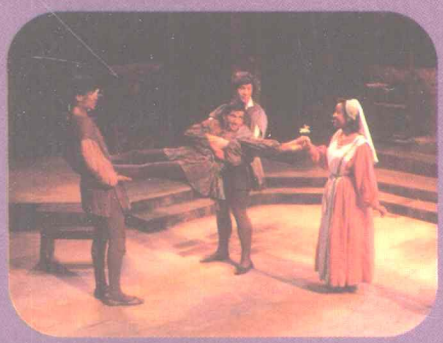
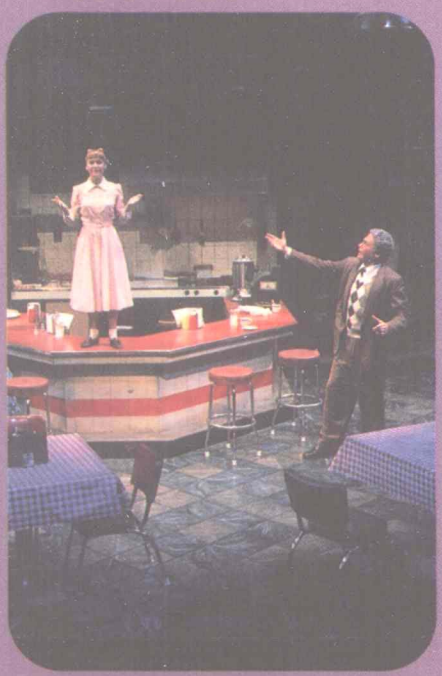
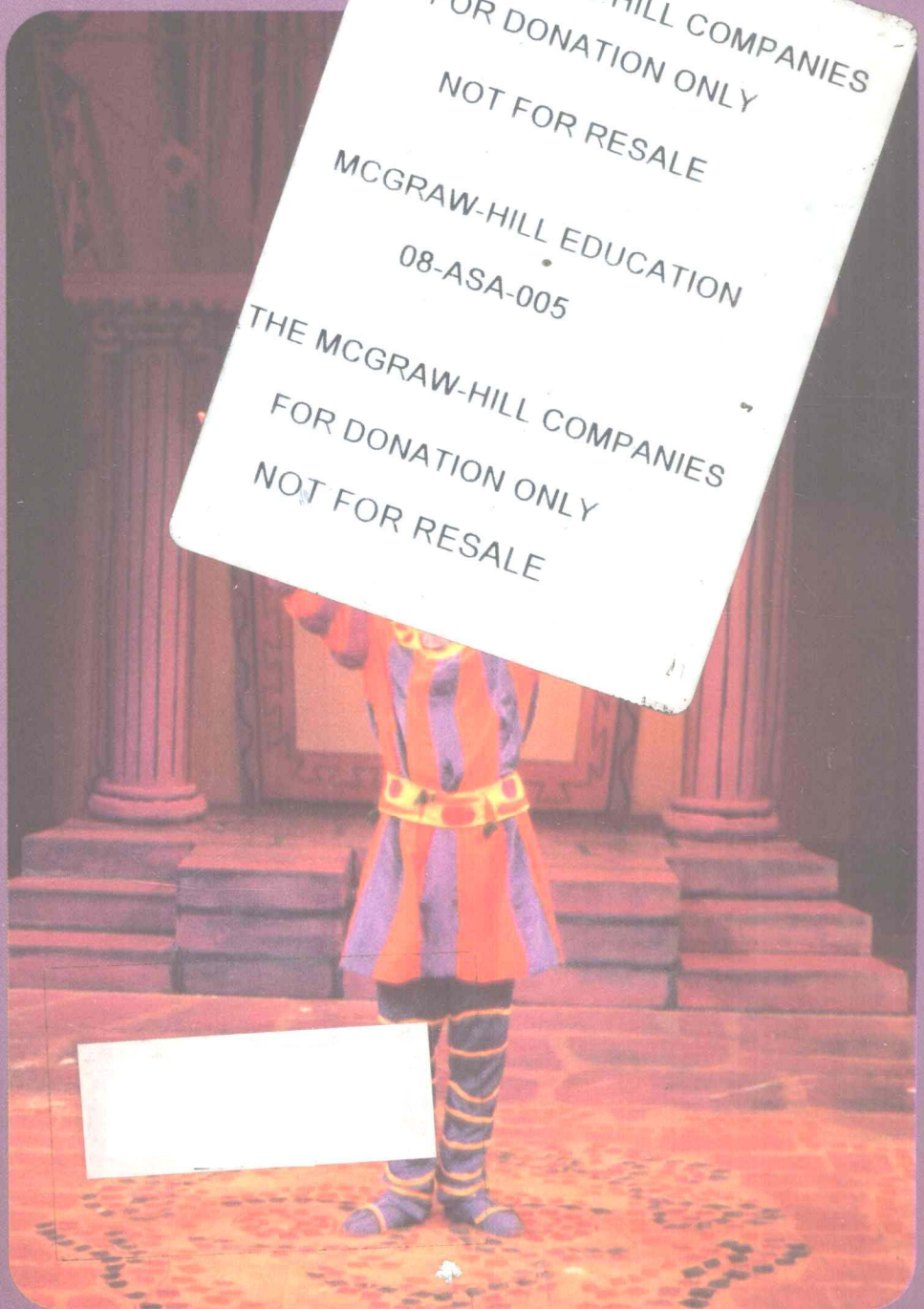
Getting Started in Theatre

