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Mapping Reality: An Introduction to Theatre

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Abstract

This book seeks to give insight into the people and processes that create theatre. Like any other world—be it horse racing, fashion, or politics—understanding its complexities helps you appreciate it on a deeper plane. The intent of this book is not to strip away the feeling of magic that can happen in the presence of theatre but to add an element of wonder for the artistry that makes it work. At the same time, you can better understand how theatre seeks to reveal truths about the human condition; explores issues of ethics, gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and spirituality; and exists as a representation of the culture at large.

Disciplines

Acting | Communication | Theatre and Performance Studies

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1 Mapping Reality

An Introduction to Theatre

Charlie Mitchell and Michelle Hayford

Nothing has as much potential as a stage. In all of its incarnations, it is a world of imagination, limitless possibilities, and the site of passionate labor. Consider the following moments repeated countless times from antiquity to today. An audience has assembled, full of anticipation, to witness a performance. The appointed time draws near. Perhaps these patrons are seeing this work for the first time. Maybe they have heard or read the opinions of others. It is possible that they have seen another version of the show created by other hands. Nevertheless, it is a certainty that this experience will be unique; every performance has a singular, organic nature—no two can be the same. Among the crowd, perhaps a playwright nervously sits, anxiously waiting to see what will become of his words. The director who shaped this production, once a powerful creative force, is now helplessness. Backstage, hidden from the curious eyes of the audience, actors fight with nerves. As they run their lines and movements in their heads, they adjust their costumes, or check on items they might use in the show. Some may have preshow rituals such as physical and vocal warm-ups. Others may simply enter a psychological state of preparation. All the hours of preparation will now be put to the test. Will the audience celebrate or reject what has been created?

It is time to begin. The actors take their places. Suddenly a signal is given to the audience—the theatre darkens, music is heard, a curtain rises, or actors simply enter the performance space. This is the moment of creation. In the next moment, a new world will appear where none existed, crafted to say something about the nature of our existence. This world, in turn, is the product of many others, one of practitioners who

have shared their creativity in the service of this experience. If they have done their best, an everlasting impression will be made and lives may be changed forever.

This book seeks to give insight into the people and processes that create theatre. Like any other world—be it horse racing, fashion, or politics—understanding its complexities helps you appreciate it on a deeper plane. The intent of this book is not to strip away the feeling of magic that can happen in the presence of theatre but to add an element of wonder for the artistry that makes it work. At the same time, you can better understand how theatre seeks to reveal truths about the human condition; explores issues of ethics, gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality, and spirituality; and exists as a representation of the culture at large.

The benefits of studying theatre can be immense. Think of it as a structure that houses other domains of knowledge. It touches and has influenced disciplines such as languages and literature, psychology, music, science, law, journalism, and business. It enables you to cross cultural boundaries and bridge the distance that separates understanding. In the future, anthropologists will examine our contemporary theatre as a cultural artifact in order to help them understand who we were, how we saw ourselves, and what we aspired to be.

Studying theatre also adds a great deal to your overall cultural literacy. Because it has had such a profound social presence in everyday life, understanding references to plays, playwrights, theatrical movements, and production practice helps you communicate with the past and present. For example, look at how the theatre has permeated our language. Against a “backdrop” of anticipation, some could be viewed as “acting out,” taking “center stage” or “standing in the limelight” while people “work behind the scenes.” You can be accused of being “melodramatic,” “upstaging” the work of others, or forcing them to “wait in the wings.” And with a nod to the high-stakes struggle found on stage, you can even engage in a “theatre of war.”

Of course, the best way to learn about and learn from theatre is to create it yourself; you do not have to pursue a professional career in the arts to gain its benefits. Employers have found that theatrical practice answers the need for enhanced cognitive ability in the workplace. Analysis of texts, the interpersonal and collaborative skills gained in production, and the development of the creative mind gives students an advantage

in whatever field they pursue. Theatre is a training ground for successful thinkers and doers.

Basic Elements

For all of the intricate ways that theatre produces meaning, its core elements are simple. Legendary British director Peter Brook puts it best in his book *The Empty Space* when he writes: “I can take any 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.” This space could be anything from a vintage Broadway theatre to a high school auditorium to a claimed space in a public park. All that is needed are boundaries, agreed upon by performer and audience.

A variety of artists and other members of the theatrical community dedicate their time and efforts to supporting the creation of fully realized productions. However, nothing more is required than an actor, an audience, a space, and the intent to create a fictional world. The popularity of improvisational theatre reminds us that a script is not even mandatory. This type of performance also disproves the absolute need for a director, the person usually responsible for providing a single artistic vision for a production. That position, in its current incarnation, has been around for only a hundred years, a small span of time when you think about the lengthy history of the theatre. Prior to its creation, staging had been shared by actors, producers, and playwrights, usually with very little rehearsal by today’s standards.

There are not even a requisite number of audience members for something to be called theatre. Take Ludwig II (1845–1886), the eccentric king of Bavaria, who took this idea to its logical extreme. Convinced he could not enjoy himself surrounded by others, he arranged more than two hundred private viewings of operas by composer Richard Wagner and others. Unfortunately, this chronic shyness was later used by his enemies as a symptom of mental illness, and he was ousted from his throne.

Today, you can still live like a king. Since 2009, the area known as Times Square, the epicenter of commercial theatre in the United States, has been the site of Theatre for One. A four-foot-by-eight-foot portable theatre booth is erected and for six days, only one person can enter at a time. Once a partition lifts, a five-to-ten-minute show is given by a single

performer, a strange oasis from one of the most chaotic places on the planet.

Fine Art and the Qualities of Theatre

Theatre, along with music and dance, has been labeled a fine art as well as a performing art; it can be found in performing arts centers and taught in colleges and departments of fine art. But these terms lead to larger issues. By the twentieth century, educational programs had been broken down into classifications, all of which were historically tied to economic class. In many cultures of the ancient world, work was done by slaves. Consequently, physical labor was imagined to be degrading and associated with a lack of nobility. The Romans, for example, called any activity where money changed hands the vulgar arts (*vulgares artes*) or sordid arts (*sordidae artes*), also translated as “dirty arts.” By the Middle Ages, the designation changed. The term *mechanical arts* was adopted to mean skilled activities accomplished by manual labor. In the seventeenth century, **useful arts** appeared, and with the arrival of the machine age in the nineteenth century, it was replaced with *industrial arts*, a term still in use today.

In the ancient world and beyond, proof of high status was having leisure time to pursue self-improvement of the mind or to serve the public good. Therefore, philosophy, history, languages, math, and science were given the term **liberal arts** (“arts befitting a freeman”). Now the term simply means subjects separate from science and technology and implies an education that is not particularly specialized. Therefore “liberal,” in this sense, is not a political term and is not meant to contrast any “conservative” mode of thought.

“I think art describes the vacuum. Art describes what isn't there -- the thing that needs to be said -- the missing element of the current dialogue that is going on in the world.”



John Patrick Shanley, playwright

The third branch, separate from *useful* and *liberal*, was given the term *fine arts*. Coined in the eighteenth century, it was meant to include sculpture, painting, music, and poetry. Later, the performing arts were added along

with disciplines such as printmaking, photography, and collage. “Fine” was not intended to suggest art that was “acceptable” or “delicate”—it was supposed to classify artistic endeavors that were beautiful for their own sake and not compromised by serving any practical function. In other words, a craftsman could make a stunningly beautiful cabinet, but once it stored clothes, it ceased to be art. An architect could design a building that was a pleasure to behold, but since it provided shelter, his work was considered only useful.

Clearly, the exchange of money and the association with leisure time has been abandoned as a dividing line between fine and useful art. However, the remaining concept of beauty for its own sake leaves us with a variety of con-

**"Life beats down and crushes the soul
and art reminds you that you have one."**



Stella Adler, actor

licts, questions, and ambiguities. Many works communicate images or use material that we may not regard as beautiful. Still, we would not hesitate to label them as art. Theatre deals in conflict, sometimes using subject matter that can make some feel uncomfortable. Does it cease to be art when no pleasurable feeling is derived from it? Many would argue that even though the arts do not serve any domestic function, they can be extremely useful as a means of interpreting our world and spiritually nourishing our lives. Is that not useful? When does an object or performance stop being artistic and start being art? Are there rules that must be satisfied or is it simply in the eye of the beholder? Does the quality of something determine if it qualifies as art? To ask and engage with these sorts of questions is to practice **aesthetics**, a branch of philosophy that deals with beauty and taste.

