

II. THE AUDIENCE

II.1 - ITS ROLE AND IMAGINATION

Today we are used to seeing theater in many forms: not only in live performances onstage but also on films, on television in our homes, on DVD, or online. But theater existed for many centuries before that: in India, theater became well established nearly 2,000 years ago; in Greece, a fully developed theater had emerged even earlier, almost 2,500 years ago. For centuries, live theater was the only form of dramatic experience. When, around 1900, all these mechanical and electronic devices began to appear which could reproduce drama on film, many people thought theater would become obsolete.



First it was silent movies, then radio, followed by films, and after that television. Given the many challenges that theater has faced, its survival seems amazing. But it has survived, and in certain respects it has been greatly enriched.

In performance, audience and performers are the two basic elements in the theater equation, and both are essential. The presence of the audience is what sets theater apart from other forms of entertainment such as film and television. Each audience is unique, especially in its reactions to what is happening on stage. This is sensed by the actresses and actors and influences their reactions.

At the heart of the theater experience, therefore, is the performer-audience relationship: the immediate, personal exchange whose chemistry and magic give theater its special quality. During a stage performance the actresses and actors can hear laughter, can sense silence, and can feel tension in the audience. In short, the audience can affect, and in subtle ways change, the performance. At the same time, members of the audience watch the performance closely, consciously or unconsciously asking themselves questions: Are the performers convincing in their roles? Will they do something surprising? Will they make a mistake? At each moment, in every stage performance, the audience is looking for answers to questions like these.

For the observer, theater is an experience of the imagination and the mind. The mind seems capable of accepting almost any illusion as to what is taking place, who the characters are, and when and where the action occurs. Our minds are capable of leaps of the imagination, not just in the theater, but in our everyday lives, where we use *symbol* and *metaphor* to communicate with one another and to explain the world around us.

II.2 ~ TOOLS OF THE IMAGINATION

Symbol and Metaphor. In general terms, a *symbol* is a sign, token, or emblem that signifies something else. A simple form of a symbol is a sign. Some signs stand for a single, uncomplicated idea or action. In everyday life we are surrounded by them: road signs, such as an S-shaped curve; audible signals, like sirens; and a host of mathematical symbols: -, +, \$. We sometimes forget that language itself is symbolic; the letters of the alphabet are only lines and curves on a page. Words are arrangements of letters that we agree to let mean something else.

At times, symbols show emotional power: a good example is a flag, embodying a nation's passions, fears, and ambitions. Like flags, some symbols signify ideas or emotions that are far more complex and profound than the symbol itself. The cross, for example, is a symbol of Christianity itself. Whatever form a symbol takes—language, a flag, or a religious emblem—it can embody the total meaning of a religion, a nation, or an idea.

A similar transformation takes place with *metaphor*, where we announce that one thing *is* another, in order to describe it or point up its meaning more clearly. Take, for example, the saying, "It's cool," or "it's no skin off my nose." We are saying one thing but describing another. When someone describes a person or event as "cool," the reference is not to a low temperature but to a good quality.

Our use of symbol and metaphor shows how large a part imagination plays in our lives. Symbols and metaphors, and our acceptance of them, are used to communicate, to express emotions. Theater works the same way. It uses symbols and metaphor, in writing, acting, design, etc., to convey meaning about some part of human life. Though not real in the literal sense, it can be completely—even painfully—real in an emotional or intellectual sense. Theater, like dreams or fantasies, can sometimes be more truthful about life than a boring, unbiased description.

Realism Vs. Nonrealism. In theater, audiences are called on to imagine two kinds of worlds: realistic and nonrealistic. Realistic theater depicts things onstage that are similar to observable reality; nonrealistic theater includes the realm of dreams, fantasy, symbol, and metaphor. In theater, realism and nonrealism are frequently mixed. Take, for example, Shakespeare's masterpiece *Hamlet*, in which the young prince encounters the ghost of his father. Beyond this supernatural experience, however, the rest of the play is predominantly realistic (it could happen in real life).