Linda Pinnell







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Preface

Theatre is a unique art form that took root in ancient ritual and has grown to encompass every human emotion from grief to euphoria. While theatre has evolved constantly in the past twenty-five centuries, there is one element that has remained constant, the connection established between the action on stage and the audience.

Drama is the only literature written specifically to be performed before an audience. Because of this, to truly appreciate the form, you must understand all of the components that move the play from page to stage.

This book is your introduction to a very complex world, a guide to *getting started in theatre*. Each chapter covers a different element of theatre and gives you background information and activities designed to get you involved in drama and theatre.

- Chapter 1 provides a brief history of theatre and more fully explains what separates drama from other types of literature.
- Chapter 2 analyzes the form in more detail, differentiating between the major types of drama.
- Chapter 3 and Chapter 4 focus on the technical aspects of theatre including set design, lighting, props, costumes, and makeup.
- Chapter 5, Chapter 6, and Chapter 7 focus on the actor's role in the production. Along with discussing styles of acting, the elements of stage movement and vocal interpretation are detailed.
- Chapter 8 and Chapter 9 discuss the role of the director and give an overview of the entire rehearsal process.
- Chapter 10 is a collection of scenes from a wide variety of plays, offering you opportunities to experiment with strategies for performance and production you learn throughout the text.

All of the chapter activities will get you thinking about theatre. Some activities are writing exercises; some may be assigned as homework, at your teacher's discretion. Many will require physical and emotional participation in class, culminating in performance before an audience.

A glossary of key theatre terms introduced in this text and an appendix on career opportunities in the theatre are included at the end of this text.

PREFACE

The main body of this book is made up of an exposition of the history of the development of the formal features of film style, and also of those developments in film technology that might have some connection with stylistic developments. Although the main events in the history of film technology are covered, it is not intended to be an exhaustive treatment of that subject, and I omit all those technical ideas that had no success in the film industry, not to mention the pre-history of film technology. My consideration of the major trends in film style and technology is based on the examination of several thousand films whose production dates spread fairly evenly over the years from 1895 to 1970, and on the comparison of those films with information about film-making and technology derived from the sources listed in the Bibliography of this book, and also from my own film-making experience.

