ANTHOLOGY OF LIVING THEATER

EDWIN WILSON
ALVIN GOLDFARB

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Alvin Goldfarb

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PREFACE

Anthology of Living Theater is intended as a companion volume to our three other books—*The Theater Experience, Theater: The Lively Art,* and *Living Theater.* Its use, however, need not be confined to those texts; it will prove valuable for any theater course in history, theory, criticism, play analysis, or directing, as well as any introduction to theater.

The sixteen plays included offer the widest possible range in time periods, geographic areas, theatrical styles, and subject matter. Moreover, each play selected is not only representative of a period and a genre but exceptional for other reasons.

Antigone is a prime example of a classic Greek tragedy, but it also resonates with modern themes: a young woman's challenge to male authority and questions of pragmatism versus idealism. *The Menaechmus Brothers* is a typical Roman farce, but it is more than that, having served as the model for numerous subsequent plays, including Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors* and the Rodgers and Hart musical *The Boys from Syracuse. Abraham and Isaac* is by common consent among the most poignant and best-constructed of the medieval religious plays. *Sotoba Komachi* is an excellent example of noh drama from Japan. William Shakespeare's *Hamlet* stands apart in popularity and complexity not only from Shakespeare's other works but from practically any other Renaissance play. Molière's *Tartuffe* occupies almost as lofty a place among comedies of the period, particularly—for English-speaking audiences—in Richard Wilbur's translation.

Unheralded until quite recently were the women playwrights of the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. Though Aphra Behn has received more attention, we feel that Susanna Centlivre deserves a place of at least equal importance. Moreover, we are confident that those reading *The Busy Body* for the first time will delight in their discovery of a witty, inventive comedy.

From the works of the important early figures in modern realism—Henrik Ibsen, August Strindberg, and Anton Chekhov—it is not easy to select a single play. We have chosen Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* for its depth, humor, and lyricism and its insight into the human condition, especially as it foreshadows ideas and attitudes that are with us still. Equally important to twentieth-century theater have been the many departures from realism; and among the early examples Strindberg's *A Dream Play* pointed the way to expressionism, surrealism, and stream of consciousness.

One of the major figures of twentieth-century theater was Bertolt Brecht, who developed theories of epic theater and created many noteworthy plays. *The Good Woman of Setzuan* not only exemplifies his theories—including his ideas on Marxism—but is among the most accessible and fascinating of his works because of its relevance to the lives of people today.

Of the three best-known American playwrights just before and just after World War II—Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, and Arthur Miller—the most poetic is Williams. Both his lyricism and his acute dramatic sense are evident in the haunting, evocative *The Glass Menagerie.*

The most striking movement in the period immediately after World War II was theater of the absurd, and the undisputed leader of this movement was Samuel Beckett. *Krapp's Last Tape* provides an excellent introduction to the work and techniques of this seminal figure.

Among dramas of the past quarter-century, we have selected four plays representing significant aspects of the diversity that many consider the hallmark of contemporary theater; these plays illustrate today's multiculturalism, gender diversity, and performance art. *Zoot Suit* by Luis Valdez is a Hispanic play, set in Los Angeles in the 1940s, which deals with members of a Chicano street gang who are wrongly accused of a murder. Charles Ludlam's *The Mystery of Irma Vep* is an outrageously humorous takeoff on Victorian melodrama and other long-standing dramatic traditions that also addresses gay and gender issues. August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone,* which takes place in Pittsburgh in 1911, is a poetic treatment of a cross-section of African-Americans who have migrated from the South and are facing a series of crises. Finally, *Twilight Los Angeles, 1992* by Anna Deavere Smith is a solo performance piece based on interviews with a wide variety of people touched by the notorious episode in which Rodney King was beaten.

For each play, we have provided an introduction consisting of three sections: information about the play, about the playwright, and about the period in which the play was written. These introductions provide a context for the plays and offer important background material to make the plays more meaningful and accessible.

