



Enjoy the Play!



Robert Cohen
Lorna Cohen

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Robert Cohen's *Theatre* or
Theatre: Brief Version



Enjoy the Play!

Robert Cohen

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, IRVINE

Lorna Cohen



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Prologue: Going to Theatre

First, we'd like to introduce ourselves. As a couple, we have been theatregoers for nearly thirty years, seeing more than five hundred plays in that time—on and off Broadway, in national and regional theatres around the world, and in colleges, universities, and community theatres throughout the United States and abroad. But as we have come to the theatre from different beginnings, let us briefly introduce ourselves in separate prefaces to this book.

By Lorna Cohen

My first experience in the theatre was as a child, seeing a touring production in Los Angeles of *Peter Pan*, starring Mary Martin. When Peter first took flight over the heads of the audience, my sister stood up in her seat and tried to go with him. I grabbed onto my sister's ankle, determined not to be left behind. We were both ready to leave this world and fly off to Neverland with Peter, Wendy, Michael, and John. Oh, and let's not forget Tinkerbelle, the fairy whom the audience "brings back to life" by clapping, to show that they believe in fairies.

Do adults really believe in fairies? Only in the theatre. Could I really fly to Neverland? Absolutely, but only in the theatre!

Since then I have been privileged to spend a considerable part of my past thirty years in a Neverland where not only do people fly but almost anything can and does happen. For the theatre is a place not only to "think lovely thoughts," as Peter suggests we do, but to meet the most lively characters (some of them long dead), to share in the intimacy of the most imaginative encounters the human spirit can conjure, and to take flight with our fellow travelers in the audience to unearthly realms of pure delight.

Theatre can also deliver hard lessons. It can make us see our own prejudices and smallness. It can challenge our most cherished beliefs. Our world can be blown up or enlarged by the theatre, which can confront us

with long-denied truths, touch our emotions in unexpected ways, and actually change our hearts over the course of two or three hours. All of these things have happened to me in the theatre—the only place to encounter and to witness with our peers the fully embodied dreams of theatre artists.

By Robert Cohen

I began going to theatre as a child, having grown up in Washington, D.C., which was a major theatre touring city in the 1940s and 1950s. The first professional production I saw was the national touring version of the great musical *Oklahoma!* in 1947. In 1948, when I was ten, I saw my first Broadway show, *Where's Charley?*, starring the amazing dancer Ray Bolger. Not long after that, I saw my first nonmusical play, *Mrs. McThing*, starring the legendary Helen Hayes. In the fifty years since, I have seen at least one play on Broadway—and more commonly ten or twenty—each and every year, plus ^{170 E prop}several hundred other plays in ⁸¹⁰campus and professional theatres here and abroad.

Though not a drama major in college (political science was my game then), I spent much of my time at my campus's Players Club, mostly building sets and stage-managing. Eventually I headed off to the Yale Drama School to study theatre more seriously. Today, in addition to directing, writing books and plays, and teaching drama, I continue to attend several plays a month, reviewing many of them for *Plays International* and other publications. No matter how many productions I see—and they must number over a thousand at this point—I still get a shiver of excitement when the lights come up, and a noticeable tear in my eye at the end of a great performance.

Enjoy the Play!

This guide is not carelessly titled. Going to the theatre is one of the most rewarding activities of daily life. Almost every night across America, and in most other countries as well, lights go up on theatre productions that can be numbered in the tens of thousands—plays of every variety that capture the imaginations of literally millions of people. Almost all of these theatre evenings (or afternoons in some cases) provide their spectators with enjoyable and thought-provoking *entertainment*—entertainment in both senses of that word: “amusement” and “attention holding” (from the French *entretenir*, or “holding together”). Many will provide visions, impressions, ideas, and memories that will stay with you for decades—or even a lifetime.

