

Eleventh Edition

# THEATRE

BRIEF



Robert  
COHEN



Donovan  
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# Theatre Brief

Eleventh Edition



## **Robert Cohen**

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University of California, Irvine

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Seton Hall University



THEATRE, BRIEF, ELEVENTH EDITION

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## Illustrating Live Theatre

With Donovan Sherman joining Robert Cohen on the author team, *Theatre Brief* offers a vast updating of contemporary theatre in America and abroad. Virtually *every paragraph* synchronizes closely with today's students throughout the English-speaking world.

Among the new materials throughout are dozens of *new color photographs* of major play productions as they have been presented in theatres throughout the world in the past two years (2014 and 2015), as well as new and frequent references to social media and other contemporary cultural phenomena that will help connect this study more closely with today's students.

In addition to these general additions, the new edition includes the following content changes:

Chapter 1: A new section and extended discussion on "theatre as play."

Chapter 2: A fully reworked section on Aristotle's elements of drama.

Chapter 3: A new section on "method acting," its history, and its importance in America and abroad.

Chapter 4: A new section on award-winning playwright Suzan-Lori Parks, and a new section on playwrights combining their continuing stage work with the creation of critically acclaimed television scripts.

Chapter 5: New emphases and information on puppets as characters, projections as scenery, in-ear monitors as sound equipment for actors, and a brand new photo essay on Broadway stage manager Lisa Iacucci as she prepares another performance of the musical revival, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*.

Chapter 6: A new section (The Pre-Preparation Period) now includes a comprehensive discussion of a play's producer.

Chapter 7: A new Spotlight on the Renaissance producer and theatre owner Philip Henslowe.

Chapter 9: A broad study of the rapidly expanding American musical theatre.

Chapter 10: Extensive updating and extensions of nontraditional, color-blind, and cross-gender casting, applied drama (as in theatre in prisons) and immersive performance, and movement-based theatre (as in Washington's Synthetic Theatre), along with new sections on the continuing careers of directors Peter Brook and Robert Wilson.

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# About the Authors

ROBERT COHEN was the founding chair of the drama program at the University of California, Irvine, in 1965, and was the sole creator of the original—and nine subsequent—editions of *Theatre*, starting in 1981. A prolific theatre scholar, teacher, director, playwright, translator, critic, and acting theorist for over fifty years as professor of drama at UCI, he is the author of twenty-three books (translated into six languages), thirty-six scholarly articles, numerous published and produced plays and play translations, and over four hundred published reviews of plays produced in America and around the world. He has also directed fifteen plays at the Utah and Colorado Shakespeare Festivals and ninety more at both regional and academic theatres in the United States and abroad. In addition to teaching at UCI, Cohen has served multiple times as master teacher at the Actors Center in New York City and at TVI Studios in New York and Los Angeles; he also speaks and conducts acting workshops regularly, with residencies in Korea, China, Hungary, Finland, Estonia, Sweden, Poland, Costa Rica, Hong Kong, Canada, Romania, Australia, and approximately half the states in the United States. His books include *Shakespeare on Theatre, Acting Power: The 21st Century Edition, Acting in Shakespeare, Acting One, Acting Professionally, Advanced Acting, Creative Play Direction, Working Together in Theatre, Falling Into Theatre, Jean Giraudoux: Three Faces of Destiny*, and various plays, translations, and anthologies.

UCI awarded Cohen its highest honor, the UCI Medal, in 1993, and conferred on him a Clair Trevor

Professorship and Bren Fellowship in 2001 and the UCI Distinguished Faculty Award for Research in 2015. He has also received the Career Achievement Award in Academic Theatre from ATHE (the Association for Theatre in Higher Education), the Honoris Causa Professor degree at Babes-Bolyai University in Romania, and—for bringing the great Polish director Jerzy Grotowski to UCI for three years—the Polish Medal of Honor.

