



FOURTH EDITION



THEATRE

Brief Version



Robert Cohen

Fourth Edition

THEATRE

Brief Version

Robert Cohen

University of California, Irvine

SHAKESPEARE
FESTIVAL



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Preface

I am sitting in a darkened theatre correcting the galley sheets for the book you are about to read. A technical rehearsal for a play I am directing is in progress; I am seated at a make-shift desk in the back of the house, my reading illuminated by a tiny covered gooseneck lamp. On stage stand several actors, silent and motionless, as light plays over their faces and bodies. Above me, unseen and unheard, technicians operate, adjust, and record the settings for another of the play's hundred and fifty light cues. To the outside observer, it is the dulllest situation imaginable; nothing observable happens for twenty or thirty minutes at a stretch. A pool of light intensifies and then recedes, muffled conversation crackles over headsets, footsteps clang on steel catwalks lacing the ceiling, and a spotlight is carefully repositioned. This has been going on now since eight in the morning, and it is already past dinnertime.

And yet my eye is continually pulled from these pages to the dance of light upon the stage. The violet and amber hues are rich with color, and the sharp shafts of incandescence dazzle with brilliance. I am fascinated by the patient weariness of the actors, alternately glowing in and then shadowed by the lights, endlessly holding the positions that, in performance, they will occupy for only a few transi-

tory seconds. I gaze with admiration at the followspot operator, his hands gloved, as he handles his instrument with the precision and sensitivity of a surgeon.

The silence, the stasis, is hypnotic. All is quiet but profound with held-back beats, incipient torrents of passion and exhilaration. The potential is riveting—I am alive with excitement—and I look back to these cold galley sheets with alarm.

How can I have thought to express the thrill of the theatre in these pages? How can I have hoped to make recognizable the joy and awe I feel in theatrical involvement?

The theatre is not merely a collection of crafts, a branch of literature, a collaboration of technique, or even an all-encompassing art form. It is a life. It is people. It is people making art out of themselves. Its full reality transcends by light years anything that could be said or written about it.

What I have tried to do in these pages is not so much to introduce the theatre or to survey it as to *present* the theatre with its liveliness and humanness intact, with its incipient passion and exhilaration always present, with its potential for joy, awe, wisdom, and excitement as clear to the reader as they have been made clear to me.

FEATURES

This is a brief version of a larger book that is being published simultaneously. The larger volume includes five chapters on theatrical history that do not appear here and three chapters (instead of two) on the modern theatre. The goal of this brief version is to provide students surveying the theatrical arts and collaborative theatrical crafts—but not dramatic history—with a comprehensive text in the dramatic arts as they exist today.

To enhance the reader's understanding of drama, I have included more than 175 photos gathered during my recent surveys of stage productions in North America and abroad. Extended captions help readers better appreciate these images of theatre worldwide and make stronger connections to the text examples. Quotes from prominent theatre professionals such as Peter Brook, Edith Head, Tennessee Williams, August Wilson, and others are included in boxed insets throughout the text as another means of bringing the theatre to life.

The text offers a number of pedagogical aids to help students get the most out of a written introduction to a highly visual and aural medium. Terms commonly used in theatre and theatre history are defined in the glossary at the back of the book, and further sources of information for the curious can be found in the selected bibliography. To help students enjoy performances to the fullest, I've included an appendix that offers advice on observing and writing critically about plays.

No study of the theatre can be truly comprehensive without seeing and reading plays. It is my hope that regular playgoing and play-reading, supported by the discussions in these pages (and, if you choose, in the companion anthologies *Eight Plays for Theatre* and *Twelve Plays for Theatre*), will provide a foundation for the reader to develop an informed and critical enthusiasm for the art of drama, to which goal this book is dedicated.

A Test Bank, written by Marilyn Moriarty, includes 50 multiple choice questions and

several short answer or essay questions per chapter. A computerized version of the test bank is available to qualified adopters.

WHAT'S NEW?

Most prominently, this edition includes a section on the theatre of Asia, with a special focus on Japan and the Kabuki theatre. I hope this material will provide not only a basic introduction to one of Asia's major dramatic forms, but also a representation of the brilliance and variety of Eastern theatrical creativity and its parallels and contrasts with Western drama.

