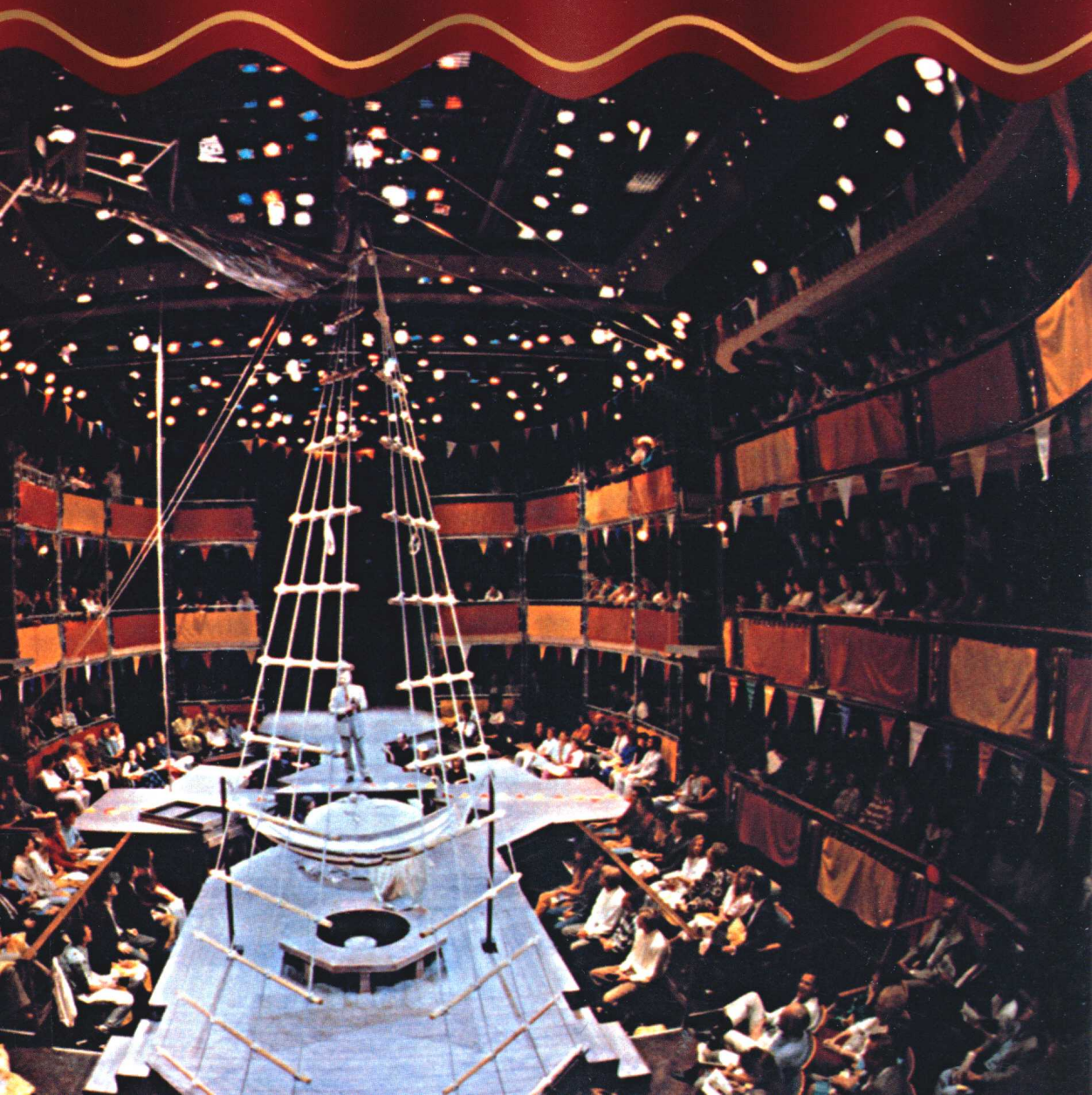


What Is Theatre?

An Introduction and Exploration

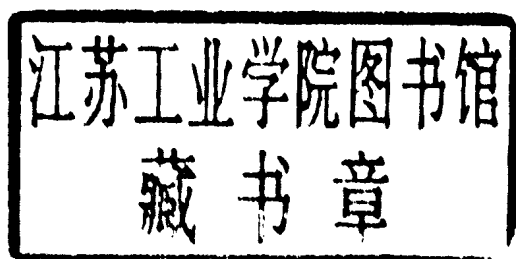
JOHN RUSSELL BROWN



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John Russell Brown



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Cover photo: Set Design by Warren Carrie for the Alberta Theatre Projects production of *Candide* (music by Leonard Bernstein, book adapted from Voltaire by Hugh Wheeler, lyrics by Richard Wilbur, additional lyrics by Stephen Sondheim and John LaTouche), directed by D. Michael Dobbin and presented in the Martha Cohen Theatre, Calgary Centre for Performing Arts, May 27–July 21, 1990. Photo by Trudie Lee. Courtesy of Alberta Theatre Projects.

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A huge debt of another kind is due to the custodians of the numerous collections of illustrative material whom I have consulted, both those whose pictures I have been able to use and those who tried to provide what I sought but for various reasons were unable to do so. A writer of any book that seeks to show what theatre is must rely a great deal on this wide network of specialists who generously share their knowledge as well as make their treasures available. A special debt is due to the artists who have allowed me to use their original drawings or designs: Marjorie Bradley Kellogg, G. W. Mercier, Richard Pilbrow and his associates at Theatre Projects, and Jan Swaka. The citation of sources for the illustrations should be read not only as documentation but also as an expression of my gratitude.

