

EDWIN WILSON & ALVIN GOLDFARB

# LIVING THEATER



# A HISTORY

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# A HISTORY

Second Edition

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## LIVING THEATER: A HISTORY

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# PREFACE

Anyone writing a theater history faces a daunting task. By definition, a *history* is a chronicle, a recapitulation of events from the past. It cannot, therefore, be a contemporary, spontaneous event. And yet, that is precisely what theater is. Theater exists not in the past but in the present. In fact, it exists *only* at the moment when it occurs. The essence of theater is an immediate exchange between the audience and what unfolds onstage: performances, words of a text, and visual effects of sets, lights, and costumes.

The first challenge of writing a theater history, therefore, is to bring theater from the past to life today. In *Living Theater* we have taken a number of steps to achieve this. First, the opening of each chapter is a vignette: a reenactment of what it was like to attend a performance of a particular play on a particular day. We try to take the reader back to the past and recreate the atmosphere and the experience of going to the theater in a different time and place.

We have also set each theatrical era in a broad social, political, and economic context. In each chapter, the section following the opening scene establishes the background which formed a framework for theater practitioners: playwrights, performers, managers, architects, and designers.

In describing the various aspects of theater, we have striven to give flesh and blood to each activity. As we discuss the artists who created theater, we provide details of their personal histories: interesting information that makes them come alive. To focus on these people as individuals, we have often highlighted them in the text—with their names, their dates, and photographs or drawings. Rather than being set apart in separate boxes, however, as was the case in the first edition, in this edition these biographical sections are an integral part of the text, so that the flow of *Living Theater* is not interrupted. There are also a number of additional profiles with a special emphasis on women and members of ethnic and racial minorities.

The teaching of theater history—like the teaching of most history—has undergone a radical transformation in recent years. For one thing, there are now varying approaches to how history should be viewed and taught—revisionism, feminism, deconstructionism, multiculturalism, semiotics. We take account of these approaches in the Introduction and deal with them where appropriate elsewhere in the text.

A second way in which theater history has changed is that it is no longer seen as a monolithic, *ex cathedra* body of facts. New evidence is constantly being gathered, new discoveries are being made, and new insights are being offered. In the text, we provide the most recent discoveries and theories in every era; in addition, we include a section in each chapter called “Debates in Theater History,” in which we focus on some point of disagreement among scholars and historians. This feature underscores for students the fact that no single view of history should be taken as immutable.

This edition of *Living Theater* can be considered a revision of our first edition, published over a decade ago. But it represents much more than a revision.

The latest information and scholarship have been incorporated. We have included discussions, for instance, of the excavations of the Globe and the Rose in London, and the important work of Prof. John J. Allen regarding the Corral del Principe in Madrid. Beyond this, however, we have reorganized the book to include such features as the “Debates” sections described above. Moreover, the entire text has been reworked, and we have added a significant amount of new material. Though the book is now more comprehensive than the first edition, it remains entirely appropriate for all undergraduate history courses.

As before, we have deliberately avoided an approach too frequently taken by theater historians—lengthy, undifferentiated lists of plays, playwrights, or performers, sometimes known as the *catalogue* approach. Instead, we separate the foreground from the background to give the student a clear perspective on the material covered. At the same time, we believe that most of the significant figures, trends, and developments have been covered, not only fully but, we hope, excitingly.

The important features that were well received in the first edition have been retained. One is an accessible writing style. We have attempted to present material clearly, completely, and simply, but in language that will engage and hold the reader. Also, the illustration program—interesting and informative photographs and drawings—is once again a key feature, with every illustration tied closely to the text. We have included—in a more attractive format than in the first edition—a series of “time lines” that relates important dates in theater to significant events in politics, economics, and the other arts. As appendixes, we have an informative glossary of theatrical terms and an up-to-date bibliography.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Retained from the first edition is the excellent material provided by Prof. James V. Hatch on African American theater and by Prof. J. Thomas Rimer on Asian theater. Much of the original biographical information was developed by Dr. Rita Plotnicki; for African American figures, the original material was furnished by George C. Wolfe. Prof. J. K. Curry and Thom Thomas provided information on the many additional figures who have been given biographies in this edition, and Edward Dee compiled a comprehensive list of plays and playwrights for each period.