This book is basically concerned with mainstream fictional cinema, and most truly avant-garde films are excluded from consideration in it. This is because there is a very real separation between these two bodies of cinema, with avant-garde films being influenced mostly by other avant-garde films and other contemporary advanced art, and not by mainstream cinema, and vice-versa. My failure to treat avant-garde cinema does not mean that I consider it to be unimportant: on the contrary, following the principles I set forth in Chapter 4, I believe that on the whole its works are of at least equal value to those of mainstream cinema. Japanese cinema is also excluded for rather similar reasons. Until fairly recently there have been influences on Japanese cinema from Western cinema, but no influences going the other way. Also, the large number of films that are necessary to get a clear and accurate picture of overall developments within which individual films are placed has not been available to me in the case of Japanese cinema, nor has a complete knowledge of the very different social and cultural background to Japanese films.

The main work in this book extends naturally in several directions, and some of these are exemplified in the consideration of the films of Max Ophuls at the end of it. In that final section some of the stylistic information from earlier in the book is put to work in combination with the analytical and aesthetic principles I develop at its beginning. In their turn, my analytical and aesthetic principles are justified in both positive and negative ways by the critical material in Chapters 1 to 3. Although it is possible to understand everything that follows Chapter 3 without reading these first three chapters, there are further good reasons for their presence in this book. Ideally, the critical material in these early chapters should have been published long ago in one of the serious film journals, but in fact *Sight & Sound*, *Movie*, and *Screen* in England, and *Film Quarterly* and *The Quarterly Review of Film Studies* in the United States have all refused to publish all, or part, of various earlier versions of these first three chapters, with no reasons given. As well as this, quite a number of American film academics have tried to prevent these chapters being published in book form, so I have drawn the obvious conclusion that all of these people have no answers to my criticisms of various previous forms of film theory that they happen to believe in. Adding the fact that a recently published book on film history uses novel information taken from the manuscript of this book without acknowledgement, it is clear that I had to get all of this book published by the only means left to me. However, I am very glad to acknowledge that there were two people, namely John Ellis and Ben Brewster, who though they do not agree with many of my ideas, were broad-minded enough to advocate its publication, though without success.

My work was supported for some years by the Slade School of University College, London, headed by Sir William Coldstream, where the prime mover of the beginning of my researches was the head of the Slade Film Unit, James Leahy. James Leahy has given me massive support ever since, and it is difficult to be sufficiently grateful to him for this. Pieces of useful information about past film practices have been generously provided by Kevin Brownlow, Byron Haskin, Vic Margutti, Mark Pytel, Noël Burch, Charles Musser, André Gaudreault, Tom Gunning and Tim Dean, and a special acknowledgement goes to Ben Brewster for pointing out to me an important stylistic trend that I had overlooked. I have another important debt to Richard Abel for his descriptions of four films by Louis Delluc and Jean Epstein that I have so far been unable to see. I also owe a lot to Laurence Baxter and Valerie Isham for their help with the analysis of the statistics of shot length distributions, and Wai Ling Chan for her calculations on those same distributions. Other people whose help I want to acknowledge on the production side of this book are Frances Thorpe and Peter Miller for their advice, Cathy Grant for doing the typing in the early stages of the writing of it, Nick Collins for proof-reading, Yossi Balanescu for the jacket design, and Tom Graves of *Wordsmiths* for his mastery of typesetting from microcomputer disks.

The large amounts of film viewing that lie behind my work in this book depended on the help and facilities provided by a number of film organizations and the people who work in them, and I tender my appreciation to Eileen Bowser and the staff at the Museum of Modern Art film archive, the American Film Institute Archive at the Library of Congress, the Danish Film Museum and Ib Monty and Karen Jones, the Cinémathèque Royale Belgique and Jacques Ledoux, the Cinema Studies Department of New York University, and the film

archive at Eastman House, Rochester, under John Kuiper. By far the largest part of part of my viewing has been done in London, and here my thanks go to the National Film Theatre and its staff, and the British Film Institute Distribution Division under Colin McArthur, where I especially thank Nigel Algar and the Film & Video Library. But my major debt is to the National Film Archive of Great Britain and its staff under David Francis. My special personal thanks go to Jeremy Boulton, Elaine Burrows, David Meeker, Clive Truman, and Tim Cotter who do their all to keep researching viewers happy, not to mention Roger Holman and the staff of the Cataloguing Department, particularly Don Swift and James Patterson. Without them nothing could have been done, and for this reason this book is dedicated to the National Film Archive and all who sail in her.

