

GLOSSARY OF THEATRE TERMS

Act: Apart from being what actors do on stage, the term also means a major section of a play, similar to a chapter in a book; it is usually made up of several scenes

Actor: A performer in a play, either male or female

Antagonist: Antagonists are present in almost every play. They oppose what the main hero, or protagonist is trying to accomplish.

Artistic Director: This is the person who, in a non-profit professional theatre, chooses the plays and generally the people—director, designer, actors—who will bring the plays to life on stage. The artistic director also carries out the creative mission of the theatre, oversees the artistic quality of the productions and may also direct particular shows.

Aside: A line spoken to a character which is not supposed to be heard by others on stage, but is heard by the audience

Auditions: a tryout for a part in a play

Auditorium: An enclosed space in which an audience gathers to hear a performance. Generally, in the theatre, it is referred to as the house—thus the expression, much loved by theatre managers everywhere—“full house.”

Balcony: The second tier of seating in a theatre, elevated and protruding over the back rows of orchestra or main-level seating.

Backdrop: A large drapery of painted canvas that provides the rear or upstage masking of a set.

Backstage: The area behind and around the stage that it is unseen by the audience.

Blackout: A sudden darkening of the stage. A slow darkening is described as “fade to black.”

Blocking: These are the stage movements and positions that the director works out with the actors in rehearsal for dramatic effect—and so they won’t bump into each other.

Break a leg: A friendly, customary encouragement offered to performers prior to a show. It may sound harsh but the expression is said to derive from the idea of a performer, having left the stage, being called back from behind the legs for an encore.

Body Language: The gestures, postures, and facial expressions by which a person shows various physical, mental, or emotional states and communicates nonverbally with others

Booth: An enclosed, windowed area, usually at the back of the auditorium, used for technical control purposes. Sometimes there is a separate booth for sound and lighting control. The stage manager may also operate from here rather than from backstage.

Broadway: The famous theatre district of midtown Manhattan in which 32 theaters are located.

Business: silent actions that actors do when they are on stage but don't have lines and are not part of the main action or dialogue; might include pretending to talk to someone, pretending to shop, pretending to play a game, etc.

Call: This is a notification to cast and crew of a rehearsal or performance. It’s also used to describe the countdown to a performance provided by stage management.

Call backs: after auditions, when actors who are trying out are asked to read again, often with other possible actors for the production

Cast: The complement of actors in a play.

Catwalk: Narrow bridges above the stage from which scenery and lighting equipment can be handled. Some theatres also have lighting catwalks above the seating area.

Character: An imaginary person that inhabits a literary work. Literary characters may be major or minor, static (unchanging) or dynamic (capable of change).

Characterization: The means by which writers present and reveal character. Although techniques of characterization are complex, writers typically reveal characters through their speech, dress, manner, and actions.

Climax: The turning point of the action in the plot of a play or story. The climax represents the point of greatest tension in the work.

Cold Reading: When an actor auditions for a role without having a script beforehand

Comedy: This term describes a play that is light in tone and designed to amuse. The ancient Greeks are credited with inventing them as a way to comment satirically on domestic situations.

Comic relief: The use of a comic scene to interrupt a succession of intensely tragic dramatic moments. The comedy of scenes offering comic relief typically parallels the tragic action that the scenes interrupt.

Complication: An intensification of the conflict in a story or play. Complication builds up, accumulates, and develops the primary or central conflict in a literary work.

Costume: What an actor wears to evoke the appearance of a particular character. May be realistic or stylized. They may be “period”—appropriate to the historical setting of the play—or deliberately modern in look, even when the play is set in a past era.

Crew: The team of theatre workers—often the unsung heroes—who take care of the physical aspects of a production at each performance.

Cue: A prearranged sign that indicates to a performer, crew member or stage technician that it is time to proceed to the next line or action. Actors also listen for them in the text so that they know when it's time to say or do something.

Curtain call: What happens at the end of the play—even if there isn't an actual curtain to signal the end—when the actors acknowledge the audience's applause.

Dark: We say the theatre, or house, is “dark” when it's closed to the public, as between productions or on non-performance days.

Denouement: A concluding scene in a play where the drama of the action is resolved—happily or otherwise.

Designer: This a person who designs sets and/or costumes for a play. Also, the person responsible for illuminating a production is often called the lighting designer.

