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# THE ESSENTIAL THEATRE



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# The Essential Theatre

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# Preface



Behind this edition lies more than fifty years of publication. Although *The Essential Theatre* was first published in 1976, it began as an abridged version of another book, *The Theatre: An Introduction*, which first appeared in 1964. *The Essential Theatre* has since taken on an identity of its own and is now in its Eleventh Edition.

As in its earlier versions, this edition is divided into three parts. Part 1 addresses basic issues and features related to the nature of theatre, to the role of audiences, to the varied criteria for judging theatrical performances, and to dramatic structure and style. Part 2 looks at various theatrical experiences from theatre's past and present. These experiences suggest that, as a vital form of creative expression, theatre changes to reflect the dynamics of the cultures within which it exists. Part 3 provides an overview of theatre production today: the principles, practices, and procedures used in the creation of theatre.

*The Essential Theatre* is intended primarily to serve two kinds of courses: an introductory course in which an overview provides a foundation for those intending to major in theatre (future theatre-makers), and a theatre appreciation course in which an overview provides insights and understanding for audience members (future theatregoers). Although these two courses may address the same topics, they usually do so with somewhat different emphases. Because instructors often use the material in ways suited to their individual needs, we have sought to provide a logically organized, comprehensive overview of the theatre. But instructors need not follow the sequence we have chosen nor use all of the material in the book. Some instructors may wish

to use only some of the chapters in Part 2, for instance, while others may wish to assign Part 3 prior to or concurrently with Part 2. Regardless, our aim is to provide helpful discussions of topics pertinent to introductory and theatre appreciation courses rather than to prescribe how the courses should be organized.

This Eleventh Edition continues to feature the “Theatre in a Broad Context” timelines; these help students situate theatrical events and developments within a larger historical context (see the final pages of Chapters 4 through 11). Chapters 14 through 18 include a series of questions to help students attending performances more fully consider and analyze the work of different theatre artists (directors, actors, and designers). Finally, an extensive bibliography is appended to the book as a guide to additional sources about the topics discussed in each chapter.

We have assumed that many of those who use this book will both read plays and attend theatrical performances. Ideally, students should be able to read a play and then see a performance of that play. This is often not possible, but reading plays and seeing performances illustrate the difference between text on the printed page and its production on stage—the difference between drama and theatre. Because students typically will not have read a wide variety of plays, fourteen examples cited in *The Essential Theatre*, Eleventh Edition, are also included in a companion anthology titled *Plays for the Theatre*, Eleventh Edition, originally edited by Oscar G. Brockett and Robert J. Ball and published by Cengage Learning. These plays

serve as foundations for discussions of various types of theatrical experience. The anthology includes three new plays. Plays retained from the previous edition include Sophocles's *Oedipus the King*, the anonymously composed *Noah and His Sons*, the Noh drama *The Shrine in the Fields*, William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Molière's *Tartuffe*, Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*, Tennessee Williams's *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*, Wole Soyinka's *The Strong Breed*, Paula Vogel's *How I Learned to Drive*, and Octavio Solis's *Lydia*. The three new plays are Sam Shepard's *True West*, August Wilson's *Fences*, and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*.

## New to This Edition

As we have moved from “contributors” to an enhanced edition to official authors of a new edition, our goal has been to build upon a successful framework while enhancing the features we have found to be most instructive in our own teaching. Likewise, we have listened to users of this book in attempt to increase the clarity, content, and organization to fit the needs of different instructors.