DONOVAN SHERMAN received his doctoral degree in 2011 at the Joint Program of Theatre and Drama at the University of California, Irvine, and the University of California, San Diego. He is currently an assistant professor of English at Seton Hall University. His research focuses on the drama of Shakespeare and his contemporaries, along with theatre history, performance studies, and critical theory. His scholarly work includes his book *Second Death: Theatricalities of the Soul in Shakespeare's Drama*, which will be published by Edinburgh University Press, along with essays on Shakespeare, performance studies, film, early modern religious practice, and animal studies in *Shakespeare Quarterly*, *The Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, *Literature/Film Quarterly*, *Theatre Journal*, and *Seventeenth Century News*. As a theatre artist, Sherman has performed with the Actors Theatre of Louisville, the SITI Company, Steppenwolf Theatre Company, and several other regional theatre companies in the United States, and he co-wrote and directed new work with the performance collectives Neo-Futurists and Weather Talking.

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# Introduction

IT IS EVENING IN MANHATTAN. On Broadway the marquee lights up, and “Performance Tonight” signs appear in front of double doors. Beneath a few box-office windows placards announce “This Performance Completely Sold Out.” At Grand Central and Penn stations, trains release eager suburbanites from Greenwich, Larchmont, and Trenton; students from New Haven and Philadelphia; and day-trippers from Boston and Washington. Out of the Times Square subways pour mobs of locals, inhabitants of the island city and the neighboring boroughs. They head to the “TKTS” booth to line up and buy the discount tickets that go on sale a few hours before curtain time for shows with seats yet to be filled. Now, converging on these few midtown blocks of America’s largest city, come limousines, restaurant buses, private cars, and taxis, whose drivers search for a curbside slot to deposit their riders among the milling throngs of pedestrians. Wall Street bankers, college students, teenagers gazing at their smartphones, sleek executives in expensive suits, Brooklyn hipsters, arm-in-arm widows, out-of-town tourists and conventioners, celebrities, honeymooners, old and young, all different cultures, classes, and identities—all commingle in this bizarre mass that is the New York Broadway audience. Even during (and perhaps especially during) troubled times in this vibrant city, it is as bright, bold, and varied a crowd as is likely to assemble at any single place in America.

It is eight o’clock. In close to forty theatres within two dozen blocks of each other, houselights dim, curtains rise, and spotlights pick out performers who have fervently waited for this moment to arrive. Here a hot new musical, here a star-studded revival of an American classic, here a contemporary English comedy from London’s West End, here a new play fresh from its electrifying Seattle or Chicago premiere, here a one-woman show, here an experimental play that has transferred to larger quarters, here a touring production from eastern Europe, and here the new play everyone expects will capture this year’s coveted Tony Award. The hours pass.

It’s 10:30. Pandemonium. All the double doors open simultaneously, as if on cue, and once again the thousands pour out into the night. At nearby restaurants, waiters stand by to receive the after-theatre onslaught. In the private upstairs room at Sardi’s restaurant, an opening-night cast party gets under way; downstairs, the patrons rehash the evening’s entertainment and sneak covert glances at celebrities. Actors sip their drinks while impatiently awaiting the reviews that will determine whether they will be employed next week or back on the street looking for new jobs.

Now let’s turn back the clock. It is dawn in Athens, the thirteenth day of the month of Elaphebolion in the year 458 B.C. From thousands of low mud-brick homes in the city, from the central agora, and from temples





Plays were often the sources of films in the early days of cinema, but now major films are increasingly turned into plays—mostly musicals—and very successful ones (for example *The Lion King*, *The Producers*, *Once*). This scene is from the 2012 Broadway hit, *Newsies* adapted by Disney from their 1992 film of that name; the musical won Tony Awards for both its score and choreography. © Sara Krulwich/The New York Times/Redux

and agricultural outposts, streams of Athenians and visitors converge on the south slope of the Acropolis, Athens's great hill and home of its grandest temples. Bundled against the morning dampness, carrying breakfast figs and flagons of wine, they pay their tokens at the entrance to the great Theatre of Dionysus and take their places in the seating spaces allotted them. Each tribe occupies a separate area. They have gathered for the City Dionysia festival, which celebrates the rebirth of the land and the long sunny days that stretch ahead. It is a time for revelry and for rejoicing at fertility and all its fruits. And it is above all a time for the ultimate form of Dionysian worship: the theatre.

The open stone seats carved into the hillside fill up quickly. The crowd of seventeen thousand here today comprises not only the majority of Athenian citizens but also thousands of tradesmen, foreign visitors, slaves, and resident aliens. Even paupers are in attendance, thanks to the two obols apiece provided by a state fund to buy tickets for the poor; they take their place with the

latecomers on the extremities of the theatron, as this first of theatre buildings is called. Now, as the eastern sky grows pale, a masked and costumed actor appears atop a squat building set in full view of every spectator. A hush falls over the crowd, and the actor, his voice magnified by the wooden mask he wears, booms out this text:

I ask the gods some respite from the weariness of this watchtime measured by years I lie awake . . .

