books, which were widely read. His approach to theatre found adherents in more than forty countries. Wherever the Theatre of the Oppressed was established, its productions challenged injustice, especially in poor and disenfranchised communities where citizens are often without a voice or an advocate. In his later years he was looked upon by many as the most inspirational person of his time in propagating socially oriented theatre.

THE SEPARATE ROLES OF PERFORMERS AND SPECTATORS

It is important to note the difference between *observed* theatre and *participatory* theatre. In observed theatre, as audience members we participate vicariously or empathetically with what is happening onstage. Empathy is the experience of mentally or emotionally entering into the feelings or spirit of another person—in this case, a character onstage. Sometimes we will not be in tune with the characters onstage but will react vehemently against them. In either situation, though, we are participating empathetically. We might shed tears, laugh, pass judgment, sit frozen, or tremble with fear. But we participate through our imagination while separated from the action.

There are also times when observers and audience members participate in a theatre event. In rituals and ceremonies in parts of Africa and among certain tribes of Native Americans, those attending have become, in effect, participants, joining in the singing and dancing, for instance. At a number of contemporary theatre events spectators have also been urged to take part. For example, one of the chief aims of the Theatre of the Oppressed created by Augusto Boal was to eliminate the distinction between audience members and performers. In Boal's philosophy, every spectator could be and should be an actor, and he developed a number of strategies to bring this about.

How Should the Audience Be Involved?

The attempt to involve audience members directly springs from a desire to make theatre more immediate and intense, and such work can be innovative and exciting. It remains, however, an exception to the kinds of theatre most of us are likely to encounter. The theatre most of us will experience requires a degree of distancing, in the same way that all art requires a certain perspective. Imagine trying to get the full effect of a large landscape painting when standing a few inches from the canvas: one would see only the brushstrokes of a single tree or a small patch of blue sky. To perceive and appreciate a work of art, we need distance. This separation, which is called ***aesthetic distance,*** is as necessary in theatre as in any other art.

aesthetic distance Physical or psychological separation or detachment of audience from dramatic action, usually considered necessary for artistic illusion.

In the same way that we must stand back from a painting to get its full effect, so too, as theatre spectators we must be separated from the performance in order to see and hear what is happening onstage and absorb the experience. If an audience member becomes involved in the proceedings or goes onstage and takes part in the action, as often occurred in a Boal production, he or she reverses roles and becomes a performer, not a spectator. The separation between performers and spectators remains.

Audience Participation through Direct Action

Today a range of educational or therapeutic activities employ theatrical techniques. The aim is not a performance viewed by an audience, as such. Those who take part in such activities are not performers in the usual sense, and there is no attempt to follow a written script. Rather, the emphasis is on education, personal development, or therapy—fields in which theatre techniques have opened up new possibilities. In schools, for example, creative dramatics, theatre games, and group improvisations have proved invaluable for self-discovery and the development of healthy group attitudes. By acting out hypothetical situations or giving free rein to their imagination, children can build self-confidence, discover their creative potential, and overcome their inhibitions.

DRAMA THERAPY
Theatre techniques can be used for educational and therapeutic purposes. Shown here is a moment from the play *Circle Mirror Transformation*, by Annie Baker and directed by Sam Gold, at Playwrights Horizons in New York in 2009 that depicts the use of theatre for therapeutic purposes. The actors in this scene (from left to right) are: Tracee Chimo, Deirdre O'Connell, Heidi Schreck, Reed Birney, and Peter Friedman. (Sara Krulwich/The New York Times/Redux)

In some situations, creative dramatics can teach lessons that are difficult to teach by conventional means. Playwriting, too, has often proved to be an invaluable educational tool. Students who write scenes, whether autobiographical or fictional, find the experience not only fulfilling but also enlightening. In addition to creative dramatics, a wide range of other activities—*sociodrama, psychodrama,* and *drama therapy*—incorporate theatrical techniques. For adults as well as children, these activities have come to the forefront as educational and therapeutic methods. In sociodrama, the members of participating groups—such as parents and children, students and teachers, or legal authorities and ordinary citizens—explore their own attitudes and prejudices. One successful approach is *role reversal.* A group of young people, for instance, may take the part of their parents while the adults assume the roles of the children; or members of a street gang will take the roles of the police, and the police will take the roles of the street gang. In such role playing, both groups become aware of deep-seated feelings and arrive at a better understanding of one another.

Psychodrama uses some of the same techniques as sociodrama but is more private and interpersonal; in fact, it can become so intense that it should be carried out only under the supervision of a trained therapist. In psychodrama, individual fears, anxieties, and frustrations are explored. A person might reenact a particularly traumatic scene from childhood, for example. In participatory drama, theatre is a means to another end: education, therapy, group development, or the like. Its aim is not public performance, and there is little emphasis on a carefully prepared, expertly performed presentation before an audience; in fact, just the opposite is true. In observed drama, on the other hand, the aim is a professional performance for spectators, and this requires a separation between the performers and the audience—the "aesthetic distance" described earlier.