And, of course, playgoing is also a sublime *cultural* activity; people have been eagerly attending theatre, much as they do today, for more than 2,500 years. And while theatregoing can begin at a very young age, it is fundamentally an adult activity. Playgoing is one of the most mature (and maturing) of life's adventures—intellectual, sensual, and spiritual—of earthly civilization. ~~2011~~ ²⁰¹¹

But theatre is, finally, a wonderful *social* activity as well; one in which a large public gathers to enjoy a dramatic presentation *en masse*—to collectively wrestle with the play's implications, laugh at its jokes, sigh with its romance, and weep at its tragic and joyful dimensions. Theatre is something to see, hear, think about, and feel about while it's going on and—equally important—to talk about afterwards. Indeed, the lively buzz of conversation after a performance (as well as during an intermission) is one of the unique characteristics of fine drama worldwide; such conversations frequently spring up among persons who, at the start of the evening, were total strangers.

Theatre, therefore, is a great meeting place for genuinely inquiring minds—for people who enjoy a good laugh, a good cry, and a good battle of ideas. It is, at its best, comic and tragic, romantic and inspiring, thought-provoking and eye-popping. It is the legendary venue for a “night on the town” in most major cities around the world, and indeed the world's singles' ads in most cities rank “going to theatre” very high among the desired traits of a prospective partner—somewhere between liking candlelit dinners and travel abroad.

And theatre is inherently *human*. Unlike film or television, theatre places its audience in the physical presence of the actors who perform it. We see and hear them—but they see and hear us as well. It is perhaps because of this reciprocity—of tears, laughter, and applause shared between stage and house—that great stage performances remain in our memories long after the curtain has fallen. If a great dramatic performance seems larger than life, we know for certain it is due to the brilliance of the performer and not to photographic enlargement or cinematic trickery.

Going to the theatre, however, is not quite as simple as going to a movie or turning on a television set. It is often (but not always!) more expensive and usually requires some advance planning. First-timers might not always know how to get tickets, or how to dress, or even how to behave. While there is nothing remotely sanctimonious about theatregoing, the following pages should completely demystify what is a very public, very common, very easy, and very rewarding activity.



What to See?

When you decide to go to a “play,” you are really going to three different things: a play, a particular production of that play, and a particular performance of that production! For unlike movies, plays—particularly well-known classics—can be staged by dozens of different groups and in hundreds of different ways: Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, for example, might be a swashbuckling sixteenth-century version with Renaissance costumes at one theatre, while at another—as seen recently in New York—it might be mounted on a spare stage with four young men in modern dress. You might find either one wonderful—or terrible! A little research is therefore helpful in choosing what you want to see. How do you do it?

The easiest way to choose a good play to see is by reading the entertainment pages of your local or campus newspaper for theatre listings, advertisements, and reviews. Listings tell you what plays are being offered, ads tease you with a fuller description and maybe a picture, and reviews give you at least one critic’s reaction to the play and the production. Weekend editions of many metropolitan newspapers, and certain urban-oriented weekly publications like *The New Yorker* and *LA Weekly*, summarize theatre reviews of plays currently running in the area. If you’re traveling to New York or another major city, you can pick up advance copies of such publications at most newsstands around the country. You can also access both capsule listings and complete play reviews of currently running productions throughout the world on a wide variety of websites, some of which are listed in the appendix to this guide.

But hunting down listings and reviews is only part of deciding what to see. Word-of-mouth—talking with theatregoing friends and getting their recommendations—is probably more common, and probably better as well, because you know your friends’ tastes better than you do those of the

critics. If you take classes in drama, your instructors might recommend local plays of interest.

What should you look for? Surely you'll want to find a play where the subject interests you, but you should also look for theatre companies and producing groups that have good reputations for presenting the sort of theatre you'd like to see. This might vary, of course, by the occasion: you might at one time seek out a broadly amusing and splashy musical, and at another a brilliantly innovative avant-garde original play; you might also be attracted by a play that features an actor you admire (or, for that matter, have a crush on), or that is produced by a company promoting certain spiritual values you appreciate. Theatres known for high artistic standards should also be high on your list.

How Much Will It Cost?

