

# THE THEATER EXPERIENCE

# EDWIN WILSON



FIFTH EDITION

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THE  
THEATER  
EXPERIENCE

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EDWIN WILSON

*Hunter College and Graduate Center  
The City University of New York*

New York St. Louis San Francisco Auckland Bogotá  
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## THE THEATER EXPERIENCE

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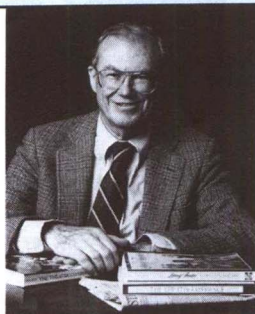
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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**T**eacher, author, and critic, Edwin Wilson has worked in many aspects of theater. Educated at Vanderbilt University, the University of Edinburgh, and Yale University, he received a Master of Fine Arts degree from the Yale Drama School, as well as the first Doctor of Fine Arts degree awarded by Yale. He has taught at Hofstra, Vanderbilt, and—since 1967—at Hunter College and the CUNY Graduate Center. At Hunter he has served as chair of the Department of Theatre and Film and head of the graduate theater program. At CUNY he directs the Center for the Advanced Study in Theater Arts (CASTA).

As a writer, Edwin Wilson has been since 1972 the theater critic of the Wall Street Journal. In addition to *The Theater Experience*, he is a coauthor of *Living Theater* and *Theater: The Lively Art* also published by McGraw-Hill, and he was responsible for the volume *Shaw on Shakespeare*. He is a member of the New York Drama Critics Circle, of which he has served as president. He has also been on the Tony Nominating Committee and was four times a member of the Pulitzer Prize Drama Committee. He has been president of the board of directors of the Theatre Development Fund, which (among other activities) runs the half-price TKTS booth in Times Square; and he is on the boards of the John Golden Fund and the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize.

Before turning to teaching and writing, Edwin Wilson was assistant to the producer for the film *Lord of the Flies*, directed by Peter Brook, and the Broadway play *Big Fish, Little Fish*, directed by John Gielgud. He produced several off-Broadway shows and coproduced a Broadway play directed by George Abbott. He also directed in summer and regional theater, serving one season as resident director of the Barter Theater in Virginia.

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## PREFACE

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Preparing a new edition of *The Theater Experience* invariably becomes a balancing act. On the one hand, we wish to preserve those qualities and features from previous editions which have met with wide approval. On the other hand, there is a desire to improve the book: to make it more responsive to students' needs and more up-to-date than ever before. I hope this fifth edition has successfully met both objectives—that we have retained the best elements of the previous four editions while eliminating outdated material and adding new information that will make this the best edition yet.

Features that we have incorporated from previous editions include a nonhistorical approach to theater, an accessible writing style, frequent analogies to everyday experience, a coherent organization, abundant photographs and illustrations tied directly to the text, and a series of informative appendixes.

One important change has been to tighten the text. Upon reviewing the previous editions, I recognized that I often gave two or three illustrations or examples in making a point where one would do. There were other redundancies as well that have been eliminated. The result, I hope, is a clearer, more concise text. In addition, references have been updated throughout the book.

Another significant change is the rearrangement of the parts of the book. As always in the past, we open with a section on the audience. For Part Two, however, rather than turning to the playwright and the script, we take up the performers and the director. The actor-audience exchange is the heart of theater, and for many people the theater's excitement and immediacy are epitomized by the work of actresses and actors onstage. The hope, therefore, is that this early placement of acting and directing will engage the student's interest at the start of his or her studies. In Parts Three and Four, we turn to the playwright and the script—first to structure and characters, and then to genre. Part Five remains, as before, about the design elements.

In Part Six—Bringing the Elements Together—there is another important change. Because both the playwright Arthur Miller and the director Elia Kazan have written autobiographies in recent years, describing their collaboration on the original production of *Death of a Salesman*, the decision was made to substitute this play for *A Streetcar Named Desire* in the final chapter. Firsthand accounts of the way the production was put together provide a vivid picture of the theater's collaborative process.