Participatory and Immersive Theatre There are some times, however, when observers and audience members are invited, even urged, to participate actively together in a theatre event. In the 1960s, for example, many politically and socially engaged theatre groups created productions in which spectators were encouraged to ignore the traditional boundaries between audience members and performers. In other words, instead of viewing the stage action as taking place in a separate space, audience members were asked to see the stage and the viewing area as a single entity.

In recent years a new phenomenon, ***immersive theatre,*** has become popular internationally. In immersive theatre, the audience plays an active role in some way, often moving through a performance space, sometimes even choosing where they go

immersive theatre In immersive theatre, audience members play an active role in some way, often moving through a performance space, sometimes even choosing where they should go within that space and what they should see and do. Many such productions use transformed, redesigned spaces as well as requiring audience members to engage in a complete sensory experience (touch, smell, even taste of foods and drink).

within that space and what they see and do. Many immersive productions use transformed, redesigned spaces as well as require the audience member to engage in a complete sensory experience (touch, smell, even taste of foods and drink). The goal is an attempt to personalize the experience for each audience member while still emphasizing the social interaction between small groups in the audience, as well as with the performers.

An example of such a work is *Sleep No More* (2003), an adaptation of Shakespeare's *Macbeth,* which the British company Punchdrunk has staged successfully in New York and London. Another group, the Australian theatre company One Step at a Time Like This, also focuses on immersive theatrical experiences. Their production *En Route,* for example, takes individual audience members through city spaces connecting those spaces to theatrical interactions with individual performers along the way. In Chicago, Windy City Playhouse stages immersive works, including *Southern Gothic* (2018), in which 30 audience members move from room to room, eavesdropping on the hosts and guests of a unique birthday celebration that is more and more out of control. In 2020, this theatre revived *Boys in the Band,* a significant 1968 drama about gay life in New York, in an immersive environment.

Although there has been a long history of participatory theatre where audience members are asked to take an active role, the most traditional role of audience members in the contemporary theatre is as observers.

THE IMAGINATION OF THE AUDIENCE

For those who create it, theatre is a direct experience: a performer walks onstage and embodies a character; a carpenter builds scenery; a scene designer paints it. For these people the experience is like cutting a finger or being held in an embrace: the pain or the warmth is felt directly and physically. Members of a theatre audience experience a different kind of pain or warmth. As spectators in a theatre, we sense the presence of other audience members; we observe the movements and gestures of performers and hear the words they speak; and we see costumes, scenery, and lighting. From these we form mental images or make imaginative connections that provoke joy, laughter, anger, sorrow, or pain. All this occurs, however, usually without moving from our seats.

We naturally assume that those who create theatre are highly imaginative people and that their minds are full of vivid, exciting ideas that might not occur to the rest of us. If we conclude, however, that we in the audience have only a limited theatrical imagination, we do ourselves a great injustice. As we saw earlier, theatre is a two-way street—an exchange between performers and audience—and this is nowhere more evident than in the creation of *illusion.* Illusion may be initiated by the creators of theatre, but it is completed by the audience.

In the eerie world of William Shakespeare's *Macbeth,* when three witches appear out of the mist or when Banquo's ghost interrupts the banquet, we know it is fantasy; witches and ghosts like those in *Macbeth* do not appear in everyday life. In the theatre, however, we take such fantasy at face value. In Shakespeare's own day, for instance, a convention readily accepted by audiences was that women's parts were played by boy actors. Shakespeare's women characters—Juliet, Desdemona, Lady

Macbeth—were not acted by women, as they are today, but played by boys. Everyone in the audience at an Elizabethan theatre knew that the boys were not actually women but accepted without question the notion that a boy actor was presenting an impression or an imitation of a woman. The film *Shakespeare in Love* (1998) afforded a fascinating glimpse of this: the actress Gwyneth Paltrow plays a young woman portraying a boy actor (in secret), while her acting partner is a young man playing a young woman portrayed by a boy (in the open).

Along with fantasy, we, as audience members, accept drastic shifts in time and space. Someone onstage dressed in a Revolutionary uniform says, "It is the winter of 1778, at Valley Forge," and we do not question it. What is more, we accept rapid movements back and forth in time. ***Flashbacks***—abrupt movements from the present to the past and back again—are a familiar technique in films and television shows, but they are also commonplace in modern drama. A similar device often used in drama is *anachronism.* An anachronism involves placing some character or event outside its proper time sequence: for example, having people from the past speak and act as if they were living today. Medieval mystery and morality plays frequently contained anachronisms.