A working definition of art that is elastic enough to bridge different mediums of expression has occupied us for centuries. The Greek philosopher Plato called it an imitation of nature but for that same reason, condemned it as artificial, a copy of a copy, and believed actors should be banned from what he saw as an ideal republic. Many have tried to adopt the poet William Wordsworth’s definition of poetry for art in general — “the



This is a word cloud, a type of data visualization where more frequently used words become larger than others. It was created by comparing two dozen definitions of art from classical to modern sources.

spontaneous overflow of powerful feelings” from “emotion recollected in tranquility.” Novelist Leo Tolstoy wrote that experiencing art was “receiving an expression of feeling” from the artist.

Contemporary critics have also chimed in. Susanne Langer called art “the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling,” and Ellen Dissanayake claimed that art is “a specialness” that “is tacitly or overtly acknowledged.” The frustration in creating a unifying theory of art has led some to claim that even the attempt is self-defeating. Playwright Oscar Wilde once lectured, “We want to create it, not to define it.”

So what separates theatre from the other arts? What are the qualities particular to theatre that, collectively, make it unique? Theatre certainly deals in the **imitation** of human action. We can trace the origins of theatrical practice in the Western world to the citizens of the Greek city-state of Athens in the fifth century BCE. Theatre began with *dithyrambs*, a chorus of fifty men with a leader who told stories about a fertility god named

“Artists are created, not made. To be an artist you just have to find your path, and there’s no short-cuts to it, and nobody can really help you, and you’ve got to find it.”



Peter Sellers, theatrical director

Dionysus through song and dance. Eventually, innovations were made such as performers imitating individual characters. In addition, the chorus was greatly re-

duced and changed to represent the men or women of a city where a play took place. Presented at festivals, this form became what we know today as Greek tragedy.

Sitting in the audience was Aristotle. The student of the philosopher Plato, he could be called our first drama critic. His collected notes form the basis for a treatise called *Poetics* (dated between 335 and 322 BCE), which described what he thought were the components of a good tragedy. He began by defining his subject, calling it “the imitation of an action that is good and also complete in itself and of some magnitude.” This could be interpreted as requiring that drama artfully depict the actions of someone; have a beginning, middle, and end; and be of an appropriate length. Independently, an Indian critic named Bharata came to a similar conclusion in a text called the *Natyashastra*. Written sometime between 300 BCE and 300 CE in a now-dead language called Sanskrit, he defined drama as “an imitation of people’s demeanor, attitudes, conditions, and joys and sorrows.”

Here, both authors speak to a fundamental aspect of humanity. It is our nature to imitate the actions of others—psychological studies confirm that imitation is a major part of our social development. Mimicry strengthens the bond between parent and child. Newborns copy the facial movements of their parents. Toddlers learn to speak by imitating and sifting through the sounds they hear. When we observe an action, it has been shown that the neurons in our brain respond as if we were performing the same action. Our capacity for empathy is based on this hardwired ability. In acting classes, one of the most common exercises to get scene partners to connect emotionally is called mirroring. Actors are paired, facing each other, and one performs all of the physical movements of the other until they are told to switch leaders. Duplicating actions is the fastest way to get two people to reach synchronicity.

Our skill in patterning behavior is also one of the reasons that actors—and the theatre in general—have often been greeted with suspicion throughout history. Even though psychologists have established that children as young as twelve months can recognize the concept of pretense, there has always been a belief that viewing or participating in fictional worlds can warp our moral core, regardless of age. In 1999, two teenagers entered Columbine High School in Colorado and killed twelve students and a teacher before ending their own lives. Soon after, many tried to tie their violent behavior to the playing of video games.

This type of role playing was seen as tantamount to being trained to point and shoot weapons. A lawsuit was brought against gaming companies, but in the end, a judge decided that “there is social utility in expressive and imaginative forms of entertainment, even if they contain violence.” When California tried to ban selling violent video games to children in 2011, the Supreme Court overturned the law, finding it a violation of free speech.

This leads us to how an imitation-based definition of theatre is lacking. Simply to watch the actions of others would brand too much of everyday life as theatre. However, imitation in the sense of representing a fictional or real person creates a better dividing line between performance and an action that is performative. In the brief but effective words of critic Eric Bentley, “A impersonates B while C looks on.” A sporting event or a fashion show has performers and an audience, but these “actors” are not pretending to be someone else. Theatre needs a **pretense of self**—a presentation of character. This is a useful definition to limit the scope of your study, but as you will see, many avant-garde and postmodern performers have sought to challenge this idea by blurring the line between real life and fiction, audience and performer.

Potentially, a great many people can participate in the creation of this pretense. Unlike other solitary forms of art, theatre is often **highly collaborative**. Although the actor is its only requirement, theatre has developed numerous artistic and support personnel such as directors, designers, and stage managers who may contribute to the final product. This is one of the reasons that theatre studies are so valuable—they teach teamwork in the service of excellence.

Theatre has other qualities that, collectively, make it distinct from other art forms. The economics of producing plays is one reason theatre is no longer a mass medium. Film and television can reach greater audiences because their product can be broadcast and played simultaneously on millions of screens. Additionally, computers can now stream the same content on demand. Theatre can never be as profitable or match the scale of these mediums. However, its resistance to duplication is what makes it special. Live performance is **immediate**. When you read a novel or watch a recorded television program, you have total control over the experience by varying your tempo of reading or stopping and starting altogether. The theatrical experience, however, is relentless. It pushes your focus from place to

place, forcing you to reflect on the events on the fly, during intermissions, or after the show. That is the reason it is **ephemeral**. Performances can have no true reproduction. Anyone who has participated in the creation of theatre can attest to the strange, emotional moment when the run of a show has ended, sets are removed, and nothing remains but an empty stage. In dressing rooms and backstage walls of many theatres, you will find lines from shows scribbled by actors, a poignant attempt to live beyond the temporary world of a production run. While it is true that performances can be captured on film or video, the true experience of live theatre cannot be truly duplicated. Once it is finished, it lives only in memory.

This transitory quality of theatre is due to the **dynamic between the actor and the audience**. There is a feedback loop—energy is exchanged. Each produces signals that are perceived by the other, which, in turn, can profoundly affect how the performance evolves. This is more difficult to perceive in serious drama but is especially evident in comedy, where laughter influences the delivery and timing of lines or the intensity of an individual performance. Actors complain of tough or dead audiences and celebrate the ones that seem to take an emotional journey with them, inspiring them to make bolder choices.

The idea of pretending that the audience is not present is a relatively new one. In many theatrical traditions, actors commonly spoke directly to their audiences. Readers of Shakespeare often ignore that his famous soliloquys, monologues in which a single character shares his or her innermost thoughts, are direct appeals to the audience. The audience members become characters in the play, confidants who can seemingly solve the problems they are being asked to hear.

This relationship between actors and audiences has changed over the centuries. In many theatrical traditions, the audience has been a much more influential “actor” in the performance. In eighteenth-century France and England, wealthy patrons could sit right on the stage in full view. As much as we complain about the annoyances of cell phone use and texting during performances today, to a nineteenth-century audience, our behavior would seem downright passive. It was common practice for people to vocalize their criticism by booing and hissing at villains during their entrances or heckling actors when it was thought a performance was subpar. Vocal reactions to onstage action built to such a crescendo that newspapers often complained of theatrical rowdiness.

How to See a Play

The following observations were written by a German traveler to a theatre in the United States in 1833:

. . . freedom here degenerates into the rudest license and it is not uncommon, in the midst of the most affecting parts of a tragedy, or the most charming 'cadenza' of a singer, to hear some coarse expressions shouted from the gallery in a stentor voice. This is followed, according to the taste of the by-standers, either by loud laughter and approbation, or by the castigation and expulsion of the offender. . . . It is also no rarity for some one to throw the fragments of his 'gouté' [snack], which do not always consist of orange-peels alone, without the smallest ceremony, on the heads of the people in the pit or, or to shail them with singular dexterity into the boxes; while others hang their coats and waistcoats over the railing of the gallery and sit in shirt-sleeves.

We certainly have come a long way! Although politeness is a relative idea, it can be said that theatre-going today has some common rules of etiquette to follow so everyone can have an enjoyable experience. We list them here to save you any future embarrassment:

Arrive on time. Finding your seat in a dark theatre is disruptive to those in your wake.

Do not talk during the show.

Do not use your phone or smartphone. It is best to turn it off completely. Vibrating phones can be just as attention-getting as a ring tone.

Do not eat or drink during the show.

Do not open candies with loud wrappers.

