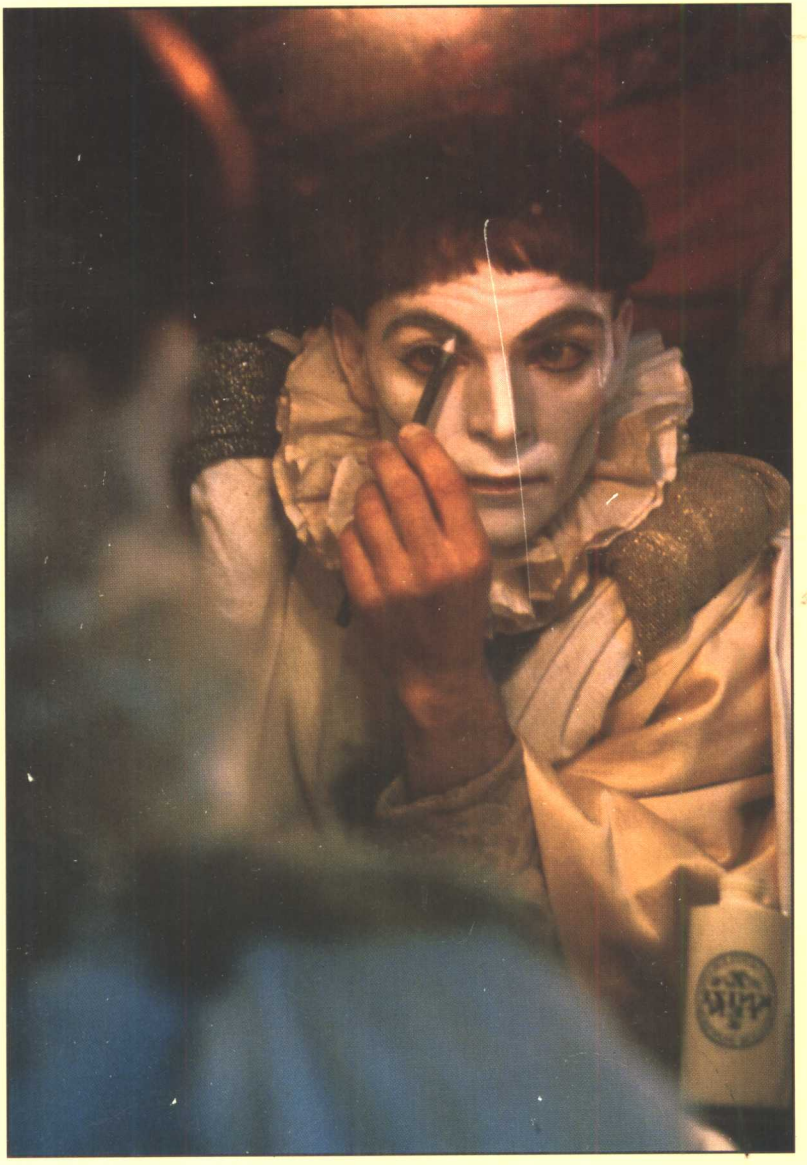
THEATRE

A Way of Seeing

SECOND EDITION



MILLY S. BARRANGER

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SECOND EDITION

MILLY S. BARRANGER
University of North Carolina
Chapel Hill

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To PETER and BETTY DUQUESNE

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PREFACE

Theatre *as a way of seeing* is the subject of this book. We will talk about the nature of the theatre experience—who sees, what is seen, where, and how it is seen—largely from our own viewpoint as audiences engaged in the direct experience of a complex art. We will also try to place ourselves in the creative process of those artists engaged in creating the theatre event. Many persons—writers, directors, actors, designers, technicians, producers, managers—contribute to what is truly a collective art. It is important that we, as viewers, have an understanding of their perspectives, tools, and working methods.

I have organized the book to discuss theatre as an experience of art and life: spaces, people, plays, language, stories, trends, designs, sounds, forms, and productions. For this purpose, the book is divided into twelve chapters. Nine deal with theatre aesthetics, theatrical spaces, theatre artists, dramatic forms, structures, and conventions. Two chapters discuss playreading and theatre language, and the last examines theatre criticism and the theatre review—its form and influence on our experience of theatre. In addition, there are diagrams, models, quotations, sections from texts of plays, and photo essays illustrating theatre's variety, color, stages, and styles. If instructors want to change the order of the chapters, they will find that they can readily do so.

Written for the basic course, this book *introduces* students to theatre as a way of seeing men and women in action: what they do and why they do it. After all, Shakespeare said that "All the world's a stage,/And all the men and women merely players . . ." (*As You Like It*). Since many students are probably discovering theatre for the first time and perhaps even attending their first performances, I have limited to *fourteen* the number of plays used as major examples of trends, styles, and forms from the Greeks to the moderns: *Oedipus The King, The Trojan Women, The Crucifixion Play (Wakefield), Hamlet, Macbeth, Tartuffe, The Beaux' Stratagem, Ghosts, The Three Sisters, The Caucasian Chalk Circle, The Bald Soprano, A Streetcar Named Desire, Look Back in Anger,* and *Buried Child.* In addition, the complete text of Samuel Beckett's *Rockaby*, along with extensive excerpts from *The Cherry Orchard, Marat/Sade, Interview,* and *Buried Child* are included in an effort to keep the book (and its material) self-contained, at least for use in the classroom.