The second part of this book appears thanks to the willingness of writers and artists to allow the reproduction of their writings, courtesy of their publishers. The gathering of other voices to follow mine has given me great pleasure, complementing what I wrote and providing perspectives I am not in a position to supply. I am most grateful for the generosity that has made this possible.

In some very few instances when seeking permission to reproduce writings and illustrations, I was not able to be entirely sure that I had contacted all interested

parties; such omissions, if any, I greatly regret and beg indulgence. I would be grateful for information that would allow me to repair the fault in a later reprinting.

For her expert care and patience, I am greatly indebted to Maura Kelly who saw this book through its last stages towards publication.

—John Russell Brown
Ann Arbor, December 1995

Introduction

This book is about what theatre is and what it might be. It gives a great deal of information and explains many ideas, but it does not tell readers what to think. Above all other aims, I want to set readers thinking about theatre for themselves, as their view of theatre becomes wider and more complete.

Anyone can take a published play from the shelf and read the words that actors have spoken on the stage. This is a very convenient way of starting serious study of theatre and, while studying *What Is Theatre?* readers are encouraged to read, and probably reread, a number of plays, giving preference to those that can be seen in performance. Yet reading play texts alone is not enough for students who are exploring what theatre is in practical terms; nor is it easy to grasp the theatrical worth of a play simply by studying it as if it were any other book. Sitting down with a text in hand is a very different experience from seeing the same play in performance: while reading you can feel shut out from understanding, not *hearing* the different voices or the varying force of the speeches, and not *seeing* the people and events that give rise to the spoken lines of text. *What Is Theatre?* sets out to explain why this is so and to show readers how to take into account all aspects of the work that goes into putting a play on the stage.

After studying with this book, readers should find that reading a play is a more complete experience, and seeing one is more rewarding. Besides being introduced to plays and dramatists, readers will also learn about actors, directors, designers, managers, and audiences, about the various kinds of theatre buildings, stages, and technical equipment from the past and the present day, and about the organizations that support some of the most thriving theatres. Students of theatre or drama need to know how all these people and facilities function and what they contribute to the well-being of theatre. With such knowledge it becomes possible to read a play and imagine it in performance, and to judge whether a production or an actor's performance is as good as it might be.

In our study of theatre, great plays from the past make repeated appearances—plays by Shakespeare, Molière, Chekhov, Ibsen, Shaw, O'Neill, the Greek tragedians, Samuel Beckett, and other master dramatists. If readers happen to be able to see any of these in performance, the opportunity should be taken, but this is not necessary. This book is designed to be equally useful and give the same insights

into the nature of theatre whatever plays its readers are able to see. The more plays seen onstage the better, because the focus of this book is directed wherever possible toward a direct experience of playgoing, but seeing only one or two should be sufficient. Any production, by a student, community, or professional company, can provide some solid ground on which to put thoughts and ideas to the test. With good fortune, some readers may see a very new play that has not yet won critical acclaim, one that is about lives very like their own or about ideas of immediate interest that were unknown to “classic” or established writers. The information and ideas in this book are applicable to all plays—the new and adventurous quite as much as the great and famous.

This is also a book about plays and theatres that its readers could not possibly have seen, because they do not exist at present. We look at what famous actors, dramatists, and directors have done in the past, but to be true to the nature of theatre, we also look at what is happening at the present time and what *may* happen in the future. One reason we need to be concerned with the here and now is that all theatre experience starts to die with the end of a performance. Critics can describe what they have seen and consult video recordings, and playgoers can remember certain moments in a play, but no one can remain in touch with the reality of a performance taking place before an audience: that experience is over once and for all at the end of the show. So although a book that introduces readers to theatre must look at past triumphs, it must also turn away from them and lead its readers to explore the theatre that they can see for themselves today, and to imagine new theatres not yet in existence.

The text falls into two halves. The first part is drawn from one person’s experience and ideas and, being as short and as clear as possible, gives a wide view of theatre and how it is created. The second half is quite different in that it brings together a number of specialists to speak for themselves. Here actors, dramatists, directors, and designers give individual accounts of what they do and how they do it: for example, a manager explains how his theatre is run, and a finance director supplies figures to show how much it all costs and how it is paid for. This part of the book gives a sense of the personal and very particular involvement that is common to all theatrical work. Because theatre is such a complicated art form, these accounts are often very detailed and not always easy to understand at first reading, but with a little patience, readers should be able to explore a wide range of the fascinating activities that go into making a theatre production. Illustrations throughout the book are intended to work in much the same way; with careful study, they will reveal some of the effects achieved in particular productions, insofar as still photographs can capture them.

Among the different voices and different kinds of evidence offered, readers are invited to make their own way and find material to feed their own particular interests. Whatever their areas of study, readers should find some treatment of their special interests, as well as suggestions for further lines of inquiry. Theatre is made by a collaboration between people with very different skills and understandings, and therefore many voices and various elements of theatre making have been brought together here.

At intervals, suggestions are made about how readers might investigate further for themselves, outside of class or workshop, and so gain firsthand knowledge of what is described in the text. These notes are usually placed at the end of a section,

but sometimes the text is interrupted to give readers an opportunity to experience the consequences of a point that has been made or to show alternative views. Often these paragraphs ask readers to visit a theatre, but they do not prescribe seeing any particular play and very seldom dictate what kind of play should be seen. Actual performance before an audience is the crucial experience to be explored, whether the actors are accomplished professionals or beginning students, whether the plays are serious or funny, innovative or very traditional. Obviously the better the production of its kind, the better will be the audience's experience and the more a student can benefit from it.

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I

What Is Theatre?

1



Plays on Offer: A selection of theatre programs.