And the entranced spectators settle in, secure in the knowledge that today they are in good hands. Today they will hear and see a new version of a familiar story—the story of Agamemnon's homecoming and his murder, the revenge of that murder by his son, Orestes, and the final disposition of justice in the case of Orestes' act—as told in the three tragedies that constitute *The Oresteia*. This magnificent trilogy is by Aeschylus, Athens's leading dramatist for more than forty years. The spectators watch closely, admiring but critical. Tomorrow they or their representatives will decide by vote whether the festival's prize should go

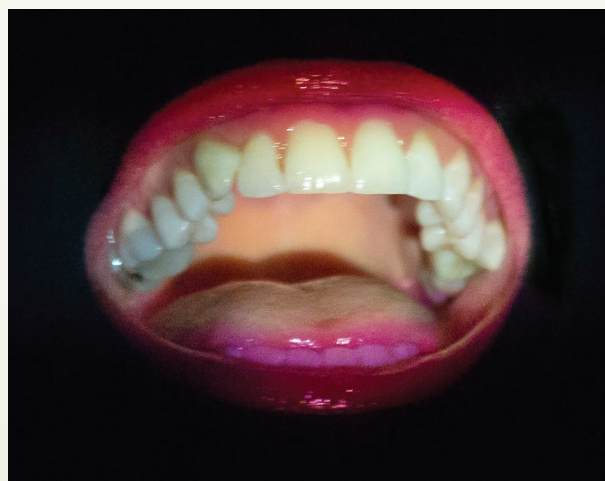


Singer, songwriter, guitarist, thumb pianist, and now playwright, Jonatha Brooke wrote and performed her one-woman play, *My Mother Has 4 Noses*, to great success off-Broadway in 2014, basing her play on the last years of her own mother's life—and playing both her mother and herself. © Sandrine Lee

to this work, or whether the young Sophocles, whose plays were presented in this space yesterday, had better sensed the true pulse of the time.

Let's zoom ahead in time. It is noon in London, and Queen Elizabeth I sits on the throne. Flags fly boldly atop three of the taller buildings in Bankside, across the Thames, announcing performance day at The Globe, The Rose, and The Swan. Boatmen have already begun ferrying theatergoers across the river, where The Globe will present a new tragedy by Shakespeare (something called *Hamlet*), and The Rose promises a revival of Christopher Marlowe's popular *Dr. Faustus*. North of town, The Fortune and The Curtain are likewise opening their gates for new plays of their own.

Now, at The Globe, two thousand spectators have arrived for the premiere. A trumpet sounds, then sounds again, then builds into a full fanfare. Members



Theatre is not always grandiose. Samuel Beckett virtually revolutionized the theatre in 1958 with his *Waiting for Godot*, which basically shows two men under a tree waiting for a man who never comes. It was ridiculed at first, but by 2000 was cited as the greatest play of the century. From there his plays were steadily reduced in characters and actions until, in his 1972 *Not I*, there was but one performer—whose mouth, eight feet above the stage, is all the audience sees. This 2014 performance was performed by Lisa Dwan at the Brooklyn Academy of Music's Harvey Theater. © Sara Krulwich/New York Times/Redux



Some plays never die. This Pulitzer Prize-winning 1936 production of Moss Hart and George S. Kaufman's farce, *You Can't Take It With You*, "set the stage on fire"—or at least flooded it with fireworks, in its 2014 Broadway revival directed by Scott Ellis. © Sara Krulwich/*New York Times/Redux*

of the audience, standing on the ground before the stage or seated in bleachers overlooking it, exchange a few final winks with their friends old and new before turning their attention to the platform stage. Through a giant door a guard bursts forth, lantern in hand. "Who's there?" he cries, and across from him another guard hollers "Nay! Answer me!" In two thousand imaginations, the bright afternoon has turned to midnight, London's Bankside has given way to the battlements of Denmark's Elsinore, and a terrified shiver from the onstage actor has set up an answering chill among the audience. A great new tragedy has begun its course.

