

WHAT IS THEATER?

Taken in its broadest sense, theater is everything around us. It's a wedding; a funeral; a Thanksgiving Day parade; a White House press conference; a fireworks display on the 4th of July. It's even a spontaneous, high-speed car chase, or a hostage situation. The person holding the camera has framed the "shots" showing an event: someone has edited the film to give it focus and make it dramatic. These choices for viewing are what make drama.

More obvious forms of theater are the dramas that appear daily on television or in the movies. These provide all kinds of dramatic material: soap operas, comedies, action-packed stories of mystery, historical epics, or even Shakespearean films.

When we turn from electronic media to live performance, we see that theater has informed and influenced music, specifically, rock and roll. Throughout its history, rock has taken on elements of theater. Not only do rock stars often adopt a stage persona (personality), like Britney Spears or Pink, but rock concerts are highly theatrical events, using lights, sound, and properties in ways that are like multimedia stage presentations. Rock shows that theatrical elements have become an essential part of our popular entertainments and that we often find these elements in unexpected places.



What's more, the drama we see on film or television owes its existence to live theater. Serious theater in many modern mediums has its roots in ancient Greek theater, and there is a direct line connecting today's situation comedy on television to ancient Roman comedy. The most widely produced playwright in North America is still William Shakespeare, who wrote his plays more than 400 years ago.

In studying live theater – its immediacy, its excitement, its various elements, its history—we prepare ourselves not only for a lifetime of attending theater performances but for a far better understanding of the dramas we see at a movie theater or on television. And we also see the impact that theater has had on all entertainment forms.

THEATER: THE ART FORM

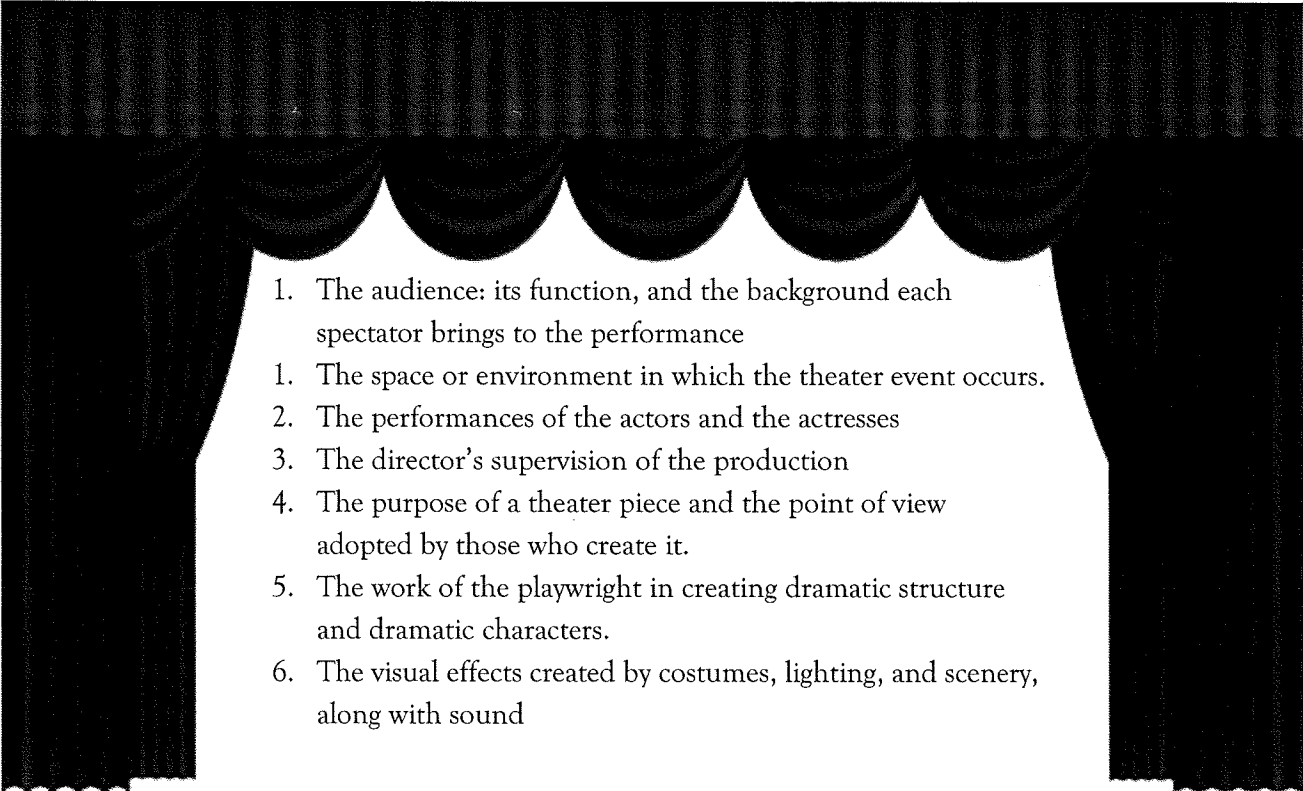
Theater is art, which means it reflects or mirrors life. It does not try to encompass the whole of life at once; rather, it selects and focuses on a part of the total picture. Theater focuses on human beings, even though different plays emphasize different human concerns, from profound problems in tragedy to pure entertainment in light comedy.

Even when the performers play animals, inanimate objects, or abstract ideas, theater concentrates on human concerns. In the modern world, human beings have lost the central place they were once believed to occupy in the universe. The earth is no longer the center of the universe; recent explorations in the universe have taught us how small the earth is in comparison. The human being has become seemingly less and less significant, and less and less at the center of things. But not in theater. Theater is one area where the worries of men and women are still the core, the center around which other elements orbit.

The impulse toward theater is universal and has appeared wherever human society has developed. Rituals, religious ceremonies, and celebrations have certain elements of theater, including a performance in front of an audience, costumes, and storytelling.

Theater is action. In contrast to sculpture, painting, or literature, theater is a dynamic art, changing from moment to moment as performers interact with one another.

A performance results from the coming together of many elements and forces, which we will examine separately. All together we will examine the following basic elements of theater:

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1. The audience: its function, and the background each spectator brings to the performance
 1. The space or environment in which the theater event occurs.
 2. The performances of the actors and the actresses
 3. The director's supervision of the production
 4. The purpose of a theater piece and the point of view adopted by those who create it.
 5. The work of the playwright in creating dramatic structure and dramatic characters.
 6. The visual effects created by costumes, lighting, and scenery, along with sound