

THE THEATER EXPERIENCE

 EDWIN WILSON

SEVENTH EDITION



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EDWIN WILSON

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The Theater Experience

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Teacher, 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 Yale, Hofstra, Vanderbilt, Hunter College, and the CUNY Graduate Center. At Hunter he 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).

Edwin Wilson was the theater critic of *The Wall Street Journal* for 22 years. In addition to *The Theater Experience*, he is coauthor with Alvin Goldfarb of *Living Theater: A History* and *Theater: The Lively Art* also published by McGraw-Hill, and he was responsible for the volume *Shaw on Shakespeare*. He has served as president of the New York Drama Critics Circle and was four times on the Tony Nominating Committee, most recently in the 1996–1997 season. He is on the boards of the John Golden Fund, the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize, and the Theatre Development Fund, of which he was also president.

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.

TO MY WIFE, CATHERINE

PREFACE

This, the seventh edition of *The Theater Experience*, is more extensively revised than any previous edition. After consultations with a great many people in the field—teachers who have used *The Theater Experience* as well as other experts—major sections of the book have been revamped.

To begin with, significant new material has been added. The most important addition is the new Chapter 11, “Theater of Diversity.” In this chapter the many multicultural, multiethnic, and gender theaters that have come to the forefront in the past quarter-century are discussed in considerable detail. Other developments, such as performance art and postmodernism, are also dealt with.

Despite the addition of this new chapter, the overall book is no longer than previous editions. In order to accomplish this, material deemed unnecessary or redundant has been eliminated. The first two chapters on the audience, for example, have now been combined in a single chapter. The chapter on musical theater has been shortened and sharpened. A section in what was the final chapter which described the first production of *Death of a Salesman* has been eliminated.

Naturally, there has been considerable updating in some sections, not only of information but of ideas and concepts. Other sections have been completely rethought and rewritten. This is particularly

true of the two chapters on acting. The present sequence on acting is more logical than that in the sixth edition and contains much more up-to-date information on methodology and approaches. It should be not only more accurate, therefore, but more accessible to students.

Though the sequence of chapters in the seventh edition of *The Theater Experience* should prove satisfactory to the vast majority of users, it is important to remember that some teachers have adopted their own order of progression, taking chapters in a different sequence from the one in the book. I have discovered that this can be done easily and satisfactorily. If, therefore, a teacher prefers to use a different sequence, she or he should not hesitate to do so.

Features from previous editions which have met with widespread approval, and which have been retained in the current edition, include 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.

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, regional theater, and college and university theater. Ninety percent of the illustrations are new to this edition, and once again, they are closely tied to material in the text. As with other recent 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, a work by Ibsen, or a more modern piece. To aid students in appreciating, understanding, and reporting on plays, the publisher includes a free *Theatergoer's Guide* with each copy of the seventh edition of *The Theater Experience*.

In order to supplement the plays that students see and read as a part of the course, this edition, like the previous editions, includes a series of plot summaries, set apart from the text in boxes. In the seventh edition, two new plays have been included: *Fences* by August Wilson and *M. Butterfly* by David Henry Hwang. The other plays summarized include *Antigone*, *King Lear*, *Tartuffe*, *Ghosts*, *The Cherry Orchard*, *Death of a Salesman*, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, *Waiting for Godot*, *Mother Courage and Her children*, and *Fefu and Her Friends*; all the synopses are listed on page xiii. In addition to these synopses, *Anthology of Living Theater*, a companion volume of the full texts of carefully selected plays from the Greeks to the present is also available and will greatly aid in teaching the course.

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. 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.

In the past, most theater texts adopted either a historical or a genre approach to the subject. Historically oriented texts begin with the Greeks and generally devote half of the book to a chronological treatment of theater. 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, the Spanish golden age, Restoration drama, 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, where possible, these provide a key, or bridge, to the theater experience. For example, interior design 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 many of 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 former colleagues and students at Hunter, I express my deep appreciation.

Teachers who have used the book have contributed specific material which I have incorporated in the text. I particularly wish to thank Stuart

Baker, who was responsible for Appendix 2 and much of the material in Appendix 3; Mira Felner, who not only wrote the material on women and Greek and Elizabethan theater but also made a substantial contribution to the revisions of the chapters on acting; J. K. Curry, who has previously worked on the index and contributed the synopsis of *Fefu and Her Friends*; Scott Walters, who prepared the Instructor's Manual; Christopher Goumas, who provided invaluable assistance with the design chapters; and Alvin Goldfarb, whose advice in many areas, especially the chapter on diversity, was of inestimable assistance.

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

Through all seven editions of *The Theater Experience*, I have had the great good fortune to work closely with two exceptional people: Inge King, the enormously capable and discerning photograph editor; and Joan O'Connor, an immensely talented and imaginative designer. Also, through several editions I have had the invaluable help of an extraordinary copy editor: Susan Gamer. In addition, my editor at McGraw-Hill, Cynthia Ward, her assistant, Allison McNamara, and editing supervisor David Damstra have been a constant source of support and encouragement and have contributed an abundance of helpful ideas.

Edwin Wilson

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