We have refined the expanded “Theatre in a Broad Context” timelines that were used in the Enhanced Tenth Edition and have added one for the new Chapter 10 coverage of Musical Theatre. In addition, we have further reorganized the material in Part 2 to make the historical overview of theatre's many expressions more clear. Chapter 6 is now “Theatre in the 1800s” and includes Symbolism and “Art-for-Art's Sake” as early reactions to realism. This has transformed Chapter 7 into “Modernism in the 20th Century: 1900–1960.” An examination of the differences between the early modernist movements of realism, symbolism, expressionism, surrealism, futurism, and dada is featured in a text box that contrasts

the distinctive features of each movement. There is also a new text box on American female playwrights of the interwar years. In the second half of the chapter, the trends in post–World War II European theatre are treated together, followed by the trends in American theatre. Chapter 8 now begins with a more in-depth treatment of post–World War II British theatre, including consideration of three major theatres (National Theatre, Royal Shakespeare Company, Royal Court Theatre) and three major playwrights (Harold Pinter, Peter Shaffer, and Tom Stoppard). The chapter's coverage of decentralization and subsidization includes a consideration of Sam Shepard's play *True West* as it illustrates the back-and-forth movement between regional theatres and the different tiers of theatre production found in New York. Chapter 9's treatment of diversity includes a more in-depth treatment of African American theatre as well as discussion of August Wilson's *Fences* and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America*; its treatment of contemporary theatre retains Octavio Solis's controversial play *Lydia* and is updated in its discussions of contemporary plays. Throughout all the chapters, there is increased attention to the major playwrights of the respective eras. In addition, all plays mentioned in the text include a date of first production and all major figures include their birth and death dates; the more rigorous inclusion of dates is not for memorization, but rather to offer a clearer sense of context, of where a particular work falls within the artist's lifetime or where it fits in the sociological context suggested by the topics covered in the “Theatre in a Broad Context” timelines.

Part 2 also features a new chapter, one devoted entirely to Musical Theatre. It covers musical theatre's development, major figures, major works, and various incarnations that comprise the most popular genre of theatre. In addition, spread throughout the chapters of Part 2, there are ten new “Then & Now” text boxes that link select topics in theatre history to the present day; these text boxes (and accompanying photos) highlight

the way that the past continues to influence the present, not only in theatre but also in popular culture, including films, contemporary comedy, and even flash mobs.

In Part 3, updates have been made so that the discussions of theatre production reflect standard practices and terminology. There is increased attention to the designer as artist and interpreter; Chapters 16, 17, and 18 include text boxes where designers discuss the artistry of their design process. In Chapter 18, the expanded treatment of sound design has been retained. In addition, the chapter on Acting (now Chapter 15) has been completely revised, offering a clearer, more focused, up-to-date presentation of the diversity of contemporary approaches to acting.

Throughout the text, the text boxes, play summaries, and historical content have been subtly edited to sharpen the clarity or significance of the topic being discussed. This Eleventh Edition also has over eighty new photos and illustrations; the additions typically feature contemporary productions as well as actors and actresses that students will recognize from film and television.

Overall, the new features to this edition help underline the idea that theatre does not exist in isolation but rather is an art form that is a vibrant part of the cultural makeup of the entertainment industry, both in the past and in the present.

## Teaching Resources

- **Instructor's Resource Manual.** Save time, streamline your course preparation, and get the most from the text. This indispensable manual offers teaching suggestions, assignment ideas, and a sample course syllabus. It also provides sample quiz and essay questions, video and web resources, and suggested classroom activities.

- **Instructor Companion Website.** This protected companion website provides exclusive instructor materials, including PowerPoint® presentations for the entire text, as well as a downloadable version of the Instructor's Resource Manual.
- **Cengage Learning Testing Powered by Cognero.** This flexible, online system allows you to author, edit, and manage test bank content from multiple Cengage Learning solutions. You can create multiple test versions in an instant and deliver tests from your LMS, your classroom, or wherever you want.

All of these resources are available with an instructor account at [login.cengage.com](http://login.cengage.com).

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# The Essential Theatre

ELEVENTH EDITION



PART

# 1



• • • • • War Horse, based on the novel by Michael Morpurgo, adapted by Nick Stafford, premiered at London's National Theatre in 2007. Directed by Marianne Elliott and Tom Morris, the production featured life-sized puppets created by Handspring Puppet Company. In New York, War Horse won five Tony Awards, plus a special Tony Award for Handspring Puppet Company.