A word here about the sequence of chapters in the book: it has become increasingly clear that the book can easily be taught out of sequence and frequently is. Teachers adopt their own approach and ask students to study chapters or parts according to their own preferences. This appears to work admirably, with a minimum of disruption or loss of continuity. Some teachers, for example, assign Chapter 20 toward the beginning of the course rather than at the end. I have always been pleased that teachers approach the book in such a creative and individual way.

A long-standing trademark of *The Theater Experience* has been its use of carefully selected and clearly reproduced photographs and illustrations. As in previous editions, these are drawn from a range of productions—Broadway theaters, smaller not-for-profit theaters, regional theaters, college theaters. Ninety percent of the illustrations are new to this edition, and once again they are closely tied to material in the text. As with the third and fourth editions, sixteen pages in full color have been included.

Because the book stresses the encounter between audience and performers, it is assumed that anyone using it will make attendance at performances an integral part of the course. Though the text deals with specific plays, its approach can easily be adapted to a current production readily available to students. Any Shakespearean play, for example, can prove beneficial, as can any Greek play, any work by Ibsen, or a more modern piece.

In order to supplement the plays that students see and read as a part of the course, this edition, like the third and fourth editions, includes a series of plot summaries, set apart from the text in boxes. The plays thus summarized include *King Oedipus*, *King Lear*, *Tartuffe*, *Ghosts*, *The*

*Cherry Orchard, Death of a Salesman, A Streetcar Named Desire, A Raisin in the Sun, and Waiting for Godot*; all the synopses are listed on page xiii.

*The Theater Experience* is intended as a text for the introductory theater course offered by most colleges and universities. Generally, such a course is aimed at students who are not intending to major in theater, and the book has been written with that in mind. While it is neither a history nor a "how to" book, there is an abundance of solid information in it. It can serve equally well as the text for a prerequisite course leading to advanced work in theater or for the theater component in a combined arts course. Students who plan to concentrate on theater can begin in no better way than by examining the actor-audience exchange, learning the spectator's side of the equation as well as the creator's.

Before *The Theater Experience*, most theater texts adopted either a historical or a genre approach to the subject. Historically oriented texts begin where western theater began—with the Greeks. Texts adopting a historical approach generally devote half of the book to a chronological treatment of theater, with subsequent chapters on the actor, designer, and director, among others. In the genre approach, chapters on tragedy, comedy, farce, and so forth, are substituted for the history. In both of these, theater tends to be treated as a frozen artifact divided into discrete units of history or genre: tragedy, Restoration drama, the Spanish golden age, and so on.

In his book *The Empty Space*, Peter Brook speaks of the "immediate theater." In a sense, all theater is immediate—an experience given and received. Treated as a set entity, a remote body of knowledge divorced from the lives of those who view it, theater loses any chance of immediacy. The aim of this text is to analyze and explain what theater is about—what goes on in theater and what it means to the viewer. For audience members, the experience begins when they come into the theater, confront the environment, and, following that, encounter the performance. This encounter, between those who create theater and those who view it, is at the heart of theater. Thus, the crucial role of the audience—its importance in the dynamic exchange between creators and viewers in theater—is dealt with throughout this text.

Every effort has been made to relate theater to experiences already familiar to the student. Certain elements in theater have analogues in daily life, and wherever possible these are used to provide a key, or bridge, to the theater experience. Interior design, for example, can be used to create an atmosphere or ambience in a restaurant, or a room can be viewed as a form of "scene design." In this way a familiar experience becomes the basis for understanding the more specialized art of stage design. In this, as in every other feature of *The Theater Experience*—approach, writing style, and organization—the aim has been to provide both teachers and students with a book that is not only informative and incisive but also pleasurable.