Chapter 8, "Theatre Today," has been thoroughly updated, with new coverage of American dramatists Terrence McNally and Tony Kushner and expanded coverage of the American musical, including color photos of major new productions such as *Passion* and *Sunset Boulevard* and important revivals such as *Carousel* and *A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum*.

As part of the updating throughout, I've included more than 60 new color photographs of significant theatre developments in Europe, Asia, and North America. Chapter 5 now includes a boxed insert on computer uses in theatre design, and Chapter 9 offers a box with two contemporary reviews of a modern play (*The Sisters Rosensweig*) to illustrate differing modes of current dramatic criticism.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Let me again express my gratitude to the generous and wise scholars and theatre artists who provided me with advice and suggestions on the first three editions of this book, and to the very gracious and perceptive reviewers of the fourth edition manuscript who have helped me shape this text: Jim Billings, New Mexico State University; Tom Bliese, Man-

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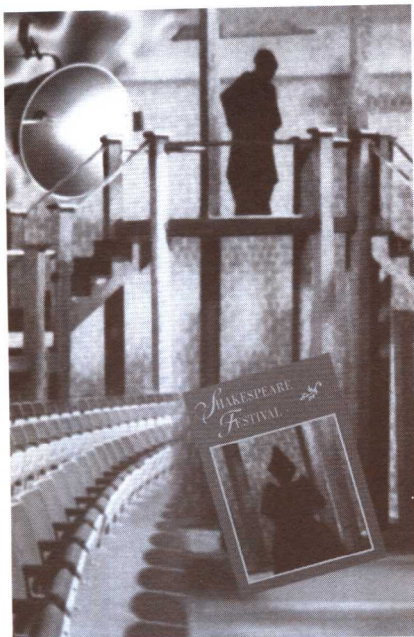
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Introduction

It is evening in Manhattan. On Broadway and the streets that cross it—44th, 45th, 46th, 47th, 50th, 52nd—marquees light up, “Performance Tonight” signs materialize in front of double doors, and beneath a few box-office windows placards announce “This Performance Completely Sold Out.” At Grand Central Station to the east and Pennsylvania Station to the south, trains disgorge suburbanites from Greenwich, Larchmont, and Trenton, students from New Haven and Philadelphia, daytrippers from Boston and Washington. Up from the Seventh and Eighth Avenue subway stations of Times Square troop denizens of the island city and the neighboring boroughs. At the Times Square “TKTS” Booth, hundreds line up in the deepening chill to buy the half-price tickets that go on sale a few hours before curtain time for undersold shows. Now, converging on these few midtown blocks of America’s largest city, come limousines, restaurant buses, private cars, and taxis, whose drivers search for a curbside slot to deposit their riders among the thousands of pedestrians who already throng the streets. Financiers and dowagers, bearded intellectuals, bedraggled bohemians, sleek executives, hip Harlemites, arm-in-arm widows, conventioners, tourists, honeymooners, out-of-work actors, celebrities, the precocious young—all commingle in this bizarre aggre-

gation that is the Broadway audience. It is as bright, bold, and varied a crowd as is likely to assemble at any one place in America.

It is eight o'clock. In thirty or forty theatres houselights dim, curtains rise, spotlights pick out performers whose lives center on this moment. Here a new musical, here a star-studded revival of an American classic, here a contemporary English comedy from London's West End, here a new play fresh from its electrifying Seattle premiere, here a one-woman show, here an off-Broadway hit moving to larger quarters, here a new avant-garde dance-drama, here a touring production from Eastern Europe, and here the new play everyone expects will capture this year's coveted Pulitzer Prize. The hours pass.

Eleven o'clock. Pandemonium. All the double doors open as at a signal, and once again the thousands pour out into the night. At nearby restaurants, waiters stand by to receive the after-theatre onslaught. In Sardi's private upstairs room, an opening-night cast party gets under way; downstairs, the patrons rehash the evening's entertainment and sneak covert glances at the celebrities around them and at the actors heading for the upstairs sanctuary to await the reviews that will determine whether they will be employed next week or back on the street.