Geraint Lewis/Alamy

# Foundations

Theatre is a complex art at least 2,500 years old. Over the centuries and across cultures, it has undergone many changes and followed diverse paths. When one attends theatre today, a few hundred people come together, usually in the evening, to see a performance that will last approximately two hours on an indoor stage illuminated by artificial light. But theatregoing has not always been this way. For example, the modern experience of theatregoing would have seemed strange to Greeks living in the fifth century B.C. as they assembled at dawn in an outdoor theatre seating some 17,000 people to watch a series of plays that lasted half the day under the bright sunlight. The modern experience would have seemed equally strange to a fifteenth-century A.D. English audience that gathered at various places along a route to watch a series of short biblical plays performed on wagons that moved from one performance site to the next. These examples by no means exhaust the possibilities because theatrical experience has been as varied as the cultures in which it has appeared. The practices audiences are familiar with today encompass only a limited range of the theatre's immense possibilities.

Such variety invites questions about the continuing appeal of theatre: Why do people create theatre? What attracts audiences to it? What makes one production of a play seem better to us than another?

It is useful to begin looking at theatre by examining some basic issues: the nature and function of theatre; the relationship of theatre to other forms of art; criteria for judging theatrical performances; the structure of the dramatic text; and other related topics. These initial explorations will help build the foundation for a fuller understanding and appreciation of theatre and the processes of theatrical production.





Shakespeare's Globe, a re-creation of the sixteenth-century playhouse in London, strives to faithfully reproduce the original English renaissance stagings of Shakespeare's plays. The company's 2012 presentation of *Twelfth Night* followed the Renaissance practice of having an all-male cast. The production, directed by Tim Carroll and featuring Mark Rylance as Olivia, transferred to the West End (London's commercial theatre district) and then Broadway (2013–2014).

SARA KRULWICH/The New York Times/Redux

*I regard the theatre as the greatest of all art forms, the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be a human being.*

—Oscar Wilde

# The Nature of Theatre

It is uncertain just how and when theatre originated. As far back as one can trace human history, various kinds of rituals considered vital to the well-being of the community used the elements needed for theatre: a performance space, performers, masks or makeup, costumes, music, dance, and an audience. The function of these early rites was only incidentally theatrical; they were addressed to supernatural forces thought to control the return of spring, success in hunting and war, the fertility of human beings and the land, and the place of humans in the cosmic scheme. Other activities that contributed to theatre, such as storytelling and mimicry, also were already evident.

Although exactly how it emerged from these beginnings is unclear, theatre achieved its own distinct identity at least 2,500 years ago. During its existence, its relative status has varied considerably. In ancient Greece, theatre was valued highly as it was performed for the entire community at religious festivals financed by the state and wealthy citizens. At other times, theatre has existed on the fringes of respectability, as it did from the fifth to the tenth century A.D., when small bands of itinerant performers traveled around playing wherever they could, for whatever they could collect from those who

came to watch. In other times, theatre has been forbidden, as it was in England between 1642 and 1660 when the Puritans, then in power, considered it not only morally unacceptable but also an activity that tempted people away from more honest work. During its long life, theatre has been both denounced and praised, and its value—even its right to exist—has sometimes been questioned.

Such divergent responses have been encouraged in part by theatrical terminology (*play, show, acting*) that suggests that theatre lacks pragmatic value and is the product of grown-ups who have prolonged their childhood by dressing up and playing games to divert themselves and others. Furthermore, because dramas are fictional, they have at times been denounced as a form of lying, as they were in colonial New England. Because plays tend to emphasize human crises (often involving deception, violence, and socially reprehensible behavior), they have been accused of exerting dangerous influence on the young (a claim sometimes made against various forms of media today). Nevertheless, in almost all periods at least some people have considered theatre not only an acceptable form of entertainment but also a truthful reflection of human behavior.