## \* ACKNOWLEDGMENTS \*

I first developed the ideas in this book while teaching a course in Introduction to Theater at Hunter College of the City University of New York. To my colleagues and students at Hunter, I express my deep appreciation.

I particularly wish to thank three colleagues who have contributed specific material: Stuart Baker, who was responsible for Appendixes 4 and 5; Alvin Goldfarb, who wrote the special sections on the theories of tragedy and comedy; and Mira Felner, who wrote "A Note on Women and Greek and Elizabethan Theater." I am grateful to J. K. Curry, who was responsible for the index; and to Scott Walters, who prepared the Instructor's Manual for the fifth edition. Special thanks, also, to Emilie Smith Kilgore of Stages Theater.

McGraw-Hill and the author wish to express their thanks for the many useful comments and suggestions provided by the following reviewers: William Akins, Arizona State University; Byrne Blackwood, Southwest Missouri State University; David Burr, Rhode Island College; Joseph Capello, Broward Community College; Sharon Carnegie, University of Southern California; Lorraine Commeret, University of Northern Iowa; Tony Distler, Virginia Polytechnic University; Robert Gilmore, Southwest Missouri State University; Lou Hackleman, Indiana State University; Glen Harbaugh, Indiana State University; John Jellicorse, University of North Carolina; Betty Jean Jones, University of North Carolina; Joe Karioth, Florida State University; Kae Koger, University of Massachusetts-Amherst; Paul Lifton, North Dakota State University; Jim Ludwig, Bradley University; Alice McElhaney, Southwest Missouri State University; Sherry McFadden, Indiana State University; Geraldine Maschio, University of Kentucky; Mildred Mulliken, Broward Community College; Doug Paterson, University of Nebraska; Ellis Pryce-Jones, University of Nevada at Las Vegas; George Roesler, Inver Hills Community College; Chuck Vicinus, University of Toledo; Albert Wehlburg, University of Florida; Bob Welk, University of Nebraska; Laura Wescott, Indiana State University; and Ben Wilson, University of Nebraska.

I express special appreciation to the artist Al Hirschfeld, who has allowed us to use his incomparable drawings for the part openings.

Through all five editions of *The Theater Experience* I have had the extreme good fortune to work with two people: the exceptional, imaginative photograph editor, Inge King; and the talented, highly creative designer, Joan O'Connor. I also wish to thank, for their support and tireless efforts, editing supervisor Susan Gamer and editor Peter Labella.

Edwin Wilson



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# INTRODUCTION

## THEATER: A UNIQUE EXPERIENCE.

*Performers onstage before an audience combine with the words in the script and with scenery, lighting, and costumes to create a special moment of theater. When we go to the theater, we experience a series of such moments. The scene shown here is from Summer and Smoke by Tennessee Williams, with Christopher Reeve and Laila Robins in a production at the Williamstown Theater.*

The impulse toward theater is universal. It has occurred wherever human society has developed: in Europe and Asia, throughout Africa, and among Native Americans. In virtually every culture recorded in history or studied by anthropologists, we find rituals, religious ceremonies, and celebrations that include elements of theater.

One element is a presentation by *performers* in front of an *audience*—a ceremony, for example, conducted by religious leaders before members of a community.

Another element is the wearing of *costumes*, such as those worn by priests or tribal chiefs. In some rituals or ceremonies, animals or gods are impersonated by people in costume.

*Storytelling* is a third element. In many cultures there are strong traditions of storytellers who recite myths or legends from the past, or teach lessons by means of stories, to a group of listeners. In doing this, the narrator impersonates the characters in the story, sometimes actually changing his or her voice to imitate the character.

#### THE IMPULSE TOWARD THEATER IS UNIVERSAL.

Cultures throughout the world have rituals, ceremonies, and dances that include theatrical elements such as masks, costumes, and impersonations of people, animals, or spirits. Shown here is a Salaam ceremonial dance in Tanzania, Africa, featuring elaborate costumes and headdresses as well as ritualized dance movements.



(Marc Riboud/Magnum)