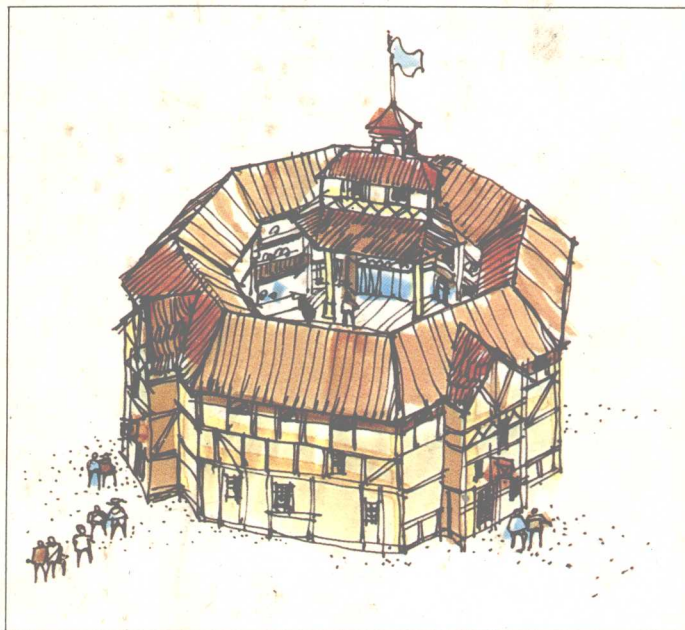


THEATRE

ROBERT COHEN



THEATRE

ROBERT COHEN

University of California, Irvine

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Illustrator

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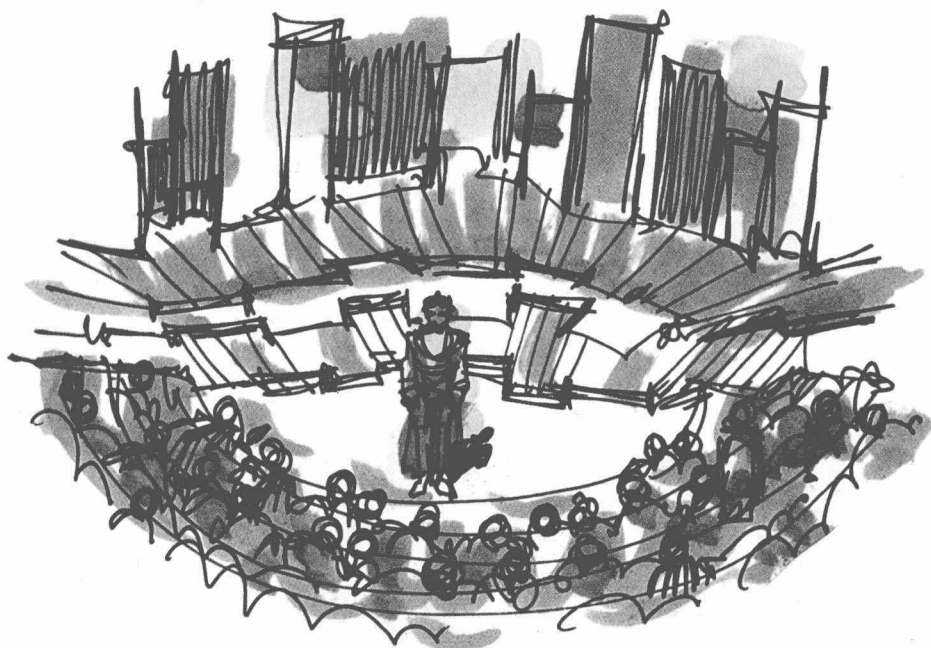
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THEATRE



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To Michael Cohen

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Molière, *The Bourgeois Gentleman*. Translation and added stage directions by Robert Cohen.

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Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannos*. Translation by Luci Berkowitz and Theodore F. Brunner.

York Cycle Plays. Modern adaptation by Robert Cohen.

Bibliographic information appears elsewhere in this volume.

Preface

I am sitting in a darkened theatre correcting the galley sheets for the book you are now about to read. A technical rehearsal for a play I am directing is in progress; I am seated at a makeshift desk in the back of the house, my reading illuminated by a tiny covered gooseneck lamp. On stage stand several actors, silent and motionless, as light plays over their faces and bodies. Above me, unseen and unheard, technicians operate, adjust, and record the settings for another of the play's hundred and fifty light cues. To the outside observer, it is the dullest situation imaginable; nothing observable happens for twenty or thirty minutes at a stretch. A pool of light intensifies and then recedes, muffled conversation crackles over headsets, footsteps clang on steel catwalks lacing the ceiling, and a spotlight is carefully repositioned. This has been going on now since eight in the morning, and it is already past dinnertime.