In this new, revised edition of *Theatre: A Way of Seeing* the reader will also find, in addition to the complete text of *Rockaby*, new sections

discussing Japanese Noh and Kabuki performance; the Théâtre du Soleil as the most distinguished European environmental theatre group at work today (they were part of the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics Arts Festival); the new stage technology, especially sound and computers; new photo essays on women playwrights, Sam Shepard, great actors, Mabou Mines, *Nicholas Nickleby*, and the original reviews of *A Streetcar Named Desire* and *Look Back in Anger* by premiere critics Brooks Atkinson and Kenneth Tynan.

I have also provided tools to help students with questions of history, biography, definition, and example. Included are play synopses; short biographies of playwrights, actors, directors, designers, and critics; study questions; suggested plays to read related to each chapter; other suggested readings; lists of films and videotapes providing "recorded" performances of some of the representative plays and featuring such distinguished actors as Laurence Olivier, Vivien Leigh, Marlon Brando, Alan Bates, Billie Whitelaw, Orson Welles, and many others. These recommended films represent work by such directors as Elia Kazan, Peter Brook, Laurence Olivier, Tony Richardson, and Alan Schneider. A glossary of theatre terms, as well as projects that require special work outside the classroom and attendance at performances, are included in the book's appendixes. All terms that appear in boldface in the text are defined in the glossary. Wherever possible, terms are briefly defined within the text itself, but the glossary gives more extensive explanations.

Finally, this book is in no way a definitive treatment of theatre practice, history, or literature, but an attempt to put students in touch with theatre as a performing art and humanistic event. Most important, it introduces students to theatre as an *immediate* experience, engaging actors and audiences for a brief time in a special place. The Greeks called that special place where audiences sat to watch performances a *theatron*, or "seeing place." Let us make theatre as a way of seeing our guide to understanding and enjoying the theatre experience.

My thanks are due to colleagues and students for their encouragement and assistance in the preparation of this book. Those who advised on the manuscript at various stages were: Arthur Housman, Roberta Owen, Linwood Taylor from the University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill; Manager Robert W. Tolan; Professors Susan Cole, Appalachian State University; David Cook, University of Tulsa; Donald A.

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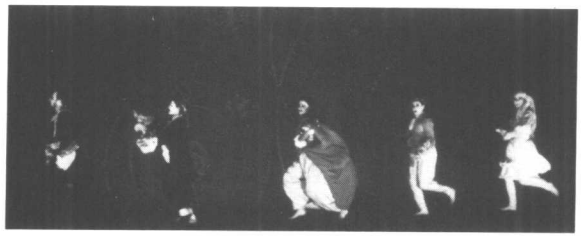
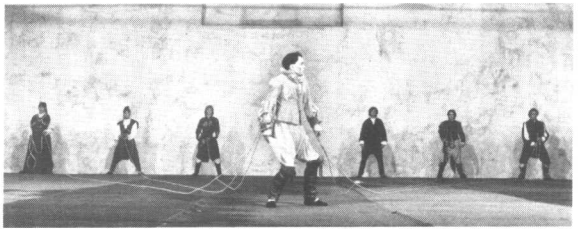
CONTENTS



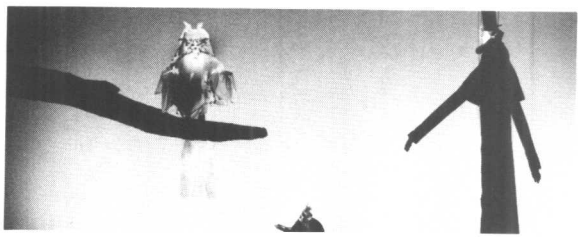


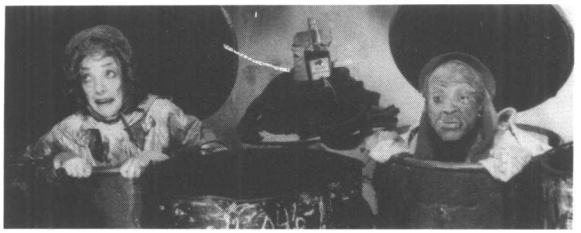
Chapter Three

THE SEEING PLACE: NONTRADITIONAL SPACES 68

Chapter Four

THE IMAGE MAKERS: PLAYWRIGHT AND DIRECTOR 88





Chapter Nine

Chapter Ten

Chapter One

DISCOVERING THEATRE

While we are watching, men and women make theatre happen before us. In the theatre we see human beings in action—what they do and why they do it—and we discover our world's special qualities by seeing them through others' eyes.

