

Theatre

A Way of Seeing

MILLY S. BARRANGER

THIRD EDITION



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To Heather



Preface

Theatre as a way of seeing is the subject of this book. We will talk about the experience of *theatre* — who sees, what is seen, where, and how it is seen — largely from our own viewpoint as audiences engaged in the direct experience of a complex, living art. We will also try to place ourselves in the creative process of those artists engaged in creating the theatre event. Many persons — writers, directors, actors, designers, technicians, managers, producers — contribute to what is truly a collective, all-encompassing art.

Theatre is where people make art out of themselves for others to watch, experience, think, and feel. Chiefly through the actor, theatre is humanness, aliveness, and presence. Nor does theatre exist in any book. A book, like this one, can only *describe* the passion, wisdom, and excitement that comes with experiencing theatre — in its motion, color, and sound.

This edition has been revised and updated to discuss theatre as an experience of art, life, and human imagination: spaces, people, plays, language, artists, designs, staging, forms, and productions. For this purpose, the book is divided into thirteen chapters. Ten of the thirteen deal with the complex answer to the question: What is theatre? There are discussions of theatre aesthetics, theatrical spaces, theatre artists, artistic process, dramatic forms, elements, and conventions. Two chapters discuss playreading and theatre language, and the last examines theatre criticism — its form and influence on our theatregoing. In addition, there are diagrams, definitions, quotations, sections from texts of plays, and photo essays illustrating theatre's variety, color, tools, and styles. If instructors want to change the order of the chapters, they will find that they can readily do so. None of these discussions, of course, takes the place of sitting with others in a darkened theatre and experiencing the actors, text, scenery, costumes, changing lights, music, and sound effects in a carefully crafted event demonstrating the wonders of the human imagination.

Written for the basic course, this book *introduces* students to theatre as a way of seeing men and women in action: what they do and why they do it. After all, Shakespeare said that “All the world’s a stage,/And all the men and women merely players . . .” (*As You Like It*). Because many students are probably discovering theatre for the first time and perhaps even attending their first performances, I have limited to eleven the “model” plays, ranging from the Greeks to the moderns, used as examples of trends,

styles, and forms in theatrical production: *Oedipus the King*, *The Trojan Women*, *Hamlet*, *Tartuffe*, *Ghosts*, *The Cherry Orchard*, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, *Waiting for Godot*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *Buried Child*, and *Fences*. Each of these plays has a special place in the history of theatrical writing and performance from the past to the present. They also represent, in combination, the extraordinary range and magnitude of human expression and theatrical achievement.

In addition, the complete text of Samuel Beckett's *Rockaby*, along with extensive excerpts from *The Three Sisters*, *The Bald Soprano*, *Marat/Sade*, and *Buried Child* are included in an effort to keep the book (and its material) self-contained, at least for use in the classroom.

In this revised edition of *Theatre: A Way of Seeing*, the reader will also find sections discussing the "new" director-collaborators (for example, Peter Brook, Robert Wilson, and Martha Clarke); current stage technology, especially sound and computers; and photo essays on contemporary stages, environmental performance, women playwrights, new stage design, and great actors.

I have also provided tools to help students with questions of history, biography, definition, and example. A list of these tools appears on pages xiv–xv. Included are synopses of the model plays and short biographies of playwrights, actors, directors, designers, and critics. Other elements that should be useful for teachers and students include study questions; suggested plays and books to read; lists of films and videotapes providing "recorded" performances of some of the model plays and featuring such distinguished actors as Laurence Olivier, Jessica Tandy, James Earl Jones, Derek Jacobi, Irene Worth, Marlon Brando, Vivien Leigh, John Malkovich, and many others. These recommended films represent work by such directors as Peter Brook, Elia Kazan, Alan Schneider, and Ariane Mnouchkine. An expanded glossary of theatre terms, as well as projects that require special work outside the classroom and attendance at performances, are included in the appendixes. All terms that appear in boldface in the text are defined in an expanded glossary. Wherever possible, terms are briefly defined within the text itself, but the glossary provides more extensive explanations.

