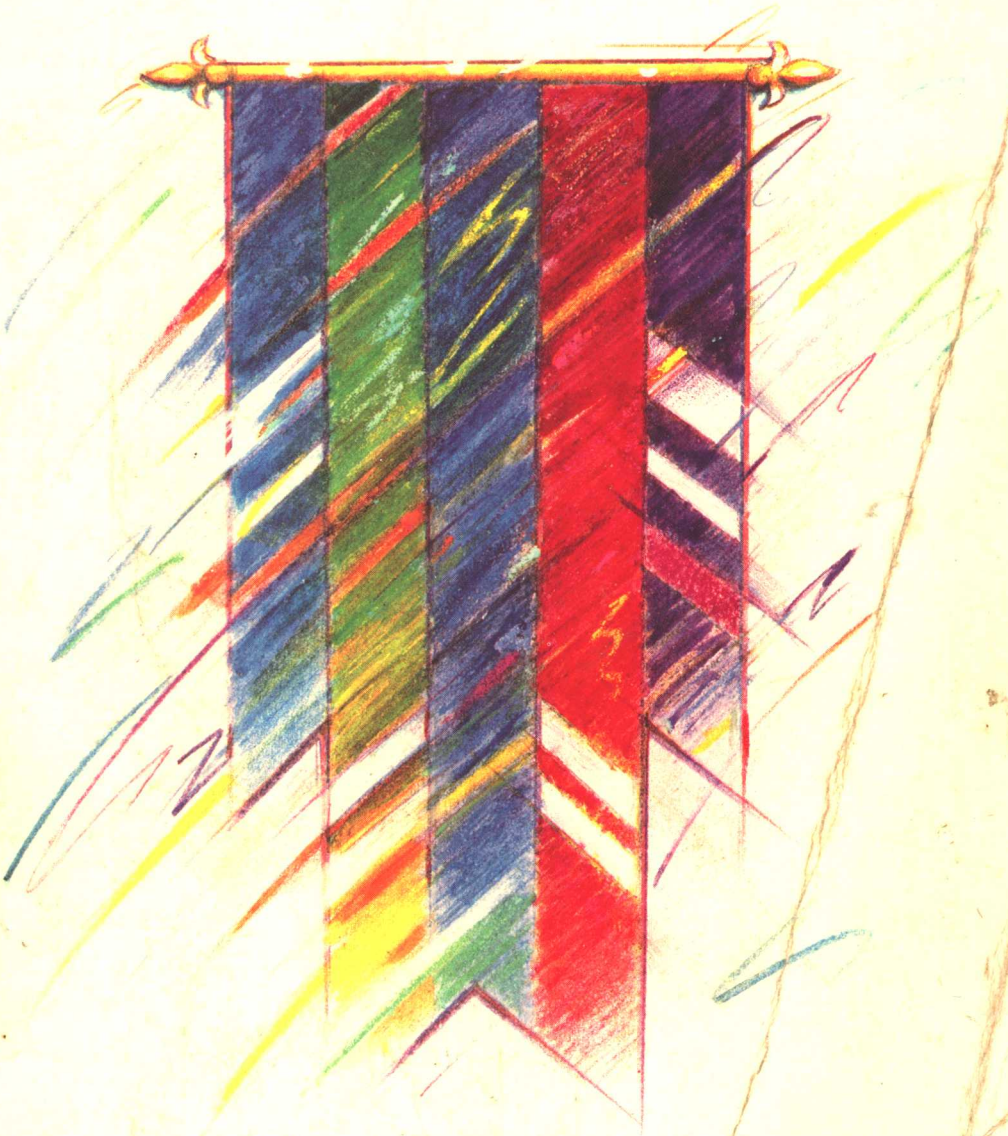
THEATRE

BRIEF VERSION

SECOND EDITION

ROBERT COHEN



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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.

WHAT'S NEW?

This is a brief version of a larger book that is being published simultaneously; both are second editions of volumes that first appeared in 1981 (*Theatre*) and 1983 (*Theatre: Brief Edition*). The larger volume includes four chapters on theatrical history that do not appear here and three chapters (instead of two) on the modern theatre. The second editions of both versions have been substantially revised and expanded, particularly in their coverage of modern theatrical activity; the glossary has been expanded to include performance and technical terms that a beginning theatre-goer needs to know, and an appendix on writing about drama has been included for the first time to help novice theatre-goers intelligibly describe and critique plays.

The brief second edition continues the goal of the first: it is intended to provide students surveying theatrical theory and practice—but not dramatic history—with a comprehensive text in the dramatic arts as they exist today. The expanded section on modern theatre and the full-color photographs of current professional productions should help to amplify the successful realization of that goal.