THE IMAGINATION OF THE AUDIENCE
The audience and the performers are the two essential elements of theatre: both are required for theatre to occur. One aspect of the audience's participation is the use of its imagination. For the Broadway musical *Avenue Q*, audience members were expected to focus on the puppets as well as the clearly visible performers/operators. Shown here is a scene presented at the 2004 Tony Awards. Left to right are: Jennifer Barnhart, Rick Lyon, and John Tartaglia. (Sara Krulwich/The New York Times/Redux)

flashback In a narrative or story, movement back to a time in the past to show a scene or an event before the narrative resumes at the point at which it was interrupted.

The medieval play *Abraham and Isaac,* for instance, is set in the time of the Old Testament, but it makes several references to the Christian trinity—a religious concept that was not developed until centuries later. The medieval audience accepted this shift in time as a matter of course, just as we do in theatre today.

In his frequently revived play *Angels in America* (1993), Tony Kushner includes a number of bizarre and fantastic characters or events. For example, a

PLAYING YOUR PART: EXPERIENCING THEATRE

1. Watch a scene from the film *Les Misérables.* Now try to imagine why it would be different as a live theatrical experience.
2. Read aloud the balcony scene from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. What is realistic about the scene? What are some nonrealistic elements?
3. Discuss your favorite current nonrealistic film or television show. What fantastic elements are most appealing? Why?
4. Discuss a recent film or television show that you felt was realistic. What was real about it? What wasn't real?
5. Read a speech from a play (or a paragraph from a novel) aloud in class. How did your classmates affect your reading? How would you describe your class as an audience? Homogeneous? Heterogeneous? Explain.

character in the play called Mr. Lies is an imaginary person created in the mind of Harper, a housewife who is addicted to pills. Near the end of part 1, Mr. Lies takes Harper on a fantasy trip to the Antarctic. At the very end of part 1, an angel crashes through the ceiling and speaks to Prior, a man ill with AIDS. In the theatre, then, our imagination allows us to conceive of people and events we have never seen or experienced and to transcend our physical circumstances to the point where we forget who we are, where we are, or what time it is. How is this possible? It happens because in the theatre our imagination works for us just as it does in everyday life.

The musical *Hamilton* uses anachronisms in many ways to draw parallels between our country's past and its present.

Tools of the Imagination: Symbol and Metaphor

We can understand this process better if we look closely at two tools of our imagination: symbol and metaphor.

symbol A sign, a visual image, an object, or an action that signifies something else; a visual embodiment of something invisible. A single image or sign stands for an entire idea or larger concept—a flag is a symbol for a nation; a logo is a symbol for a corporation.

Functions of Symbols

In general terms, a ***symbol*** is a sign, token, or emblem that signifies something else. A simple form of symbol is a sign. Some signs stand for a single, uncomplicated idea or action. In everyday life we are surrounded by them: road signs, such as an S-shaped curve; audible signals, like sirens and foghorns; and a host of mathematical and typographical symbols: $, 1/4, @, &. We sometimes forget that language itself is symbolic; the letters of the alphabet are only lines and curves on a page. Words are arrangements of letters that by common agreement represent something else. The same four letters mean different things depending on the order in which they are placed: *pear, reap, rape.* These three words set different imaginative wheels in motion and signal responses that vary greatly from word to word.

At times, symbols exert incredible emotional power; a good example is a flag, embodying a nation's passions, fears, and ambitions. Flags are symbols: lines, shapes, and colors that in certain combinations become immediately recognizable. Like flags, some symbols signify ideas or emotions that are far more complex and profound than the symbol itself. The cross, for example, is a symbol of Christ and, beyond that, of Christianity as a whole. Whatever form a symbol takes—language, a flag, or a religious emblem—it can embody the total meaning of a religion, a nation, or an idea.

Functions of Metaphors

A similar transformation takes place with metaphor, another form of imaginative substitution. With metaphor we announce that one thing is another, in order to describe it or point up its meaning more clearly. (In poetry, you will remember, a simile says that one thing is *like* another; metaphor simply states directly that one thing *is* another.) The Bible is filled with metaphors. The psalmist who says, "The Lord is my shepherd," or who says of God, "Thou art my rock and my fortress," is speaking metaphorically. He does not mean literally that God is a shepherd, a rock, or a fortress; he is saying that God is similar to and has qualities like these things. Just as with

symbols, metaphors are part of the fabric of life, as the following common expressions suggest:

"How gross."

"They are off the wall."

"It's a slam dunk."

"Give me the bottom line."

"That's cool."