Dialogue: Conversation in a play.

Director: The person responsible for interpreting and bringing the text of a play to life on stage. Also manages the overall artistic unity of the production.

Downstage: The front of the stage closest to the audience.

Drama: literature written to be performed

Drop: A large piece of fabric hung down onto the stage floor.

Energy: a necessary element for an effective performance. The liveliness and enthusiasm an actor brings to a piece

Enter: a stage direction – tells the character(s) to come onto the stage. Often includes a direction (left or right) or additional information about how characters are to enter the scene.

Exit: a stage direction – tells the character(s) to leave the stage and the scene. Often includes a direction (left or right) or additional information about how characters are to leave the scene.

Exposition: The part of a play that fills in things that have already happened so you can make sense of who's who and why they're doing whatever. Sometimes playwrights use actual narrators to do this by addressing the audience directly. Other times it is cleverly woven into the opening dialogue.

Facial Expressions: used to support the emotions in a scene, and also the tone/sound of your voice. A vital part of any performance, these must always “fit the character” you are playing.

Focus: a synonym for concentration. Means to remain fully involved in the scene and to avoid being distracted by peers, visitors, sounds, mistakes, or calls for lines

Front of House: This usually refers to the public areas of the theatre but strictly includes everything in front of the proscenium. A front-of-house manager oversees staff members who work in this area.

Gestures: The physical movement of a character during a play. Used to reveal character, and may include facial expressions as well as movements of other parts of an actor's body.

Green room: A room in the theater—rarely painted green—where the actors and crew can relax or receive instructions. The term may come from ancient Greek theatre where actors would stretch out on the lawn before stepping onstage.

Grip: A colloquial term for a stagehand.

Hamming: This describes flagrant over-acting

House: The place where the audience sits to enjoy the performance on stage.

House lights: The lights in the house or auditorium. Dimming of the house lights customarily signals the start of a performance.

Improvisation: An impromptu (without rehearsal) scene where the actors make up the dialogue and action on the spot

Intermission: A designated break in a play. In cases where there is no intermission you will be warned in advance.

Introduction: Brief information given to an audience prior to performance of a monologue or dialogue that has been cut from its original play format. Usually includes the actor's name, the name of the character to be played, and the name of the original production

Legs: Vertical curtains or flats used to hide the wings from view and frame the audience's view of the stage.

Lines: What actors learn and speak on stage. The word may also be used to ask for a cue during rehearsals, when an actor forgets what to say next

Method Acting: an approach that calls on the actor to use personal experience and sense memory to develop a character

Monologue: A lengthy speech by a single character delivered to other characters in a play; not to be confused with a soliloquy.

Mood: the feeling or tone of a performance. It refers to ambience or aura and is often created through a combination of several dramatic and stagecraft elements working in harmony with each other

Motivation: Why a character does what he does. To show a character's desires through voice and move

Off Book: Having one's part memorized so that a script is no longer needed

Offstage: Technically this refers to all stage areas outside the visible acting area.

Onstage: The acting area of the stage floor.

Orchestra: In its ordinary sense this refers to a group of musicians but the term is also used in the theatre to refer to the seating area immediately behind the orchestra pit—even when there is no pit!

Orchestra Pit: This is where an orchestra will usually be placed in a musical production. It generally extends across the breadth of the stage and is called a pit because it's at a lower elevation so that the musicians do not block the audience's view.

Pace: how fast or slow the dialogue and action proceeds

Play: a drama, as performed on stage

Playwright: The person who writes the play. In the case of living playwrights they sometimes direct and may in rare cases even act in their own work.

Plot: the action of a drama; what actually happens

Posture: the position of the body; how an actor holds him/herself

Projection: using the voice in such a way that it will carry to the edges of a performance space

Prompt: This is what actors get if they forget their lines. Some theatres have fulltime prompters standing by in the wings. In this class, we will call "line."

Props: Objects on the stage such as furniture that are not part of the actual scenery. Many are objects the actors actually handle such as swords, books and cups.

Protagonist: The character who generates the main action of the story.

Publisher: person who has a drama printed for public distribution

Rehearsal: practice for a play in preparation for performance

Runthrough: An uninterrupted rehearsal of the entire scene, act, or play. This is in contrast to a "working" rehearsal where director or technicians may stop the run to work problems, or a "blocking" rehearsal where director gives movement to actors.