And yet my eye is continually pulled from these pages to the dance of light upon the stage. The violet and amber hues are rich with color, and the sharp shafts of incandescence dazzle with brilliance. I am fascinated by the patient weariness of the actors, alternately glowing in and then shadowed by the

lights, endlessly holding their positions which, in performance, they will occupy for only a few transitory seconds. I gaze with admiration at the followspot operator, his hands gloved in asbestos, as he handles his instrument with the precision and sensitivity of a surgeon.

The silence, the stasis, is hypnotic. All is quiet but profound with held-back beats, incipient torrents of passion and exhilaration. The potential is riveting—I am alive with excitement—and I look back to these cold galley sheets with alarm.

How can I have thought to express the thrill of the theatre in these pages? How can I have hoped to make recognizable the joy and awe I feel in theatrical involvement?

The theatre is not merely a collection of crafts, a branch of literature, a collaboration of technique, or even an all-encompassing art form. It is a life. It is people. It is people making art out of themselves. Its full reality transcends by light years anything that could be said or written about it.

What I have tried to do in these pages is not so much to introduce the theatre or to survey it as to *present* the theatre with its liveliness and humanness

intact. With its incipient passion and exhilaration always present. With its potential for joy, for awe, for wisdom, and for excitement as clear to the reader as they have been made clear to me.

At the heart of this book lies the presentation—through text samples and correlated visual illustrations—of eight “model plays” drawn from the theatre’s history. These eight plays—*Prometheus Bound*, *Oedipus Tyrannos*, *The Trojan Women*, the *York Mystery Cycle*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Bourgeois Gentleman*, *The Three Sisters*, and *Happy Days*—are not necessarily the greatest pieces of theatre of the past three thousand years, but in combination they encompass the range and magnitude of the theatrical experience. I do not intend for these presentations to substitute for seeing the plays or for reading them; the presentations merely provide outlines for the reader’s understanding and springboards for the reader’s imagination. I do hope the outlines will be both stimulating and clarifying. I also hope that the “model play” presentations, together with the broad range of discussions in the book, will provide a foundation upon which the reader can develop an informed and critical enthusiasm for the theatre, an enthusiasm that will ultimately lead to theatrical participation—either as spectator or artist.

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I also am grateful to the many reviewers who made hundreds of suggestions, all of which helped to sharpen my writing and improve my understanding of many fine points: William Brasmer, Denison University; John Ford, Foothill College; Joseph Karioth, Florida State University; Helen Manfull, Pennsylvania State University; Gordon Rogoff, Brooklyn College; Carl White, American River College; Joan-lee Woehler, Santa Rosa Junior College; Stephen Wyman, University of Texas; and James Yeater, Arizona State University. The professionalism of Mayfield Publishing Company again astonished me, and I am particularly thankful for Carole Norton’s meticulous editing and Nancy Sears’ artful design.

Finally, Lans Hays, the publisher of this volume, served also as its inspiration and guide throughout development, and must rank as a collaborator of the first order. And Lorna Cohen, whose incisive editorial advice solved major structural impasses, and who served as private audience both to my written words and my unwritten thoughts, deserves and has my deep and everlasting gratitude.