We are saying one thing but describing another. When someone describes a person or event as "cool," the reference is not to a low temperature but to an admirable quality. The term *slam dunk* comes from basketball, but in everyday parlance is applied to a wide range of activities that have nothing to do with sports. We can see from these examples that metaphors, like symbols, are part of daily life.

THE POWER OF SYMBOLS

Symbols and metaphors, though not real in a literal sense, have enormous power to influence our lives; in that respect, they become "realer than real." A forceful symbol of the bravery, tragedy, and losses of the Vietnam War is the wall designed by Maya Lin in Washington, D.C., where the names of those who died are etched into the side of the memorial. (Win McNamee/Getty Images)

The "Reality" of the Imagination

Our use of symbol and metaphor shows how large a part imagination plays in our lives. Millions of automobiles in the United States can be brought to a halt, not by a concrete wall, but by a small light changing from green to red. Imagine attempting to control traffic, or virtually any type of human activity, without symbols. Beyond being a matter of convenience, symbols are necessary to our survival.

The same holds true for metaphor. Frequently we find that we cannot express fear, anxiety, hope, or joy—any of the deep human feelings—in descriptive language. That is why we sometimes scream. It is also why we have poetry and use metaphors. Even scientists, the men and women we are most likely to consider realists, turn to metaphor at crucial times. They discuss the "big bang" theory of the origin of the universe and talk of "black holes" in outer space. Neither term is "scientific," but both terms communicate what scientists have in mind in a way that an equation or a more logical phrase could not.

Dreams provide another example of the power of the imagination. We dream that we are falling off a cliff; then, suddenly, we wake up and find that we are not flying through the air but lying in bed. Significantly, however, the dream of falling means more to us than the objective fact of lying in bed. Theatre functions in somewhat the same way. Though not real in a literal sense, it can be completely—even painfully—real in an emotional or intellectual sense. The critic and director Harold Clurman (1901–1980) gave one of his books on theatre the title *Lies Like Truth.* Theatre—like dreams or fantasies—can sometimes be more truthful about life than a mundane, objective description. This is a paradox of dreams, fantasies, and art, including theatre: by probing deep into the psyche to reveal inner truths, they can be more real than outward reality.

IN FOCUS: THE CONTRAST BETWEEN REALISM AND DEPARTURES FROM REALISM

The distinction between realistic techniques in theatre and those forms that depart from realistic techniques becomes clearer when the two approaches are examined side by side. This distinction is present in all aspects of theatre.

Realistic Techniques	"Departures from Realism" Techniques
STORY	
Events that the audience knows have happened or might happen in everyday life: Blanche DuBois in Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* goes to New Orleans to visit her sister and brother-in-law.	Events that do not take place in real life but occur only in the imagination: in Kushner's *Angels in America,* a character in a housewife's mind takes her on an imaginary trip to the Antarctic.
STRUCTURE	
Action is confined to real places; time passes normally, as it does in everyday life: the hospital room setting in Margaret Edson's *Wit* is an example.	Arbitrary use of time and place: in August Strindberg's *The Dream Play,* walls dissolve and characters are transformed, as in a dream.
CHARACTERS	
Recognizable human beings, such as the priest and the nun in John Patrick Shanley's *Doubt*.	Unreal figures like the ghost of Hamlet's father in William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* or the three witches in *Macbeth*.
ACTING	
Performers portray people as they behave in daily life: the men on a summer holiday in the country house in Terrence McNally's *Love! Valor! Compassion!*	Performers portray animals in the musical *The Lion King;* they also engage in singing, dancing, and acrobatics in musical comedy or performance art.
LANGUAGE	
Ordinary dialogue or conversation: the two brothers trying to get ahead in Suzan-Lori Parks's *Topdog/Underdog.*	Poetry such as Romeo speaks to Juliet in Shakespeare's play; or the song "Tonight" in the musical *West Side Story.*
SCENERY	
Rooms of a real house, as in Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*	Abstract forms and shapes on a bare stage—for example, for a Greek play such as Sophocles's *Electra.*
LIGHTING	
Light onstage appears to come from natural sources—a lamp in a room, or sunlight, as in Ibsen's *Ghosts,* where the sunrise comes through a window in the final scene.	Shafts of light fall at odd angles; also, colors in light are used arbitrarily. Example: a single blue spotlight on a singer in a musical comedy.
COSTUMES	
Ordinary street clothes, like those worn by the characters in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson.*	The bright costumes of a chorus in a musical comedy; the strange outfit worn by Caliban, the half-man, half-beast in Shakespeare's *The Tempest.*
MAKEUP	
The natural look of characters in a domestic play such as Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun.*	Masks worn by characters in a Greek tragedy or in a modern play like the musical *Beauty and the Beast.*

THE IMAGINARY WORLDS OF THEATRE

As theatre audience members, we are asked to accept many kinds of imaginary worlds. One way to classify these imaginary realms is as ***realism*** and ***departures from realism (or nonrealism).*** At the outset, it is essential to know that in theatre the term *realistic* denotes a special application of what we consider "genuine" or "real." A realistic element is not necessarily more truthful than a nonrealistic element. Rather, in theatre, realistic and nonrealistic denote different ways of presenting reality.

realism Broadly, an attempt to present onstage people, places, and events corresponding to those in everyday life.

nonrealism (or departures from realism) All types of theatre that depart from observable reality.