Violating these rules breaks the reality the actors are trying so hard to create as well as greatly annoying patrons around you (although they may not say it). You do not want to be the person everyone complains about after the show.

If there is an intermission between the acts, some theatres will blink the lights or broadcast a tone to let you know it is time to take your seat. At the end of the show, applaud the actors for their efforts instead of darting for the door. It is the only way they know you enjoyed their work, and they appreciate it immensely. Standing ovations should be reserved for outstanding performances.

And now for backstage superstitions. Do not say "Good luck" to an actor before a show; it is considered bad luck to do so. "Break a leg" is the proper way to give your good wishes. It is also believed by some that it is bad luck to whistle in a theatre. This probably originated back when ex-sailors used to work in theatres to operate the ropes and pulleys that raised and lowered scenery. They communicated by whistling, so an errant one could cause pandemonium on stage. Today, however, all communications are done through intercoms. But these infractions are trivial compared to saying "*Macbeth*" in a theatre. Supposedly, disaster will befall any show if this word is spoken aloud. We have seen many a seemingly mature and levelheaded actor go into a histrionic tizzy at the mention of Shakespeare's play. Calling it "the Scottish play" is imagined to be a harmless alternative. The fanciful legend connected to this irrational belief is that Shakespeare observed the rituals of a real witches' coven and included their spells in his play. Outraged, the witches placed a curse on the play. If its title is said by accident, actors have developed elaborate rituals to combat this "curse," involving spinning, spitting, and/or circling the theatre a number of times.

Finally, many theatres claim to have a kindly ghost in residence. It is likely that an apparatus referred to as a "ghost light" contributes to this one. This bare lamp mounted on a pole is put on stage whenever the theatre is not in use and all the lights are shut off. It is a safety measure but also saves on electrical costs. Its eerie light has convinced many a green actor that a ghostly presence is nearby.

Other cultures have a more casual relationship between actor and audience. For example, in some puppet theatre traditions like the *wayang kulit* in Indonesia, shows are played from evening until dawn, and it is common practice for spectators to move about, talk, and feast during the show. Nevertheless, actors and audiences are ultimately partners. Theatre's primary strength comes from the fact that it is a medium of imagination that depends on the *suggestion* of reality rather than slavish photorealism.

How Theatre "Means"

How theatre generates meaning is both simplistic and highly complex. Think of the theatrical space as a machine that constantly generates meaning. A bare stage can become any location by using language or gesture—our minds fill in the blanks. Actions on stage forge what we call a **convention**, an unspoken agreement between actor and audience concerning a fictional reality. As long as this covenant is unbroken, other fictions can be built upon it. A fun example of this concept comes from a play called *Black Comedy* by Peter Shaffer. The show opens in darkness but when the characters in the play experience a blackout caused by a short circuit, the stage suddenly becomes illuminated. As the actors grope around in the "dark," we realize the convention. When the lights are on, the reality is that the characters are experiencing darkness. When the lights are out, the lights in the house have returned. Following this logic, if a match is struck or a flashlight is switched on, the stage lights dim.

Entire styles of performance can be created through conventions. In musical theatre, a performer interrupts a scene to break into song. In doing so, he has constructed a world where singing as a means of expression is an accepted reality. In poetic drama, characters speak in patterned language and as long as the other characters do the same, it establishes a norm.

Of course, the audience must be willing to participate in this enterprise. Back in 1817, Samuel Taylor Coleridge coined the expression "*the willing suspension of disbelief*" to describe a reader's encounter with supernatural poetry. The theatrical community has since adopted that phrase to describe the decision by an audience member to put aside any doubts about the narrative being presented. In other words, the audience chooses to believe as long as the actors hold up their end of the bargain and support the established reality.

At the outset, nothing on the stage has any inherent meaning. The symbolism that is generated is entirely based on context. Visualize a chair in a performance space. At its most basic, it represents a simple piece of furniture. However, if used as a throne, it becomes a sign of power. If physically toppled, for example, it can change into a symbol of the overthrow of monarchy. In many ways, a stage is no different from a painting—everything inside the frame is open for interpretation—but theatre can constantly morph to create other meanings. In August Wilson’s play *Fences*, a character named Troy builds a fence around his house at the insistence of his wife, Rose. On the surface, it seems to symbolize a barrier to protect the family from the threat of the outside world. However, as the play progresses and facts about his behavior outside the home come to light, the fence comes to symbolize a kind of emotional prison shared by both husband and wife or the emotional barriers that keep people apart.

Because theatre cannot help but generate meaning, it has a strong tendency to be allegorical. If a play depicts a single romantic relationship triumphing over adversity, a strong message that “love conquers all” might be communicated. If multiple couples are shown with different outcomes to their relationships, the result becomes more complex. This is why it is problematic to have a person of a particular background or ethnicity represented in a negative light when there is no positive counterpoint. Nevertheless, playwrights of color have struggled with this idea. Some believe the theatre is an opportunity for positive portrayals, while others bristle at the thought of being “ghettoized” and want to represent the human condition without being a spokesperson for their race or gender.

Of course, the reception of art does not begin and end at the theatre. The conclusions we reach about the onstage world we experience are greatly influenced by the personal and cultural baggage we bring with us. Our background—socioeconomic status, history of personal relationships, familiarity with the subject matter, and so on—all influence how we interpret the fictional lives and outcomes we see. One of the major strengths of the theatre is that it helps us transcend our own preconceptions by intimately exposing us to new ideas, cultures, and subcultures.

It should also be noted that stories that are deeply rooted in our own cultural traditions often have little or very different meaning to people from another one. An American anthropologist named Laura Bohannan discovered the fallacy of “universal understanding” in 1961 when she was living with a tribe called the Tiv in southeastern Nigeria. Pressed

to tell a story by the elders of the village, she attempted to recount the story of *Hamlet*. When she told them that the ghost of a dead king appeared to demand revenge, they rejected the idea. They insisted it must be an omen sent by a witch or a zombie and that Hamlet's father should have taken more wives. As she continued the story, it was determined, among other reinterpretations, that the only explanation for the behavior of Hamlet and Ophelia was bewitchment. "Tell us more stories in the future," said one of the elders, "and we will instruct you in their true meaning." Theatre practitioners forget their audience at their own peril.

The Uses of Theatre

We certainly look to theatre for entertainment, but many believe that using it as a source of pleasure or escape is not its only purpose. A series of practices called **drama therapy** is described by its national association as when "participants are invited to rehearse desired behaviors, practice being in relationships, expand and find flexibility between life roles, and perform the change they wish to be and see in the world." It is a mix of theatre and clinical and psychological practice, and master's degrees in drama therapy are now offered nationally and internationally to train specialists to work with special populations such as troubled children and adolescents, the elderly, substance abusers, people with developmental disabilities, and those who have experienced traumatic events such as wars or natural disasters. Drama therapists might also work with dysfunctional families or individuals seeking help with life problems. One example is called playback theatre, in which an audience member tells a story about his life and then a troupe of actors recreates it through artistic improvisation. This allows the storyteller to actively and immediately reflect upon an event—choices and dynamics can be reexamined and insights can be gained. At the same time, audiences can find parallels in their own lives.

Role play can even be valuable for the clinicians themselves. Today, prominent hospitals and medical schools commonly hire actors to portray the sick to help aspiring doctors learn to relate to patients. Encounters are recorded and reviewed by supervisors in order to improve students' bedside manner.

Although it can be argued that all plays teach by presenting an outlook that can be accepted or rejected by the spectator, numerous groups have

sought to use theatre to educate throughout history. In the Christian world, for example, theatre was widely used to provide a moral education. During the Middle Ages in Europe, most people were illiterate and could not speak Latin, the language of the Bible and the Christian service. To share biblical stories and teach Catholic doctrine, priests oversaw the creation of plays that were performed by amateurs belonging to the local community. At first, plays were presented inside the church, but they were later moved outside to temporary stages. Each of these stages, called *mansions*, represented a specific location such as heaven or hell with an open space called a *platea* used for the playing space. The audience would then follow the action from set to set. It was not uncommon for these shows to have elaborate special effects such as flying machines to raise and lower actors (Jesus' ascension and flying demons), smoke and fire, and mirrored lighting to simulate a halo.