It is expected that instructors will select from the sixteen plays in *Anthology of Living Theater* those works that best suit their individual courses. Some may choose to emphasize the sweep of history; others may focus on the more modern works, beginning with Chekhov and Strindberg. We hope, however, that as many plays as possible will be included, because we feel that each will prove to be rewarding in itself and an important experience in discovering theater.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

As always, there are many colleagues and others who have helped to make this book possible and to whom we are deeply grateful. To all of the readers of our other textbooks, *The Theater Experience, Theater: The Lively Art,* and *Living Theater,* who frequently suggested that we develop an anthology, we express our sincere appreciation.

At Illinois State University, we would like to thank Georgia Bennett, who always eases the administrative burden on Dean Goldfarb and makes it possible for

him to continue his scholarly career. Michelle Sullivan, a theater graduate assistant, wrote excellent, early drafts of the biographies of a number of the playwrights and also provided invaluable assistance with research.

At McGraw-Hill we express our deepest thanks to our sponsoring editor Cynthia Ward and her assistant editor Allison McNamara. This is a project that was discussed a number of times in the past but never undertaken until Cynthia and Allison exerted their leadership and patient supervision. We also want to express our ceaseless admiration to our designer Joan O'Connor and to our unsurpassed copy editor, Susan Gamer. These two, individually or together, have collaborated on a total of thirteen books with us.

Finally, we must thank our wives, Catherine Wilson and Elaine Goldfarb, for their patience, encouragement, and support. Dedicating books to them cannot fully acknowledge their importance to our lives and careers.

Edwin Wilson
Alvin Goldfarb

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INTRODUCTION

HOW TO READ A PLAY

HOW TO READ A PLAY

Reading a play is an act of the imagination. In this, it is like reading a novel or a short story. When a novelist writes about a young American woman in a foreign country, sitting with a friend at an outdoor café drinking expresso, or a secret agent on a dangerous mission trailing someone through an airport, or a group of hikers on a mountain pass suddenly caught in a deadly snowstorm, the reader visualizes these scenes in her or his mind's eye.

When a person reads a play on a printed page, the same thing happens. But something else happens as well: The reader must imagine the scene being played out *on the stage of a theater.* Unlike a novel or a short story, a printed play is not a completed work of art; rather, it is a blueprint for a production. The finished product is something quite different—a presentation on a stage before an audience. Some contemporary critics even suggest that a written script is only a *text*—that is, a basis—for performance and that the people staging the script can take whatever liberties they believe are necessary to create their own vision of the play.

Reading a play can be a double pleasure: It can have all the excitement afforded by reading a biography, a spy story, or a comic encounter, but there is the added reward of imagining that we are in a theater, watching a production unfold. Everyone understands how to read a book; but in reading a play, this second aspect—imagining it as a stage presentation—requires additional thought and information.

In some cases, before you read a play it will be helpful to have background information. Reading a Greek play, for example, will be a more meaningful experience if you understand how the plays were produced and such details as the use of the chorus, which is unique to Greek theater. A medieval religious play or an Asian play will be easier to understand if you are aware of the style of the play and the way in which it was originally presented. This anthology includes some of this background information before each play. More can be learned, however, by consulting a theater textbook or speaking with an instructor who can provide crucial facts.

WHERE AND WHEN THE PLAY TAKES PLACE: THE SETTING AND CIRCUMSTANCES

When we begin to read a play, the first thing we must do is familiarize ourselves with the circumstances surrounding it. Looking at the title page and the description of the location, we discover when and where it takes place. Perhaps it takes place in ancient Greece, in Russia in the late nineteenth century, or in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1911. We must also know whether this is fiction or fact: whether the play is based on a myth, an invented story, or a true event. It is possible, of course, that the play is based on an actual life or an actual happening but has been embellished or altered. For example, possibly the author wants us to see a historical event as reflecting contemporary issues.

After learning when and where the play occurs, we next need to determine where the stage action occurs. Does the text tell us that it all happens in one room—a living room, a kitchen, a dining room—or that it ranges over a number of

locations? We should try to create in our minds our own "stage set" as we begin to read. How do the spaces look? How large are they? What color are they? What kinds of furniture and other accessories are present?

It can be helpful to make your own *ground plan*. This is a blueprint of what the stage set would look like seen from above: the placement of the walls, the doors, the furniture. In this way you can visualize where characters enter and leave the set and where they are located during specific scenes.