Realistic Elements of Theatre

In theatre, a realistic element is one that resembles *observable* reality. It is a kind of photographic truth. We apply the term *realistic* to those elements of theatre that conform to our own observations of people, places, and events. Realistic theatre follows the predictable logic of everyday life: the law of gravity, the time it takes a person to travel from one place to another, the way a room in a house looks, the way a person dresses. With a realistic approach, these conform to our normal expectations. In realistic theatre, we are called upon in our imaginations to accept the notion that what we see onstage is not fantastic but real, even though we always know we are in the theatre and not watching an actual event.

We are quite familiar with realism in films and television. Part of the reason is mechanical. The camera records what the lens "sees." Whether it is a bedroom in a house, a crowded city street, or the Grand Canyon, film captures the scene as the eye sees it. Theatre too has always had realistic elements. Every type of theatre that is not pure fantasy has realistic aspects. For example, characters who are supposed to represent real people must be rooted in a human truth that audiences can recognize. When we are so readily able to verify what we see before us from our own experience, it is

REALISTIC AND NONREALISTIC THEATRE CONTRASTED
These scenes illustrate some of the differences between two approaches to the make-believe of theatre. At the left we see Gabriel Brown as George Murchison, Edena Hines as Beneatha Younger, and Susan Kelechi Watson as Ruth Younger in the Westport Country Playhouse production of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun.* In contrast, the scene at the right is from a revival of an avant-garde production presented at the Brooklyn Academy of Music of *Einstein on the Beach,* directed and designed by Robert Wilson. Note the abstract setting, the eerie lighting, the symbolic characters. This kind of theatre contrasts sharply with realism. (*left*: T Charles Erickson *right*: Sara Krulwich/The New York Times/Redux)

easy to identify with it and to accept its authenticity. For this reason, realistic theatre has become firmly established in modern times, and it seems likely to remain so.

Departures from Realism: Nonrealistic Elements of Theatre

Departures from realism includes every technique that does not conform to our observations of surface reality: poetry instead of prose, ghosts rather than flesh-and-blood people, abstract forms for scenery, and so forth. Again, we find a counterpart in films and television. The extremely popular vampire and zombie films and television shows present us with fantastic characters and situations. All of the *Star Wars* films have intriguing digitally generated characters and effects, which is one of the reasons audiences look forward to each of the new additions to the series.

In theatre, the argument for *departures from realism* (or *nonrealism*) is that the surface of life—a real conversation, for instance, or a real room in a house—can never convey the whole truth, because so much of life occurs in our minds and imagination. If we are depressed and tell a friend that we feel "lousy" or "awful," we do not even begin to communicate the depth of our feelings. It is because of the inadequacy of ordinary words that people turn to poetry, and because of the inadequacy of other forms of daily communication that they turn to music, dance, art, sculpture, and the entire range of symbols and metaphors discussed earlier.

soliloquy Speech in which a character who is alone onstage speaks inner thoughts aloud.

pantomime A form of theatrical presentation that relies on dance, gesture, and physical movement without speech.

A wide range of theatrical techniques and devices fall into the category of departures from realism or nonrealism. One example is the ***soliloquy,*** in which a solitary character speaks to the audience, expressing in words a hidden thought. Another example is ***pantomime,*** in which performers pretend to be using objects that are not actually present, such as drinking from a cup or opening an umbrella. Many aspects of musical comedy are nonrealistic. People in various human circumstances do not break into song or dance as they do in musicals like *Guys and Dolls, West Side Story, Wicked, The Book of Mormon, Hamilton* or *The Prom.* One could say that any activity or scenic device that transcends or symbolizes reality tends to be nonrealistic.