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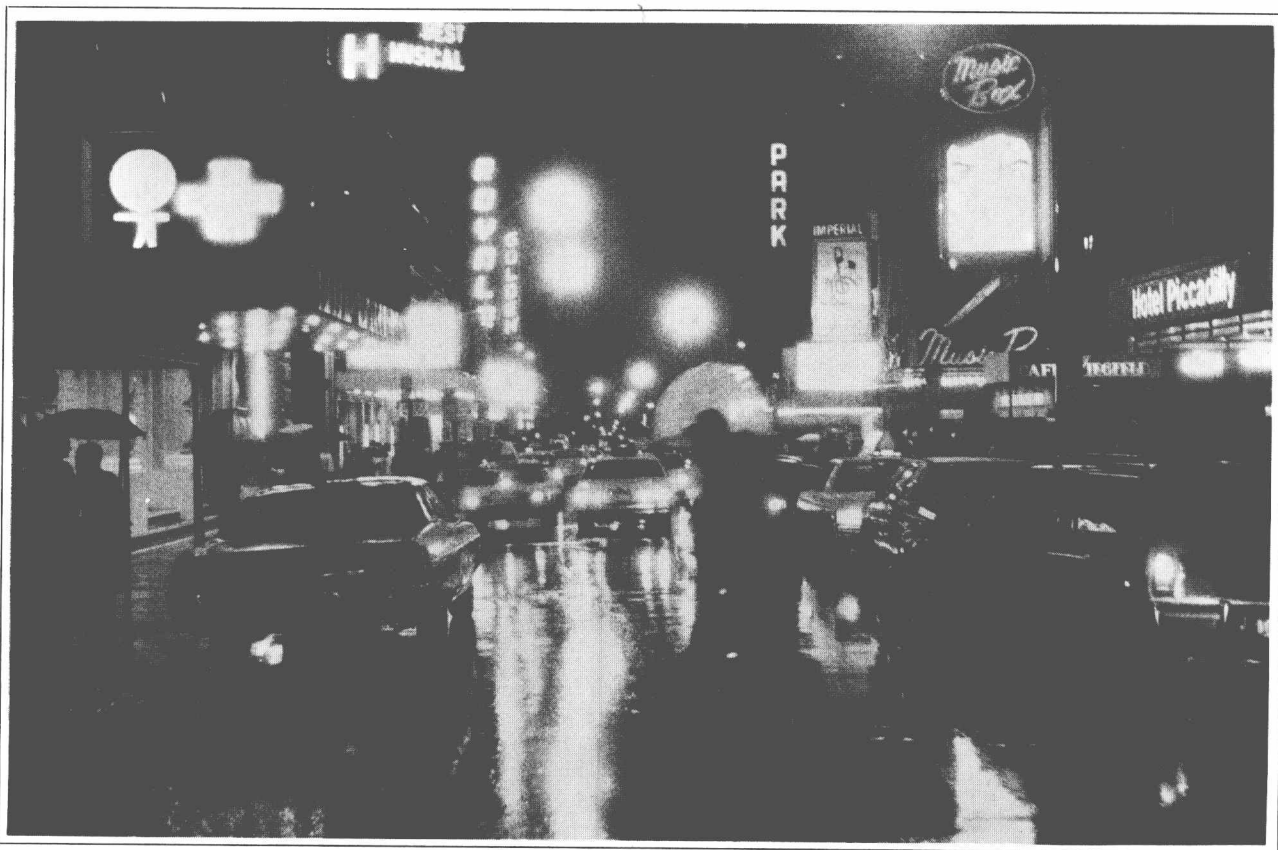
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Theatre



The Broadway theatre district. This photo taken on 45th Street shows six theatres—the Booth, the Plymouth, the Royale, the Golden, the Imperial, and the Music Box—together with numerous restaurants and cafes.

INTRODUCTION

It is evening in Manhattan. On Broadway and the streets that cross it—44th, 45th, 46th, 47th, 50th, 52nd—marquees light up, “Performance Tonight” signs materialize in front of double doors, and beneath a few box office windows placards announce “This Performance Completely Sold Out.” At Grand Central Station three long blocks to the east, and at Pennsylvania Station ten shorter blocks to the south, trains disgorge suburbanites from Greenwich, Larchmont, and Trenton, students from New Haven and Philadelphia, visiting firemen from Boston and Washington. Up from the Seventh and Eighth Avenue subway stations of Times Square troop denizens of the island city and the neighboring boroughs. At the Times Square “TKTS” Booth, hundreds line up in the deepening chill to buy the half-price tickets that go on sale a few hours before curtain time for undersold shows. Now, converging on these few midtown blocks of America’s largest city, come limousines, restaurant buses, private cars, and taxis, whose drivers search for a curbside slot to deposit their riders among the thousands of pedestrians who already throng the streets. Financiers and dowagers, bearded intellectuals, bedraggled

bohemians, sleek executives, hip Harlemites, arm-in-arm widows, conventioners, Japanese tourists, honeymooners, out of work actors, celebrities, pushers, the precocious young—all commingle in this bizarre aggregation that is the Broadway audience. It is as bright, bold, and variegated a crowd as is likely to assemble at any one place in America.