It is midnight in a basement in the East Village, or in a campus rehearsal room, or in a coffee shop in Pittsburgh, Seattle, Sioux Falls, or Berlin. Across one end of the room, a curtain has been drawn across a pole suspended by wires. It has been a long evening, but one play remains to be seen. The author is unknown, but rumor has it that this new work is brutal, shocking, poetic, strange. The members of the audience, by

turns skeptical and enthusiastic, look for the tenth time at their programs. The lights dim. Performers, backed by crudely painted packing crates, begin to act.

What is the common denominator in all of these scenes? They are all theatre. There is no culture that has not had a theatre in some form, for theatre is the art of people acting out—and giving witness to—their most pressing, illuminating, and inspiring concerns. Theatre is a medium through which a society displays its ideas, fashions, moralities, and entertainments, and debates its conflicts, dilemmas, yearnings, and struggles. Theatre has provided a stage for political revolution, social propaganda, civil debate, artistic expression, religious conversion, mass education, and even its own self-criticism. It has been a performance ground for priests, shamans, intellectuals, poets, painters, technologists, philosophers, reformers, evangelists, jugglers, peasants, children, and kings. It has taken place in caves, fields, and forests; in circus tents, inns, and castles; on street corners and in public buildings grand and

squalid all over the world. And it goes on incessantly in the minds of its authors, actors, producers, designers, and audiences.

Theatre is, above all, a *living* art form. It does not simply consist of plays but also of playing, and a play is not simply a series of acts but a collective ritual of acting. Just as “play” and “act” are both noun and verb, so theatre is both a thing and a happening, a result and a process: it is fluid in time, rich in feeling and human experience.

And above all, then, theatre is live and *alive*: an art that continually forms before our eyes and is present to an audience even as it is presented by its actors. In fact, this very quality of “presentness” (or, in the actor’s terminology, “stage presence”) defines every great theatrical performance.

Unlike the more static arts, theatre presents us with a number of classic paradoxes:

It is spontaneous, yet it is rehearsed.

It is real, yet it is simulated.

It is unique to the moment, yet it is repeatable.

The actors are themselves, yet they play characters.

The audience believes in the characters, yet they know they are actors.

The audience becomes emotionally involved, yet they know this is only a play.

These paradoxes comprise the glory of theatre. The actors may “live in the moment” during their performances, yet they have carefully studied, planned, and rehearsed the details of their roles beforehand. And the audience responds to their performance by rooting for their “characters” to achieve their goals, and then applauding the “actors” who play those roles during the curtain call. But this is also how we live our own lives, which we both experience and, at various points, present to others. The theatre shows us to ourselves in all of our human complexity.

And so this book about the theatre is also, ultimately, a book about ourselves.

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## Chapter

# 1

## What Is Theatre?

**W**HAT IS THEATRE? To start, let's look at the origin of the word. "Theatre" comes from the Greek *theatron*, or "seeing place." So on a basic level, a theatre is a place where something is seen. Already, with this simple definition, we gain an important clue about what theatre is. After all, for something to be seen there must be people to do the seeing. So the theatre involves those who watch and those who are watched—the audience and what is on stage.

But the word can mean many other things. We also use it to indicate where films are shown, as in "movie theatre." We use it to refer to a place where wars and surgeries occur, as in the "theatre of operations" and the "operating theatre." These are all examples of the physical sense of the word. Let's call these the "hardware" definitions of theatre.



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The "software" definition is more abstract. This understanding of the word refers to the *activity* of the theatre: not just the place where something is seen, but also what is enacted *in* that place. When we say "theatre," in fact, we are usually referring to both the hardware and software definitions. "The Guthrie Theatre" refers not only to a physical building in Minneapolis (hardware), but also to the plays produced there (software). And it also refers to *people*: the theatre artists and administrators who put on the plays. In fact, we can extend the definition to include more abstract concepts, like the ideas and visions that animate the artists and the plays they produce. Theatre, then, is a combination of place, people, plays, and ideas—and the works of art that result from this collaboration.

Finally, we also use the word “theatre” to summon the professional *occupation*—and often the passion—of thousands of men and women all over the world. It is a vocation and sometimes a lifelong devotion. If someone says “I work in theatre,” they are using the word to conjure an entire world of meanings. They are telling you that they work *in* a theatre, they participate in the *activity* of theatre, they collaborate with other theatre *artists*, and—perhaps most importantly—that they are *inspired* by theatre. Theatre is an occupation and an art. To work in the theatre is not just to labor, but also to create.