If the play covers a number of locations—as is the case, for instance, with a play by Shakespeare—how is this handled onstage? Is a relatively bare stage transformed simply by the addition of a few properties (called *props* in the theater) such as a throne, a dining room table, or a few trees to represent a forest? Perhaps there are different levels onstage, on which the action unfolds. It is helpful, then, to have some mental picture of the setting.

Equally helpful is to have some idea of the kind of theater space in which the play is mounted. Theaters can be of different configurations and sizes. They can also be indoors or outdoors—Greek amphitheaters and many Shakespearean festivals are outdoors, for example. If the play is indoors, the stage and the auditorium can be arranged in one of several different ways.

A *proscenium* or *picture-frame* theater resembles a movie theater. All the seats face toward the stage, which is enclosed with a frame, the proscenium (a term originating in Renaissance Europe). This type of stage was prominent throughout Europe and the United States through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and the first half of the twentieth century. It works very well for plays that take place in interiors (the rooms of a house, for instance) because the picture-frame opening can serve as a "fourth wall" of a room whose other three walls will be created onstage. The proscenium stage is also ideal for spectacle. Behind the proscenium opening elaborate stage effects can be created—ballrooms, street scenes, palaces—and these can be changed almost as if by magic because the stage machinery is hidden behind the picture frame that encloses the stage opening.

Another major arrangement is the *thrust stage*. In this case, the stage area "thrusts" out into the audience, which surrounds it on three sides. At the back of the thrust stage is a wall or some type of scenery. This is the kind of stage for which Shakespeare and his Spanish contemporary Lope de Vega wrote their plays. This type of stage is particularly good for episodic plays in which the action moves rapidly from place to place. In contemporary theater, the dramas of the German playwright Bertolt Brecht also work well on a thrust stage. Whereas all the Broadway theaters have proscenium stages, many of the regional professional theaters in the United States have thrust stages.

A third kind of stage is the *arena* or *circle* arrangement, in which the audience—in either a circle or a square—surrounds a playing area at the center. This type of stage affords a great deal of flexibility and intimacy to a production.

A fourth possibility is the use of *found spaces*. These are spaces not originally intended for theater, such as gymnasiums, garages, lofts, and cafeterias, which are transformed for theatrical purposes. Some texts call for the use of *site-specific* staging, that is, staging a play at actual locales appropriate for the setting of the script. For example, a text set in a factory building, in a stockyard, or on a street corner would be presented in these actual spaces.

As you begin to read a play, try to decide on which of these stages, or in which of these spaces, you would imagine the action unfolding. Also, try to conjecture whether the theater is small, seating perhaps 200 people; or larger, seating 1,000 spectators or even two or three times that many.

WHO THE PARTICIPANTS ARE: THE CHARACTERS

The next step in the adventure of reading a play is to familiarize yourself with the cast. At the beginning of a printed play, there is usually a list of the characters. Look at this carefully to see who the participants are. What are their ages and sexes? What are their occupations? What are their relationships to one another? You will really get to know the characters by seeing them in action once the play unfolds, but before you begin, it is helpful to know who they are and how they relate to one another.

Later, after you are well into the play, consider what strikes you most about various characters: how humorous they are, how evil, how noble, how human, how vulnerable. In visualizing characters, it sometimes helps to imagine flesh-and-blood performers you have seen playing individual roles on television, in films, or in the theater.

As you consider the characters, think about their functions in the play. Who is the main character—sometimes referred to as the *protagonist?* With whom is she or he in conflict? This character, the chief person opposing the protagonist, is sometimes referred to as the *antagonist.* Who are the minor characters who interact with the protagonist? These secondary characters are often called *foils.*

A number of contemporary critics suggest that we also consider how marginalized groups—people who are politically, economically, or socially disenfranchised—are represented by authors. For example, how are women presented? Are they dramatized as stereotypes? Are they less powerful than their male counterparts? Are they conceived in a way that reflects how men view women? (Contemporary criticism sometimes describes this as creating female characters through the "male gaze.") Are they presented as objects—that is, are they objectified? Similarly, how are minority groups—African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, Hispanics, gays, lesbians—represented?

