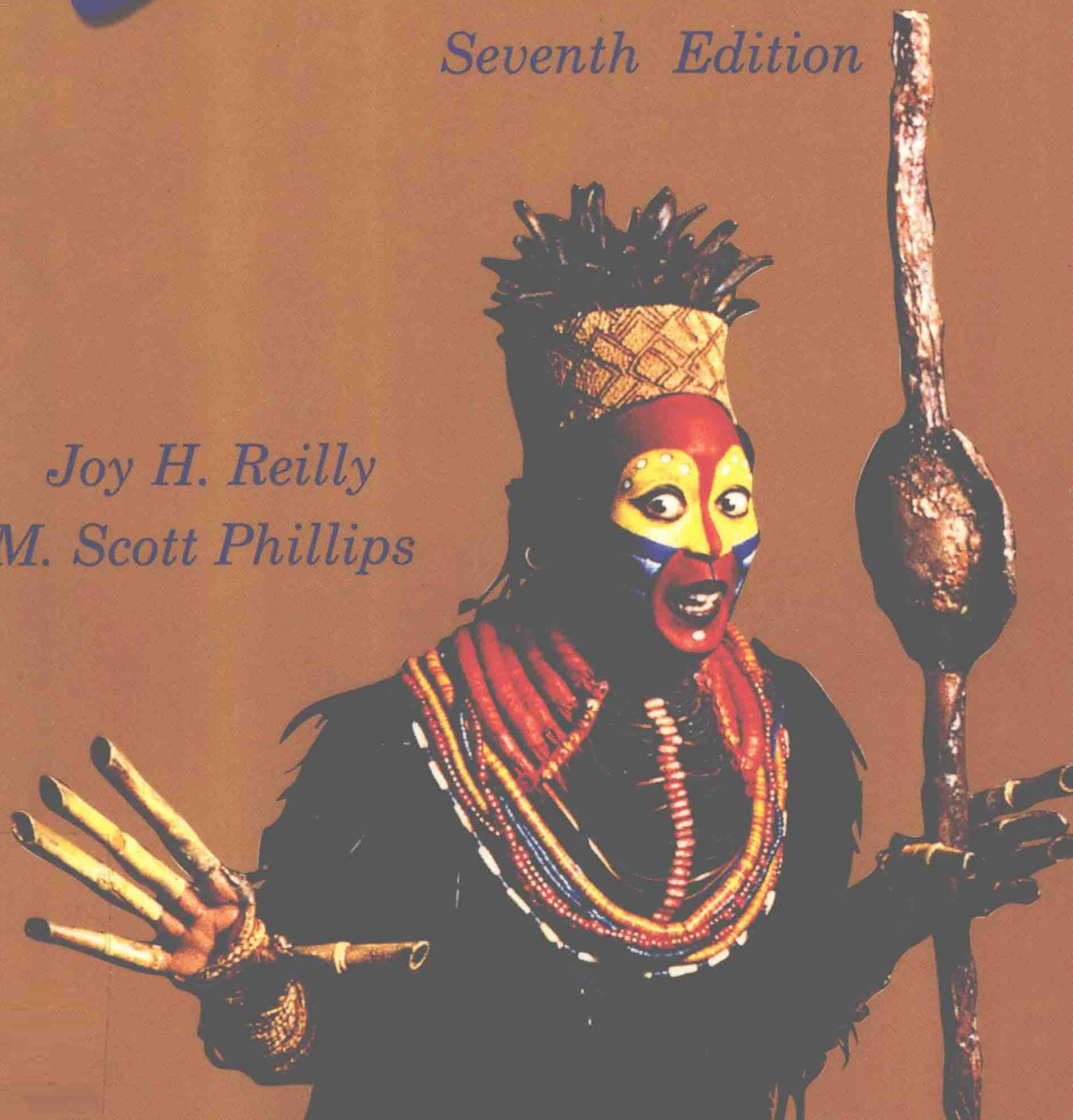


Introducing
Theatre

Seventh Edition

Joy H. Reilly
M. Scott Phillips



INTRODUCING THEATRE

SEVENTH EDITION

JOY H. REILLY
M. SCOTT PHILLIPS



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Tsidii Le Loka as “Rafiki” in the original Broadway Company of Disney’s *Lion King*, photograph by Per Breiehagen © Disney.

