

THE ESSENTIAL THEATRE

FOURTH EDITION



OSCAR G. BROCKETT

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- Chapter 1:** *The Mystery Plays*, directed by Mary B. Robinson, John Rensenhouse as Adam; Angela Bassett as Eve; Christopher McCann as God. (Courtesy Hartford Stage Company.)
- Chapter 2:** Arthur Miller's *Death of a Salesman* (1984) starring Dustin Hoffman, Kate Reid, and John Malkovitch. Directed by Michael Rudman. (Photo by Inge Morath/Magnum.)
- Chapter 3:** Beth Henley's *Crimes of the Heart*. Priscilla Hake Lauris as Lenny; Kamella Tate as Babe; Joan Stuart-Morris as Meg. Directed by James Moll. (Photo by Hank Krantzler. Courtesy Oregon Shakespearean Festival.)
- Chapter 4:** *Oedipus the King* at the State Theatre, Darmstadt (West Germany). Design by Franz Mertz. (Courtesy German Information Center.)
- Chapter 5:** A booth stage such as might have been used by traveling players during the Middle Ages. Redrawing of an illustration in a fifteenth-century manuscript. (*L'Ancienne France: Le Théâtre . . . 1887.*)
- Chapter 6:** Final scene of Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well* at the Oregon Shakespearean Festival, 1985. Directed by Tony Amendola; costumes by Merrily Murray-Walsh; setting by William Bloodgood; lighting by James Sale. (Photo by Hank Krantzler. Courtesy Oregon Shakespearean Festival.)
- Chapter 7:** Dion Boucicault's melodrama, *The Octoroon*, 1859.
- Chapter 8:** Ibsen's *The Wild Duck* as performed at the Théâtre Libre, Paris, 1889. Directed by André Antoine.
- Chapter 9:** Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*. Directed by the author at the Schiller Theater Workshop, West Berlin. (Courtesy German Information Center.)
- Chapter 10:** Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as directed by Liviu Ciulei at the Guthrie Theatre, Minneapolis. Production designed by Beni Montresor. (Photo by Joe Giannetti. Courtesy Guthrie Theatre.)
- Chapter 11:** Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* at the Dusseldorf Schauspielhaus, 1985. Directed by Michael Grüner. (Photo by Lore Bernbach. Courtesy German Information Center.)
- Chapter 12:** Rehearsal of Arthur Miller's *After the Fall*. At right, Miller; Jason Robards seated on box, with Elia Kazan standing beside him. (Photo by Inge Morath/Magnum.)
- Chapter 13:** Bill Irwin, as Arlecchino in a *commedia* play, *The Three Cuckolds*, at the La Jolla Playhouse. (Photo by Micha Langer; courtesy La Jolla Playhouse.)
- Chapter 14:** Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* as produced at the Thalia Theater, Hamburg. (Photo by Hermann J. Baus. Courtesy German Information Center.)
- Chapter 15:** *Kabuki Medea*, conceived, directed, and designed by Shozo Sato at the Wisdom Bridge Theatre, Chicago. (Photo by Jennifer Girard. Courtesy Wisdom Bridge Theatre.)
- Chapter 16:** Karel Capek's *The Insect Comedy*. Design by Josef Svoboda. (Photo by Jaromír Svoboda.)
- Appendix:** *Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a musical by William Hauptman and Roger Miller. Ben Halley, Jr. as Jim and Tuck Milligan as Huck Finn. Directed by Des McNuff. (Photo by Micha Langer. Courtesy La Jolla Playhouse.)

Preface

Behind this edition of *The Essential Theatre* lies almost twenty-five years of publication: the book was published first (in 1976) as an abridged version of *The Theatre: An Introduction*, which appeared originally in 1964. *The Essential Theatre* has now taken on an identity of its own, this being the fourth edition.

Like the earlier versions, this edition is divided into three parts. But within those parts, a number of major changes have been made. The chapter entitled "Performance, Audience, and Critic" has been moved forward (now as the second rather than the final chapter), since many instructors wish students to attend plays and write reviews throughout the course and need this material early rather than at the end of the course. The section on the playwright has also been moved forward and integrated with the chapter on scripts and play analysis. A list of questions designed to assist students in analyzing scripts has also been added to this third chapter.

The greatest number of changes have been made in Part II. The focus in these chapters is now on various types of theatrical experience rather than on a connected account of the theatre's historical development. The chronological arrangement has been maintained, but there is no longer an attempt to provide an overview of the entire history of Western theatre. Furthermore, one Oriental form (Japanese Noh) is examined, not only to familiarize students with that form but also to offer a perspective on Western theatrical conventions. The discussions still consider the historical context, but the major emphasis is now experiential. The number of chapters in Part II has been reduced from nine to seven, but each of the chapters examines in some detail at least two contrasting types of plays and theatrical experiences. One of the chapters is devoted to two major examples of popular theatre: commedia dell'arte and nineteenth-century melodrama.

Part III on contemporary theatrical practices now contains six rather than seven chapters, the material on the producer having been integrated into the chapter on directing and that on the playwright with the chapter on scripts. In all of these chapters, greater attention is paid to the function of each theatre art and the skills and training needed by its practitioners. In all the chapters, additional concrete examples help to clarify the discussions. At the ends of chapters, a number of questions encourage students not merely to attend the theatre but to examine critically what they see there.

Many new illustrations have been added and carefully integrated with the written text throughout. The Appendix, summarizing opportunities open to those who wish to work in the theatre, has been retained, though revised to reflect changes in the profession. The Bibliography, listing books that may be useful in further study or as sources for additional information, has been updated.