Today, churches continue to use theatre for instruction. Many use skits, with varying degrees of sophistication, to illustrate points made in sermons, and Easter plays continue to dramatize the crucifixion and resurrection of Christ. Other religious uses of theatre can be quite controversial. Since the 1990s, many evangelical Christian churches have presented Hell House, a yearly alternative to the traditional Halloween haunted house. Performed by teenagers and targeted to their age group, it follows the same structure and spirit as a medieval theatrical presentation. An actor playing the devil or the devil's helper shepherds the audience from one graphic and disturbing scene to the next in an effort to frighten the audience away from behaviors it considers sinful. After depictions of gay lifestyles, drugs, suicide, occultism, drunk driving, or domestic violence, characters involved are dragged away by demons to eternal damnation. At the end of the tour, the crowd moves to some representation of heaven, then is invited to pray and possibly join the congregation.

Secular forces have also made full use of the theatre's persuasive possibilities. Public opinion has been swayed by plays designed to inform the public about important social issues. In the 1840s and 1850s, alcohol consumption was considered an enormous threat to the American family, so much so that a temperance movement was established in order to preach abstinence and pressure the government to restrict and/or abolish its use. One of their strongest weapons was a play called *The Drunkard* written by a former alcoholic actor with help from a Unitarian minister.



During the medieval period, the Bible was available only in Latin and could not be understood by an illiterate public. To address this problem, the Catholic church used theatre to illustrate stories such as the Creation, Cain and Abel, and the Last Supper. Performed by amateur actors from the community, these plays were funded outside the church and often had elaborate sets and special effects. This print recreates one type of performance called a **passion play**, which depicted the suffering, death, and resurrection of Christ. It was presented in Valenciennes, France, in 1547; took twenty-five days to perform; and had one hundred roles for seventy-two actors. On the left, you can see a depiction of paradise with God on his throne surrounded by angels and saints. On the right, Satan and his devils control the entrance to hell or "hell-mouth." Fire and smoke effects were designed to strike fear into the hearts of any audience members that dared to sin. Courtesy of Bibliothèque Nationale de France.



A 2013 passion play presented on Good Friday in Trafalgar Square, London. Photo by Elena Dante.



Images from a 2008 Hell House created by an evangelical church in Cedar Hill, Texas. A "demon guide" ushers the audience to disturbing scenes such as this simulated school shooting. The Hell House phenomenon began in 1995 with a church in Arvada, Colorado, that went on to sell kits to other churches. Approximately three thousand Hell Houses are presented each year. Some churches have drawn sharp criticism for their controversial interpretations of immoral behavior. Soon after the 9/11 terrorist attack, a Waco, Texas, Hell House contained a scene in which a woman's abortion was followed by her announcement that she was to accept a new job at the Twin Towers. Photos by Marcus Junius Laws.

It portrays a good-natured landowner who is destroyed by liquor and abandons his wife and child only to be saved from a life of shame by a wealthy philanthropist. It became one of the most successful plays in American history and was one of more than one hundred plays dedicated to showing the evils of drink.

Equally influential were the many dramatizations of *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, an anti-slavery book by Harriet Beecher Stowe, already one of the most popular books of the nineteenth century. Audiences throughout the country could watch the story of runaway slaves Eliza and George and their escape from cruel masters and slave traders along with the travails of Uncle Tom, a faithful slave rewarded only with misery. Because of a lack of copyright laws, some adaptations had a pro-slavery bent, but most questioned the immorality of the institution and humanized its sufferers.

Today, plays like *The Drunkard* might be called **engaged theatre**, drama that aspires to promote dialogue and social justice through performance. It can take many forms: community-based theatre, theatre in education, health education, theatre for development, prison theatre, museum and memory theatre, and theatre for social change. Engaged theatre also answers to many names: applied theatre, civically/socially/politically engaged theatre, ethnodrama, and documentary theatre, to name several. As currently practiced, it can trace its emergence to the





The Metropolitan Playhouse's 2010 revivals of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (featuring Marcie Henderson, directed by Alex Roe) and *The Drunkard* (featuring Michael Hardart, directed by Frank Kuhn). Photos by Debbie Goldman.

early 1990s intersection of anthropological research into theatre and community-based performance. However, if we consider its ethos of democratic participation, we find that its origins are the same as Western theatre itself. Athenian theatre of the fifth century BCE relied on an engaged citizenry for its development. In addition to tragedies, playwrights Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides wrote comedies for a demanding democratic public who judged the relevance and relative merits of their work by how it engaged the current political debate. The archetypal characters created on stage stood in for competing philosophies, and major political figures could be criticized for their excesses.

Documentary or Verbatim Theatre

Some performers have sought to represent not only characters, but pivotal events as well. They do it by constructing plays using material directly from firsthand interviews as well as historical or contemporary documents. Unlike so-called reality television, which often asks us to negatively judge its subjects, these "verbatim plays"

ask us to empathize and see multiple sides of a single issue. The following are some contemporary examples.

Actor Anna Deavere Smith's work began in the 1970s when she traveled the country, interviewing interesting people with a tape recorder and then transforming this material into a series of monologues in which she would play all of the parts. Her most famous plays are about race relations that have erupted into riots. *Fires in the Mirror* takes you to Crown Heights, Brooklyn, in 1991. Tensions turned into violence in this African American and orthodox Jewish neighborhood after two shocking events: a black child was killed by a car transporting a rabbi, and a Hasidic man was stabbed by a group of black men. By portraying real people from both communities who experienced the riot, she brought both perspectives into sharp focus. Later, she performed *Twilight: Los Angeles, 1992*, a piece she created after the violence following the acquittal of several white police officers who had been videotaped repeatedly beating Rodney King, a black man pulled over for drunk driving.

The Laramie Project (2000) was devised by members of the Tectonic Theater Project. They sought to understand the rural community of Laramie, Wyoming, where Matthew Shepard, a gay twenty-one-year-old university student, was savagely assaulted and left to die by two local men. They spent fifteen months in the city conduct-



Anna Deavere Smith. Photo by Kevin Fitzsimons.

ing interviews with its inhabitants. Some were connected to Matthew Shepard and the events surrounding the murder, and others were simply dealing with its aftermath and what it meant to be a resident of Laramie. The result was a play with seventy-two characters played by eight actors. *The Laramie Project* has been produced worldwide and generated so much interest that a companion epilogue, created from follow-up interviews, was added ten years after Shepard's death.

The following two shows have dealt with the inequities of our criminal justice system. *The Exonerated* (2002), by Jessica Blank and Erik Jensen, was constructed from interviews with six death row inmates who were freed when new evidence proved their innocence. *Doin' Time: Through the Visiting Glass* (2004) was developed by actor Ashley Lucas by interviewing prisoners in California, Texas, and New York; their families; and people connected to the prison system. She also added material from her own childhood dealing with an



A high school production of *The Laramie Project*. In this scene, members of Westboro Baptist Church protest the funeral of Matthew Shepard. Mary Institute and Saint Louis Country Day School, 2008. Photo by Anthony Chivetta.

incarcerated father to help audiences gain perspective into prison life and its effect on families.

A perennial favorite in the theatre community is *The Vagina Monologues* (1996). Eve Ensler conducted interviews with two hundred women about a body part that she thought deserved celebration rather than shame or embarrassment and created an entire evening dedicated to it. Now performed on countless college campuses, this series of monologues is usually presented by a group of women instead of a single performer and has been used as a fund-raiser for charities that deal with violence against women.

Do these plays have a point of view, or does the fact that they are made out of the words of real people prove their objectivity? Keep in mind that although they are made from primary sources, they are still forms of artistic expression. Out of the sum total of material collected, points of view are chosen, others go unused, and the texts are arranged for some kind of overall effect. Regardless, they have the potential to create powerful theatre and are an indelible link to historical moments from which we can learn and initiate change. In the words of Anna Deavere Smith, "I think when things fall apart—you can see more and you can even—be a part of indicating new ways that things can be put together."

While we can see the embrace of democratic ideals of participation since the inception of Western theatre, more recent developments in engaged theatre have sought to extend these ideals to their logical conclusions—why not involve the community as creators of theatre instead of solely as observers? To subvert the notion of theatregoers as consumers, this kind of theatre empowers community members to produce their own art—a passive audience is not the goal. Even in work that does not have explicit audience/community participation in the creation or performance, the content will be relevant to the audience as it speaks to community social realities. So what does engaged theatre look like?

Case Studies

Hallie Flanagan was an American experimental theatre director who used theatre to address the struggles of everyday people. She accepted

a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1926 to study theatre abroad, and while in Russia, she attended “living newspapers,” performances that delivered the news and politics of the day through theatre. When Flanagan was called on to serve as the director of the U.S. Federal Theatre Project (FTP; 1935–1939), one of many stopgap programs to put people to work during the Great Depression, she accepted her post and instituted the same type of performances in the United States. She had already earned a reputation directing a script she had adapted in 1931 with Margaret Clifford titled *Can You Hear Their Voices?* It was based on a newspaper’s true account of Arkansas farmers raiding a Red Cross station to get food during the Dust Bowl, a time when droughts and violent dust storms destroyed once-fertile land and left farmers destitute.