Finally, this book is in no way a definitive treatment of theatre practice, history, or literature but an attempt to put students in touch with theatre

Brief Contents

CHAPTER ONE

Discovering Theatre 2

CHAPTER TWO

*The Seeing Place:
Traditional Spaces* 26

CHAPTER THREE

*The Seeing Place:
Nontraditional Spaces* 56

CHAPTER FOUR

*The Image Makers:
The Playwright* 76

CHAPTER FIVE

*The Image Makers: The Director
and the “New” Collaborators* 92

CHAPTER SIX

*The Image Makers:
The Actor* 108

CHAPTER SEVEN

*The Image Makers:
The Designers* 134

CHAPTER EIGHT

*The Image Makers:
The Producer* 168

CHAPTER NINE

*Drama’s Perspectives
and Forms* 186

CHAPTER TEN

Structures of Seeing 214

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Theatre Language 252

CHAPTER TWELVE

Visualizing the Script 282

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Viewpoints 318

GLOSSARY 340

APPENDICES 351

INDEX 373

Contents

CHAPTER ONE

Discovering Theatre 2

The Immediate Art 3

The Special Place 4

*Photo Essay: Types of
Contemporary Theatres 5*

The Grand Illusion 9

Audience, Space, and Actor 9

The Living Experience 10

Entertainment 12

The Collaborative Art 14

*Color Photo Essay: "Magic Time"—
The Taming of the Shrew, 1990*

Life's Double 15

Discovery 16

Audience Expectations 20

Summary / Questions for Study 23

CHAPTER TWO

The Seeing Place: Traditional Spaces 26

Ritual and Theatre 27

The Special Place 27

The Greek Theatre 30

The Chorus as Spectator and Commentator 31

Theatre Space as Social Commentary 32

Medieval Theatre 34

Types of Medieval Staging 35

The Elizabethan Theatre 38

Shakespeare's Globe 39

*Photo Essay: Elizabethan Theatres
and Reconstructions 40*

Theatrical Influences 42

The Proscenium Theatre 43

Recent Proscenium Theatres 45

Thrust, or Open, Stages 47

The Eastern Theatre 47

The Japanese Noh Stage 48

The Performers 49

Japanese Kabuki Theatre 49

The Kabuki Stage 50

The Performers 51

Eastern Theatre in the West 52

Summary / Questions for Study 52

CHAPTER THREE

The Seeing Place: Nontraditional Spaces 56

Forerunners: Meyerhold,
Reinhardt, Copeau 58

The Polish Laboratory Theatre 59

Grotowski's Poor Theatre 59

Environments 60

Holy Theatre 62

Akropolis 62

Environmental Performance
Groups 64

**Photo Essay: Environmental Theatre —
A Perspective 66**

Performance Style 69

Théâtre du Soleil 69

The Bread and Puppet Theatre 72

Summary / Questions for Study 74

CHAPTER FOUR

The Image Makers: The Playwright 76

The Playwright 77

A Personal Vision 77

The Playwright's Beginnings 78

**Photo Essay: The Plays of
Sam Shepard 80**

The Playwright's Function 82

Aspects of Playwriting 83

**Photo Essay: Women Playwrights:
Emerging Voices and Perspectives 86**

The Playwright and the Industry 89

Summary / Questions for Study 90

CHAPTER FIVE

The Image Makers: The Director and the "New" Collaborators 92

Background 93

The Director's Role 94

**Color Photo Essay:
The "Creative" Director**

Auditions and Casting 96

The Director and the Actor 97

Assistants 100

The Director as Creative Artist 100

The "New" Collaborators 102

Summary / Questions for Study 106

CHAPTER SIX

The Image Makers: The Actor 108

The Astonishing Art 110

The Actor's Reality 111

The Actor's Training 111

Photo Essay: Great Moments of Acting 112

External Technique 117

Internal Belief 119

Stanislavsky's "Method" 119

Subtext 123

Recalling Emotions 125

Physical and Vocal Training 127
 The Actor's Body 127
 The Actor's Voice 129
Rehearsals and Performance 130
Summary / Questions for Study 131