NONREALISTIC ELEMENTS
Realism has been a major approach to theatre since the late nineteenth century, but for hundreds of years before that, theatre incorporated many unrealistic elements. One example is Shakespeare's use of ghosts, spirits, and various otherworldly creatures. Shown here in a Royal Shakespeare Company production of *The Tempest,* directed by Gregory Dora, with Simon Russell Beale as Prospero (front center) and Mark Quartley as Ariel, a spirit. This production was staged at Stratford Upon Avon in 2016. (Geraint Lewis/Alamy Stock Photo)

Combining the Realistic and the Nonrealistic

In discussing realistic and nonrealistic elements of theatre, we must not assume that these two approaches are mutually exclusive. The terms *realistic* and *nonrealistic* are simply a convenient way of separating those parts of theatre that correspond to our observations and experiences of everyday life from those that do not. Most performances and theatre events contain a mixture of realistic and nonrealistic elements. In acting, for example, a Shakespearean play calls for a number of nonrealistic qualities or techniques. At the

same time, any performer playing a Shakespearean character must convince the audience that he or she represents a real human being.

To take more modern examples, in *The Glass Menagerie* by Tennessee Williams (1911–1983), and in *Our Town* by Thornton Wilder (1897–1975), one of the performers serves as a narrator and also participates in the action. When the performer playing this part is speaking directly to the audience, his actions are nonrealistic; when he is taking part in a scene with other characters, they are realistic.

Distinguishing Stage Reality from Fact

Whether theatre is realistic or nonrealistic, it is different from the physical reality of everyday life. In recent years there have been attempts to make theatre less remote from our daily lives. For example, plays have been presented that were largely transcripts of court trials or congressional hearings. This was part of a movement called *theatre of fact,* which involved reenactments of material gathered from actual events. Partly as a result of this trend, theatre and life have become intertwined. Television has added to this with *docudramas,* dramatizing the lives, for example, of ordinary, often actual people who become heroic. There has also been a vogue for what is called "reality television," in which real people are put in stressful situations with a presumably unplanned outcome.

FACT-BASED THEATRE
A popular form that has emerged in the past half century is theatre based on facts. This includes documentary theatre taken from court trials, congressional hearings, and interviews. Shown here is Lynn Japjit Kaur, center, as Jyoti Singh Pandey, a woman who died in 2012 after she was gang-raped and tortured in New Delhi, in the play *Nirbhaya*. The testimony of five Indian women describing their experiences of sexual abuse is used by South African playwright and director Yael Farber to create a harrowing documentary drama that was performed internationally, including at the Lynn Redgrave Theater in New York in 2015. (Sara Krulwich/The New York Times/Redux)

This kind of interaction—and sometimes confusion—between life and art has been heightened, of course, by the emergence of television and film documentaries that cover real events but are also edited. In addition, today we have "staged" political demonstrations and hear of "staged news." In politics staged events have become commonplace: a presidential or senatorial candidate visits a flag factory, an aircraft carrier, or an elementary school for what is called a "photo opportunity." When news becomes "staged" and theatre becomes "fact," it is difficult to separate the two.

These developments point up the close relationship between theatre and life; nevertheless, when we see a performance, even a re-creation of events that have actually occurred, on some level we are always aware of being in a theatre. Most of us have seen plays with a stage setting so real we marvel at its authenticity: a kitchen, for instance, in which the appliances actually work, with running water in the faucets, ice in the refrigerator, and a stove on which an actor or actress can cook. What we stand in awe of, though, is that the room *appears* so real when we know, in truth, that it is not. We admire the fact that, not being a real kitchen, it looks as if it were. We are abruptly reminded of the distinction between stage reality and physical reality when the two lines cross. If an actor unintentionally trips and falls onstage, we suddenly shift our attention from the character to the person playing the part. Has he hurt himself? Will he be able to continue? A similar reaction occurs when a performer forgets lines, or a sword falls accidentally during a duel, or a dancer slips during a musical number.

We remember the distinction, also, at the moment when someone else *fails* to remember it. Children frequently mistake actions onstage for the real thing, warning the heroine of the villain's plan or assuming that blows on the head of a puppet actually hurt. There is a famous story about a production of *Othello* in which a spectator ran onstage to prevent the actor playing Othello from strangling Desdemona. Most people, however, are always aware of the difference; our minds manage two seemingly contradictory feats simultaneously: on the one hand, we know that an imagined event is not objectively real, but at the same time we accept it completely as fantasy. This is possible because of what the poet and critic Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) called the "willing suspension of disbelief." Having separated the reality of art from the reality of everyday life, the mind is prepared to go along unreservedly with the reality of art.

PLAYING YOUR PART: THINKING ABOUT THEATRE

1. Think of an event you have recently attended in person: a rock concert, a circus, a dance or musical presentation, a religious or memorial service. Explain what it meant to you to be present, in the same space at the same time as those performing or officiating. What was the feeling, the emotion, the stimulation you experienced that would not have been the same if you had watched the event on television?
2. During a performance you may observe a puppet or group of puppets who appear as real as people we deal with every day. Or you may see on a bare stage two or three props (a tree, for example, or a throne) and you assume you are in a forest or a royal palace. Why do you think during a performance we are able to let our imaginations take over? Is this something we also do in everyday life?
3. While watching a performance you may dissolve into laughter or cry real tears. The whole time, on some level, you know what you are observing is not "real." But does this matter? In some sense is the experience real? What is the relationship between a theatre experience such as this and an experience in daily life?