In order to take part in theater as an observer, it is important to keep the "reality" of fantasies and dreams separate from the real world. By making this separation, we open our imagination to the full range of possibilities in the theater.

II.3 ~ BACKGROUND AND EXPECTATIONS OF THE AUDIENCE

When audiences attend a theater event, they bring more than their presence; they bring a background of personal knowledge and a set of expectations that shape the experience. Several important factors are involved:

1. The knowledge and personal memories of individual members of the audience.
2. Their awareness of the social, political, and philosophical world in which the play was written or produced (the link between theater and culture).
3. Their specific information about the play and playwright
4. Their individual expectations concerning the event: what each person anticipates will happen at a performance. Misconceptions about what the theater experience is or should be can lead to confusion and disappointment.

When we see a play that has been written in our own day, we bring with us a deep awareness of the world from which the play comes, because we come from the same world. Through the books we read, through newspapers and television, through discussions with our friends, we have a background of common information and beliefs. Our shared knowledge and experience are much larger than most of us realize, and they form a crucial ingredient of the theater experience.

But we can also relate to characters and events onstage when we see plays set in other times and places. The story of *Antigone*, for example, was treated by Sophocles in Greece in the 5th Century B.C.E., and then again in World War II by French playwright Jean Anouilh. A young woman, Antigone, opposes her uncle, Creon, the ruler of the state, because he is a political realistic who makes compromises; she is an idealist who believes in higher principles of right and wrong. Anyone, especially a young woman, who has ever tried to oppose corruption in a broken political system will find much to recognize in *Antigone*. Any activity onstage that reminds us of something in our own lives will trigger deep personal responses that become part of the equation of our theater experience.

Theater and Society. Art does not occur in a vacuum. All art, including theater, is related to the society in which it is produced. Artists are sometimes charged with being “antisocial” or “enemies of the state.” To be sure, art often challenges society and is sometimes seems to predict the future. More accurately, though, this art simply recognizes what is already present in society but has not yet surfaced. With very few exceptions, art is a mirror of its age, revealing prevailing attitudes, underlying assumptions, and deep-seated beliefs of a particular group of people. When we speak of art as “universal,” we mean that the art of one age has so defined the characteristics of human beings that it can speak to another age; but we should never forget that every work of art first emerges at a given time and place and can never be adequately understood unless the conditions surrounding the birth are also understood.



Modern Theater and Culture. Modern society is extremely heterogeneous – many races, religions, and national backgrounds living side by side. When cultures and societies are brought together, we are reminded of the many things people have in common but also of the differences among us. At the same time, the twentieth century was marked by increasingly swift global communication.

Discoveries about evolution by Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud’s study of the subconscious, and Einstein’s theory of relativity changed everything. The overall effect of these discoveries was to make human beings much less certain about their place in the cosmos and their mastery of events. Today, life appears much less unified and ordered than it once

seemed. These two developments—the bringing together of cultures by population shifts and communication, and the challenges of long-held beliefs—are reflected in today’s theater. It is a theater of *eclecticism*—the embracing of different strains. A typical theater company today performs a wide range of plays. Moreover, the dramatists of today write on many subjects and in a wide range of styles.

Background Information on The Play or Playwright. Sometimes, we need additional knowledge not only about the historical period of a play but also about the play itself. For instance, a play may contain difficult passages or obscure references which it is helpful to know about before we see a performance.

EXPECTATIONS: The Variety of Experiences in Modern Theater. An expectation sometimes held by people who have not often been to the theater is that all theater experiences will be alike. In fact, audiences go to the theater for different purposes. Some, like those who enjoy the escape offered by movies and television, are interested primarily in light entertainment. Audiences at dinner theaters or Broadway musicals, for example, do not want to be faced with troublesome problems or serious moral issues. On the other hand, some people want to be challenged, both intellectually and emotionally. To these audiences, a situation comedy will seem frivolous or sentimental. It must be remembered, too, that many people can like both kinds of theater.