Now turn back the clock.

It is dawn in Athens, the thirteenth day of the month of Elaphebolion in the year 458 B.C. From thousands of low mud-bricked homes in the city, from the central agora, from temples and agricultural outposts, streams of Athenians and visitors converge upon the south slope of the Acropolis. Bundled against the early damp, carrying with them breakfast figs and flagons of wine, they pay their tokens at the entrance to the great Theatre of Dionysus and take their places in the seating spaces allotted them. Each tribe occupies a separate area. They gather for the Festival of the Great Dionysia, celebrating the greening of the land, the rebirth of vegetation, and

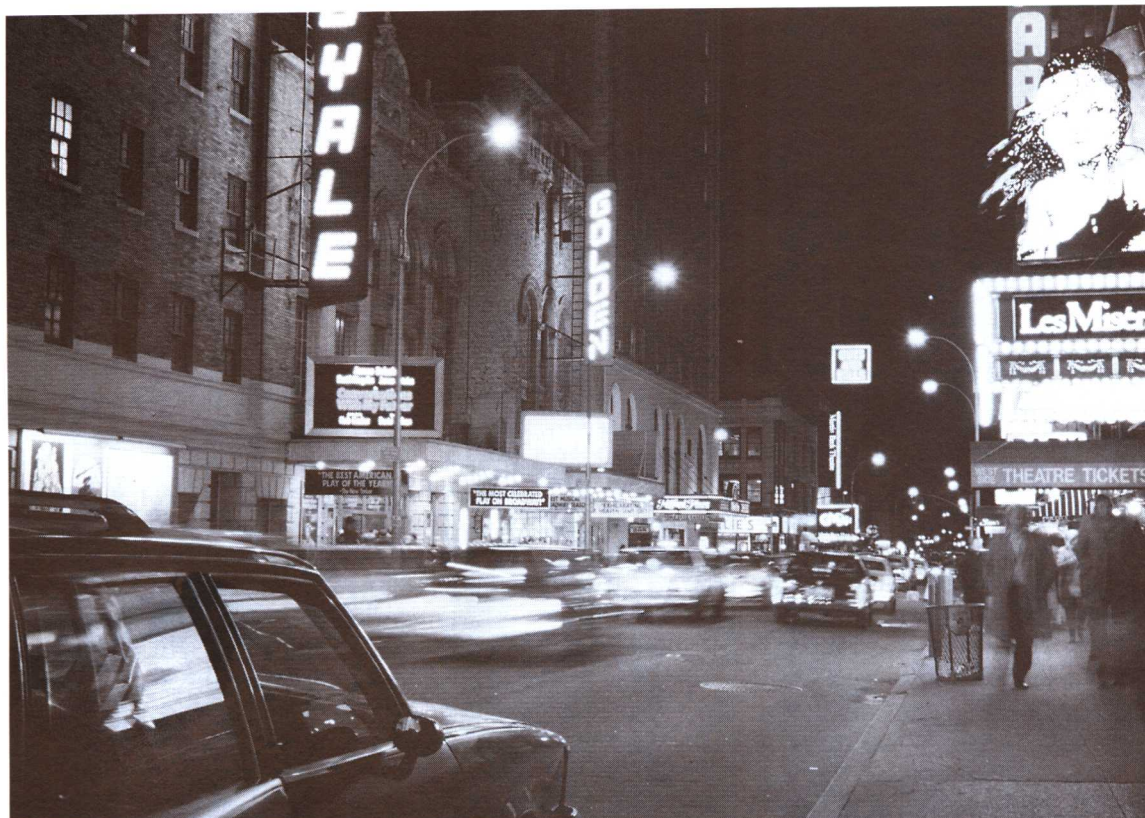
the long sunny days that stretch ahead. It is a time for revelry, a time for rejoicing at fertility and its fruits. And it is above all a time for the ultimate form of Dionysian worship: the theatre.