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Professors Joy Reilly, historian, actor, director, playwright is a native of Dublin, Ireland and grew up in England. She has headed one of the largest Introduction to Theatre programs in the country at Ohio State University since 1985. Professor M. Scott Phillips, historian, actor, director, recently took over the Introduction to Theatre program at Auburn University.

P ROLOGUE

It all comes to trying to find the electricity in theatre . .

All the good theatre I've seen

Takes me on a journey

Where I'm moved, entertained, inspired or threatened.

I'm taken away from my seat

And my normal way of thinking

Brought to another place

Then brought back.

Anne Bogart, Director

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1

THEATRE AND ART

The lights of the marquee burn brightly in the night as we take our place in the bustling crowd awaiting entrance to the theatre. The lobby is bedecked with glowing theatre reviews, silent testimony to the quality of the work we are about see, a work which requires the efforts of many theatre artists to produce. Tickets in hand, we slowly file into the auditorium and settle into our seats. The house is abuzz with excitement—the audience chatters as the orchestra tunes, and the sense of eager anticipation intensifies. Now the houselights dim, the noise subsides and the curtain rises. The moment of theatre is at hand.

During the next two hours we, along with our fellow audience members, will enter into a journey. We will not venture anywhere physically, of course, but we will go on a journey just the same. For 2,500 years, the theatre has had the power to transport us to distant and exotic locales, to draw us into the fabric of another world and to live, vicariously, the lives and experiences of countless fictional characters. No other art form can so completely harness the power of the human mind, arouse such passion, or create such vivid living pictures. Twentieth-century technology has made the contemporary stage a place of limitless scenic possibility. But technical artifice is merely the icing on the cake. For centuries,

the stage has been a place of wonder, a magical space, where an almost empty platform can be transformed through the bounty of imagination. Shakespeare knew this well. "Can this cockpit hold/ The vasty fields of France?" he asks,

or may we cram
Within this wooden O the very casques
That did affright the air at Agincourt?
O, pardon! since a crooked figure may
Attest in little place a million;
And let us, ciphers to this great accompt,
On your imaginary forces work.

Henry V

The people who create the marvelous illusions to which Shakespeare refers are the practitioners of the most collaborative art in the history of human endeavor. Some call theatre the most lifelike of arts because it creates the illusion of a virtual reality and brings the fictive world to life. It is among the most fleeting of the arts because it exists only in the moment of its creation, and leaves no trace but memory. The theatre is an art, but to appreciate it as art we must first arrive at some understanding of art itself.

WHAT IS ART?

What is art? That question has been the focus of debate for centuries. For some, the epitome of artistic expression is an illustration by Norman Rockwell; for others it could be the abstract splatterings of Jackson Pollock. Performance artist Karen Finley strips off her clothing and rubs chocolate all over her body. The artist Christo specializes in covering famous buildings and civic monuments with canvas—literally wrapping up his subjects like giant packages. One of composer John Cage's most famous pieces entails sitting for several minutes in front of a piano without playing a single note, a tribute to the sounds of silence. Much of the late photographer Robert Mapplethorpe's work was intensely homoerotic, featuring scores of male subjects in various stages of undress. Italian Renaissance painter Michelangelo's biblically-inspired adornment of the Sistine Chapel has been a source of inspiration for hundreds of years.

As you can see from these few examples, the term "art" encompasses a broad range of human activity. What, you may ask, does Karen Finley have in common with Michelangelo? Why do these very different activities fall under the umbrella category of "art"?

First, it is important to understand what art is *not*. Two persistent popular misconceptions about art are that (1) it is an activity productive of beauty and (2) that an art work can be judged by the technical skills required for its execution. In this view, art must always be pleasing to the senses and is synonymous with craftsmanship. The second of these

misconceptions was illustrated recently in the comments of radio commentator Rush Limbaugh. "I have a simple definition of art," said Limbaugh, "If I can do it, it isn't art." Limbaugh's explanation is funny, but as a definition it is unsatisfactory.

Art is not always pleasant (as Finley's audiences will attest) and craft and art *are* separate and distinct concepts. As for the contention that art must be an expression of beauty, Tolstoi pointed out almost a century ago that, if that were the criteria, it would be a meaningless standard, because of the degree to which individuals differ in their tastes. Furthermore, to claim that the best art is always the most beautiful is a bit like saying that the value of food lies solely in the pleasure we get from eating it. Anyone who has forced a child to eat her spinach or has had triple bypass surgery to remedy the effects of too much fried chicken and pizza knows better than that.