London, June 1983

PREFACE TO THE 2ND. EDITION

Many things have happened since the first edition of this book, some of them good, some of them bad. One of the good things was that I sold all the 2000 copies of it that I had printed, and it has made a certain impression, at least in Europe. On the other hand, the printers destroyed the film from which a reprint could have been made. But even this has its good side, as I have taken the opportunity to revise the book and include the latest discoveries I have made about the development of film style. I have also extended the treatment up to the present, with full chapters on the 'seventies and 'eighties.

Another piece of bad news is that even after I had successfully published the first edition of this book, many American academics have continued to oppose its distribution in the United States, and have used their power as advisers to American publishers to prevent them distributing it or making a co-publication deal with me for the second edition. Proper distribution in America is impossible for very small publishers like myself without either a co-publication deal with an American publisher, or alternatively by paying out a lot of money to a commercial book distributing firm. The reason for this academic opposition is that the opening chapters of this book criticize various forms of film theory and interpretation that they happen to believe in, and in particular those derived from Marxism and psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis is apparently an area of blind faith for most American academics in the humanities departments of universities, and their closed minds are shown by their inability to produce any rebuttal of criticism of its validity. In fact there has been no attempt whatever to produce an intellectual defence of any of the forms of film theorizing and interpretation that I criticized in the first edition of this book, which is just what I expected. All this has continued, despite the admission by Althusser and Lacan towards the ends of their lives, that they were indeed charlatans, as was obvious twenty years ago to any intelligent and informed person. Yet Lacan's version of psychoanalysis is *still* being taught as received truth in film departments in universities around the world, and new 'theoretical' nonsense of similar kind has continued to appear, so the early chapters on film theory in this book still have to stay there. I do what I can, though those academics who oppose the truth being told know they can continue to rely quite successfully on their institutional power, which grows ever stronger, to protect their inadequacy.

However, another good thing that has happened is that there has been an increasing amount of research into silent cinema over the last nine years, immensely helped by the appearance of new yearly festivals of silent film, and also by single conferences on aspects of the subject. The most important of the festivals is the *Giornate del cinema muto* at Pordenone, but there are others which include silent film sections, such as the *Mostra del cinema libero* at Bologna. I have not been present at all of these, but like everyone else interested in the subject, I am profoundly grateful for their existence. The people who have begun researching early cinema in the last decade are mostly eager to collaborate in the production of knowledge, though there are unfortunately a few Americans who are more dishonest and careerist about what they do.

On the good side again, Ben Brewster has shared a number of viewings and ideas with me, and most importantly, let me see his frame enlargements of some of the copyright fragments of early Vitagraph films in the Library of Congress. His work on this, together with frame enlargements, can be seen in *Vitagraph Co. of America* (ed. Paolo Cherchi Usai, Studio Tesi, 1987). Much of the other contributions to film history during the last nine years are valuable too, but nothing that has appeared removes the need for this book in a second edition, even though some works, like the new series 'History of the

Contents

1 What Is Drama?

A Brief History of Theatre

Most people cherish childhood memories of having stories told or read to them. In the jumble of Mother Goose, Peter Rabbit, folklore, Dr. Seuss books, and tales about your heritage that your family and teachers shared with you, certain stories stand out—stories that became favorites to be listened to over and over again.