WHAT KIND OF PLAY IT IS: CATEGORIES AND GENRE

Sometimes we are told on the title page what kind of play we are reading: a tragedy, a comedy, a farce, a history. Having this information can often help us understand the basis on which we are supposed to experience it. If it is a serious play, we should expect to take a sober, thoughtful look at the events that take place. If it is a comedy, we know that we are meant to laugh and not to take the characters or the incidents very seriously. If it is a farce, we understand that there will be wild antics and that both the characters and the plot will be exaggerated.

The category to which a play is assigned is often referred to as its *genre* (pronounced "JAHN-ruh") from a French word meaning type. In the past, more emphasis was placed on the question of category or genre than is the case today.

Traditionally, a *tragedy* is defined as a play that involves serious action of universal significance and has important moral and philosophical implications. The hero or heroine is usually a person of royal or noble blood—or some other exceptional character—who suffers a tragic fate. The play usually ends unhappily.

As for *comedy,* a wide range of plays fall under this heading; but usually a comedy is a play that is light in tone, is designed to amuse and provoke laughter, is concerned with issues tending not to be serious, and has a happy ending. The most sophisticated kinds of comedy—intellectual comedy and comedies of manners—stress wit, satire, wordplay, and ideas. At the other end of the spectrum of comedy is *farce,* which is broad, often slapstick, and emphasizes plot twists and exaggerated characters.

Tragicomedy, a form that has come very much to the forefront in modern drama, is a mixture of tragedy and comedy. It is not tragedy with comic relief, such as *Hamlet* or *Macbeth,* but a true mixture of serious and comic elements. It is like a sweet-and-sour sauce.

Two other types that should be mentioned are *domestic drama,* which deals with everyday people in ordinary circumstances facing crises in their lives; and *melodrama,* which emphasizes effects—fear, suspense, moral judgment—and pits good characters against evil ones to achieve its ends.

The subject of domestic drama leads to two other categories: *realism* and *departures from realism.* The distinction between these two does not imply that one is truer or more genuine than another; rather, it is an aesthetic distinction. In realistic drama, all the elements in a play—language, characters, plot developments—conform to our observations of the way people speak and behave in daily life. Departures from realism, by contrast, uses devices that do not conform to our experience of everyday life: poetry rather than prose; otherworldly characters, such as ghosts or angels; and fantasy of all kinds.

In discussing genres and categories, it is important to remember that these are convenient guides; they are not ironclad divisions. They help us understand what the playwright, director, and performers are trying to do, but we should never try to categorize plays at the expense of experiencing them. Most plays do not fall neatly into a genre or category, and many plays mix genres. In this regard, there are questions you should ask as you are reading a play: Does the play clearly fit into any of the categories? Is it possible that the author has mixed genres, styles, realistic and nonrealistic elements, or high art and popular art?

A number of contemporary critics question traditional categorization altogether and suggest that a mixture of styles and disregard for distinctions is a key characteristic of present-day postmodernist art. There are also critics who argue that an appropriate way to categorize texts is by political point of view. For example, is the author a feminist, a Marxist, a gay activist? There are even subdivisions within these groups. When we approach a play in this way, a key question to ask is how the author's politics affect the way she or he structures the drama or represents the characters.

Possibly the best advice about categorization is to remain open-minded. Do not try to pigeonhole texts simplistically. Think about all of the possible approaches to categorization, and see each drama as a unique work of art.

HOW THE PLAY UNFOLDS: ACTION AND THEME

The Play Begins

The first scene of a play should be a key to what is to follow. It should introduce you to the tone of the play—whether serious or comic—and to the characters and the main action. If the chief characters do not appear in the opening scene, they will probably be talked about. Their appearance will be prepared for in advance. The chief conflicts of the play—what actions the characters are planning against each other, what tasks they have been commanded to undertake (by a god or a ghost, perhaps), what is at stake (a kingdom, turf in a neighborhood, control and power in a marriage)—will frequently be spelled out in the opening moments.