No study of the theatre can be truly comprehensive, however, without seeing and reading plays. It is my hope that regular playgoing and playreading, supported by the discussions in these pages (and, if you choose, in the companion anthology *Eight Plays for Theatre*), will provide a foundation for the reader to develop an informed and critical enthusiasm for the art of drama, to which goal this book is dedicated.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I again thank the persons who contributed their help and concern in the preparation of the first edition of this book. I also am grateful to the many reviewers who made hundreds of suggestions for the first and second editions, all of which helped to sharpen my writing and improve my

understanding of many fine points: Mary Jo Beresford, Northern Kentucky University; William Brasmer, Denison University; Bill G. Cook, Baylor University; Kenneth Cox, Oklahoma State University; Jerry L. Crawford, University of Nevada, Las Vegas; John Ford, Foothill College; Robert Jenkins, San Jose State University; Joseph Karioth, Florida State University; Helen Manfull, Pennsylvania State University; James Norwood, University of Minnesota; Thomas Pallen, Austin Peay State University; Gordon Rogoff, Brooklyn College; Carl White, American River College; Joanlee Woehler, Santa Rosa Junior College; Stephen Wyman, University of Texas; and James Yeater, Arizona State University.

Robert Cohen

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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, conventioneers, 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 varied a crowd as is likely to assemble at any one place in America.

It is eight o'clock. In thirty or forty theatres houselights 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 play from a regional theatre, here a one-woman show, here a new revue moving up from off-Broadway, here a new ballet, here a touring production from Europe, here the new play everyone expects to win this year's Pulitzer Prize. 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

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.

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 rejoicing 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 as well: women, slaves, tradesmen, foreign visitors, and resident aliens. Even the paupers are in attendance, thanks to the two 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 . . .

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 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, as well as the complicated interpretations of character, motivation, and moral ramifications supplied by the playwright Aeschylus, 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 Thames, announcing performance day at The Globe, The Rose, and The Swan. Boatmen have already begun ferrying theatre-bound Londoners across the broad river. Meanwhile, north of town, other flocks of Londoners are headed by foot and by carriage up to Finsbury Fields and the theatres of Shoreditch: The Fortune and The Curtain. Public theatres have been banned in the city for some time now by action of the Lords Aldermen; however, an ensemble of trained schoolboys is rehearsing for a private candlelight performance before the Queen.

Now, as the morning sermon concludes at St. Paul's Cathedral, the traffic across the river increases; London Bridge fills with pedestrians hurrying to Bankside, where The Globe

players will present a new tragedy by Shakespeare (something called *Hamlet,* supposedly after an old play by Thomas Kyd), and The Rose promises a revival of the late Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus.* The noisy crowds swarm into the theatres, where the price of admission is a penny; another penny is needed for a pint of beer, and those who wish to go upstairs and take a seat on one of the benches in the gallery—the best place to see the action, both on stage and off—must plunk down yet more pennies.

At The Globe, 2,000 spectators are on hand for the premiere. A trumpet sounds, sounds again, and then builds into a full fanfare. The members of the audience exchange a few last winks with friends old and new, covert and overt invitations to post-performance intimacies of various kinds, and turn their attention to the pillared, trestled, naked stage. Through one giant door Bernardo bursts forth. "Who's there?" he cries. Then through another door, a voice: "Nay, answer me: stand and unfold yourself," and Francisco enters with lighted lantern in hand. In 2,000 imaginations, the bright afternoon turns to midnight, the Bankside gives way to the outskirts of Elsinore. A shiver from the actors on stage sets up an answering chill among the audience as Francisco proclaims, "'Tis bitter cold, and I am sick at heart." The audience strains forward. The tragedy has begun.

It is evening at Versailles, 1664. King Louis XIV nods graciously as the celebrated actor-playwright bows before him. Jean Baptiste Poquelin, known throughout France as Molière, has just presented his *Tartuffe,* with its scathingly witty denunciation of the powerful Church extremists. The courtiers, taking Louis's nod, applaud vigorously; in one corner of the glittering hall, however, a bishop glares coldly at the actor. The Archbishop of Paris will hear of this.

It is 5 A.M. in Moscow, 1898. At a cafe in the shadow of the Kremlin wall, Konstantin Stanislavski and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko hotly discuss the wretched state of the current Russian Theatre. It is too declamatory, they agree; it is also too insensitive, too shallow, too inartistic. Out of this all-night session the Moscow Art Theatre will be formed, bringing to the last days of czarist society the complex, gently ironic masterpieces of Chekhov and an acting style so natural as to astonish the world.

It is midnight in a coffeehouse in the East Village, or on the Left Bank, or in the campus rehearsal room. Across one end of the room, a curtain has been drawn across a pole suspended by wires. It has been a long evening, but a play yet remains to be seen. The author is unknown, but rumor says that this new work is brutal, shocking, poetic, strange. The audience, by turns skeptics and enthusiasts, look for the tenth time at their mimeographed programs. The lights dim. Performers, backed by crudely painted packing crates, begin to act.