The Pulitzer Prize winning play *Fairview* (2018) by Jackie Sibblies Drury, begins as a theatrically realistic work, with the audience observing a birthday party being given by a Black family for a grandmother. But eventually, the audience is shatteringly reminded that they are in the theatre and in turn of the racist world off stage. The play makes us realize that nothing in the theatre is ever real and that true reality only exists off the stage.

SUMMARY

1. During the past 100 years, theatre has been challenged by a succession of technological developments: silent movies, radio, talking movies, television, and electronic handheld devices. It has survived these challenges partly because of the special nature of the performer–audience relationship.
2. In 2020 and 2021, live theatre was challenged by the worldwide shutdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. The desire for live performance resulted in streamed and Zoom hosted performances. Still, there was a clamor for a return to live performances.
3. The relationship between performer and audience is "live": each is in the other's presence, in the same place at the same time. It is the exchange between the two that gives theatre its unique quality.
4. Theatre—like the other performing arts—is a group experience. The composition of the audience has a direct bearing on the effect of the experience.
5. Participants and spectators play different roles in the theatre experience; the role of spectators is to observe and respond.
6. There is a difference between participating in theatre by direct action and by observation. In the former situation, nonactors take part, usually for the purpose of personal growth and self-development. In the latter, a presentation is made by one group to another, and the spectators do not participate physically in the experience.
7. For the observer, theatre is an experience of the imagination and the mind. The mind seems capable of accepting almost any illusion as to what is taking place, who the characters are, and when and where the action occurs.
8. Our minds are capable of leaps of imagination, not just in the theatre but in our everyday lives, where we use symbol and metaphor to communicate with one another and to explain the world around us.
9. The world of the imagination—symbols, metaphors, dreams, fantasies, and various expressions of art—is "real," even though it is intangible and has no objective reality. Frequently it tells us more than any form of logical discourse about our true feelings.
10. Theatre makes frequent use of symbols and metaphors—in writing, acting, and design—and theatre itself can be looked upon as a metaphor.
11. Theatre calls upon audiences to imagine two kinds of worlds: realistic and nonrealistic. Realistic theatre depicts things onstage that conform to observable reality; nonrealistic theatre includes the realm of dreams, fantasy, symbol, and metaphor. In theatre, realism and nonrealism are frequently mixed.
12. In order to take part in theatre as an observer, it is important to keep the "reality" of fantasies and dreams separate from the real world. By making this separation, we open our imagination to the full range of possibilities in theatre.

Design Elements: Audience Sitting in Theatre (theatre): Ron Chapple/Photodisc/Getty Images; Studio Light (spotlights): Exactostock/SuperStock

2

Background and Expectations of the Audience

We are soon going to attend a theatre performance, either for personal enjoyment or as a class assignment. As a soon-to-be audience member is there a way we can prepare so that the production will be more entertaining or more meaningful? Are there steps we can take beforehand that will enhance the experience, make it more rewarding, and make us a more engaged audience member? The answer to these questions is "yes."

In a sense, this entire book is a preparation for going to the theatre. Chapter by chapter it explains the various elements of a production—the acting and directing, the script, the scenic and costume design—and how all these fit together in the final stage presentation. But initially, before getting to these specifics, there is information and preparation that will make attending a specific production more exciting and pleasurable, as well as make us a more informed, engaged, and knowledgeable audience member.

For one thing, when we attend a theatre event, we bring more than our mere presence; we bring a background of personal knowledge and a set of expectations that shape the experience. Several important factors are involved:

1. Our family and personal history, knowledge, and memories.
2. Our awareness of the social, political, and philosophical world in which the play was written or produced—the link between theatre and society.
3. Our knowledge about the play and playwright.
4. Our personal expectations concerning the event: what we anticipate will happen at a performance. As we will see, misconceptions about what the theatre experience is or should be can lead to confusion and disappointment.

THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE

Members of a theatre audience come to a performance with individual, personal backgrounds, which can make the experience more meaningful. An example would be an African American audience member seeing A Raisin in the Sun*, which depicts an African American family trying to move into a home in an all-white neighborhood in mid-twentieth century, originally opening on Broadway in 1959. Shown here is a 2014 revival at the Barrymore Theatre in New York, directed by Kenny Leon. From left to right are: LaTanya Richardson Jackson and Sophie Okonedo.* (Sara Krulwich/The New York Times/Redux)

BACKGROUND OF INDIVIDUAL SPECTATORS

A background element that each of us brings to a theatre performance as an audience member is our own individual memories and experiences. Each of us has a personal catalog of childhood memories, emotional scars, and private fantasies. Anything we see onstage that reminds us of this personal world will have a strong impact on us. When we see a play that has been written in our own day, we bring with us also a deep awareness of the world from which the play comes, because we come from the same world. Through the books we have read, through newspapers and television, through our discussions with friends, we have a background of common information, values, and beliefs. Our shared knowledge and experience are much larger than most of us realize, and they form a crucial ingredient in our theatre experience.