The contention that art should be difficult to create is a little harder to dismiss, but it fails to hold up under close scrutiny. There are certainly many techniques employed by artists which are difficult to master. But if difficulty were the only standard, how then could we differentiate between, say, the *Mona Lisa* and a velvet portrait of Elvis? Craftsmanship and skill were necessary for the execution of both, but one hangs in the Louvre and the other is available at Woolworth for \$9.99.

So art is not necessarily that which is beautiful, or even difficult to produce. Its purpose is not necessarily to entertain or to give us pleasure or to depict reality. Art can, of course, do any of these things, but it is not defined by its ability to do so. Art, says critic Susanne Langer, "is the creation of 'expressive forms,' or *apparent forms expressive of human feeling*." It is, she claims, a creation which depends for its reception on sense or imagination and which expresses "*everything that can be felt*, from physical sensation, pain and comfort, excitement and repose, to the most complex emotions, intellectual tensions, or the steady feeling-tones of a conscious human life." "Feeling," in this sense, does not necessarily refer to the artist's opinions or emotional state, *but to the broad range of sensation which makes up the core of the human experience*. As human beings, we do not view the world in purely objective terms; we encounter it subjectively. It is the artist's job to express the essence of that subjective encounter.

Langer was by no means the first theorist to define art in terms of human feeling. In *What is Art?* (1896) Tolstoi says:

To evoke in oneself a feeling one has experienced, and having evoked it in oneself, then, by means of movements, lines, colors, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others experience the same feeling—this is the activity of art.

Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, so that other people are infected by these feelings and also experience them.



So through an expressive medium, the artist “infects” those who encounter his or her work. The key to this definition is the term “medium,” for it is the artist’s vehicle which mediates between herself and those who would view her work. Art is not reality, it is a representation, and the artist’s medium is the raw material of that representation. The painter’s raw material is his paint and canvas; the novelist uses ink and paper; the sculptor, blocks of stone. In each case, the artist takes something that exists already (paint, stone, ink) and transforms them into something else. Thus, the activity of the artist is one of creation and transformation.

Theodore Shank has pointed out that an object’s status as art depends, to a large extent, upon its purpose. Many activities which are not generally considered to be art also involve creativity

and transformation. But the key criteria for art, as Shank has suggested, is in its purpose as an *expressive object for perception*. A shoemaker transforms leather into footwear, but we probably would not call the result a work of art. That is because the shoe’s primary purpose is utilitarian, not aesthetic. Even in the case of a highly decorative shoe, the primary purpose—to protect the foot—is one of utility.

Art has no practical function. It cannot keep us warm, protect us from danger or butter any parsnips. Perhaps it is our culture’s emphasis on pragmatism and the work ethic which causes us to view the artist’s project with suspicion. For many, a life spent devoted to art is, at best, a curiosity, at worst, a frivolous waste of time. And yet, there has been no civilization in the history of the world which has not fostered and valued artistic expression. “I must study politics and war that my sons may have liberty to study mathematics and philosophy,” said John Adams in 1780, adding that his children should also learn “geography, natural history, naval architecture, navigation, commerce, and agriculture, in order to give their children a right to study painting, poetry, music, architecture, statuary, tapestry, and porcelain.” Art not only give us pleasure, but defines us as a people; it has been, throughout recorded history, the most exquisite form of human expression.

It follows, then, that the artist is a special kind of person. In many respects, the artist is a person just like anyone else, yet he or she is different. Most of us go through life largely ignoring all that there is to be seen, felt, tasted, heard and smelled. But the artist does not. He or she is more acutely sensitive and therefore enjoys a sensory experience of life that is deeper and fuller than the majority of people. Somehow, because

The artist enjoys a sensitivity and a perceptive power that eludes the average person. The artist’s world is a heightened world, where feelings and sensations are magnified far beyond what they are in ordinary life.

[Foto Marburg/
Art Resource,
New York]

an artist is more tuned into living, his or her emotional reaction is usually broader and deeper. Likewise, the artist is extremely perceptive of the order and arrangement of things. While many of us frequently find life meaningless or confusing, the artist can take the raw material of life and find meanings or discern relationships which elude the average person. When an artist creates an art work, his or her experience of life is reflected in the work. The value that we place on an artwork depends upon the extent to which we are able to perceive in it the life—the human feeling, to use Langer's terms—that the artist has shared with us.

