

Peter Arnott

The  
Theater  
in Its  
Time



An Introduction

# **THE THEATER IN ITS TIME**

## ***An Introduction***

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*(continued on page 550)*

*The Theater in Its Time*



A fact is like a sack which won't stand up when it's empty.  
In order that it may stand up, one has to put into it  
the reason and sentiment which have caused it to exist.

*Luigi Pirandello*



# Preface

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The purpose of this book is to consider both the theory and practice of the theater, and to illuminate the more important principles that control its operation through a study of the theater's past. Of all the lively arts, the theater offers the clearest demonstration of the folly of attempting to separate past from present. Greek plays over two thousand years old exercise modern minds and provide star vehicles for twentieth-century actors. Molière's comedies have enjoyed a continuous performance history of three hundred years, and Shakespeare is the greatest box-office success on record. But the theater preserves ideas as well as examples. Contemporary controversy about what the stage should properly show, and the rights and responsibilities of the dramatist, merely reformulates arguments that were old in Plato's time. The censorship of Puritan London or feudal Japan brought the same charges against the theater that we are still hearing today. Though the language has changed, certain attitudes remain constant.

Thus the history of the theater offers a series of examples, drawn from a range of local situations, of phenomena that are still with us, and makes it easier for us to consider and evaluate them because they are at some remove from us and can be judged more objectively. In the chapters that follow I have

tried to stress the debt that the modern theater owes to a past off which it is continually feeding. In its cyclical history, the theater shows a pattern of constant rediscovery. Techniques discarded as outmoded in the fifteenth century are exhumed and hailed as innovations in our own. Actors, in their ceaseless re-examination of the basis of their art, talk to one another across the gap of many years.

As the emphasis is on how the theater's past feeds into, and to a large extent controls, the theater's present, this history is inevitably selective. Greater consideration has been given to those periods or works which have had a demonstrable effect on the developing pattern of the theater and its present manifestations, or which embody fundamental attitudes still evident today. Less attention has been paid to periods that are dramatic cul-de-sacs or have had little impact on the modern repertory. Thus, the classical theater of Japan has been discussed in some detail as one of the clearest examples of a particular conception of the art that has influenced many artists elsewhere, although the Japanese plays themselves have never been widely seen outside their own country. The theater of the Spanish Golden Age, by contrast, has been summarily (and, some are bound to feel, unfairly) treated, both because its plays have made little impact on the main body of drama and because its basic principles are illustrated in the more familiar products of its historical contemporary, the public playhouse of Elizabethan London.

The sheer mass of material makes further selection obligatory. Theater is an integrative art. It involves writers, singers, actors, dancers, composers, scene designers, costumers, makers of props and lighting technicians, administrators and business people, critics, censors, and audiences. A systematic study of any *one* of these groups would run into several volumes. My method, therefore, has been to illustrate the most significant characteristics of a given period by examples drawn selectively from all of them, as each seems appropriate, and to suggest the flavor of an age sometimes by the description of a building, sometimes by the synopsis of a play, now by an actor's or a playwright's life, now by a study of audience behavior. In the early chapters, which deal with periods and styles now remote from us, I have from time to time attempted to make the reconstruction more alive and meaningful through a description of a play in performance. Although these descriptions, for the sake of simplicity and vividness, are presented as fact, it must be emphasized that many details are hypothetical. We shall never know exactly what the medieval audience saw when the *Second Shepherds' Play* was given in the streets of Wakefield or the positioning of actors at the first performances of *Doctor Faustus*. The descriptions represent intelligent surmise based on available evidence.

It remains for me to record some special debts: to my editor Charles Christensen, who suggested that this book be written; to my daughter Catherine, who typed the greater part of the manuscript and whose criticism has improved it in many places; to my son Christopher, who undertook several portions of the research when my own time was lacking; to Patricia Sankus and Renata Sorkin, who assisted in the work's preparation; and to my colleague, Professor



Sylvan Barnet, whose comments have saved me from many errors. Above all, my thanks must go to the audiences throughout Great Britain and North America before whom, for the past thirty years, I have directed or acted in most of the plays used as examples in this book, and whose approval has encouraged me in the conviction that old plays can still speak with a modern tongue.

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*The Theater in Its Time*



# 1

## *The Study of Theater*

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### *What Is Theater?*

To anyone writing such a book as this, even as recently as fifty years ago, this question would have seemed to have an easy and obvious answer. It would have been taken for granted that theater involved a script — which had an independent literary existence, over and above the fact of its performance — designed to be given life, by actors, in a place specially built for, or at least adapted for, its presentation. Thus for the Western world the history of the theater was assumed to begin with the earliest known playscript, and this was thought to be a largely choral drama called *The Suppliant Women*, by the Greek playwright Aeschylus (525–456 B.C.). The scanty evidence for plays and theaters from before this time was of interest only to specialists. The script was the thing, and from Aeschylus the study proceeded methodically from text to text, with an emphasis on the plays as literature. Such things as acting, music, scene design, and audience reaction, when they were considered at all, were viewed as secondary considerations, providing the milieu in which the script could operate.

This literary emphasis (which to some extent is still with us) meant two