THE DESIGN OF DRAMA

HUBENKA/GARCIA

# The Design of Drama:

An Introduction

Lloyd J. Hubenka Reloy Garcia

THE DESIGN OF DRAMA: AN INTRODUCTION

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RG

Creighton University Omaha, Nebraska

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- 2 Comedy: Lysistrata, The Taming of the Shrew
- 3 Realism: A Doll's House, Saint Joan
- 4 Expressionism: The Ghost Sonata, The Adding Machine
- 5 Theatricalism: The Lark
- 6 Total Theatre: Tabernacle
- 7 Anti-theatre: Fantasy, a Non-Play
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- 2 Lysistrata (411 B.C.)
- 3 The Taming of the Shrew (ca. 1592)
- 4 Othello (1604)
- 5 A Doll's House (1879)
- 6 The Ghost Sonata (1907)
- 7 The Adding Machine (1921)
- 8 Saint Joan (1923)
- 9 The Lark (1952)
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- 2 Rebels of the Social or Divine Imperative

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The Ghost Sonata \*

The Adding Machine \*

Saint Joan
The Lark \*
Tabernacle \*

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3 The Battle of the Sexes

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The Taming of the Shrew A Doll's House \*

4 Alienation and Communication

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The Adding Machine \*

Tabernacle \*
Fantasy

The Seventh Seal \*

<sup>\*</sup> These plays are cross-referenced.

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A Doll's House \*

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2 Man and his Family
Oedipus Rex \*
Lysistrata \*
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Othello \*
A Doll's House \*

3 Man and Society
Oedipus Rex \*
Lysistrata \*
A Doll's House \*
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Saint Joan \*
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4 Man and the Cosmos
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<sup>\*</sup> These plays are cross-referenced.

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### 1

# What is a Play?

To ATTEMPT To answer this complex question now would be to underestimate its scope and true nature. But what is constructed by the mind is accessible to other inquiring minds, and anything built by men must necessarily follow a logic or a scheme. Beneath the surface of a play-however formless or unreined that play may seem -hides a framework, a "sub-text," which makes that play different from any other. For art is the imposition of order upon the world outside the skin by a process of calculated and informed selection. There are no accidents in a play; every word, every line, every incident, every character, is the product of a shaping hand which knows its craft. In an important sense, then, a drama book might well end with a definition, only after a careful examination of the tools of the architect of the play and of the people who bring his plan to life on the stage.

Yet, we can isolate the chief characteristics of dramatic action and discuss how drama is unique among verbal art forms. The most important characteristic of drama is that it is a public art form presupposing a stage, an audience, and a performance. Drama is people in front of other people. Since before the Greeks created great drama, men of every color and from every

place presented imitations or representations of their hopes and fears before their fellow citizens. A play, therefore, is a ritualistic game that mankind has played over the centuries to convey communal themes in a way distinct from other art forms. As such, the public nature of drama defines the elements which make up the world of the play. Aristotle, the first great critic of drama, indicated that drama was comprised of six elements: the dramatic event or action; the people within the play who enact the dramatic action, or character; the plot; the theme as transmitted by language, or thought; music; and spectacle, or the actual representation of the event with the full employment of the stage craft and properties. All of these are dependent upon a public and a performance and directed at three central uses: symbolic ritual, persuasion or enlightenment, and entertainment.

In essence, then, drama is the act of performing before a group of people, and the script is the blueprint for the actors. Indeed, the word "drama" derives from a Greek word meaning "to do, to act," while the word "theatre" derives from a Greek word meaning "to see, to view." All acting is impersonation, but not all impersonation is acting. Is the con-artist acting when he sells

bogus stock? Is the game of charades acting? Is bullfighting acting? If a group of people compose a tableau for us, are they acting? What, in short, satisfies the definition of acting? The con-artist does not return the money when his game is over, and charades involve only the enactment of a word or activity. And while bullfighting might be interpreted as an enactment of man's conflict with his passional or animal half, these fights are very real and the bull does not pretend to die. In contrast, in drama the players and audience are fully aware of the imitative nature of what they see.

Furthermore, the dramatist must transmit his "imitation" to a knowing audience primarily through the senses and secondly through the imagination; he works from the outside in. This point is clear if we understand the relationship between drama and life. There are basically three ways in which we learn about people in real life. We may witness something directly, such as an automobile accident; or we may infer from a dented fender that an automobile accident took place; or, thirdly, we may be told about the accident by another person. In all three cases we learn chiefly from what we see or are told. The same situation applies in drama, for in drama we are wholly dependent upon the enacted outer life and the spoken word for information about the inner life of a character. If we wish to explore the inner recesses of the mind, we must realize that other forms are better suited for this.