Many people contemplating a first trip to the theatre worry that it will be too expensive, particularly when they hear that the best seats for popular Broadway productions now cost \$100 or so.

But you can see the vast majority of theatrical productions around the country for **as little as \$10 to \$15**, and sometimes far less than that. Indeed, some of the best theatre productions are **absolutely free**! And getting half-price tickets, or student discounts, or group rates, is much more common than you might expect, even for some of the best productions you could see anywhere. And although ticket prices are normally higher for live professional theatre than for movies, *most theatre tickets are considerably less expensive than tickets for professional rock concerts, sporting events, or theme parks.*

You should also be aware that—apart from Broadway—theatre ticket prices usually cover only a portion of the cost of what you will see. Most American theatres—including virtually all regional, community, and academic companies—are subsidized in significant measure by arts councils, private and government foundations, and individual donors. So in the theatre you almost always get more than you pay for!

Where/When/Who—Prices, Discounts, and Freebies

First, let's talk about going to theatre for **free**. Most college and university drama departments—particularly those with graduate programs in

directing—present low-budget or no-budget productions directed by their students, and sometimes by their faculty directors as well. Usually called “workshops” or “lab productions,” these shows may not be widely advertised, but they’re often open to a limited public audience; you can usually find out about them by looking on your local drama or theatre department bulletin board. Some of these shows, though amateur, are absolutely outstanding—they represent the theatre of the future. And free professional productions are also presented around the country, particularly during the summer—most notably at the New York Shakespeare Festival in Manhattan’s Central Park and at similar **festivals** in Washington, San Francisco, Los Angeles, and many other cities, large and small.

Other freebie possibilities: You might see if you can **serve as an usher** at your local theatre; generally you can get a free seat after the audience has been taken care of, and sometimes you can get paid for it as well. Or you might offer to write play reviews for your school or community newspaper; if the paper regularly publishes theatre reviews, you might be able to obtain free **press seats** from the theatre’s public relations department.

Not free, but still inexpensive, are the regular productions at university and community theatres, with general admission usually in the \$10—\$18 range, and with **student rates** ordinarily half of that or less, and rarely more than a movie ticket. Ticket prices at start-up professional theatres (classed as equity-waiver theatres in Los Angeles, off-off-Broadway theatres in New York, and small professional theatres in most other cities) are often in this general price range as well.

And even at full-fledged regional professional theatres, where ticket prices may rise to the \$25—\$45 range, you may often purchase lower-priced **preview tickets** before the show has formally opened, even cheaper **rush tickets** (which are available at the box office an hour or two before showtime), or **group rates** at significantly reduced prices. Many of these theatres also feature **pay what you can** performances occasionally. Check with the theatre’s box office or local newspaper listings for these special rates.

Only on Broadway do play tickets rise to the \$100 maximum, but even there you can find bargain seats for most shows. **Balcony** ticket prices are often considerably less than those in the orchestra or mezzanine and can be ordered and purchased in advance. Inexpensive **standing-room** tickets are also available for certain Broadway productions (usually musicals) when all the seats have been sold—you can get these, sometimes, on the morning of performance. Some shows (*Rent* is one) offer inexpensive

front-row seats on the day of performance—with the expectation that you will help lead a standing ovation at the curtain call.

And you can buy substantially **discounted** tickets for many Broadway shows on the day of performance (and for many off-Broadway ones as well) at the **TKTS** booth at Broadway and 47th Street. This booth—and there are equivalents in many other cities here and abroad—offers half-price seats to dozens of shows, and 25% reductions to many others. And while waiting in line at the TKTS booth, hawkers will be offering you discount coupons that can be exchanged for tickets to yet other shows.

Ordering and Buying Tickets

You can order theatre tickets many different ways:

At the box office, where you can buy in advance, choose your exact seat location from the complete selection of price ranges available, pay by cash or credit card as you choose, and be charged no commission. The box office is also the only place where you may have certain day-of-performance options, such as discounted rush seats, cheap standing room, and occasionally best-location (though full-price) **house seats** that are only put on sale an hour or two before performance.