Often the appeal of these tales came not from the stories themselves, but from the person who told them. Maybe Dad did all the voices when he read *The Cat in the Hat.* Maybe Grandma brought Harriet Tubman and the underground railroad to mind in dramatic detail. Maybe no one built the suspense of Cinderella's trying on the glass slipper like the library's storyteller could.

As you grew older, you began to realize that different people could tell the same joke with varying degrees of success. You realized that there is an art to telling a story. "It's not in the tale," the saying goes, "it's in the telling."

Activity One

Your teacher will divide the class into groups of three or four. Each member of the group will tell the others a story. These stories may be fairy tales, jokes, or real-life experiences. At the conclusion of all the stories, each group should choose one person to tell his or her story to the entire class. Listen carefully to these presentations and discuss what makes these students good storytellers.

The earliest literature evolved from the oral tradition, literature not written down but passed by word of mouth from generation to generation. This tradition crosses many cultures. The African *griot* (oral historian), the revered Native American storytellers, the anonymous author of the Old English tale *Beowulf,* and the ancient Greek poet Homer all are or were talented, dramatic storytellers—so great that their stories survive through centuries.

As a child, once you got beyond the listening stage, you probably began making up your own stories. Your play sessions may have been reenactments of your favorite movies or TV shows—or maybe they were on-the-spot improvisations—but you loved assuming another character and pretending to be someone else.

Activity Two

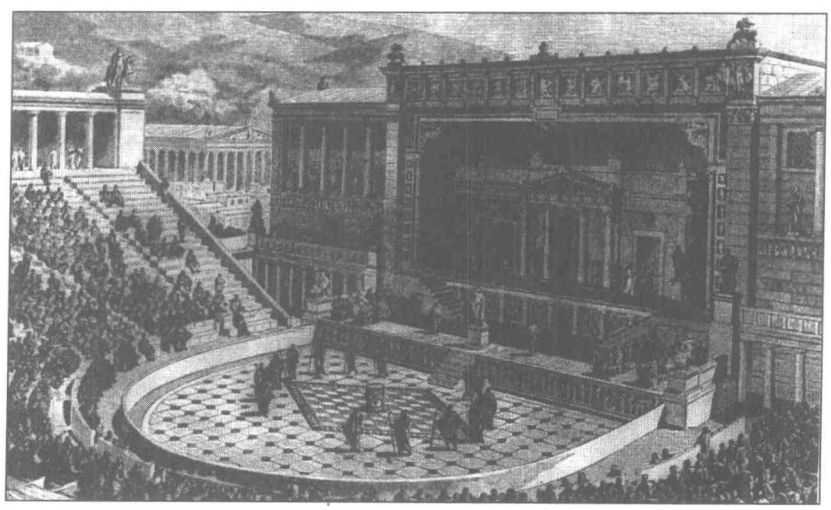
What was your favorite game of pretending when you were a child? What made it so much fun? What props were involved? Who were your playmates? What was the setting for your game? The old West? A tropical island? A battlefield?

The Beginning in Ancient Greece

Given the universal human love of sharing stories and taking on other identities, it seems inevitable that these elements would eventually merge into a formalized *genre,* or type of literature. This happened in the fifth century B.C. in Athens. The ancient Greeks became the first people in the Western world to present to an audience familiar stories in a formal manner. Although the ancient Greeks were the creators, ancient Greek theatre bears little resemblance to theatre as you know it today.

Drama began as a religious rite to the god of wine, Dionysus. You easily can feel the religious overtones in Greek drama, especially the tragedies.

Originally, the plays were chanted by a chorus of fifty men. Eventually, Thespis, a Greek playwright, had one member of the chorus step out from the group and assume the role of a character. Thus, the first actor was added to the concept of theatre. Aeschylus, a writer of tragedy or a *tragedian* added the second actor; and Sophocles, another dramatist, added the third. Finally, the characters could converse in a crude type of dialogue. However, the addition of dialogue did not mean the end of the chorus. The chorus was still there, often representing the elders of the city or even the major character's conscience, interpreting the action, foreshadowing what was to come, and summarizing what had gone before.