Theatre as a building, a company, an occupation—let’s look at all three of these usages more closely.

## The Theatre Building

A theatre building is not always an enclosed structure. The most ancient Greek *theatron* was probably no more than a circle of bare earth, where performers chanted and danced before a hillside of seated spectators. The requirements for building such a theatre were minimal: finding a space to act and a space to watch and hear.

As theatre grew in popularity and importance, and spread out into different cultures and geographical locations, its structures grew larger and more elaborate. The theatre’s producers had to seat larger and larger numbers of people, so the hillside soon became an ascending bank of seats, each level providing a good view of the



National theatre buildings in many European countries, generally supported by their governments, are often palatial. The National Theatre in Cluj, Romania, is regarded as the most beautiful building in this Transylvanian capital, which indicates the prominence of live theatre in that country. © Robert Cohen

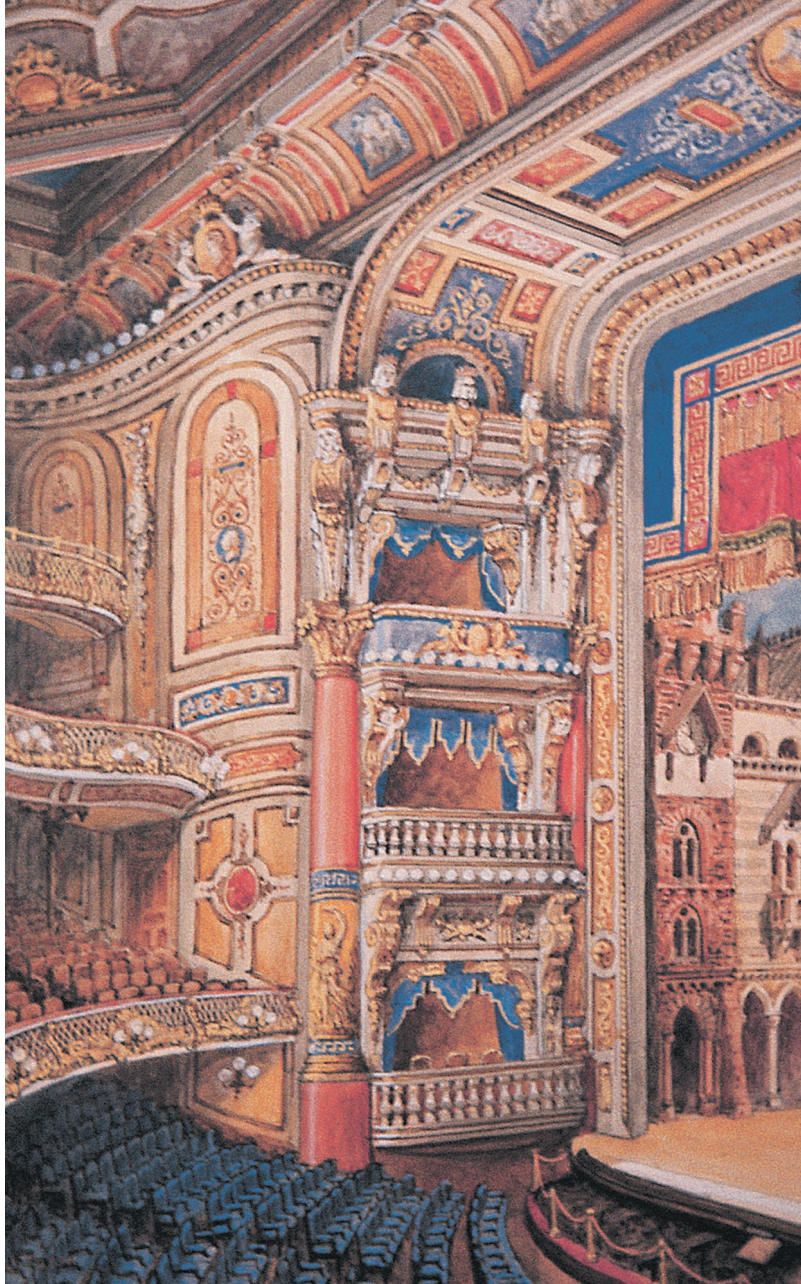
acting area. And as the theatre grew, attention had to be paid to its *acoustics* (the sound quality derived from the Greek *acoustos*, “heard”) so the sounds coming from the stage would be protected from the wind and directed toward the *audience* (from the Latin *audientia*, “those who hear”).