If we agree to make ourselves receptive to the artist's work we will find that it does three things: it magnifies and intensifies sensation, while clarifying and then interpreting experience (see boxes). The world of the artist is a heightened world, where feelings and sensations are magnified far beyond what they are in ordinary life. Art clarifies because it allows us to focus on selected aspects of our experience in a detached manner. It is interpretive because, through the very act of selection and arrangement, the artist expresses a definite point of view.

Not only is art an act of self-expression, it is also communicative; it "speaks" both to the individual and to the community, either directly or indirectly. But in the indirect arts of painting, sculpture, architecture, and literature the artist does not come into contact directly with those experiencing the work of art. The direct arts are the performing arts—music, dance, drama and performance art—and the art work is the performance by the artist for an audience.

The Intensification of Sensation

It is one of the chief functions of the artist to render experience arresting by rendering it alive. The artist, be he poet, painter, sculptor, or architect, does something to objects, the poet and novelist do something to events, that compel the eye to stop and find pleasure in the beholding, the ear to hear for the sheer sake of listening, the mind to attend for the keen, impractical pleasure of discovery or suspense or surprise.

—Irwin Edman, *Arts and the Man*

The Clarification of Experience

The spectacle of life fascinates. Caught in the turmoil of affairs we do not see it clearly, for our eyes are fixed on other things, our business, our wealth, our occupations, our reputation. These things give us a bias and a preoccupation which prevent our seeing the spectacle we make of ourselves. But in moments of leisure we flock to the theatre or read stories of love, passion, intrigue and adventure. These, and not our experience, tell us what life really is, for they transform us from participants in action to spectators of it. . . . We have the happiness of detachment. . . . We see life without living it. . . . Art, not business or work or morals or religion or science or philanthropy, reveals what life is and reveals it to be viewed in freedom.

—Frederick J. E. Woodbridge, *The Son of Appollo*

The Interpretation of Experience

All artists in one way or another, to some greater or lesser extent, interpret life. They may “interpret” nothing more than the way in which a bowl of fruit “appears” to the ordered imagination of a painter. They may “interpret” nothing more than sensation. Or they may interpret, as Hamlet does, or *War and Peace*, or *Ode on the Intimations of Immortality from Recollections of Early Childhood*, the confused intuitions of millions of men, bringing to a focus an obscure burden of human emotion. . . . Explicit interpretation, of course, is to be found chiefly in literature. But a statue by Michaelangelo or Rodin, a piece of music by Beethoven or Debussy, is by virtue of its comprehensive and basic quality, its mood, its tempo, and its essential timbre, an interpretation of experience. . . . These works are the language of men who not only saw and heard with the external eye and ear, but put into sound a hearing, into canvas a vision of what life essentially meant to them.

—Irwin Edman, *Arts and the Man*

THE THEATRE AS AN ART

Consider a fairly typical scene from a motion picture detective story. The detective is on the roof of a building and is shot at by someone on the roof of a neighboring building. The sniper escapes through a door in the rooftop—the detective rushes to the ledge of the roof. We have a shot from the detective’s viewpoint down at the street many stories below. We then have a closeup as the detective climbs up on the ledge and prepares to leap. Next comes a longshot as the detective leaps from one roof to the other. During the leaps, we do not really fear for the actor. Subconsciously we know of the several ways in which such a scene may be photographed without there being any real danger to the actor. Indeed, the leaping figure may not be the actor at all but a stunt person performing the action. The thrill that we feel is qualified by the theatrical illusion that the actor is the character. The character is in danger, but the actor is not.

Compare the actor as performer to another type of theatrical performer, the trapeze artist. As he or she leaps from trapeze to trapeze in the course of the performance, the trapeze artist is really in danger. There is no illusion here. The trapeze artist is precisely what he or she appears to be. The threat to life and limb is thrillingly true. The anxieties that we may feel during the performance are blunted by the skill and ease with which each trick is executed. The cool aloofness and smiling acceptance of applause indicate a seeming unawareness or indifference to the threat to the performer’s well-being.