There is a common denominator in all these scenes: they are all theatre.

Theatre is the most natural of the arts. There is no culture that has not had a theatre in some form, for theatre, quite simply, is the art of people acting out—and giving witness to—their most pressing, most illuminating, and most inspiring concerns. Theatre is at once a showcase and a forum, a medium through which a society's ideas, fashions, moralities, and entertainments can be displayed and its conflicts, dilemmas, and struggles can be debated. Theatre has provided a stage for political revolution, for social propaganda, for civil debate, for artistic expression, for religious proselytization, for mass education, and even for its own self-criticism. It has been a performance ground for shamans and priests, intellectuals, poets, painters, technologists, militarists, philosophers, reformers, evangelists, prime ministers, jugglers, peasants, children, and kings. It has taken place in caves, in fields and forests, in Chatauqua tents, in inns and in castles, on street corners, and in public buildings grand and squalid all over the world. And it goes on incessantly in the minds

of its authors, its actors, its producers, its designers, and its audiences.

For theatre is, above all, a *living* art form—a *process,* an *event* that is fluid in time, feeling, and experience. It is not simply a matter of "plays," but of "playing"; and a play is composed not simply of "acts," but of "acting." As "play" and "act" are both noun and verb, so theatre is both a "thing" and a "happening." It is continually forming, continually present in time. In fact, that very quality of "presentness" (or, in the actor's term, "stage presence") defines great theatrical performance.

Theatre, unlike the more static arts, presents a number of classic paradoxes:

It is unique to the moment, yet it is repeatable.

It is spontaneous, yet it is rehearsed.

It is participatory, yet it is presented.

It is real, yet it is simulated.

It is understandable, yet it is obscure.

The actors are themselves, yet they are characters.

The audience believes, yet it does not believe.

The audience is involved, yet it remains apart.

These paradoxes stem not from any flaw or weakness in the logic of theatrical construction, but from the theatre's essential strength, which resides in its kinship and concern with the ambiguity and irony of human life—our life. It is *we* who are at the same time unique yet conventional, spontaneous yet premeditating, involved yet isolated, candid yet contriving, comprehensible yet fundamentally unknown and unknowable. Theorists of dramatic literature and of dramatic practice often ignore these paradoxes in their attempts to "explain" a play or the art of the stage; in this they do a grave disservice to art as well as to scholarship, for to "explain" the theatre without reference to its ambiguities is to remove its dynamic tension—in other words, to kill it. And although certainly much valuable information can be discovered at an autopsy table, it is information pertinent only to the appearance and behavior of a corpse.

In this book we shall not be overly concerned with corpses. Our task will be the harder one—to discover the theatre in being, *alive* and with all its paradoxes and ambiguities intact. From time to time it will be necessary for us to make some separations—between product and process, for example—but we must bear in mind at all times that these separations are conveniences, not representations or fact. In the end we shall be looking at the theatre as part of the human environment, and at the ways in which we fit into that environment—as participants and observers, artists and art critics, role models and role players, actors and persons. So this book about the theatre is also about ourselves.

WHAT IS THE THEATRE?

What *is* the theatre, this art that excites such imagination across so many climes and cultures?

The word derives from *theatron*, the Greek word for "seeing-place," which was coined to describe the semicircular hillside benches that seated the audience during ancient Greek dramatic performances. We still use the word "theatre" to refer to a structure where dramatic performances take place, but we also use it to describe the events themselves.

In its various usages "the theatre" today may refer to a culture's entire dramatic literary heritage; or it might encompass only plays; or it might refer as well to mime shows, musical extravaganzas, minstrel entertainments, cabaret revues, acted-out storytellings, even puppet shows. By extension, the word is occasionally broadened to include motion pictures and radio and television productions. Metaphorically, "theatre" has even been applied to political boundaries and military operations (the "Pacific Theatre" and the "European Theatre" of World War II).

For the purposes of this book, we shall consider "the theatre" as simply *that body of artistic work in which actors impersonate characters in a live (that is, not filmed) performance of a scripted play.* This definition is not to be taken as a final pronouncement on the true meaning of the word—should such a thing even be thought possible—but merely as a useful categorization that describes our field of primary interest.

Let us now take a closer look at our definition. It makes six crucial assertions:

1. Theatre is *work.*
2. Theatre is *artistic* work.
3. In theatre, actors *impersonate* characters.
4. Theatre is *performance.*
5. Theatre is *live* performance.
6. Theatre involves a *scripted play.*

What do we mean by these assertions? What do they tell us about the nature of theatre? These are the questions that underlie the opening chapter of our investigation into this complex and rewarding subject.