At a discount booth, like TKTS, where you will get a discounted rate (usually 50% off), but, for the privilege, will be limited to buying a ticket for that same day and from a narrower range of seat locations. At TKTS and most such booths, you must also pay in cash or by traveler's check and must also pay a small commission.

By telephone or Internet, where the convenience of calling from home or accessing on the Web will only cost you a service charge (small when ordering directly from the theatre box office, and a bit larger if ordering from a commercial ticket service such as TicketMaster). Exact seat selection, however, may be unavailable, and you must pay by credit card. Tickets ordered by telephone or Internet will be mailed to you or held at the theatre box office (at **will-call**), in which instance you must bring your credit card for identification when you pick up your ticket.

By mail, where you will pay no service charge but will receive no instant confirmation of your order either.

At a commercial ticket agency: these store-front or hotel desk services, mainly in Manhattan and intended for business clients, can usually get you good seats to otherwise sold-out Broadway shows, but at very high prices. A last resort for most people: we, for example, have never used one.

Wherever you get your ticket, we suggest you write down your seat number and keep it separate from the ticket itself. If you then should lose your ticket before the performance, the house manager will probably be able to let you take your seat anyway—if you can cite the seat number. (It also helps to keep your receipt.)

Preparing to See a Play

Seeing a play should require no preparation at all—it's the job of the director and the other artists to make a play intelligible and meaningful to the audience. Still, you will undoubtedly enjoy the play more—particularly if it's a classic—if you know something of its background. Reading about the play's author, the period of its writing, the play's issues, characters, the historical period with which it deals, and the notable past productions by the director, principal actors, designers, and theatre company will provide you with a fuller context for appreciating what you see. Reading the first scene or two of the play in advance might also help you get “into the action” right at the start of the performance, particularly if it's a complex or highly stylized historical tragedy. But you probably don't want to study the play or its production details too much before seeing it—so as to preserve your own capacity for surprise during the performance itself.

ASIDE FROM ROBERT: I never read complete reviews of plays I'm about to see; only the first paragraph or so—enough to know if the reviewer recommends it or not. Then I save the review to read afterwards, in case I want to compare my reactions with those of the critic.

What to Wear

Theatregoing was a pretty fancy deal a generation ago; in a few places (the opera, for example, or opening-night galas at some performing arts centers) it still is. By and large, however, the theatre today is a fully democratized institution around the world, with casual adult dress now the norm from Broadway to community stages everywhere. That means, for men, a range from wash pants to dress pants with either a short- or long-sleeved dress shirt; sweaters, jackets, and ties are optional. For women, either dresses, skirts, or pants are fine; hats, unless they're close fitting, should be stashed under your seat, because they can block other people's view. Dressier outfits are of course OK (and you'll see more men with jackets and ties than without them at major metropolitan theatres), but nothing ultra-formal is ever expected. Above all, you should dress com-

fortably, as you will be sitting in a relatively small space for two or more hours. But comfortable attire doesn't mean beachwear: going to the theatre—any theatre—is, as we've tried to make clear, a one-time-only interaction with live theatre artists; it's an *event*, unlike flipping on the TV or popping into your local movie house. And since how you dress can enhance the event—for yourself and those around you—the theatre is not really the place for tank tops, gym shorts, or thong sandals.

But hey—*never* let your wardrobe, or lack thereof, keep you from seeing a play! Theatre is a public art. What you choose to wear is not as important as that you have chosen to come.

FASHION ASIDE FROM LORNA: A disaster! I once attended a performance in Germany that was nine hours long. The seating was on the floor, and I had worn a suit which had a long, fitted skirt. I would have been miserable if the play hadn't been so good. I just hiked my skirt up above my knees and made the best of it, but I should have worn loose pants or jeans and a T-shirt.