In writing this book, I have assumed that students will both read plays and attend theatrical performances. Ideally, students would be able to read a script and then see that script performed. In actuality, this is seldom possible, but reading a play and experiencing a performance, even if not of the same script, illustrate the differences between the text on the printed page and the enacted script on the stage—the differences between drama and theatre.

Recognizing that students have not read a wide range of plays, I have selected most of the examples cited in *The Essential Theatre* from fourteen scripts included in a companion anthology, *Plays for the Theatre* (5th edition), edited by Oscar G. Brockett and published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston in 1988. These scripts also serve as the foundation for discussing varied types of theatrical experience. The plays are: *Oedipus the King*, *The Menaechmi*, *The Second Shepherds' Play*, *The Shrine in the Field* (a Noh drama), *Hamlet*, *Tartuffe*, *The Servant of Two Masters*, *The Wild Duck*, "The Hairy Ape," *The Good Woman of Setzuan*, *Death of a Salesman*, *Happy Days*, *A Raisin in the Sun*, and *Fool for Love*. Those instructors who prefer to have students read a different but parallel set of plays may wish to consider *World Drama*, edited by Oscar G. Brockett and Mark Pape, published by Holt, Rinehart and Winston in 1984. It includes seventeen plays: *Antigone*, *Iphigeneia at Aulis*, *Lysistrata*, *Pseudolus*, *Everyman*, *Matsukaze* (a Noh play), *King Lear*, *The School for Wives*, *The Recruiting Officer*, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *A Doll's House*, *Major Barbara*, *The Little Foxes*, *Life of Galileo*, *Krapp's Last Tape*, *The Strong Breed* (an African play), *Slave Ship*, and *Buried Child*.

The Essential Theatre is designed to meet the needs of two kinds of courses: introduction to theatre (that is, an overview serving as a unifying foundation for students who expect to major in Theatre—the future

theatre makers), and theatre appreciation (that is, an overview providing insight into, and understanding of, theatre for audience members—the future theatregoers). While these two types of courses may cover the same basic subjects, they usually do so from somewhat different angles. Thus, I have assumed that individual instructors will use the material in ways suited to their needs. I have sought to provide a logically organized, comprehensive overview of theatre, but instructors need not rigidly follow my sequence or use all of the material in this book. For example, time or individual preference may keep some instructors from assigning all of Part II, while others may wish to assign Part III prior to Part II. My goal has been to provide helpful discussions of topics pertinent to introductory courses rather than to prescribe how the courses should be organized.

It would be impossible to list all of those to whom I am indebted. The bibliography indicates most of the sources I have used, and captions indicate those persons or organizations who have permitted me to include these illustrations. A few individuals deserve special mention. I want to thank my colleagues for their insightful and useful comments: Doug Cummins, Pan American University; John Ford, Foothill College; Terence Gleeson, Penn State University, Delaware County Campus; James Hawes, Radford University; R. Eugene Jackson, University of South Alabama; Jack McCullough, Trenton State College; Dale Miller, Purdue University; Tice Miller, University of Nebraska at Lincoln; William Shankweiler, Boise State University; Roman Tymchyshyn, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. I also thank those who assisted me in proofreading and indexing: William Stotts, Richard Runkel, Michael Barnes, and Brian Lieske. Finally, I would like to thank my editor at Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Karen Dubno, for her guidance and encouragement, and my senior project manager, Sondra Greenfield, for producing this book.

Oscar G. Brockett

Austin, Texas

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Part I

FOUNDATIONS

Theatre is a complex art with a recorded history going back at least 2500 years. Understandably, over such a long span of time, it has undergone many changes and followed extremely diverse paths. Its long history invites questions about theatre's fundamental nature—what it is and what its varied manifestations have in common, no matter when or where they have occurred. It also invites questions about the theatre's appeals—why for so long it has continued to attract audiences. In addition, it provokes questions about how we judge theatrical performances—why we think one production is good and another bad.

Let us begin our look at the theatre, then, by examining some basic characteristics of theatre: its nature and function; its relation to other forms of art; criteria for judging performances; the nature of dramatic action; how scripts, the usual starting point of theatrical production, are structured; and other related topics. This exploration should provide a foundation for further study—especially the varieties of theatrical experience and the processes of theatrical production.

The Nature of Theatre

1





Just how and when theatre originated is uncertain, but the earliest records of human activities suggest that by that time people had already developed rituals that used all the elements required for a fully developed theatre: a performance space, performers, masks or makeup, costumes, music, dance, and an audience. The function of these early rites was only incidentally theatrical, however, since they were addressed to supernatural forces thought to control the return of spring, success in hunting or war, or the fertility of human beings and the environment. Although theatre probably had its beginnings in such rites, it undoubtedly stemmed in part from other impulses, such as the love of storytelling and mimicry. From these shadowy origins, the theatre eventually evolved into an activity prized for itself.

Though its origins may be obscure, the theatre has been present in some form throughout human history. At times, it has been highly developed and highly prized; at others, it has been reduced to little more than a skeleton existing on the fringes of respectability. It has as often been denounced as praised, and its value—even its right to exist—has frequently been questioned.

During most of its existence, the theatre has had to contend with contrasting responses: on the one hand, it has been praised as entertaining and insightful; on the other hand, it has been denounced as morally corrupt or as distracting audiences from more important things. This ambivalence has been encouraged in part by theatrical terminology (such as *play*, *show*, and *acting*) which suggests that theatre is the product of grown-ups who have prolonged their childhood by dressing up and playing games to divert themselves and others. Furthermore, because plays are fictional, they have often been denounced as a form of lying; and because they tend to depict human crises (frequently involving deception or violence), they often have been considered morally suspect