The open stone seats carved into the hillside fill up quickly. The crowd of 17,000 people here today comprises not only the majority of Athenian citizens, but thousands of noncitizens as well: women, slaves, tradesmen, foreign visitors, and resident aliens. Even the paupers are in attendance, thanks to the two obols meted out to each of them from a state fund so that they can purchase entry; they sit with the foreigners and latecomers on the extremities of the *theatron*, as this first of theatres is called.

Now as the eastern sky grows pale, a masked and costumed actor appears atop a squat building set in full view of every spectator. A hush falls over the crowd, and the actor, his voice magnified by the wooden mask from which it emanates, booms out this text:

I ask the gods some respite from the
weariness
of this watchtime measured by years I lie
awake . . .

And the entranced crowd settles in, secure in the knowledge that today they are in good hands. Today they will hear and see a new version of a familiar story—the story of Agamemnon's homecoming and his murder, the revenge of that murder by his son Orestes, and the final disposition of justice in the case of Orestes' act—as told in the three tragedies that constitute *The Oresteia*. This magnificent trilogy is by Aeschylus, Athens' leading dramatist for more than forty years. The spectators watch closely, admiring but critical. Tomorrow they or their representatives will have to decide by vote whether the festival prize should go to this group of plays or to one of those shown yesterday, whether Aeschylus still reigns supreme or the young Sophocles has better sensed the true pulse of the time.



The Broadway theatre district. About three dozen theatres line the streets of a mere ten blocks in midtown Manhattan; four of them—the Royale, the Golden, the Imperial (Les Misérables), and the Martin Beck (Guys and Dolls)—are shown here in a single half-block of 45th Street. Broadway was largely developed at the turn of the century as theatres replaced aging apartment buildings in what was originally a quiet residential district known as Longacre Square. The theatres—mostly designed by one man, Herbert J. Krapp—are relatively intimate (most seat a maximum of 1,000) and are closely situated, making for a bustling concentration of theatres unknown in most other cities.

Even forty years later the comic playwright Aristophanes will be arguing the merits and demerits of this day's work.

It is noon in London, and the first Queen Elizabeth sits on the throne. Flags fly boldly atop three of the taller buildings in Bankside, across the Thames, announcing performance day at The Globe, The Rose, and The Swan. Boatmen have already begun ferrying theatre-

bound Londoners across the river. Meanwhile, north of town, other flocks of Londoners are headed by foot and by carriage up to Finsbury Fields and the theatres of Shoreditch: The Fortune and The Curtain. Public theatres have been banned in the city for some time now by action of the Lords Aldermen; however, an ensemble of trained schoolboys is rehearsing for a private candlelight performance before the Queen.

Now, as the morning sermon concludes at St. Paul's Cathedral, the traffic across the river increases; London Bridge fills with pedestrians hurrying to Bankside, where The Globe players will present a new tragedy by Shakespeare (something called *Hamlet*, supposedly after an old play by Thomas Kyd), and The Rose promises a revival of the late Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*. The noisy crowds swarm into the theatres, where the price of admission is a penny; another penny is needed for a pint of beer, and those who wish to go upstairs and take a seat on one of the benches in the gallery—the best place to see the action, both on stage and off—must plunk down yet more pennies.

At The Globe, 2,000 spectators are on hand for the premiere. A trumpet sounds, sounds again, and then builds into a full fanfare. The members of the audience exchange a few last winks with friends old and new, covert and overt invitations to postperformance intimacies of various kinds, and then turn their attention to the pillared, trestled, naked stage. Through one giant door Bernardo bursts forth. "Who's there?" he cries. Then through another door, a voice: "Nay, answer me: stand and unfold yourself," and Francisco enters with lighted lantern in hand. In 2,000 imaginations, the bright afternoon turns to midnight, the Bankside gives way to the outskirts of Elsinore. A shiver from the actors on stage sets up an answering chill among the audience as Francisco proclaims, "'Tis bitter cold, and I am sick at heart.'" The audience strains forward. The tragedy has begun.

It is evening at Versailles, 1664. King Louis XIV nods graciously as the celebrated actor-playwright bows before him. Jean-Baptiste Poquelin, known throughout France as Molière, has just presented his *Tartuffe*, with its scathingly witty denunciation of the powerful Church extremists. The courtiers, taking Louis's nod, applaud vigorously; in one corner of the glittering hall, however, a bishop

glares coldly at the actor. The Archbishop of Paris will hear of this.