Often, theatre spaces can be easily defined. The basic relationship set up in ancient Greece can still apply to theatres all over the world: the audience is “up there,” the actors are “down there.” Occasionally, though, the spaces are merged together so the actors mingle—and sometimes interact—with the audience.

Theatre buildings may be complex structures. Greek theatres of the fourth century B.C.—the period immediately following the golden age of Greek playwrights—were gigantic stone edifices, some capable of holding up to seventeen thousand spectators. Magnificent three-story Roman theatres, complete with gilded columns, canvas awnings, and intricate marble carvings, were often erected for dramatic festivals in the later years of the Republic. Grand, freestanding Elizabethan theatres dominate the London skyline in illustrated sixteenth-century pictorial maps of the town. Opulent theatres were built throughout Europe and in the major cities of the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Many remain in full operation today, competing with splendid new stagehouses of every description and serving as cultural centers for metropolitan areas around the world. Theatres (the buildings) are fundamental to urban architecture, just as theatre (the art) is to contemporary life.

## The Company, or Troupe, of Players

Theatre is a collaborative art that involves dozens, even hundreds, of people working closely together on a single performance. Historically, theatre practitioners of various specialties have teamed up in long-standing companies, or *troupes*. Since the fourth century B.C., such troupes of players have toured the countrysides and settled in cities to present a *repertory*, or collection, of plays as a means of earning a livelihood. Generally such players have included actor-playwrights and actor-technicians who make the company a self-contained production unit capable of writing, preparing, and presenting whole theatrical works that tend to define the company itself. Some of these troupes—and the works they produced—have become legendary. The Lord Chamberlain’s Men, in London, counted William Shakespeare as a member. The Illustrious Theatre of Paris was founded and headed by the great actor-writer Molière.



This watercolor depicts the opulent interior of Booth's Theatre in New York at its 1869 opening. This grand “temple of theatre” was built by America's finest actor of the time, Edwin Booth (the brother of Lincoln's assassin). Booth staged and performed in a classical repertory of Shakespearean plays at his theatre for four years. The side boxes, similar to those that still exist in older Broadway theatres, had poor sight lines: spectators electing to sit there were interested more in being seen than in seeing the play. The luxurious seating in the orchestra made this a particularly comfortable and elegant place to see classic theatre. Charles Witham, Booth's original stage designer, painted this watercolor; part of Witham's scenery (a street scene) is visible onstage.

© The Museum of the City of New York/Art Resource, NY

The influence of these theatre companies has proven more long-lasting than the theatre buildings that physically survive them. They represent the genius and creativity of the theatre in a way that stone and steel alone cannot.



Shakespeare's Globe has been meticulously reconstructed near its sixteenth-century location on the south bank of London's Thames River. The reconstruction was spearheaded by the late Sam Wanamaker, an American actor who labored many years to acquire the funding and necessary permits (the theatre has the first thatch roof laid in London since the Great Fire of 1666). This is scholarship's best guess as to the specific dimensions and features of The Globe in Shakespeare's time. Since its 1997 opening this Globe has produced a summer repertoire of the plays of Shakespeare's age, seen on a stage much like the stages they were written for. © Robert Cohen

## The Occupation of Theatre

Theatre can be a vocation for professionals or an avocation for amateurs. In either case, theatre is *work*. The fundamental act of theater seems simple enough: actors impersonate characters in a live performance of a play. But an enormous amount of labor goes into this activity, from the design and creation of the set and props to the orientation of the lights to the direction of the action to the actors themselves—and countless other long hours spent honing specialized crafts and collaborating in concert with the other artists. We can organize this vast web of labor into four major categories—work, art,

impersonation, and performance—each deserving individual attention.

### WORK

Theatre is hard work. Rehearsals alone normally take a minimum of four to six weeks, which are preceded by at least an equal amount of time—often months or years—of writing, researching, planning, casting, designing, and creating a production team. The labors of theatre artists in the final weeks before an opening are legendary: the seven-day workweek becomes commonplace, expenditures of money and spirit are intense, and each day is