I can take any empty space and call it a bare stage. A man walks across this empty space whilst someone else is watching him, and this is all that is needed for an act of theatre to be engaged.
Peter Brook, *The Empty Space*[1]

Theatre—like dance, music, opera, and film—places human experiences before a group of people—an audience. In this first chapter, we want to ask what makes theatre different from other arts. What makes theatre unique? What is theatre as a way of seeing?

THE IMMEDIATE ART

Unlike a painting or a novel, prepared long before we see it, theatre takes place as we watch. For theatre to happen, two groups of people, actors and audience, must come together at a certain time and in a certain place. There the actors present themselves to the audience in a story that is usually about human beings. The audience shares in the story and the occasion.

There is a living quality about theatre because it centers on these two groups of people. Painting and sculpture, which are not usually performed before an audience, do not share this quality. Dance, music, and opera share with theatre the human being as performer, but they do not share theatre's special way of imitating reality. Unlike other arts, theatre presents actual human beings playing characters who move, speak, and "live" before us in recognizable places and events; for a short time we share an experience with them that is entertaining, provocative, imitative, and magical.

THE SPECIAL PLACE

At the heart of the theatre experience is the act of seeing and being seen. We are told that the word *theatre* comes from the Greek word *theatron*, "seeing place." At one time or another during the history of Western culture, this place for seeing has been a primitive dancing circle, a Greek amphitheatre, a church, an Elizabethan platform stage, an arena, a garage, a street, and a **proscenium theatre** (see Glossary). Today, it may be a Broadway theatre, a university playhouse, or a renovated church or warehouse. But neither the stage's shape nor the building's architecture makes it a theatre. The use of space to imitate human experience for an audience to see makes that space special—a seeing place.

THE GRAND ILLUSION

Theatre creates the *illusion* that we are sharing an experience with others for the first time. As members of the audience we tacitly agree with the actors that for the time of the performance, the play is a living reality; we know that theatre is not life, but we suspend this knowledge for the few hours we watch the play. We share with the actors the illusion that life is being lived on stage. We are watching and sharing the experiences of others. The actors contribute to the illusion, for they are both actors and characters. We are simultaneously aware that Oedipus, the central character in Sophocles' *Oedipus the King*, is a character and that he is played by an actor. Theatre's grand illusion is that life is taking shape before us for the first time, and that the actors are other than who they are. In the theatre we *suspend our disbelief* and give way to theatre's magic and illusion.

THESPIS

Virtually nothing is known about Thespis, the Greek actor credited with the invention of drama, other than that he won a theatrical contest sometime around 534 B.C. However, legend has it that, as a chorus leader, Thespis added to the choral narrative a prologue and lines to be spoken by an actor impersonating a character. One theory maintains that tragedy as we know it evolved from this dialogue between actor and chorus. Interestingly enough, the Greek word for actor is *hypokrites*, meaning "answerer."

AUDIENCE AND ACTOR

The two basic components of theatre are the actor and the audience; the history of theatre has been, in one sense, the record of the changing physical relationships of actor and audience. The audience has moved from the hillside of the Greek amphitheatre to a place before the Christian altar, to standing room around the Elizabethan theatre's platform stage, to seats in a darkened hall before a curtained proscenium stage, to the floor and scaffolding of a modern environmental production.

In the same historical sequence, the actor has moved from the dancing circle of the Greek theatre to the church, to the open stage of the Elizabethan theatre, to the recessed stage of the proscenium theatre, to the environmental space of some contemporary productions. The effect of historical trends and social institutions on theatre are important but not crucial to this discussion of theatre as a way of seeing. What is crucial is an understanding of the common denominators, unchanged since the legendary Thespis stepped apart from the Greek chorus and created dialogue for the listener. These common factors are *actor, space,* and *audience.*

OEDIPUS THE KING

One of several Greek playwrights whose work survives today, Sophocles wrote three plays about Oedipus. *Oedipus the King* (427 B.C.) is generally considered the greatest of Greek tragedies. (*Antigone* and *Oedipus at Colonus* are the other two.)

Oedipus the King tells the story of a man who flees from Corinth to avoid fulfilling a prophecy that he will kill his father and marry his mother. On his journey he kills an old man (an apparent stranger but actually his real father, the king of Thebes) at a place where three roads meet. He then proceeds to Thebes and solves the riddle of the Sphinx. As a reward, he is made king and married to the widowed queen, who is actually his mother, Jocasta. He rules well and has four children.

The play opens with Thebes stricken by a plague. Declaring that he will rid the city of the infection, Oedipus has sent his brother-in-law Creon to consult the Delphic oracle about the cause of the plague. As he pursues the plague's source, Oedipus comes face to face with himself as his father's killer, as his mother's son and husband, and as his children's father and brother. When the truth is learned, he puts out his eyes and Jocasta kills herself. By his own decree, Oedipus is exiled from Thebes and wanders blind into the countryside.

Oedipus the King explores human guilt and innocence, knowledge and ignorance, power and helplessness. Its fundamental idea is that wisdom comes to us only through suffering.