It is 5 A.M. in Moscow, 1898. At a café in the shadow of the Kremlin wall, Konstantin Stanislavski and Vladimir Nemirovich-Danchenko hotly discuss the wretched state of the current Russian theatre. It is too declamatory, they agree; it is also too insensitive, too shallow, too inartistic. Out of this all-night session the Moscow Art Theatre will be formed, bringing to the last days of czarist society the complex, gently ironic masterpieces of Chekhov and an acting style so natural as to astonish the world.

It is midnight in a coffeehouse in the East Village, or on the Left Bank, or in the campus rehearsal room. Across one end of the room, a curtain has been drawn across a pole suspended by wires. It has been a long evening, but a play yet remains to be seen. The author is unknown, but rumor says that this new work is brutal, shocking, poetic, strange. The audience, by turns skeptics and enthusiasts, look for the tenth time at their programs. The lights dim. Performers, backed by crudely painted packing crates, begin to act.

There is a common denominator in all of these scenes: they are all theatre.

Theatre is the most natural of the arts. There is no culture that has not had a theatre in some form, for theatre is the art of people acting out—and giving witness to—their most pressing, most illuminating, and most inspiring concerns. Theatre is at once a showcase and a forum, a medium through which a society's ideas, fashions, moralities, and entertainments can be displayed and its conflicts, dilemmas, and struggles can be debated. Theatre has provided a stage for political revolution, for social propaganda, for civil debate, for artistic expression, for religious conversions, for mass education, and even for its own self-criticism. It has been a performance ground for witch doctors and priests, intel-

lectuals, poets, painters, technologists, militarists, philosophers, reformers, evangelists, prime ministers, jugglers, peasants, children, and kings. It has taken place in caves, in fields and forests, in circus tents, in inns and in castles, on street corners, and in public buildings grand and squalid all over the world. And it goes on incessantly in the minds of its authors, its actors, its producers, its designers, and its audiences.

For theatre is, above all, a *living* art form—a *process*, an *event* that is fluid in time, feeling, and experience. It is not simply a matter of “plays,” but also of “playing”; and a play is composed not simply of “acts,” but also of “acting.” As “play” and “act” are both noun and verb, so theatre is both a “thing” and a “happening.” It is continually forming, continually present in time. In fact, that very quality of “presentness” (or, in the actor’s term, “stage presence”) defines great theatrical performance.

Theatre, unlike the more static arts, presents a number of classic paradoxes:

It is unique to the moment, yet it is repeatable.

It is spontaneous, yet it is rehearsed.

It is participatory, yet it is presented.

It is real, yet it is simulated.

It is understandable, yet it is obscure.

The actors are themselves, yet they are characters.

The audience believes, yet it does not believe.

The audience is involved, yet it remains apart.

These paradoxes stem not from any flaw or weakness in the logic of theatrical construction, but from the theatre’s essential strength, which resides in its kinship and concern with the ambiguity and irony of human life—our life. It is *we* who are at the same time unique yet conventional, spontaneous yet premeditating, involved yet isolated, candid yet contriving, comprehensible yet fundamentally unknown and unknowable. Theorists of dramatic literature and of dramatic practice often ignore these paradoxes in their attempts to “explain” a play or the art of the stage; in this they do a grave disservice to art as well as to scholarship, for to “explain” the theatre without reference to its ambiguities is to remove its dynamic tension—in other words, to kill it. And although much valuable information can certainly be discovered at an autopsy table, it is information pertinent only to the appearance and behavior of a corpse.

In this book we shall not be overly concerned with corpses. Our task will be the harder one—to discover the theatre in being, *alive* and with all its paradoxes and ambiguities intact. From time to time it will be necessary for us to make some separations—between product and process, for example—but we must bear in mind at all times that these separations are conveniences, not representations or fact. In the end we shall be looking at the theatre as part of the human environment and at the ways in which we fit into that environment—as participants and observers, artists and art critics, role models and role players, actors and persons. So this book about the theatre is also about ourselves.