In contrast, the performance of the actor corresponds to our experience in everyday life. Faced with a dangerous and difficult task, an actor sweats, strains, perhaps is even somewhat nervous, takes a deep breath before attempting the bold action, even as you and I would. The actor

appears to be so convinced that what he or she is doing is not make believe, that we may be convinced, at least momentarily, that it is true.

Dance often makes use of the same kind of material found in drama. Consider the following: two young lovers play hide-and-seek in a forest. In drama this scene may be played with convincing realism. In dance, the fact that all of the movements are executed in dance form keeps it from ever being convincing. By its very nature, dance is more abstract, farther removed from our experience in real life than drama is. This essential difference between dance and drama lies in the manner of the performers and not in the nature of the thing performed.

One other type of theatrical performance bears a striking resemblance to what happens in dramatic theatre. When a magician saws a person in half, what seems to be happening is not really happening. Like the actor, the magician in this particular act is only pretending. The magician too is creating an illusion, but the illusion is one of the moment only. Actually, what a magic performance consists of is a sequence of illusions. The thing performed by the magician is quite different from the thing performed by the actor.

A PLAY IS A SUSTAINED ILLUSION

The thing performed by an actor is a play, and in it he or she is required to sustain an illusion from the beginning of the performance to the end. A play, then, is a sustained illusion. The sustaining of the illusion that is the play is not the responsibility of the actor alone. Collaborating with the actor are the playwright, the director, the designers, and all the many craftspeople who are members of the production group. When it is possible for such a complex group of individuals to achieve the common objective of the play's illusion, and that illusion is one which the audience finds both satisfying and meaningful, the experience approximates what we call a work of art.

CONVENTIONS ARE THE RULES OF THE GAME

The success of the various theatre artists in achieving their artistic illusion is dependent not only upon the skill with which they do their jobs, but also upon the conventions which pertain at the time of the production. Conventions apply in all walks of life and make living easier. Stated most simply, conventions are the rules of the game. For example, at a time when women were distinctly second-class citizens such as Nora in Henrik Ibsen's *A Doll's House*, some men emphasize this distinction by tipping their hats, opening doors, or holding chairs.



Broadway's Titanic did what conventional wisdom says you cannot do in theatre—it recreated the history-making event in all its complexity—sinking the luxury liner to the tune of musical magic. A large cast outfitted in luxurious style on stunning sets helped bring credibility to the undertaking, which was rewarded with a 1997 Tony for best musical.

[© Joan Marcus]

THEATRICAL CONVENTIONS

Just as in life, **the conventions in theatre are always changing.** For example, for long periods in the history of the theatre, the only actors were men. The character of Jocasta in *Oedipus the King* was performed by a man in the original production. In that same production the actors wore face masks and heavy costumes throughout the performance. Nevertheless, *Oedipus the King* was a highly conventional play at the time it was first acted.

The physical nature of the theatre is a prime determinant of theatrical conventions since it establishes the relationship between the stage and the audience. Throughout most of theatre history the physical theatre and conditions of performance were such as to establish the convention of a direct relationship between actor and audience. The actor was there on stage performing for the audience; the audience was there attending to the actor. Many of the basic techniques of performance were designed “to open up the action” for the audience so that they could clearly see and hear what was going on. The fact of the proscenium theatre made possible the naturalistic convention of the “fourth wall” in which the actors performed as though an audience was not present; the action was not opened up, but rather the actors acted to one another just as people do in real life.

The conventions of motion pictures and television are conditioned by the fact that the actor and the audience do not, in fact, come together. As far as the film artists are concerned, the camera is the audience and it is for it that the performance is given. In *cinéma vérité* (the film equivalent of naturalism) the convention is that there is no camera, that the camera eye is the eye of the spectator actually watching the scene.

PERFORMANCE TIME

Another primary determinant of theatrical conventions is the element of performance time. Almost always an audience has a fairly precise

expectation as to how long a performance will take. The playwright especially must work within the restriction of that time limit. In Shakespeare's day, for most of the audience, the problem of getting to the theatre was considerable and by the time that someone went to the trouble to get there, a lengthy show was expected as compensation. The result is that uncut productions of Shakespearean plays run four hours or longer, which is difficult for a modern audience to take.