There are lots of different types of theater to fit these different contemporary interests—children’s theater, off-Broadway, Community theaters, Multicultural, gay and lesbian, political, and experimental theater are just a few.

The Critic and the Audience. A *critic*, loosely defined, is someone who observes theater and then analyzes and comments on it. Ideally, the critic serves as a knowledgeable and highly sensitive audience member. Actually, most theatergoers are amateur critics. The difference between a critic and an ordinary spectator is that the critic presumably is better informed about the event and has developed a set of critical standards by which to judge it.

Audiences can learn from critics not only because critics impart information and judges but also, as suggested above, because a critic shares with an audience the point of view of the spectator. Unlike those who create theater—writers, performers, designers—critics sit out front and watch a performance just as other members of the audience do. By understanding how the critic goes about his or her task, audience members can increase their own knowledge of how theater works and make their own theater experiences more meaningful.

Criticize means “to find fault,” but it also means “to understand and appraise,” and this meaning is much more important for a theater critic. A critic should have a thorough understanding of theater history and elements. He or she should have some concept of scenery, costume, and lights, for example, and know what is called for in each area in a given production.

Questions a critic should ask:

1. What is the play, and the production, trying to do?
2. Have their plans/intentions been achieved?
3. Was the attempt worth it?

One should be careful, though, when noticing the difference between a critic’s opinions and the facts. A critic, for example, can offer background information or explain the style of a production (fact). They can also, though, give their judgment on whether these stylistic choices work (opinion). This is also known as the difference between descriptive and prescriptive criticism. In *descriptive criticism*, the critic describes carefully and accurately what occurs. In *prescriptive criticism*, the critic undertakes to say not what does happen so much, but what *should* happen.

Audience members must realize, though, that critics also have their limitations and prejudices and that ultimately each individual spectator must come to his or her own conclusions regarding the theater event.

II.4 ~ BECOMING A CRITIC: UNDERSTANDING THE ELEMENTS



The Text: Subject, Purpose, and Perspective.

Performers and directors, considered in Part Two, do not create theater by themselves; actresses and actors must have something to perform, and directors must have material to prepare for presentation. Historically, in both western and Asian theater, this has been a *text* or *script*, usually prepared by a *playwright*, also known as a *dramatist*. But whether established by a playwright, a director, or a performance artist, every theater piece reflects choices as to subject matter, the focus of the work, and the worldview expressed (tragic, comic, etc.).

Subject: As noted earlier, the subject matter of theater is human beings. But clearly a subject is more than that. Will the work be based on history, an exploration of the creator's own life, or an imaginary story?

Focus/Emphasis: Who and what will the play focus on? For example, a playwright can emphasize a particular character trait in one play and its opposite in another.

Purpose: Every theater event is intended to serve some purpose. It may be causal, like going out to the movies as an escape. Or it may be conscious and deliberate. It may be to defend a certain political purpose, or a religious one. The options are endless. Once the purpose is clear, a primary task of those developing a production is to make certain that everyone concerned is moving toward the same goal—otherwise, various elements will be in conflict. If, for instance, a playwright intends his or her work to be serious and the performers make fun of it, they are at cross-purposes.

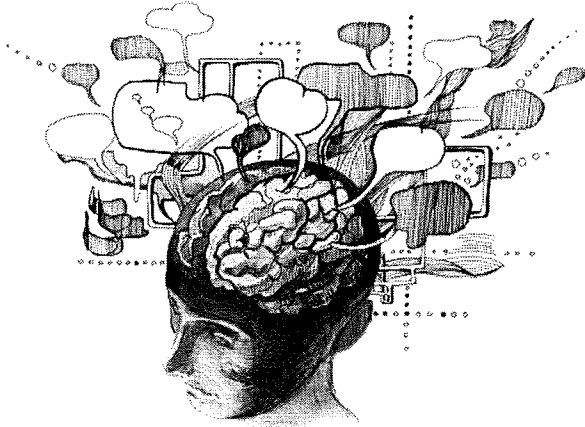
Point of View: Point of view expresses the way we look at things. People and events can always be interpreted in widely different ways. How we perceive them depends on our point of view. There is a familiar story of two people looking at a bottle half-filled with wine; the optimist will say that the bottle is half-full, the pessimist that it is half-empty. We value art because it presents its own point of view, giving us a fresh look at ourselves and the world around us. The viewpoint of the theater artist tells us how to interpret the words and actions of the characters we see onstage; it provides a key to understanding the entire experience.