Choosing an outfit that goes with what I'm seeing adds to my theatregoing experience. When we go to a contemporary play in the Village, for example, I like to wear a leather jacket and jeans. To the opera, I like to wear a velvet suit. But I am not in the least offended to see people (often students) at the opera in jeans. I think it's just great that they're there. One of the great joys of theatregoing is to see the range of people who are drawn to it and the wide range of their personal styles, from pony-tailed and black-shirted producer types to young girls in pink chiffon party dresses. We once saw Katharine Hepburn in a Broadway theatre wearing jeans and Keds. We spotted Jackie Onassis in the same theatre in a smart cocktail suit. Both seemed entirely comfortable with their choice of dress.

At the Play

Be on Time

Theatre generally starts on time—often *exactly* on time, and rarely more than ten minutes after the scheduled hour. It's always a good idea to check your tickets—and double-check them—to make sure you know the curtain time (customarily 8:00 P.M. for evening performances, and either 2:00 P.M. or 3:00 P.M. for matinees) because if you arrive after the play has

started you may not be able to be seated until the first suitable break in the action—which might be halfway through the play! (The theatre does this not to punish you but to protect the flow of the production.) So plan to arrive at the theatre early, allowing time to find the theatre, to park, to buy or pick up your tickets at the box office if you don't already have them, to go to the restroom, and to be seated.

Cloakrooms

It's not a lot of fun sitting in a theatre for three hours with a heavy overcoat and shopping bags on your lap or crammed under your seat. If one is available, you might want to take advantage of the attended cloakroom in the theatre's lobby, for which there's normally a small charge. Some theatres have coin lockers for their patrons, and others have open coat racks (though we wouldn't recommend hanging anything you couldn't afford to lose on one of these.)

Ushers and Programs

On entering the house from the lobby, show your tickets to an usher, who will greet and seat you and offer you a program. Theatre programs are normally free, though you might also wish to purchase an additional souvenir program if—as in the case of many Broadway musicals and summer festivals—one is on sale in the lobby. The free theatre program will, at bare minimum, list the cast and others involved in the production and tell you if there are one or more intermissions; it will usually indicate the play's period and settings. More elaborate programs may also provide capsule biographies of the artists (playwright, actors, director, and designers), the director's notes on the production, background information on the play, and various other articles, advertisements, and features you might find interesting. The standard Broadway theatre program, enclosed in a theatre booklet called *Playbill*, will include a history of previous productions at that theatre—which helps to place the play you are about to see into the context of great artists of the past several decades.

Ushers in America are never tipped, but in Europe the tradition of tipping theatre ushers with some small change remains in effect—in movie theatres too—in several countries.

Behavior

The theatre is a place for uproarious laughter, tears, groans, sighs, applause, and even cheers—all indications that the audience is involved in

the play and responsive to it. Applause may come at many times during a play: as a tribute to a great stage set when the curtain rises or to a well-known star coming onstage for the first time, after a terrific scene or musical number, or even in approval of a brilliantly delivered speech whose content as well as execution delights the audience. Some of the most memorable moments in theatre are when actors literally “stop the show” or “bring down the house” by the sheer magnificence of key moments in their performances—and the spontaneous applause with which the audience gratefully responds. Exuberance is part of the theatre.

But it is never appropriate to talk to the person next to you—or anyone else in the audience—during a play. Even whispering during a performance is unacceptable, as it seriously disturbs the people around you and takes them out of the world of the play they are watching. Even if you think you are being discreet by whispering with your two heads together, the people behind you can’t see the stage. The theatre is a great place to socialize—but only at the appropriate times: before the play begins, at intermission, and afterwards. Never during.

Nor is the theatre—except for dinner theatres and some outdoor venues—a place to munch popcorn, drink soda, or open candy wrappers. Theatre is simply not the place to call attention to yourself. Turn off your cell phone and your hour-chiming watch, set aside your camera and your snack food, and, dear reader, enjoy the play!

Intermission

During most plays, you’ll receive a ten- to fifteen-minute intermission. In especially long plays, you may get two intermissions. This is the time to do what you need to do: to stretch your legs, take a break, get a drink, use the restroom, or talk about the production. Very often, even in good theatres, the refreshment bar and restroom lines form quickly and can get quite long. Plan ahead so you’re able to get to your seat when the lights flicker or the bell rings, alerting you that the play is about to resume.