It is eight o’clock. In thirty or forty theatres house-lights dim, curtains rise, spotlights pick out performers whose lives center on this moment. Here a new musical, there a revival of an American classic, here a British comedy from London’s West End, here a re-interpretation of Shakespeare, here a bedroom farce, there a revue transported from Off Broadway, here a ballet, here a touring company from Poland, there a world premiere for a much-touted new playwright. The hours pass.

Eleven o’clock. Pandemonium. All the double doors open as at a signal, and once again the thousands pour out into the night. At nearby restaurants, waiters stand by to receive the after-theatre onslaught. In Sardi’s private upstairs room, an opening-night cast party gets under way; downstairs, the patrons rehash the evening’s entertainment and sneak

covert glances at the celebrities around them and at the actors heading for the upstairs sanctuary to await the reviews that will determine whether they will be employed next week or back on the street.

Now turn back the clock.

It is dawn in Athens, the thirteenth day of the month of Elaphebolion in the year 458 B.C. From thousands of low mud-bricked homes in the city, from the central agora, from temples and agricultural outposts, streams of Athenians and visitors converge upon the south slope of the Acropolis. Bundled against the early damp, carrying with them breakfast figs and flagons of wine, they pay their tokens at the entrance to the great Theatre of Dionysus and take their places in the seating spaces allotted them. Each tribe occupies a separate area. They gather for the Festival of the Great Dionysia, celebrating the greening of the land, the rebirth of vegetation, and the long sunny days that stretch ahead. It is a time for revelry, a time for re-joining at fertility and its fruits. And it is above all a time for the ultimate form of Dionysian worship: the theatre.

The open stone seats carved into the hillside fill up quickly. The crowd of 17,000 people here today comprises not only the majority of Athenian citizens, but thousands of non-citizens: women, slaves, tradesmen, foreign visitors, and resident aliens. Even the paupers are in attendance, thanks to the 2 obols meted out to each of them from a state fund so they can purchase entry; they sit with the foreigners and latecomers on the extremities of the *theatron*, as this first of theatres is called.

Now as the eastern sky grows pale, a masked and costumed actor appears atop a squat building set in full view of every spectator. A hush falls over the crowd, and the actor, his voice magnified by the wooden mask from which it emanates, booms out this text:

I ask the gods some respite from the weariness
of this watchtime measured by years I lie
awake . . .

He is the watchman of Clytemnestra, and he waits for news of her husband's return; waits, moreover, for news of the end of the Trojan war—an event imbedded in the personal mythos of every person present in the *theatron* today. The crowd leans forward:

I wait; to read the meaning in that beacon light,
a blaze of fire to carry out of Troy the rumor
and outcry of its capture. . . .

Now suddenly, a torch flares where he is looking; simultaneously (precisely as the astronomers' calculations foretold), the sun breaks over the eastern slope:

O hail, blaze of the darkness, harbinger of day's
shining, and of processions and dance and
choirs
of multitudes in Argos for this day of grace.
Ahoy!

And the entranced crowd settles back, secure in the knowledge that today they are in good hands. Today they will hear and see a new version of a familiar story—the story of Agamemnon's homecoming and his murder, the revenge of that murder by his son Orestes, and the final disposition of justice in the case of Orestes' act—as told in the three tragedies that constitute *The Oresteia*. This magnificent trilogy will last from dawn to midafternoon, and will be followed by a bawdy, hilarious, and mocking satyr play on the same theme by the same author. It is a story of astounding familiarity, but today it will take on a new complexity owing to the dramatic intrigue, suspense, spectacle, and rhetorical magnificence, and the complicated interpretations of character, motivation, and moral ramifications, supplied by the playwright Aeschylus, the man who has been Athens' leading dramatist for more than forty years. The spectators watch closely, admiring but critical. Tomorrow they or their representatives will have to decide by vote whether the festival prize should go to this group of plays or to one of those shown yesterday or the day before; whether Aeschylus still reigns supreme or the young Sophocles has better sensed the true pulse of the time.

Night falls, the plays are over. Back to the agora, to the baths, to the establishments of the courtesans, and finally to their homes go the Athenians to discuss what they have seen. Even forty years later the comic playwright Aristophanes will be arguing the merits and demerits of this day's work.

It is noon in London, and the first Queen Elizabeth sits on the throne. Flags fly boldly atop three of the taller buildings in Bankside, on the other side of the