As you move into the play, all the things we have spoken of should be kept in mind: the kind of theater in which the play is presented; the stage set; the time and place of the action; the tendencies of the characters and their interplay with each other. Observe, as you progress, what information is revealed. Which characters seem to be the "good guys," the ones with whom you identify and who you hope will come out on top? Which are the "bad guys," the villains, the unjust ones, the selfish ones? In a struggle between two or more people, which character appears to have the upper hand? How does the power shift during the course of the play?

At the same time, note what is happening in the play, that is, what action is unfolding. Who seems to be the chief agent of the action? Who is the primary opponent of that agent? Are there surprises, or does there seem to be an inevitability about what takes place? Do you believe what is happening? Are the actions, the motivations, the emotions, and the words of the characters credible? If not, why not?

During the course of reading the play, you should at all times be aware of who is onstage. Take note of who enters and who exits and when this occurs. It may be important that, say, two people are alone onstage, or that they are being observed and overheard by another person or several people.

The Play Progresses

When you have begun to read the play, notice the language. Is the play written as conversation? If so, is the dialogue fresh, convincing, or even surprising? Or are the words predictable, ordinary, and trite? Is the language formal? If so, what makes it seem formal? Is it poetry? If so, what kind of poetry is it—stiff or flowing and musical? Perhaps you might read one or two sections out loud to get a better sense of the language. Whether conversational or poetic, does the language seem to lift the play up, or does it flatten the play out?

Earlier, we mentioned the importance of the first scene. As the play progresses, observe how the subsequent scenes follow each other. Does there seem to be a logical connection? If the play skips about—as Shakespeare's plays tend to do—can we still follow the action? Suppose that we leave one set of characters, go to another set, and then return to the first group. If you need to, you might make a scheme of this,

to see how the scenes create a pattern of alternation and to trace each story as it unfolds. If there are two or more threads—a plot and a subplot, for instance, or several sets of characters—how are they related?

As you come to the end of the first act, and of each act after that, do you notice the play building to some sort of climax? Is a question posed in one act that must be answered in the next? Is there a threat or an impending conflict?

The Theme

Pause somewhere along the way—perhaps at the end of an act, or simply when the thought strikes you—to consider the *theme* of the play. What does the playwright appear to be concerned about, in terms of ideas, moral questions, values, and philosophical considerations? These matters usually come to the forefront not in direct speeches—though that may occur—but in the way different characters stand for ideas and represent different sides of a moral equation or dilemma. Perhaps the play is dealing with honor and duty to one's ancestors or to the gods. Perhaps it pits evil against good. Perhaps it takes up the subject of injustice. If it is a comedy, it may simply be dealing with human pretensions and pomposity. Once you think you have identified the theme or themes of the play, observe how the playwright develops this aspect as the action unfolds and the speeches of the characters address the subject.

Also remember that some contemporary critics believe that the playwright does not provide the meaning of a play. They argue that the response of the reader or viewer is more significant in bringing meaning to a text, and that no two readers or viewers—because of their differing backgrounds and orientations—will create the exact same reading of a script. Other critics note that a performance adds meaning to a script and that each artist who stages a work brings a unique reading of the text to his or her audience.

The Conclusion

As the play approaches its conclusion, note several things. First, does the play continue to hold your interest? Has the action become more and more exciting the closer you come to the end? Are you anxious to follow it through to the end? Do you want to know how it comes out? Have the characters remained interesting? Are they complex? Have they fooled you or surprised you? Have they acted as you expected them to act? Has the theme become clear, and has it been explored in a provocative and interesting way?

Once you have finished reading the play, think back on what you have experienced. Can you describe how you felt as you were reading and how you feel now that you are finished? Has the play entertained you? Has the play made you think? Has it given you a new perspective? Have you learned anything?

Finally, what in the play has had the most impact on you: the emotion, the excitement and suspence of the story, your identification with the characters, the language, the ideas? Probably it is some combination of these. Also, perhaps there are certain aspects of the play that bothered you or that you did not understand. If so, you might reread those sections and discuss them with your friends and your instructor.

Ideally, in the end, you should have had not only a reading experience, but an imagined theater experience.