Flanagan’s commitment to telling real stories that were vital to local and national communities was evident in the way she organized



The 1938 production of *One-Third of a Nation*, a living newspaper that opened with this scene depicting a burning tenement. Concerned with the poor state of urban housing for the poor, the show included a history of the New York real estate market, newspaper headlines, government statistics, and speeches by political figures as well as some fictional characters. During the run of the show, the content was updated to reflect new developments, and when presented in other cities, local facts were included. The play took its name from a speech by then-president Franklin Delano Roosevelt, who said “I see one-third of a nation, ill-housed, ill-clad, ill-nourished.” Courtesy Library of Congress, Music Division, ftp0068.

the Federal Theatre Project. The FTP produced many theatrical works and employed thousands of theatre artists to create children's theatre, community-specific ethnic theatre companies that embraced the nation's diversity, and productions that dealt with political issues of local and national concern. Plagued by accusations of socialist and communist designs, the FTP was halted shortly after Flanagan was called before the House Un-American Activities Committee in 1938. In 2010, Flanagan's *Can You Hear Their Voices?* was revived by the Peculiar Works Project theatre in New York City.

Augusto Boal (1931–2009) was a Brazilian theatre director and founder of Theatre of the Oppressed. His early career was spent directing at Arena Theatre of São Paulo, where he laid the groundwork for the theatre's nationalist productions and directed classical work with an eye to making it relevant to Brazilians. In 1971, Boal was kidnapped, arrested, tortured, and exiled because of his cultural activism, which was perceived as a threat to the Brazilian military regime. During his exile, he wrote *Theatre of the Oppressed* (1973). In this book, Boal argues for the direct participation of the audience in theatre, rather than their traditional role as passive spectators, recasting the audience as “spect-actors.” Upon his



Augusto Boal in 2007. Photo by Teia/Flickr.com 2007.

return to Brazil, his commitment to working for human rights and issues of citizenship resulted in his serving one term (1993–1997) as a city councilman for Rio de Janeiro and developing a new form named *legislative theatre*. Boal sought to transform voters into legislators by conducting performative town hall meetings that considered proposed laws.

El Teatro Campesino, located in San Juan Bautista, California, was founded by Luis Valdez in 1965 at the Delano Grape Strike picket lines of Cesar Chavez’s United Farm Workers Union. In order to raise awareness of poor working conditions, farmworkers performed *actos* (short improvised skits) on flatbed trucks and in union halls. These shows toured and were later honored in 1969 with an Obie Award for “demonstrating the politics of survival” and with a Los Angeles Drama Critics Award in 1969 and 1972. More recently, El Teatro Campesino and Monterey Bay Aquarium partnered to create *actos* for children that deal with global warming and conservation issues, titled *Basta Basura* and *Watt a Waste*.

Reverend Billy and the Church of Earthalujah are a New York City–based performance group that is not affiliated with any religious organization. Through the guise of the Reverend Billy character, Bill Talen and his



A performance by El Teatro Campesino, 1966. Courtesy of Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University. Photo by John A. Kouns.



Reverend Billy at the 2011 Theater Festival Impulse in Wuppertal, Germany. Photo by Robin Junicke.

gospel choir bring their activist performance art to many fronts where he feels the need to take a stand against consumerism, corporate greed, and the degradation of the planet. Reverend Billy began performing in Times Square, where he preached to any who would listen to cease their thoughtless spending. His act has since grown to include a forty-person choir and a five-piece band. In 2011, Reverend Billy and the Church of Earthalujah completed an Occupy Tour, voicing their support of the 99 percent of Americans who are not the wealthiest 1 percent of the population.

Juliano Mer-Khamis was an actor, director, and activist who was murdered in 2011 because he created theatre that engaged his conflicted community. He said of his identity: “I am 100 percent Palestinian and 100 percent Jewish.” His allegiance to intercultural peace and liberal views, including teaching theatre to Palestinian youth by integrating boys and girls together, was controversial to some in the community. His Freedom Theatre at the West Bank’s Jenin Refugee Camp persisted in its difficult work of fostering Arab-Israeli peace since its founding in 2006. The theatre continues today in Mer-Khamis’s name. At its heart, engaged theatre practice shares Mer-Khamis’s commitment and passion for both art and



Palestinians demonstrating in Ramallah on April 4, 2012, the one-year anniversary of the murder of Juliano Mer-Khamis. Despite their urgings, the Palestinian police have not found his killer. Photo by Oren Ziv/Activestills.org.

community. Most simply put, it is a creative representation that is produced out of intimate engagement with a community.

Living newspapers and groups such as El Teatro Campesino have been referred to as **agitprop theatre**, a blending of the words *agitation* and *propaganda*. Designed to provide new information and galvanize the public to act upon it, this type of political action is often practiced as street theatre. Humor has been an effective tool to spread the message of its creators. The following two groups have employed the same strategy—mocking conservative ideology and practices by acting ridiculously conservative themselves:

Ladies Against Women (LAW) began in the 1980s as a feminist reaction to Reagan-era politics and periodically surfaces to attack what it considers repressive attitudes toward women. Both sexes dress up as 1950s housewives and hold public “consciousness-lowering” events. With protest signs such as “Make America a Man Again” and “Abolish the Environment,” they have marched in parades and held bake sales for national

defense, pretending to sell Twinkies with a million-dollar price tag. Here is an example of one of their songs:

(sung to the tune of “My Bonnie Lies over the Ocean”)

My body belongs to my husband
Decisions do not concern me
My thoughts must not stray from my housework
So please make my choices for me

Please make, please make
Oh please make my choices for me

My body belongs to our nation
The judges know what’s best for me
My ovum have more rights than I do
So please make my choices for me.

Billionaires for Bush (or Gore) was another group that used irony as a form of protest. However, they used it to target corporate welfare and the influence of money on the political system. Creator Andrew Boyd writes:

The Billionaires campaign was devised to educate the public about the twin evils of campaign finance corruption and economic inequality. With the pay gap between CEOs and workers at 475 to 1, both Democrats and Republicans renting themselves out to big money donors, and 97% of incumbents running for re-election being returned to Congress, these problems had reached crisis proportions by the 2000 presidential election. Our idea was to create a humorous, ironic media campaign that would spread like a virus via grassroots activists and the mainstream media.

Their performances were often designed to coexist with serious events. The campaign kicked off with a “Million Billionaire March” where activists wearing tuxedos, top hats, and cocktail dresses arrived at the Democratic and Republican conventions waving fake money, holding signs such as “Corporations are people too!” and chanting slogans such as:

One, two, three, four, we just want to earn much more!
Five, six, seven eight, don’t you dare tax our estates!



A 2007 Billionaires for Bush performance in New York City. Photo by Fred Askew.

Whose president? Our president!
Whose money? Our money!
Whose media? Our media!

Materials about starting your own chapter were made available on a Web site, and soon independent groups sprang up in different cities, tailoring performances to their own message. After Barack Obama was elected, the organization morphed into Billionaires for Wealthcare and has shown up at Republican fund-raising events pretending to oppose healthcare reform and to lobby for corporate loopholes so the wealthy can avoid providing healthcare to their employees.

A Serbian youth movement called **Otpor!** (“resistance”) used this same kind of humorous, nonviolent consciousness-raising to overthrow Slobodan Milošević, the president of Yugoslavia accused of war crimes and corruption. It began in 1998 when fifteen students at Belgrade University decided to protest repressive laws that attacked freedom of speech. By 2000, the organization had expanded to 20,000 members, but unlike traditional political parties, Otpor! expressed dissent in unusual ways. For example, barrels with Milošević’s face were made available on the

street and people walking by could hit one with a stick for one dinar. Theatre-like events became an important part of these protests. When arrests of activists became common, Otpor! arranged a parade of mock support for Milošević populated by a small herd of sheep carrying signs that said “We support the Socialist Party.” Other movements have since adopted their methods and their symbol of a clenched fist.