Other unique aspects of Greek theatre were the direct result of compromises needed to perform the plays in huge open-air amphitheatres. Although theatres seating thousands of people are fairly common today, they are designed to acoustical perfection, with balcony seating and elaborate lighting to allow the audience to see and hear the action. The Greeks built tiers of seats up a hillside. The appearance of these early theatres was much more like a stadium as we know it than a theatre.

Activity Three

Brainstorm for a minute. If you were told that the school play would have to be canceled unless it were performed in the gymnasium or the football stadium, what would you do?

So how did these early performers overcome the obstacles in the days before sound systems and electrical lighting? With typical Greek ingenuity.

Obviously, plays were performed only in daylight, but there were also more elaborate and innovative solutions. Under their robes, actors wore *cathurni,* high platform shoes that added almost an extra twelve inches of height. Another bit of costuming that added to the actor's larger-than-life visibility was the *mask.* From a great distance, the bare face, even the heavily made-up face, would be lost. The mask portrayed character to the distant seats of the amphitheatre. What's more, the mouthpiece of the mask appears to have been a resonating chamber, a kind of megaphone, to help project the voice.

Greek Tragedy

One more thing aided the Greeks' comprehension of the plays. Typical of the epic and most early forms of literature, the dramas were based on familiar plots. These plots revolved around well-known characters and often followed a family of characters through several generations in a *trilogy,* or series of three plays.

Because the audience already knew the plots and characters of the Greek tragedies, there were no element of suspense, no plot twists, and no surprise endings. Instead the audience experienced what the philosopher Aristotle referred to as *catharsis,* the spiritually cleansing effect of good tragedy. Think about the last movie you saw where you were totally caught up in the tale and identified thoroughly with the main character's misfortune, then left the theatre feeling renewed. That was a catharsis.

Activity Four

What is your all-time favorite movie? If it is a sad movie, what is its appeal? Why do audiences flock to movies that are sometimes referred to as "tear-jerkers"?

Ancient Comedy

Once theatre was born, it grew rapidly and evolved continuously. One of its first innovators was Aristophanes, a contemporary of Sophocles. It is easy to see tragedy, with its solemn, moral tone, as an expression of religious rites. But Dionysus, the

god of drama, was also the god of wine and fertility whose rites often degenerated into destructive chaos. Aristophanes picked up on another side of human as well as Dionysian nature in the development of comedy.

While the chorus was still a part of Greek comedy, its members were now costumed as clouds or birds or wasps. The action of comedy was fast moving and physically broad. No topic was off limits for Aristophanes's sharp, irreverent sense of humor; politics, sex, bodily functions, and prominent Athenians were all part of his comic domain.

Perhaps the most important thing about Aristophanes was his total originality. No longer was the writer limited to time-worn stories of ancient heroes. Playwrights could turn their attention to contemporary stories and characters.

Still, as Aristophanes found out, theatre is a reflection of its era. When the Athenian democracy fell, the new succession of tyrants would not allow his no-holds-barred brand of ridicule. Aristophanes and his later contemporary Menander softened the pointed, satiric barbs and retreated to a kind of domestic comedy, employing characters like the bumbling father, the nagging wife, and the sly servant. The characters were refined by the Roman playwrights Plautus and Terence, and these comic characterizations later spread throughout Europe in *commedia del l'arte,* a special form of comedy. These stock characters are still identifiable in today's situation comedies on television and in films.

Activity Five

Certain one-dimensional characters from early comedy prevail today. Describe the following or cite examples from recent movies and TV shows.

1. The young couple in love
2. The cantankerous old man
3. The nagging wife
4. The clever servant
5. The pretentious scholar

The Middle Ages

Since theatre does reflect its era, it is constantly changing to suit the tastes of a particular audience. In some eras, theatre seemed to cease altogether. The period between the fall of the Roman Empire and the onset of the Middle Ages seems geared more toward the epic than the drama. Epic poems were recited from memory in the oral tradition, rather than being performed in a dramatic sense.