In the case of the playwright, point of view is incorporated in the script itself, with characters being given words to speak and actions to perform which deliver a certain attitude. In a serious work, the writer will choose language and actions suggesting sobriety and sincerity. In a humorous work, he will do the opposite.

Once a playwright's intentions are known, the director and performers transmit them to the audience. Ideally, a clear point of view should inform and permeate every aspect of a theatrical production. When the gestures, vocal inflections, and actions of performers are combined with the words and ideas of the dramatist, a special world is created. It might be a sad world, a bittersweet world, or a pleasurable one. If it is fully and properly created, however, the audience becomes aware of it instantly.

II.5 INTEGRATING THE ELEMENTS

Observation and Assimilation. So many elements make up a theater production that we might wonder how a spectator can combine them. The answer lies in our ability to handle many kinds of information and bring this information together to form a complete picture. This power makes it possible to form a whole picture out of the fragments we see onstage: we watch individual performers; we observe the costumes, scenery, and lighting effects; we not the progress of the action as characters confront each other; we hear the words of the playwright; and we associate ideas and emotions in the play with our own experiences.



Observing the Elements as Parts of a Whole. By using the powers of perception, spectators can focus on specific areas in a production without losing sight of the total effect. They can also relate individual elements to one another. If members of the audience learn to use these powers to the fullest, their enjoyment and understanding will be enhanced.

We can concentrate for a time on acting, for instance, and ask ourselves whether a performer is interpreting a role appropriately. We can ask, too, how well the performers are playing with one

another. Do they look at each other when they speak, and do they listen and respond to the other actors and actresses? As we watch a play unfold, we can also take a moment to observe the visual elements. Do the costumes suit the play? Is the scenery symbolic, and if so, what does it symbolize? Do the colors in the scenery convey a particular mood or feeling?

Although such elements as dramatic structure and point of view are not visible (unlike acting or scenery), it is possible to pause during a performance and consider them as well. As events occur onstage, we can determine what structure is being developed and whether it is maintained. If the structure is climactic, for instance, we can ask whether the events in the play are plausible and whether they follow one another logically.

In looking at separate elements of theater in this way, we need not fear that we will lose sight of the whole. The more we become aware of distinct elements, the more we can fit them into an overall picture. In watching a light comedy, for instance, we can observe how the acting underlines and points up the humor of the script; we can note how the costumes help the performers create comic characters—perhaps through exaggeration—and, at the same time, we can observe how the costumes present a visual image of their own, appropriately bright and lighthearted. We can observe, too, how lighting reinforces the comic spirit of the costumes and the performers. In short, we can see how the various aspects combine; how they heighten, emphasize, and interact with each other to create the final experience.

But what does it mean? “Meaning,” in theater, is sometimes understood to consist of ideas expressed in a text. Some plays stress this aspect of meaning by actually including lines which outright state the author’s position. But in the final analysis, meaning is simply the sum total of the theater experience itself. Meaning includes emotional and sensory data as well as intellectual content. Any attempt to summarize the meaning of a play in a few words, or reduce it to a formula, robs it of the full meaning that directors, actors, producers, and designers work so hard to create.

Because of this complexity, theater offers audiences a particularly rare experience—especially when the elements of a production come together successfully. As long as people wish to join together in a communion of the spirit or share with one another their emotions, beliefs, and challenges, the theater experience will provide them with a unique way of doing so.