Theatre and Propaganda

Sometimes theatre has been used for abhorrent propaganda. Before World War II, the Nazi regime held elaborate outdoor pageants called *thingspiele* (“meeting or judgment plays”) in specially built theatres called *thingplätze* such as this one near Heidelberg. With thousands of performers collected into huge choruses, these plays tried to conjure up a mythological German past in order to celebrate German fascism and Nordic supremacy. After a short period of success, the public lost interest in these spectacles and the program was scrapped. Of the two hundred theatres planned for construction, approximately forty-five were built. Today, the few theatres that survive are used for rock concerts and other events.



A *thingplatz* near Heidelberg, Germany. Photo by matthiashn/Flickr.com.

Show Business: An Interview with Broadway Producer Ken Davenport

Ken Davenport has produced such shows as the Tony Award-winning musical *Kinky Boots*, *Godspell*, *Chinglish*, *Oleanna*, *Speed-the-Plow*, *Blithe Spirit*, and Will Ferrell's *You're Welcome America*.

How would you define the role of the producer?

It's a difficult question to answer, but the analogy I often use is that the producer is very much like the CEO of any business or chairman of the board. We are responsible for all aspects of the business of putting a show together. We have to hire the management team. We have to find a product that we are going to sell—that would be the show. We have to find a location to sell that product. So it's similar to owning a hardware store or restaurant or anything else. In fact, especially nowadays, as I hear every politician on both sides of the dial screaming about how the future of this country is in small business, that's what we are: we are small businessmen and small businesswomen.

How much influence does the producer have over the finished product?

We have a lot of control over the finished product. At the same time, theatre is one of the most collaborative art forms there is. You're counting on a producer, of course, and for a musical, you're counting on a book writer, a composer, a lyricist, a director, a choreographer. Obviously, we are bringing money to the table and the distribution of that product. To the inventor of that product, which is the authors, we certainly have a big say in it. But at the same time, I don't hire artists that I don't trust and believe in. So often, we are just facilitating their voice, to make sure that it's heard. I often say that my goal as a producer is to make sure that my shows run as long as possible because the longer a show runs, the better chance my investors have of getting their money back. And the longer a show runs, the more people have a chance of hearing my author's voice and spreading whatever messages they want to spread. So I have a lot of control or influence over the finished product, but it's a collaborative effort.

How do you find material worthy of producing?

A number of ways. Many of the shows that I have produced I've developed myself, ideas that were born out of my head or something I was inspired by, something that I saw as a kid, or something I have always just been very passionate about. Or sometimes it's from writers, scripts . . . I have people that look for shows. Inspiration for a production can come anywhere. I just kind of live life with my eyes open, looking for something I believe can have an effect on an audience.

Can you give me an example of something that leapt from your mind and found its way onto the stage?

The very first show that I ever produced is a show called *The Awesome 80s Prom*, and it's an interactive show set at a high school prom in 1989. It's basically the dream, fantasy prom that I always wanted to have when I was in high school. And I'm also a big fan of the John Hughes movies, and that's what it is, a kind of a John Hughes movie live on stage, happening all around you. That's something I was very passionate about, thought I could make a lot of fun, and it's still running eight years later.

How did you get started?

I started as an actor. When I was about five years old, my parents dragged me to an audition for *The Steadfast Tin Soldier* and I was obsessed with it until I was about twelve or thirteen when I became too cool for it. I thought I was going to play for the Boston Celtics. I stopped growing, so that didn't work out so well. And then I was going to be a lawyer. I went to a small, private college prep school in central Massachusetts that churned out a lot of doctors and lawyers, and I said, "I'll be one of those lawyers." But I got re-bit by the bug my senior year of high school when I did the musical *Les Misérables* and saw the kind of effect it could have. I went to Johns Hopkins University for a year and ended up doing more theatre there than anything else so I transferred to Tisch School of the Arts at NYU, where I continued to act. And then I got a very fortunate position as a production assistant on a Broadway show, and that opened my eyes to all the other different roles that were available on a Broadway production

including the producer and company manager, which is what I did for about ten years. And I learned the ins and outs of how to make a musical from the administrative side and the marketing side. Then I left and leapt out into producing about nine years ago now.

What is the most difficult part of being a producer?

There are two parts. Finding product that you love is a very difficult thing to do, which is one of the reasons I started coming up with it on my own. Raising money is certainly a difficult part, but that being said, when you find great product, money is very easy to raise. I do believe in the philosophy, "If you build it, they will come." I think the hardest thing to do these days is marketing and advertising a show. We live in a very cluttered advertising world now and, especially in New York City, live entertainment is a cluttered sphere. So to make your show stand out in that group is very, very challenging.

So what is a good quality for a producer to have?

It's passion. Theatre producers have to be unbelievably passionate about what they do, about the theatre and about their shows. With that kind of passion you can accomplish anything. Without it, they'll never produce a show.

How has technology/the Internet/social media changed what you do?

We found another way to reach audiences, find audiences, and see who is talking about us. We're still catching up with the rest of the world in terms of how we deal with it. The theatre industry is about twelve years behind, or ten years behind in terms of its use of technology, partly because our audience is about ten years behind. Remember, we cater to an older group. We are not the pop music world where they need to be on the cutting edge of technology because the kids that are downloading the top forty are already there. The average theatregoer is about forty-four years old and female, and the average age of a Facebook user is thirty-eight. They haven't picked up as fast as some other demographics. But it's a way for us to find new audiences, cultivate new audiences. It's very important and certainly will be for the audience of tomorrow.

How do you see the future of Broadway? How would you like to see it change?

If you follow Broadway statistics, you'll see our gross has been going up every year. Like a telethon, we are very proud to say, "Hey, look! We did better than last year!" Which is fantastic. But if you look at the other statistic about how many people are coming to Broadway shows, you'll see that attendance is typically very flat. So we're grossing more money, but we're not putting any more butts in seats. That is not a sustainable business model. It means that we are raising ticket prices—same numbers, just paying higher prices. And at some point, that will cap out. I would like to see those graphs rise at the same proportion. I would like to see us adding dollars and putting more people in the seats, because that means we'll have a big audience for tomorrow.

Origins of Theatre

So how did theatre come into being and why does it persist? It is commonly believed that Western theatre began with the ancient Greeks. But if we are to include the performance traditions of the rest of the world, images from unrecorded history remind us that this impulse to perform has always existed. In various parts of the world, records of artistic human expression have been found in the form of drawings on cave walls that are more than forty thousand years old. Even before written language, our need to record life experience was so great that we represented ideas in symbols that could be understood by others. Looking at images such as people, bison, and horses on cave walls, it is hard to imagine that all of these images were merely decorative. Instead of mere imitation, it is far more likely that many represented a story, one important enough to live longer than its narrator. For all the technological trappings that come with today's theatre, we often forget that storytelling is still its primary concern. For all of our imagined sophistication, we still yearn to be emotionally involved in the lives of others and live vicariously through their struggles. The primary question we still ask of one who has witnessed a show is not of theme but of story. What is it about? It is no accident that all world religions teach through parables. Stories allow us to

put ourselves into someone else's universe, feel their anticipation of the unknown, and learn from their actions. Theatre artists are not trained to be solely self-expressive—they are taught to tell stories better.

Our propensity to engage in ritual can also be considered a factor in the origin of theatre. Long before we singled out art as a distinctive experience from the rest of everyday existence, human beings have looked to influence uncertainties around us, organize our lives, and satisfy our psychological needs through formalized action. Although every culture has developed performative rituals to positively influence fortune, good weather, plentiful crops, fertility, and victory in war, when we learn about the formal rituals of non-Western cultures, we often make the mistake of viewing them in a paternal way. In other words, we see them as currently existing in a primitive state that eventually evolves into something similar to our own. However, if you look beyond religious observances that we readily acknowledge such as church services, weddings, and funerals, you will notice that we engage in a host of civic rituals that also establish landmarks and transition people from one state to the next (graduations, award ceremonies, and sorority/fraternity initiations, to name a few). Although we now tend to identify ourselves as members of nations and not tribes, we still create and seek out ritual experiences that provide a fundamental need. Theatre can be seen as part of that impulse for collective experience and our need to be transformed by it.

Many historians look to Africa for the first example of impersonation performed as part of a ritual. Sometime between 1870 and 1831 BCE, there was a yearly festival in Abydos, Egypt, commemorating the death and rebirth of Osiris, a king who came to be worshipped as an important god. During this festival, there is evidence that a priest played Osiris' son, Horus, and told exciting parts of the story along with other priests and priestesses who played other major roles. Next, thousands of participants bloodlessly reenacted the combat between the forces of Osiris and Set, his brother. We can find the same type of commemorative performances today in the re-creations of famous battles from history such as the American Civil War or the English War of the Roses.