The Middle Ages, with its dread of the plague, produced little theatre. Few people of that era desired to be all in one place as part of a large audience. Still, professional commedia troupes traveled from village to village, performing improvised playlets with characters reminiscent of the ancient comedies. Groups of laborers who belonged to the same guild performed plays based on stories familiar to them, often from the Bible. These short plays eventually evolved into a form called *morality plays* in which virtues and vices are personified as characters. The most famous of these, *Everyman,* is still performed and read today.

The Renaissance of Drama

By the 1500s, these stubborn little patches of theatre had laid the groundwork for the Renaissance dramatists, most notably Shakespeare and Molière. This Renaissance, literally a rebirth, meant going back to knowledge and ideas of earlier time periods. Nowhere was this rebirth more evident than in theatre. During Queen Elizabeth's reign, William Shakespeare, acclaimed the greatest of all English playwrights, had a most appreciative audience. People of Elizabethan England—from the nobility in the private boxes to the peasants who paid a penny to stand in the pit, the area around the stage platform—flocked to the theatre. And Shakespeare's plays appealed to all of them. Similarly, other European nations saw a renewed interest in drama. In France, the comic genius of Molière refined the "flat" stereotypical characters of the "commedia" into masterpieces of humor.

Theatre from the Restoration Through the 1800s

After Oliver Cromwell came to power in England in 1649, the popularity of theatre waned, due to the politically influential Puritans who believed theatre was sinful and sought to close down all performances. However, the theatre erupted again when King Charles II was restored to power. The drama of the Restoration Period in England in the early 1700s was filled with rollicking good humor and satire. At the same time, theatre in France retained a very formal and traditional format.

During the reign of Queen Victoria in England through the late 1800s, a period typical for its reservedness or "stuffiness," playwrights like Oscar Wilde perfected the *comedy of manners*. The comedy in these plays arises from the characters' responding to ludicrous events with well-bred gentility, totally at odds with the situation.

At the same time in other parts of the world, totally different approaches to drama were being taken. For instance, writers such as August Strindberg of Sweden and Henrik Ibsen of Norway were experimenting with the concept of *realism;* that is, these writers made their plays so realistic, it was as if an audience were eavesdropping and watching the action on stage through an invisible fourth wall. Being one of the first writers to address social problems in his plays through the effective use of realism and symbolism, Ibsen is considered the father of modern drama.

In the United States, theatre was beginning to flourish in the late 1800s with the popularity of minstrel shows, vaudeville, and—in particular—*melodramas*. American audiences at the turn of the century adored these overblown, larger-than-life dramatizations of black-caped villains and heroines like Little Nell, viewed with amusement by audiences today.

An Overview of 20th Century Drama

The prewar days of the early twentieth century found Americans almost in a frenzy as their thirst for theatre grew and grew. Stage/set designers such as Adolphe Appia (Switzerland) and Gordon Craig (England) made new advances in stagecraft, such as revolving stages and multiple sets. Modern American theatre was developing.

With the end of World War I in 1918, an era ensued that was complex, filled with disillusionment along with a diverse and international mix of ideas; nowhere was this mix more evident than in the theatre. American writers such as Susan Glaspell, who was an early feminist voice in 1916 with the production of her one-act play

Trifles, and Eugene O'Neill, the foremost playwright of the early part of the twentieth century with such plays as *The Iceman Cometh,* were primarily realists. However, they and their counterparts in the United States and around the world experimented with other dramatic forms.

The theatre of the absurd, which began in France with the plays of Samuel Beckett and Eugène Ionesco, was one form of experimental theatre that became popular in the 1950s and 1960s. This style of drama, based on *absurdism,* went against the traditional concepts of plot, character, and dialogue, reflecting the chaos and unpredictability of the modern world.