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*Edwin Wilson  
Alvin Goldfarb*

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# INTRODUCTION

**T**hroughout the United States on any given day, audiences attend literally hundreds of theater events. They may see an outdoor production in a large open space such as the Shakespeare festival in Ashland, Oregon; or they may see an indoor production in a small theater like the Sullivan Street Playhouse in New York, where the musical *The Fantasticks* has been playing for many years. They may see a new play at one of the many regional professional theaters scattered across the country; or they may see a classic—a tragedy by Shakespeare or a comedy by Molière—at one of the hundreds of college or university theaters in the United States and Canada. They may see a lavish Broadway musical or a simple play set on a bare stage; they may see a formal, stylized kabuki production by a visiting Japanese troupe, or a modern American play set in a family kitchen.

The experiences audiences have at these events are almost as diverse as the events themselves. A young woman sees a production of Shakespeare's *Romeo*

**BASIC ELEMENTS OF THEATER.** Whenever and wherever theater occurs, certain elements are always present. Three of the most important are a performance space, an audience, and performers—the actual presence of the performers sets theater apart from films and television. These three elements are shown here at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival in Ashland, Oregon. The idea of a theater festival is as old as ancient Greece and continues in our own world today. (*Christopher Briscoe/Oregon Shakespeare Festival*)



*and Juliet* and is amazed at how this 400-year-old play illustrates the problems she is having with her parents, who are trying to prevent her from going out with a young man from a different background. A young man sees *The Miser* by Molière and identifies with the son in the play, whose father disinherits him and also tries to steal his girlfriend. An older couple see a revival of a musical comedy—filled with melodies they know—and are thrilled not only with the music but with the lavish scenery and costumes. Someone who works hard at a job sees a farce or a family comedy, presented just for fun, and enjoys escaping from problems at the end of the day. Someone who relishes mental puzzles and clever language sees a play by a writer like the British dramatist Tom Stoppard or the Italian Luigi Pirandello and takes pleasure in being challenged intellectually. A young African American sees a production of *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry and is caught up in the plight of its hero, who is struggling with his own identity and with the prejudice his black family must face. Many people who identify with specific groups see plays about problems of race, gender, or politics and feel a kinship with the characters portrayed onstage and the challenges those characters face.

The myriad of theatrical events and experiences open to us have their roots in the theater we have inherited—2,500 years of western theater and nearly 2,000 years of Asian theater. What are these many kinds of theater, and where did they come from? These are questions that *Living Theater* will address.

## THEATER IN EVERYDAY LIFE

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Before we begin our study of theater history, we should note that theater has a number of first cousins or near relations in everyday life. A wide range of human activities—both personal and communal—have a theatrical component. Among these are imitation, role playing, storytelling, many forms of popular entertainment, and numerous ceremonies and rituals.

### Imitation, Role Playing, and Storytelling

Imitation is universal among children. A child sees an older person walking upstairs or opening a door, and learns to do the same by imitation. Role playing is universal among young and old alike, and it too has a theatrical component. People assume family roles—father, mother, grandfather, sister, brother—and also social roles, such as doctor, lawyer, salesperson, and social worker. In playing these roles, individuals adopt behaviors required by their society. Both imitation and role playing involve aspects of acting.

Another everyday activity with a theatrical element is storytelling, found in cultures throughout the world. Experienced storytellers are able to build suspense, evoke laughter or tears, and keep alive traditions of their culture. They often adopt the voices of characters in their stories; they take on the personalities of old men, young warriors, innocent maidens, or ghosts and other