Theatre, then, has had its detractors and its advocates. Even so, those who value it often find themselves on the defensive with those who question whether it has a valid place in a college curriculum or whether a world dominated by film, television, and the Internet would miss theatre if it disappeared altogether.

## The Basic Elements of Theatre

One reason for the varying responses can be found in theatre's range and diversity, both of which are evident in its three basic elements:

- What is performed (a play, scenario, or plan)
- The performance (including all of the processes involved in the creation and presentation of a production)
- The audience (the perceivers)

Each of these elements is essential and they affect not only each other but also the totality of what is expressed and how it may be perceived.

What is performed can be extremely varied—from a comic routine performed by a single entertainer to a Shakespearean tragedy performed by a large company of actors. Likewise, some people consider events such as street carnivals and parades as types of theatre. Because of this great range, theatre is not easy to define. The critic Eric Bentley (1916–) has argued that all of the many definitions of *theatre* can be reduced to: *A performs B for C*. That is, the most basic definition of *theatre* is someone performing something for someone else.

Though theatre is varied, typically it is thought of as the staged performance of a written text. But it is important to remember that theatre does not require a written text, dialogue, or conflict. Juggling and acrobatics, for example, have often been presented as theatrical entertainments.

But even if one restricts the definition of *theatre* to performances that involve some degree of storytelling, one is still faced with great diversity because improvised scenes, pantomimes, vaudeville sketches, musical plays, and spoken dramas are all theatrical entertainments. Furthermore, they may be brief or lengthy; they may deal with the everyday or the unusual, the comic or the serious.

There are also diverse opinions about theatre's role in society. Some people think of theatre primarily as entertainment, whereas others find the essence of theatre to be its capacity to provoke thought or action about significant issues. John Millington Synge (1871–1909), one of the leading Irish dramatists of the twentieth century, argued that drama is at its best, not when it is dealing with social problems that will soon be forgotten, but rather when it feeds the imagination. Synge stated: “We should not go to the theatre as we go to a [pharmacy] ... , but as we go to dinner, where the food we need is taken with pleasure and excitement ...” Conversely, Peter Brook (1925–), one of the world's great directors, sees theatre as serving an important social and political role. According to Brook, “the basic function of theatre is to be anti-government, anti-establishment and anti-social. What we all recognize as feeble theatre is the theatre that enters into the public lie of pretending that everything's okay.” Overall, if one is to understand theatre, one must acknowledge its great range and recognize that its potential (like that of most human creations) can be developed in many ways, some of which one may like and some of which one may even consider dangerous.

Theatre's second ingredient, the performance, is equally complex. It translates the potential of a play, scenario, or plan into actuality. What the audience usually sees when it goes to the theatre is the fleshing out of a written text or plan through the application of theatrical processes. The performance takes place in a space that can vary from a building intended specifically for theatrical performances to a street, park, or nightclub. Spaces may vary from those that seat fewer than a hundred people to those (as in



SARA KRULWICH/The New York Times/Redux

The plays of Martin McDonagh are known for their violent characters and intense conflict. Pictured here is a scene from McDonagh's 1999 Broadway production of *The Lonesome West*. The production starred Dawn Bradfield, David Ganly, Brian F. O'Byrne, and Maeliosa Stafford, the same actors who created the roles in the first production in 1997 at the Druid Theatre Company in Galway. The Broadway production was directed by Garry Hynes and featured scenic and costume design by Francis O'Connor.

ancient Greece) that seat 15,000 to 20,000. The arrangement of this space may also vary; it may permit the audience to surround the performers, require the audience to sit in rows facing a platform on which the performance occurs, or use other audience–performer configurations, each of which alters the total theatrical experience. (This subject is explored more fully in Chapter 12.)