Today, a conventional straight play will be about two or two-and-a-half hours, while a musical play may be a half hour or so longer, provided there is an intermission or two for the audience to get up and stretch, or take care of other necessities. On average, motion pictures tend to be shorter in length than plays, although very long films sometimes have an intermission built into them—a practice that has become increasingly rare. The length of television drama is conditioned by the fact that all television broadcasting is based upon the quarter-hour segment or multiple units thereof. Occasionally, a play will be produced on television (another practice which has become less and less frequent), which, of course, changes the nature of the event significantly. When plays are shown on television, they are altered to conform to network time formats. Films shown on broadcast television and non-premium cable networks must also be modified to fit the constraints of standardized time slots and commercial breaks. On television, economics almost always trumps aesthetics.

At times, but not very often, allowances have been made to circumvent conventional formats. For instance, in 1915 and 1916 when the great pioneer filmmaker D.W. Griffith made *Birth of a Nation* and *Intolerance*, two classic films each with a running time of several hours, he was daringly unconventional—films at that time were rarely more than 30 or 40 minutes long. In 1981, the Royal Shakespeare Company produced an eight-hour stage version of *Nicholas Nickleby*, a dramatic adaptation of Charles Dickens' novel. When Steven Spielberg's film *Schindler's List* was broadcast on network television in the 1990s, it was shown in its entirety without commercial interruption, a rare allowance made in deference to the film's extraordinary subject matter.

It is safe to say that a conventional play stands a better chance at success than an unconventional one. The director knows that the audience has certain highly specific expectations and that it is most easily satisfied if those expectations are satisfied. At the same time, however, if a play provides its audience with something new that they accept easily and with pleasure, they will return for more of the same. In this manner, the unconventional may quickly become the conventional.

THE ARTIST'S POINT OF VIEW

The whole purpose of theatre is to express a point of view through the medium of the stage. All art and all artists express a point of view, but every form and each artist does so using different media and techniques. The painter Gainsborough would fasten his paintbrush to the end of a

seven-foot pole and would then apply the paint to the canvas with this extended brush. Eventually when the painting was finished and hung in a gallery on exhibit, the ideal place to view the painting from was at a distance of about seven feet. When Cezanne painted "The Bridge at Arles," he positioned himself at a particular angle to and distance from the bridge. The spectator has no choice but to view that bridge through the eyes of the artist. To fully appreciate an art work one must know what the artist is describing and how.

Duchamp in his "Nude Descending a Staircase" is less concerned with painting either a nude or a staircase than with painting the process of descending and, consequently, since he is painting an action, the work may be said to be, to a degree, cinemagraphic. In a painting by Picasso we may see a head which has two noses and three eyes. What Picasso has done is to paint a single head as seen from two or more angles simultaneously. He, like the other artists, is asking us to consider his subject from a unique point of view.

Just as a painter organizes form, shadow, texture and color to create an image, the playwright arranges dialogue to express a particular point of view. The playwright's point of view will be open to wide latitude of interpretation, however, and the director, designers and actors will emphasize those things in the text that, in turn, express the ideas and images they see as most important. Unlike the painter, the sculptor or the novelist, the theatre artist is never the sole author of what is being expressed. A playwright may write a very conventional play, but a director may choose to stage that play in a highly unconventional manner. A realist play such as Ibsen's *Hedda Gabler* can be presented in a decidedly unrealistic manner, if that is how the director so chooses. And of course, what is considered "conventional" is always subject to change. In Shakespeare's day, plays were staged with little or no illusionistic scenery; the actors performed on a bare stage and painted their pictures with words and poetry. In the nineteenth century, though, Shakespeare's works were most often produced using elaborate sets with many scene changes, while today the pendulum has swung back the other way, with simplicity and abstraction in design and staging more common than not. In the theatre, conventions often get recycled, with old practices becoming new again.

Much of theatre convention has to do with time, place or action. The first category concerns the way a playwright or a production manipulates temporal flow. Does the action of the play take place in real time or are there breaks, jumps and/or interruptions in the flow of events? The second has to do with the establishment and fluidity of locale. Does the entire play take place in one location or are there many settings? If there are many settings, how does the production indicate the different locations? Are there different sets for each scene or does the production ask the audience to accept the use of an abstract setting to stand in for various locations? The third category concerns the way the story of the play is told. Does the playwright concern herself with a single storyline, or does she complicate the action with subplots? There are no hard and fast rules governing theatrical conventions, but playwrights and directors