Curtain Call

You might be tempted to race out of the theatre at the start of the curtain call to get a head start on the rest of the evening. We suggest you don’t. At the curtain call, when the actors come out to take their bows, the “fourth wall” that has separated the audience from the performers disappears, and the audience and actors come together to celebrate a shared experience. The resulting applause—from a brief, polite clapping of hands to a leaping,

cheering ovation that goes on for several minutes—is a release of energy that is always worthwhile and often thrilling.

Of course, applause is not compulsory; it must be earned. But virtually all plays provide at least some compelling moments or endearing performances; they and the actors performing them and now bowing humbly before you deserve some acknowledgment—or at least their release. (The bow was originally an offer of the actors' lowered heads to the royal ax—should the performance have proved inadequate.) And the standing ovations that greet extraordinary theatre experiences provide a thrilling release of energy—for the audience and the performers. One feels both exhausted and exhilarated on these rare and magnificent occasions.

So stay around for the curtain call—at least in America. Know, though, that in much of Europe the actors will return for further bows as long as the audience keeps applauding—this can go on for up to half an hour! You needn't drag them out again, unless you really want to.

Greenroom

Following the play, actors sometimes receive members of the audience after getting out of their costumes and makeup. Should you wish to congratulate actors on their performance, ask one of the ushers. If company policy allows it and the actors are willing, you may be directed to the theatre's "greenroom" (a theatre's reception area) or some other spot. Meeting with a recognized theatre star, however, normally requires some sort of prior acquaintance or letter of introduction that you can send backstage ahead of time. Understand that acting is exhausting and that after a show most actors simply wish to leave the theatre. Be respectful of their privacy.

To request autographs after a Broadway show, you might wait by the stage door. Many actors are happy to oblige, but recognize that it's entirely their choice whether to pick up your pen or slip away.

What to Look for When Watching a Play

A play should evoke hundreds of individual sensations, which all merge together in the final experience. If you want to talk or write about the play afterwards, however, try to focus your attention on specific details. You might even want to take notes during the intermission or during brief scenery changes. (We bring a little pocket notebook and pencil with us whenever going to theatre.)

What should you focus on at these moments? First, take note of any detail that catches your imagination or curiosity. Such details, perhaps seeming only superficial at first, might eventually help you to conceptualize the larger themes of the play or the production. You might be amused—or annoyed—at the oddity of certain costumes, the way the actors move around the stage or speak, or the speed (fast? slow? surrealistic?) with which certain lines and speeches are delivered. Perhaps you are struck by certain stage effects or, conversely, at the simplicity and economy of the staging. (During a play, we try to be observant of unexpected details; occasionally we take notes on them to see if we can reconcile them afterwards with our overall impression of the play.)

Second, try to grasp the fundamental story as it is unfolding, to assess the goals and tactics of the principal characters (and to predict where they will take them), and to isolate the principal issues involved and speculate on how they might be resolved or reconciled. This process is often aided by lobby conversation, particularly during intermission, both between acquaintances and with strangers. Intermission, however, is not the time to assess a play's or a production's quality—you don't yet know exactly where it's all going—but it is the time when, on rare occasions, you might sense the thrill of heading towards what might easily become a truly momentous, life-changing theatrical experience. (It's also the time, to be perfectly honest, when you might decide the play is so terrible that you should just sneak out of the theatre and go home. But such experiences, one hopes, are extremely rare!)

After the play is over (and not too long thereafter, or the experience will lose its freshness), try to come to terms with what impact the play had on you. Part of the “after-enjoyment” of theatre is separating out all of its various elements to see which have made their maximum contributions to the aggregate theatrical experience. Here are some questions you might consider:

About the play:

What is the play really about?

What characters did you root for? Which ones did you like? Which ones did you hate? Why?

Who, in your real life or in public life, do these characters resemble, if anyone? Did the play increase your understanding of (or compassion for or anger at) such people?