Most performances require the creative efforts and cooperation of many people: playwright, director, actors, designers, stage manager, and technicians. A musical involves even more people: composer, instrumentalists, singers, choreographer, and dancers. Any component of production (the script, acting, scenery, costumes, lighting, music, dance) can be manipulated to create varied effects. All of the components may be so skillfully integrated that the spectator is aware only of a single unified impression; or one or more of the components, such as acting or spectacle, may completely overshadow the others. Today, for example, some people argue that spectacular effects overwhelm the other elements in such popular musicals as *The Lion King*, *Miss Saigon*, and *The Phantom of the Opera*.

The components may be handled in a way easily understood by almost everyone or in ways so strange that all but a few are puzzled. A performance may seem to one part of the audience original and entertaining and to another obvious and boring; conversely, what to one group may seem strange and incomprehensible may be judged insightful and brilliant by another. Although the possibilities and results of performance may be multitudinous, the beginning point of the theatrical experience has been reduced to its essentials by Peter Brook in his book *The Empty Space* (1968), where he says, “I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.”

The third basic ingredient of theatre is the audience. A theatre performance is a communicative expression that is incomplete until an audience receives or experiences it. For all the arts, a public is imperative, but for some this public may be thought of as individuals—the reader of a novel or poem, the viewer of a painting or a piece of sculpture—each of whom may experience the work in isolation. But a theatre



Joan Marcus

*The Lion King*, adapted for the stage from Disney's animated feature film (music and lyrics by Elton John and Tim Rice). Direction and design of costumes, masks, and puppets by Julie Taymor (aided by a number of others).

audience (as well as the audience for music and dance) assembles as a group at a given time and place to experience a performance. This group takes in a performance as a temporary community.

The audience affects theatre in many ways, perhaps most clearly through the immediate feedback it provides the performers. Continuous interaction occurs not only between stage and auditorium, but also among spectators involved in a communal experience. For example, if one segment of the audience begins to laugh at what the director intended to be serious, the rest of the audience may come to respond in the same way; in turn, such unexpected response may disrupt the actors' concentration and alter their performance. Conversely, the shared enthusiastic laughter of an audience during scenes intended to be comic may lift the actors

to greater effectiveness. This live interaction is a distinctive characteristic of theatre and a major cause of variations in performances from night to night.

Audiences also affect theatre through their expectations and motives for attending. Some members of the audience come to the theatre wanting only to be entertained, to be diverted from personal cares and the problems of their world. This group is likely to consider it the job of the playwright and director to make everything clear; it may see no need to make an effort to understand unfamiliar ideas or conventions. Such spectators may resent or avoid any production that questions conventional moral, political, or cultural values. Other members of the audience may prefer productions that challenge accepted values, raise provocative issues, advocate action about political or social issues, or use



innovative theatrical means. Ultimately, various segments of the public make their preferences felt through attendance or nonattendance. They support what appeals to them and fail to support what they do not like or do not understand. Now that the cost of tickets to most Broadway productions averages more than \$100, audiences understandably hesitate to attend theatre unless they feel confident that a performance will suit their tastes. In turn, Broadway producers, who need to recover the large sums required to mount a show on Broadway, often avoid controversial subject matter or unfamiliar staging conventions that might reduce attendance. Off-Broadway and regional theatres, with lower costs and ticket prices, can afford to take greater chances and may seek a more restricted audience than that sought by Broadway. Overall, audience taste significantly influences what is

performed, how it is performed, and where it is performed.

These three elements—play, performance, and audience—although they may be treated separately in discussion—interact and modify each other in practice. Playwrights may have specific intentions when they write, but they can seldom control how directors and others involved in production will interpret their plays. Therefore, different productions of the same play can vary drastically. Nor can directors dictate what audiences will get from their productions, and individual members of a single audience may have widely different reactions to the same performance. Because what is performed, how it is performed, and audience taste and perception are so diverse, not all theatre will appeal to all segments of the public. Responses to theatre are inescapably varied.



Ken Gillespie Photography/Alamy

Whether the social context for a performance is formal or casual may affect how the audience as a group responds to the event. Here, the Royal Winnipeg Ballet performs at *Ballet in the Park*.