The play *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry (1930–1965) tells the story of an African American family in Chicago in the late 1950s whose members want to improve their lives by finding better jobs and moving to a new neighborhood. But they face a number of obstacles put in their way by racism. Many African Americans—and other persons from underrepresented groups who have experienced racism—can readily identify with this situation. They may know from personal experience what the characters are going through or recognize the ongoing systemic racism confronted by the Younger family.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON THE PLAY OR PLAYWRIGHT

Often to enhance our experience of attending a theatre production we need additional information about a play or a playwright. For instance, a play may contain difficult passages or obscure references, which it is helpful to know about before we see a performance. As an example, we can take a segment from Shakespeare's *King Lear:* the scene in the third act when Lear appears on the heath in the midst of a terrible storm. Earlier in the play, Lear divided his kingdom between two of his daughters, Goneril and Regan, who he thought loved him but who, he discovers, have actually deceived him. Gradually, they have stripped him of everything: his possessions, his soldiers, his dignity. Finally, they send him out from their homes to face the wind and rain in open country. As the storm begins, Lear speaks the following lines:

> Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!
> You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout
> Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks!

In the first line, the expression "crack your cheeks" refers to pictures in the corners of old maps showing a face puffed out at the cheeks, blowing the wind. Shakespeare is saying that the face of the wind should blow so hard that its cheeks will crack. In the second line, "cataracts and hurricanoes" refers to water from both the heavens and the seas. In the third line, "cocks" refers to weathercocks on the tops of church steeples; Lear wants so much rain to fall that even the weathercocks on the steepletops will be submerged. If we are aware of these meanings, we can join them with the sounds of the words—and with the rage the actor expresses in his voice and gestures—to get the full impact of the scene.

In contemporary theatre, playwrights frequently use special techniques that will confuse us if we do not understand them. The German playwright Bertolt Brecht (1898–1956), who lived and wrote in the United States during the 1940s, wanted to provoke his audiences into thinking about what they were seeing. To do this, he would interrupt a story with a song or a speech by a narrator. His theory was that when a story is stopped in this manner, audience members have an opportunity to consider more carefully what they are seeing and to relate the drama onstage to other aspects of life.

If we are not aware that this is Brecht's purpose in interrupting the action, we might conclude that he was simply a careless or inferior playwright. Here, as in similar cases, knowledge of the play or playwright is indispensable to a complete theatre experience.

The African American playwright August Wilson (1945–2005) wrote a ten-play cycle that dramatized Black life in the United States, each play set in a separate decade of the twentieth century. Wilson wanted to chronicle the ongoing systemic racism in the United States as well as Black strength, community, and resiliency in the face of that oppression. Wilson's works are influenced by Black history, music, culture, and religious beliefs. Audience members attending his works can have a greater appreciation if they understand his intentions and have an awareness of his dramatic techniques.

BACKGROUND OF THE PERIOD

Even when we identify closely with the characters or situation in a play and we have knowledge about the play and the playwright, often in drama from the past there are elements we cannot understand unless we are familiar with the history, culture, and philosophy of the period when it was created. This is because there is a close connection between any art form and the society in which it is produced.

Theatre and Society

Art does not occur in a vacuum. All art, including theatre, is related to the society in which it is produced. Artists are sometimes charged with being "antisocial," "subversive," or "enemies of the state," and such accusations carry the strong suggestion that artists are outsiders or invaders rather than true members of a culture. To be sure, art frequently challenges society and is sometimes on the leading edge of history, appearing to forecast the future. More often than not, however, such art simply recognizes what is already present in society but has not yet surfaced. A good example is the abstract painting that developed in Europe in the early twentieth century. At first it was considered a freakish aberration, an unattractive jumble of jagged lines and patches of color with no relation to nature, truth, or anything human. In time, however, abstract art came to be recognized as a genuine movement, and the disjointed and fragmentary lines of abstract art seemed to reflect the quality of much of modern life.

Art grows in the soil of a specific society. With very few exceptions—and those are soon forgotten—art is a mirror of its age, revealing the prevailing attitudes, underlying assumptions, and deep-seated beliefs of a particular group of people. Art may question society's views or reaffirm them, but it cannot escape