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Image Makers: The Designers 134

The Scene Designer 135
 Background 135
 The Designer's Training 138
 Designing for the Theatre 138
 Photo Essay: Modern Stage Designs 140
The Costume Designer 146
 The Costume 146
 The Design Conference 146
 Costume Construction 149
 Dress Rehearsal 149
 Wardrobe Personnel 152
 Makeup 152
 Masks 153
The Lighting Designer 156
 The Art of Light 156
 ***Color Photo Essay: Makeup
and Wigs for Cats***
 Plotting and Cueing 160

The Sound Designer 161
 Photo Essay: The Working Designer 162
Summary / Questions for Study 166

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Image Makers: The Producer 168

The Broadway Producer 169
 The Broadway Option 171
 The Associations and Craft Unions 172
 Casting 173
 The Agent 174
 Preview or Out-of-Town Tryout 174
 ***Color Photo Essay: Broadway's
"Hottest" Property: The Musical***
 The Broadway Opening and After 175
 The National Touring Company 176
Producing Off-Broadway 176
Producing in the Nonprofit
Regional Theatre 178
Summary / Questions for Study 184

CHAPTER NINE

Drama's Perspectives and Forms 186

Tragedy 187
 The Tragic Vision 188
 Tragic Realization 188
 Aristotle on Tragedy 189

Comedy 189
Tragicomedy 191
 Modern Tragicomedy 193
Melodrama 195
Farce 197
Adaptations 198
 Photo Essay: The Grapes of Wrath 201
Epic Theatre 204
 Episodic and Narrative Theatre 204
 Epic Acting as Eyewitness Account 206
 The Alienation Effect 207
Absurdist Theatre 208
 The Absurd 208
Summary / Questions for Study 212

CHAPTER TEN

Structures of Seeing 214

Imitation 215
 Play as Imitation 215
 Drama as Imitation 217
The Elements of Drama 217
Play Structure 218
 Climactic Play Structure 220
 Episodic Play Structure 222
 Situational Play Structure 222

Drama's Conventions 226
 Exposition 226
 Point of Attack 228
 Complication, Crisis, Climax 228
 Resolution 230
 Simultaneous or Double Plots 231
 The Play-Within-the-Play 231
New Play Structures 233
 Happenings 233
 Talking Pieces 234
 Samuel Beckett's Rockaby as Monodrama 235
 Theatre of Visions 241
 Photo Essay: Theatre for a High-Tech World 244
Summary / Questions for Study 249

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Theatre Language 252

Verbal and Nonverbal 255
Examples of Theatre Language 256
 Hamlet 259
 Ghosts 259
 The Cherry Orchard 261
 Brecht's "Epic" Language:
 The Caucasian Chalk Circle 263
 Photo Essay: Chekhov's Theatre Language in Modern Performance 265