Dramatic action, then, is action that can be represented directly or indirectly by external behavior. Obviously, any kind of physical action can be represented directly. but unless a character tells us what is going on inside his mind, we must infer his inner state from outward symptoms. On the stage these symptoms are the actions of the actors. In his Tragedy and the Theory of Drama, Elder Olson defines these actions as "signs," which are the heart of both acting and playwriting. According to him, they fall into two classes: the natural and the artificial. Natural signs are the real consequences of some given internal condition which is their cause. Squirming in a chair, perspiring, losing the voice, are signs

of nervousness, since nervousness naturally produces such effects. Emotions, desires, dispositions, feelings, and thoughts produce characteristic effects which function as signs from which their causes can be inferred. Artificial signs, however, are not causally related to an inner quality or state; they always depend upon social conventions or upon an agreement which is known to the members of the audiences, the playwright, and the actors. These artificial signs are either social conventions or conventions established in a particular kind of drama, or they are particular to a given play. Thus, a Christmas tree is a social convention or "sign"; a cloak worn over a vellow gown is a dramatic convention or sign of exile in Tibetan festival drama; and the wild duck in Ibsen's The Wild Duck is a sign or symbol of dreams and illusions.

From an awareness of such signs and from the public nature of drama grow drama's strengths and limitations as a genre. Briefly, these limitations are space, time, and the players and audience. In the first place, the dramatist must restrict the action of his story to what can be depicted on a stage. He cannot assign to landscape or to the sea the dominant roles that Thomas Hardy and Joseph Conrad give these locales in their novels. He cannot depict a battle of any significant scope, as was done in the movie Patton, for many reasons, one of which is that the stage cannot sustain the armaments of warfare. He cannot depict a hilarious chase, such as that with which The Graduate concludes because there is nowhere to run.

Moreover, the dramatist must work with one eye on the clock. Rarely does he have more than two or three hours in which to depict his action. This consideration is critical, for it affects both the kinds of characters and actions he may create and how he depicts them. The Capulet ball where Romeo and Juliet meet, for example, should last an entire evening; yet on stage this lasts no more than six or seven minutes. After the ball, comes the balcony scene, which again lasts but a few minutes. But when Romeo leaves Juliet, he goes directly to Friar Laurence and finds him already up and about his morning chores. A night has

been telescoped into fifteen minutes on the

Unlike the novelist who can create on a vast canvas, such as that in Tolstoy's War and Peace, the playwright must limit his characters and scenes so as to allow the actions and signs employed by the characters to speak for themselves. The novel takes as one of its basic characteristics the expansive description of sounds, smells, places, characters, and ideas. The reader can review his material, or stop where and when he chooses, but the playgoer cannot stop a play to pick up a missed line, or ask the players to review some hazy bit of plot. Consequently, the dramatist must keep in mind not only how long his actors and audience can last, but also how much the spectator can absorb and digest without a copy of the script. It is no accident that in Othello Shakespeare has the actors talk about and display Desdemona's handkerchief no less than five times, just as we are told the size of Cyrano de Bergerac's nose many times before we see it. While we are delighted with surprises in a novel, the dramatist must be careful in his use of them. If a knife, a letter, or a glove is important, the audience must be apprised of its existence and importance well ahead of time.

We must not leave the impression that drama is the dispossessed son among literary genres. Indeed, all of its limitations are disguised advantages for the astute dramatist; each weakness is the inversion of a

strength. The limits of time and space force the playwright to strip action to its elements, to restrict his dialogue to specific issues, to make individuals of his principal characters. More than the film, drama has the potential of reducing life to the basic human equation. It is commonplace to hear actors say they prefer the stage to television and film because of the immediacy and rapport they share with a live audience. Here we have the strength of drama over other visual and verbal forms; it is an intense, live thing, a group form, Certainly, for most people, witnessing a play is a much more memorable and moving experience than reading a novel or a poem. However, most of our contact with plays comes from reading them. It is possible to appreciate drama without seeing it, and some plays, referred to as "closet plays," are not written for the stage at all. But it is not as satisfying an experience as taking part in a group activity. People approach reading both the novel and the play knowing that they are about to put their imaginations to work, but the demands are not the same; nor are the appeals. When reading a play, we must take into account that a play is primarily a visual and group form, and that we cannot judge drama fairly by the rules of the novel; the good playwright knows this. He consciously chooses certain disciplines and restrictions in choosing drama. but he also offers a stronger and more immediate relation between spectator and participant than any other form can claim.