However, you cannot have impersonation without a natural impulse to play, a willingness to pretend. Today, this impulse is under siege. Since the 1970s, children have lost an average of nine hours of free playtime per week. Television, smartphone, and video game use are not the only culprits. Parents have increasingly structured the lives of their children



Like the ancient Abydos participants, we continue to duplicate important cultural events. This photo shows a 2008 Civil War reenactment in Moorpark, California. Photo by Kent Kanouse.



On hundreds of college campuses, a large-scale game of tag is played called Humans vs. Zombies. The backstory is that a zombie infection has taken root and humans must fight for their survival. Human players must kill zombie players with toy guns, but if a zombie touches ("infects") them, humans must change sides. Zombies "die" if they do not feed in forty-eight hours. This photo is from a 2010 game at the University of Florida. Photo by J. Hunter Sizemore.



Improv Everywhere, a self-proclaimed "prank collective," arranges what they call "scenes of chaos and joy." Their audiences are simply passersby who, going about their daily lives, suddenly find themselves witnesses to quirky events. One of them, the "No Pants Subway Ride," has become an annual event. In the dead of winter, "agents" enter a train without pants pretending not to notice each other, much to the embarrassment and delight of the people around them. The event has become so popular that it has been duplicated in other subway cities. Photo by Karen Blumberg, www.flickr.com/specialkrb.

or converted free time to adult-supervised activities. This is unfortunate because instead of being frivolous or unproductive, playing is an important part of our development. It increases imagination, allows us to explore ideas, improves problem solving and decision making, and helps us cope with stress. Theatre helps us tap into this important element of our psyche, as both participants and observers.

How to Read a Play

Reading a play may be a new experience for those used to other forms of fiction. Keep in mind that theatre is not a literary form. Plays are meant to be performed, so scripts should be looked at as blueprints for action (ones that are meant to be only read are called **closet dramas**). In this way, plays are inert and incomplete until brought to life by theatre artists. This is why play-going is the best complement to play reading. We can marvel at the transformation and discover meanings we did not know existed.

Theatre and Games

Games can be seen as a formalized version of play. Like theatre, they have structure, rules, and an absolute outcome. Theorist James Carse defines two kinds of games—finite and infinite. In a finite game, you effect a kind of metaphorical death of the opposition by defeating him within the parameters of the agreed-upon rules. In an infinite game, the object is to prolong the game. The emphasis is on play itself and not the outcome. According to Carse, performance is more akin to infinite games. Everybody wins when a performance is aesthetically satisfying and artfully executed.

Although we associate games with children, we forget that adults expend an enormous amount of energy and resources on sports, which are merely games with a physical component. Worldwide, we spend between \$480 and \$620 billion a year on sports events. It would be difficult to even calculate how much money is spent adorning ourselves in the trappings of our favorite sports teams.

Anthropologist Claude Lévi-Straus would describe sports as having a “disjunctive effect.” In other words, unlike ritual, which brings groups together, sports divides individuals or groups into winners and losers where there was originally some kind of equality.



A scene from Dallas Theatre Center's 2012 production of *The Elaborate Entrance of Chad Diety*. Photo by Karen Almond.

Although theatre is a kind of ritual, it still provides us with the same basic element we seek out in sports—conflict. Because theatre is about people in extraordinary circumstances, it inevitably leads to clashes between powers. Actors are taught to discover what their character wants in a scene and find ways to fight other characters that stand in their way.

Although many specific elements of a play can be interpreted, the object of a production is usually to pursue the vision of the playwright and find the best means to showcase his or her ideas. This is one area where theatre and film diverge dramatically. A film script is a commodity and when it is sold, the screenwriter ceases to have any influence over the end product. Another writer or a team of writers can completely rewrite it. In addition, directors and star actors may decide that lines or scenes should be altered as well. In television, a room full of writers may get their hands on a script even though only one may end up being credited. In both cases, the result can be a polished gem, a hodgepodge of different points of view, or anything in between. In theatre, even though production teams may have radically different ideas about how to interpret a script, the playwright still holds an honored position. His favor is sought by directors and actors who seek to create a definitive live realization of his words. Playwrights or their estates have even pulled the rights to perform a play because they felt a production diverged too radically from the original intent.

Play reading is an exercise in imagination. Some plays contain extensive notes as to how the work should be staged and how each line should be delivered. Others keep it spare to leave room for artistic interpretation. Look at the beginning of the play *Waiting for Godot*, by Samuel Beckett:

(A country road. A tree. Evening. Estragon, sitting on a low mound, is trying to take off his boot. He pulls at it with both hands, panting. He gives up, exhausted, rests, tries again.)

Which country? What kind of tree? Early evening? Late evening or early evening? What does Estragon look like? How old is he? Is the business

with his boots a sad or a comic moment? As you read any play and imagine the details of the environment—how the actors should look, how the lines are delivered, and their physical actions—what you create in your head may be very different from the imaginings of your peers. But that is how it should be. That is the nature of art. And that is why there can be endlessly different productions of the same play.

Every play has what is called a **protagonist**. Identifying that character helps you understand the play overall. It is not necessarily the one with the most lines, nor does this character need to be noble or heroic. The protagonist carries the main theme of the play and usually goes through the greatest change. The concept of theme is tricky for some. Every play wants to tell you something about the way we live our lives, but theme is not the same as “the moral of the story.” Sometimes the best ones leave us with nothing but questions that we must answer for ourselves. Theme is the subject of thought, and there can be a variety in a single play. Since a protagonist struggles for something, there is often an **antagonist** who hinders the protagonist in his or her journey.

The “wright” in *playwright* means “maker.” It is useful to remember that plays are constructed; they have a shape that is chosen for a reason. Think of a play as a fictional universe consisting of characters’ lives, from birth to death, that intersect and conflict with each other. We call the place in this universe where the playwright picks up the story the **point of attack**. Presumably, he has chosen this point as the most effective way to tell this particular story. A late point of attack is one where the story begins in the midst of conflict and we find out important details about the past on the way to a much greater conflict. An early point of attack, or epic structure, takes us from the beginning of a story and allows us to experience each point of the timeline leading up to the main conflict. Plots with early points of attack tend to emphasize the past. Those with late points of attack seek to make us understand the dynamics that lead up to a conflict. One is not better than the other. It is simply two ways a playwright can attack a story.

The classic example of a late point of attack comes from the Greek tragedy *Oedipus the King*, by Sophocles, considered by many to be a masterpiece of plot construction. The story begins in the city-state of Thebes in front of the royal palace. A group of elders (or chorus) has gathered to beg King Oedipus to deliver them from a mysterious plague that has struck the city. He appears before them and listens to how disease has killed their loved ones, crops, and cattle. Oedipus tells them that

he has already sent his brother-in-law, Creon, to the shrine of Apollo, god of truth, to find out how to save the city. This is the **exposition** or background of the play, which lays the groundwork for all of the play's action. Suddenly, Creon enters and gives his report from the oracle. We find out that the previous king, Laius, was killed by someone who remains in Thebes. It is this unsolved murder that has cursed the city with disease. Oedipus is eager to help and vows to find the killer. So begins the first murder mystery in theatrical history.

As the play progresses, we are reminded that Oedipus became king after the death of Laius, at a time when Thebes was being terrorized by a merciless creature called the Sphinx, a terrible monster with the head of a woman, the body of a lion, an eagle's wings, and a serpent's tail. At the entrance to the city, all who came upon it were asked a riddle and then killed when they could not answer it. Bravely, Oedipus approached it and wisely solved the riddle, which caused the Sphinx to kill itself in frustration. In gratitude for freeing the city, he was made king and married Laius' widow, Jocasta, who bore him four children.

Tension builds in the play during the next phase, called **rising action**. The leader of the elders suggests that Tiresias, a blind fortune-teller, come forth and give details about the crime. Again, Oedipus has anticipated this request and Tiresias enters, led by a small boy. When first asked for information, he refuses. When pressured, Tiresias states that Oedipus is the murderer. Outraged, Oedipus accuses Creon of paying Tiresias to lie so Creon can become king. Creon denies the charge, but Oedipus threatens him with banishment and death. After much arguing, Oedipus' wife, Jocasta enters. She tries to put their minds at ease by stating that human beings cannot be prophets of the future. To prove it, she recounts an old prophecy made by a priest of Apollo that did not come true. It stated that the son of Laius and Jocasta would kill the king. In order to prevent it, Laius ordered their three-day-old son to be left on a mountain to die. Since Laius was killed by a traveler at a place where three roads met and not by their son, says Jocasta, prophecies are not to be believed.