New Trends 268

Violent Images in Marat/Sade 268

The Open Theatre 270

Language and the “New” Realism 274

Osborne’s Language of Rage 275

Summary / Questions for Study 280

CHAPTER TWELVE

Visualizing the Script 282

A Model 283

Human Activity 284

Space 286

Character 291

Purpose 296

Organization 299

Performance Style 303

Realism 304

The Cherry Orchard 304

A Streetcar Named Desire 305

New British Writing 306

***Photo Essay: Realism
and Theatricalism*** 308

Theatricalism 312

The Trojan Women 312

Summary / Questions for Study 314

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Viewpoints 318

Seeing Theatre 319

Audiences as Critics 319

The Professional Critic 323

The Critic’s Role 323

The Critic’s Questions 325

Photo Essay: Reviews 326

Performance Notes 328

Writing the Theatre Review 330

Two Critics at Work 333

Theatre Review: Brooks Atkinson on

A Streetcar Named Desire 333

Theatre Review: Kenneth Tynan on

Look Back in Anger 337

Summary / Questions for Study 338

GLOSSARY 340

APPENDIX A: SUGGESTED PROJECTS FOR STUDENTS OF THEATRE 351

APPENDIX B: RELATED FILMS AND VIDEOCASSETTES 358

APPENDIX C: SUGGESTED READINGS 362

APPENDIX D: NOTES 368

INDEX 373

CHAPTER ONE

Hamlet 16

Theatre and Life 18

Waiting for Godot 19

Tropes 20

A Streetcar Named Desire 21

CHAPTER TWO

Aeschylus and the Athenian Festivals 32

Oedipus the King 33

William Shakespeare 42

Chikamatsu Monzaemon 52

CHAPTER THREE

Jerzy Grotowski 60

Richard Schechner 64

Ariane Mnouchkine 70

Peter Schumann 73

CHAPTER FOUR

Sam Shepard 79

August Wilson 84

CHAPTER FIVE

Duke of Saxe-Meiningen —
George II 94

André Antoine 95

Constantin Stanislavsky 96

Alan Schneider 97

Elia Kazan 101

Peter Brook 102

Martha Clarke 103

CHAPTER SIX

Lee Strasberg 121

Stage Vocabulary 128

CHAPTER SEVEN

Appia and Craig 136

Ming Cho Lee 138

Costume Resources 148

Patricia Zipprodt 150

Theoni V. Aldredge 151

Makeup Basics 153

Jennifer Tipton 160

CHAPTER EIGHT

Cohen on Producing 171

Author's Royalties 172

Contracts Negotiated by the
League of American Theatres
and Producers 173

Audrey Wood 175

Zelda Fichandler 182

Features

CHAPTER NINE

Differences Between Tragedy
and Comedy 189
Tartuffe 190
Molière 191
The Three Sisters 192
Samuel Beckett 194
The Little Foxes 196
Noises Off 197
The Grapes of Wrath 200
Dramatic Vs. Epic Theatre 204
Bertolt Brecht 205
Eugene Ionesco 209
Excerpt from *The Bald Soprano* 210

CHAPTER TEN

Henrik Ibsen 219
Ghosts 219
The Caucasian Chalk Circle 224
The Bald Soprano 224
The Trojan Women 227
Macbeth 229
Spalding Gray 234
Rockaby 236
Robert Wilson 242
Lee Breuer 243
Mabou Mines 249

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Soliloquy from *Macbeth* 255
Anton Chekhov 257
The Cherry Orchard 257
Soliloquy from *Hamlet* 258
Ibsen's Words and Gestures 260
Chekhov's Sound Effects 263
Brecht's Songs 264
Marat/Sade 270
Joseph Chaikin 271
Interview and Transformations 274
John Osborne 275
Osborne's Angry Monologue 276
Shepard's Symbolic Language 278

CHAPTER TWELVE

Tennessee Williams 289
Andrei Serban 313

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

George Jean Nathan 325
Harold Clurman 328
Frank Rich 331
Theatre Review: Brooks
Atkinson on
A Streetcar Named Desire 334
Theatre Review: Kenneth Tynan
on *Look Back in Anger* 336

as a performing art and humanistic event. Most important, it introduces students to theatre as an *immediate* experience, engaging actors and audiences for a brief time in a special place. The Greeks called that special place where audiences sat to watch performances a *theatron*, or “seeing place.” Let us make theatre as a way of seeing our guide to understanding and enjoying the theatre.

My thanks are due to colleagues and students for their encouragement and assistance in the preparation of the several revisions of this book. Those who advised on this manuscript at various stages are Georgia A. Bomar, East Texas State University; Robert H. Bradley, Southwest Missouri State University; Sharon Broom, PlayMakers Repertory Company, Chapel Hill; Bill G. Cook, Baylor University; Marilyn J. Hoffs, Glendale College; Edward T. Jones, York College of Pennsylvania; William Leonard, Western Kentucky University; Craig Turner, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; Douglas R. Vander Yacht, Western Washington University; and Berenice Weiler, Weiler/Miller Associates.

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I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.

PETER BROOK, *THE EMPTY SPACE*¹



While we are watching, men and women make theatre happen before us. In the theatre we see human beings in action – what they do and why they do it – and we discover our world's special qualities by seeing them through others' eyes.