### 2

# The Genealogy of a Play

THE INITIAL IDEA for a play may originate in any aspect of human experience. It may grow out of immediate personal experience, from a family situation, from a conversation overheard in a plane, from a person glimpsed in a bus terminal; it may grow from an incident which, taken by itself. means absolutely nothing, but when fitted into a dramatic context takes on new and meaningful associations. George Bernard Shaw reports that a number of his plays were first conceived as conversations that came into his head unaccountably, conversations that he allowed free play and then recorded. A playwright may also take his idea from history, as Shakespeare did with his Julius Caesar, or from mythology, as Sophocles did with his Oedipus Rex, or even from a philosophical treatise or position, as Sartre did with his No Exit. Of these, both mythology and history are steady reservoirs because they provide a limitless gallery of varied and interesting character types, together with a wide range of prepared plots. Lastly, the playwright may build an incident in a newspaper account into a full-fledged statement on contemporary society, as Ibsen did with his A Doll's House, or he may even recast an earlier literary treatment of a theme, as Shake-

speare did with his Othello. And so, surprisingly, the playwright need never have come into direct contact with the raw materials that he will transmute into a work of lasting interest, although every work of art is informed to some degree by an artist's felt or imagined experience. In short, there is no single way in which a dramatic idea is conceived.

The play, however, begins with a controlling principle. It is really of secondary importance what we call this principle: the central idea, the premise, the theme, the thesis, the driving force, the goal, the aim. the subject, the purpose, the plan, or even the basic emotion. But we must remember that most plays are born of such an idea. Having a premise in mind, the dramatist must determine if it can be translated into dramatic action, given the unique capacities and limitations of the stage. Then he must particularize the premise in terms of incidents, events, situations, and characters; he must convert an abstract idea into a workable plot through the careful use of dramatic ingredients. Any plot has dramatic possibilities, if by this we mean merely that any premise can somehow be represented in an action. The crucial question for the playwright, a problem posed for no other artist,

is whether or not the plot that he has devised lends itself to acting and staging. Convinced that it does, the playwright may choose to think of his plot in terms of a scenario, which may be defined as a blue-print of the sequence of events which make up the plot, together with the respective appearances of his characters; a scenario, in short, is a sketch or outline of the dramatic representation itself.

Many of the world's great dramatists—Sophocles, Shakespeare, Ibsen, Shaw, to name a few—learned their craft through long years of acting and/or directing, or through an intensive study of the theory of

the play, for drama is a composite and demanding form. The art of playwriting touches the artist across a wide spectrum of his artistic and critical senses. The playwright, in a way, is the extrovert among the practitioners of the written word. He must have a feel for spatial and temporal representation; he must sense if an idea will "play" well; what his characters will look like on stage; and if his characters can connect with his audience. If he is gifted and trained, he will rarely abuse a good idea or source, and he may even elevate trivial sources and faceless models into unforgettable plays with unique characters.

## The Anatomy of Character

IN LITERATURE IT is seldom enough merely to discuss what a character does, and it is simplistic to assert that an act completely defines the man who commits it. The student of literature must attempt to determine why a character performs in a given manner, as well as the nature of his deeds. To understand the "why" we must first attempt to re-create the emotional state that leads to the action; we must map out the mind. Murder is murder, and always brutal. But Othello's murder of Desdemona is radically different in both reason and motive from Raskolnikov's murder of the old pawnbroker in Dostoevsky's Crime and Punishment. The key to the study of character in drama, then, is in understanding why a character does what he does. This we call motivation.

Lajos Egri perceptively sees three compelling factors in human conduct: physiology, sociology, and psychology. The first of these has to do with one's physical makeup: age, sex, race, appearance, health, etc. Each of these factors influences the way we feel and think. The sickly old man has a different conception of youth and life from that of the young and healthy man, just as young or old women have different conceptions from both of these.

And so, when Iago observes of Cassio that "he hath a daily beauty in his life that makes me ugly," he reveals that one of his motives for evil may grow out of his own physiological makeup. By sociology, the second of these factors, Egri defines man in terms of his social relationships, in terms of the people who give him birth, shape him, and influence his growth and actions. This factor must also take into account the books he reads, the lectures he hears, the plays he sees, the languages he speaks, the places he visits, the religion he practices, and the name he bears. Even the work man does reveals him in his social dimension. The physician's view of death differs from those of both the priest and the soldier. In the same manner, the orphan views life differently from a child who has parents, just as the boy who has but one parent, say a mother, may differ radically from both. The third force, the psychological, is the intersection of the physiological and the sociological dimensions; it involves placing a unique individual in a unique social situation to understand how the two affect each other and what the resulting action will be. This is what Galsworthy means when he says that "character is situation." A character placed in an unreveal-