Oedipus is shaken by the news. He questions Jocasta and finds out that the king's shepherd survived when he was killed on the road. She says this man begged to be sent out to the mountains when Oedipus was crowned. Oedipus orders the shepherd's return and then reveals a crucial moment from his past. When he lived in the city of Corinth, a drunken man claimed Oedipus was adopted and not the son of King Laius.

Reassured by his parents that it was not the case, he traveled to Delphi and consulted the oracle. There, he was told he would murder his father and share a bed with his mother. To avoid this monstrous outcome, he left Corinth. On the road, he was pushed aside by the driver of an old man's carriage. Oedipus retaliated, but the old man was angered by this action and struck Oedipus as he passed by. Oedipus hit him back with his staff and killed him along with the rest of his men in the ensuing struggle.

Oedipus is now desperate for these pieces not to fit together. Jocasta tries to soothe his fears by reminding him of the rumor that it was a band of thieves who killed Laius, not one. Then, a messenger arrives with fortunate but sad news. His father is dead from old age and the people of Corinth wish Oedipus to return and become their king. But with this news comes a terrible revelation. The messenger confirms that Oedipus was adopted, given to the family by a shepherd. Grief-stricken, Jocasta runs into the palace. Now, the testimony of a lowly shepherd controls everybody's destiny. He enters and when he is questioned by Oedipus, he describes how he was ordered to murder the child but, unable to do so, gave it to a man who brought it to the king's palace in Corinth. In this horrifying moment, the truth is now undeniable. All predictions were true—he has unknowingly committed an unspeakable taboo. This moment of painful self-knowledge is the **climax**, the highest emotional point in the play. The next section is called the period of **falling action**, followed by the **denouement**. The denouement (meaning “untying” or “unraveling”) is when the all of the final loose ends of the plot are resolved.

Oedipus moves into the palace, but soon a servant emerges and describes the terrible scene he just witnessed. Oedipus had searched for Jocasta in a rage but found that she had hanged herself. After taking her down, he took her golden brooches from her dead body and plunged them into his eyes, blinding himself. Destroyed by the light of truth, Oedipus wishes only darkness. Creon enters and sees the pathetic Oedipus emerge bloody from the palace. Oedipus begs to be banished to the mountains. Creon agrees but insists the children stay behind. The elders tell the audience:

Men of Thebes: look upon Oedipus
This is the king who solved the famous riddle
And towered up, most powerful of men.
No mortal eyes but looked on him with envy,
Yet in the end ruin swept over him.

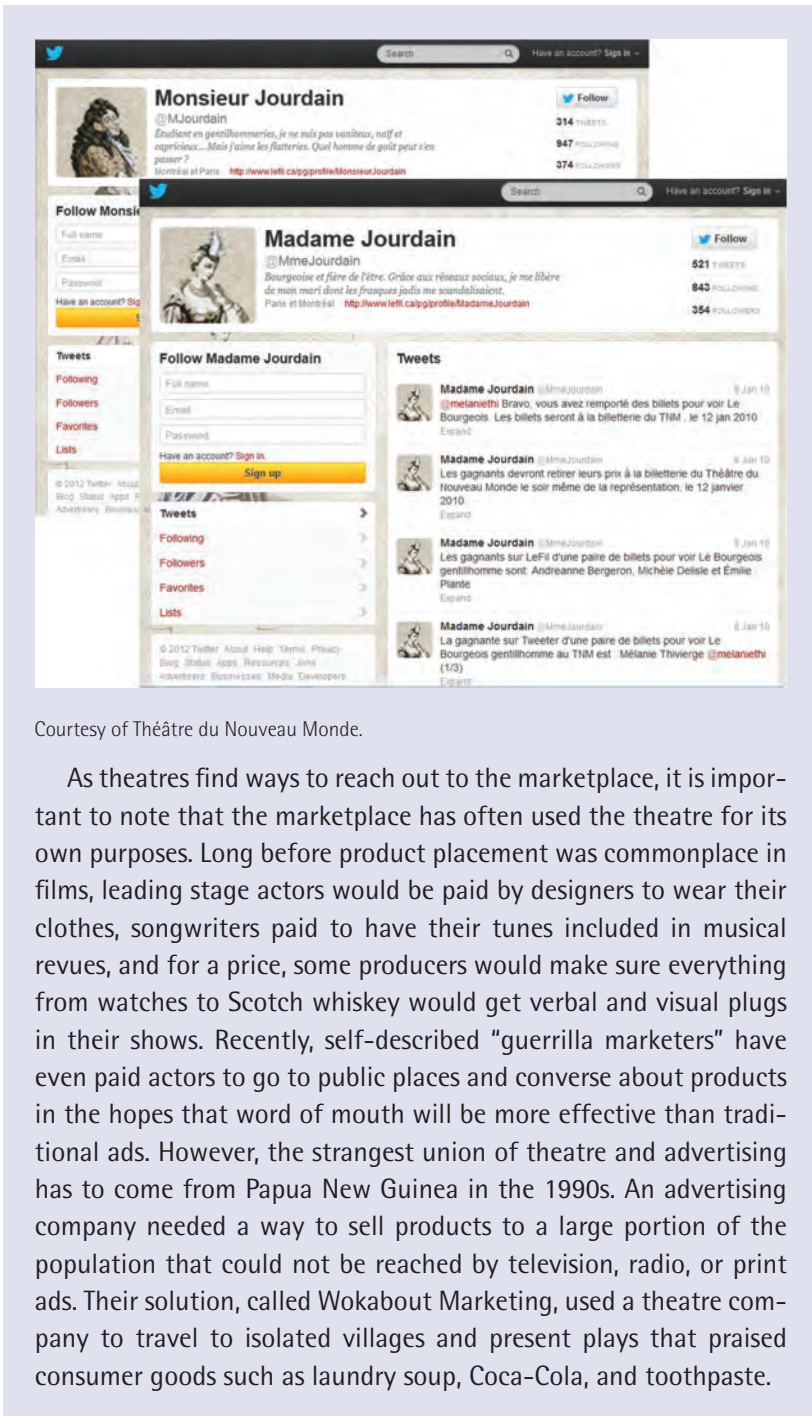
Let every man in mankind's frailty
Consider his last day; and let none
Presume on his good fortune until he find
Life, at his death, a memory without pain.
(trans. Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald)

According to the play, fate is something we cannot escape no matter what our station. We seek knowledge but have to live with the answers. Oedipus has shown us the limits and frailty of human happiness. But if Oedipus is the protagonist, who is the antagonist? You might imagine Oedipus to be his own antagonist or name those who sought to stand in the way of revealing the truth about his life. Even fate could be called the culprit since it was believed in Sophocles' time that the destiny of men was supernaturally determined.

Finding the protagonist and antagonist and charting the dramatic action is not just an exercise in dramatic analysis. It helps theatre creators shape their production. Directors must be able to answer the question, "Whose play is it?" in order to emphasize the right character through action onstage. They must also guide performances so the climax is properly highlighted. Actors must also know the highest emotional point so they can adjust their performance accordingly. Plot is the engine that drives a production.

Theatre and Advertising

Theatre companies are always looking for creative ways to attract new audiences using social media. However, Quebec's Théâtre du Nouveau Monde took a more creative step than a mere Facebook page. For their production of Molière's *The Bourgeois Gentleman*, a French comedy from the seventeenth century, they created Twitter accounts for the play's fictional characters, allowing the public to follow and converse with them. As a result, the show sold out and they had to offer additional performances. Some theatres have even created so-called "tweet seats," a reserved seating section of the auditorium where patrons are allowed to use their phones or tablets to tweet about the performance as it is happening.



Courtesy of Théâtre du Nouveau Monde.

As theatres find ways to reach out to the marketplace, it is important to note that the marketplace has often used the theatre for its own purposes. Long before product placement was commonplace in films, leading stage actors would be paid by designers to wear their clothes, songwriters paid to have their tunes included in musical revues, and for a price, some producers would make sure everything from watches to Scotch whiskey would get verbal and visual plugs in their shows. Recently, self-described "guerrilla marketers" have even paid actors to go to public places and converse about products in the hopes that word of mouth will be more effective than traditional ads. However, the strangest union of theatre and advertising has to come from Papua New Guinea in the 1990s. An advertising company needed a way to sell products to a large portion of the population that could not be reached by television, radio, or print ads. Their solution, called Wokabout Marketing, used a theatre company to travel to isolated villages and present plays that praised consumer goods such as laundry soap, Coca-Cola, and toothpaste.