Scoring: Marking the script with notes on blocking and delivery

Script: the written text of a play. Usually includes a list of characters that appear in the play with a brief description of what the character is like (Dramatis Personae), brief descriptions of the sets or setting, and the lines the characters will speak.

Set: The scenery for a scene or entire production. In the latter case it is often known as a "unit set" when designed to serve as several different settings with only minor changes between scenes or acts.

Setting: The "when" and "where" of a play; usually introduced in the first few minutes of a play

Soliloquy: This is a playwright's device for letting us know what's on a character's mind. It's as if we're listening in on the character's thoughts. A soliloquy is different from a monologue in that it's not being consciously directed at the audience.

Stage Directions: a description (as of a character or setting) or direction (as to indicate stage business) provided in the text of a play, usually indicated with italics and/or parentheses. May indicate where the scene takes place, what a character is supposed to do, or how a character should deliver certain lines.

Stage Left/Right: These directions are from the actors' perspective looking out towards the audience. So, if the stage direction calls for an actor to "exit stage left" it will be the opposite of the way the audience sees it.

Stage makeup: This is a makeup used to shape and define actors' facial feature as seen on stage. It can be simple—just a little lipstick and eye shadow—or elaborate, involving such things as false chins and noses.

Stage Manager: This is a very important person who gives instructions or “calls” for just about everything that happens on stage. Because directors usually leave soon after a show has opened, stage managers are also responsible for seeing that a production continues to be performed just the way the director wanted. Stage managers lurk unseen by the audience, either just out of sight in one the wings or in a booth at the back of the house. Depending on the arrangement of a theatre and scale of a production there may also be one or two assistant stage managers.

Stealing: Taking the audience's attention when not supposed to. Frowned upon.

Strike: Although unionized actors and crew have been known to strike, in the theatre this term is generally used to describe the process of disassembling the set when a production closes.

Symbol: The use of symbol in dramatic performance can be one of the simplest and also most complicated of all techniques. Essentially, symbolism implies a greater meaning than the literal suggestion. Props are the easiest to work with because objects in everyday life are symbols in society (for example a rose symbolizes love; a cross symbolizes Christianity). Symbols can also be found in the use of color. We often symbolize purple with royalty, red with anger or desire, black with evil and darkness or white with purity and innocence. Color association can be worthwhile symbols with costumes, sets and props. But the most sophisticated use of symbol occurs with the application of gesture and movement. A particular gesture performed by a character early in a performance can be repeated later under different circumstances (context) and have a very different meaning. Used only once, a gesture can also be a powerful symbol. Of course, all of the above examples can be combined for better effect.

Tension: an sometimes be used as an interchangeable term with conflict. But where it differs, lies in the development of suspense in a performance. As the audience anticipates certain outcomes in the plot, the tension builds

Timing: refers to dramatic rhythm or pace of movements and gestures. We often take our movements for granted in everyday life, but when performing, the use of our body must be carefully considered. This can be manipulated to create contrast in a scene or simply to demonstrate robotic, stylized and non-naturalistic movements.

Trap: This is an opening in the stage floor. In cases where the design and construction of a stage permits it, a trap can be used for all kinds of effects. Generally, however, traps are rarely used in contemporary drama.

Understudy: An actor who has been assigned to learn a lead role as well as the main actor, in case of accident, illness, or unexpected situations.

Upstage: This is the area toward the back of the stage, away from the front edge. The term is also used to describe what happens when a performer tries to draw an audience's attention away from another performer. Wings: The areas to either side of the stage that the audience does not normally see.

STAGE DIRECTIONS, AREAS, BODY POSITIONS, and MOVEMENT

Above: Away from the audience (same as *upstage of*).

Below: Toward the audience (same as *downstage of*).

Blocking: The process of working the arrangement of actors on stage with relationship to the furniture. Purposes are to tell the story, develop characterization, set mood, and also to create suspense.

Downstage: Towards the audience.

In: Toward the center of the stage.

Out: Away from the center of the stage.

Stage left: The actor's left as he faces the audience.

Stage right: The actor's right as he faces the audience.

Upstage: Away from the audience.