Another and very different aspect of modern theatre was the emergence of the musical. Beginning in the 1940s, the American collaborative teams of Rodgers and Hammerstein and Lerner and Loewe began producing dozens of upbeat, feel-good musical comedies, which see frequent revivals on Broadway (the best-known center of the professional theatre in the U.S.), and play almost nonstop in touring companies, community theatres, and school productions. Today, it seems Andrew Lloyd Webber of England has become the master of the musical drama with such hits as *Cats, The Phantom of the Opera,* and *Aspects of Love.*

A look at recent Pulitzer Prize-winners for drama reveals the diversity of contemporary American theatre. Marsha Norman won a Pulitzer Prize for *'night, Mother* (1983), a powerful Broadway play about a mother–daughter relationship and suicide. In 1989, Wendy Wasserstein won a Pulitzer Prize for *The Heidi Chronicles,* a drama demonstrating the playwright's mastery of humor in the story of one woman's life.

Another dramatization of the diversity of American theatre today is the fact that August Wilson, an African American playwright, has become a major voice in contemporary theatre with two Pulitzer Prize-winning dramas—*Fences* (1987) and *The Piano Lesson* (1990). Increasingly, minority playwrights—Luis Valdez and David Henry Hwang, to name just two—are being recognized with critical acclaim as well as commercial success.

The Future of the Theatre

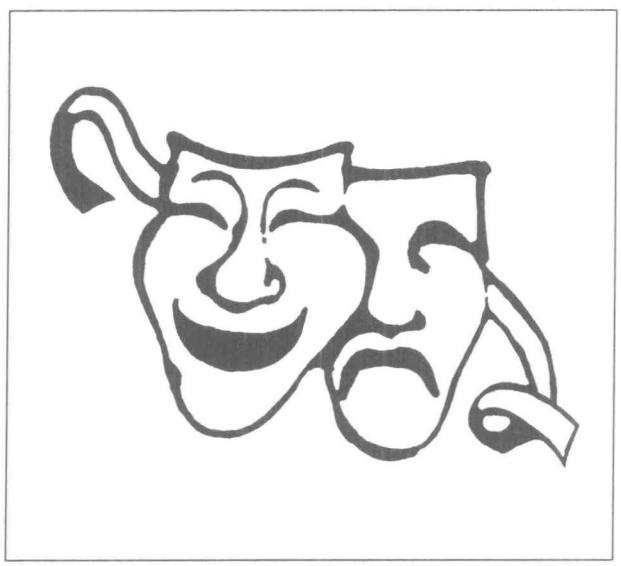
Each season opens its doors to new dramatic forms and new issues, reflecting the desires and concerns of our global society as we approach the twenty-first century.

Competing with radio, television, and film, theatre as an art and entertainment form has been challenged. Critics have decried the death of theatre for years, but it is difficult to believe that any art form that has adapted, changed, and flourished throughout the centuries is even close to its final death knell.

Today in any major city, and even in some smaller towns, you may choose from a wide variety of theatrical experiences—from the classics to new plays being produced for the first time. When you add in movies and television along with live theatre, viewing options become limitless. Theatre will continue in both traditional forms and forms yet to evolve because it addresses the basic human need to share stories and universal experiences.

2 Types of Drama

The Play's the Thing—Hamlet



Drama is different from any other form of literature in that it is written as dialogue and intended to be performed for an audience. A novel by Dickens or Hawthorne remains static, unchanging. It is exactly as the author wrote it over a century ago. But no two productions of *Hamlet* are exactly the same, partially because of what the directors, actors, and technicians bring to the performance, but also because of the audience. Theatre is vibrant, alive, always changing. Yet every production needs a starting point, a script, a written format. Even Shakespeare's Hamlet agreed; "The play's the thing."

The Dual Nature of Drama

The universal logo for theatre is the masks of comedy and tragedy. It is interesting to note that most often these masks are in some way joined, indicating that comedy and tragedy are not separate entities but parts of the same whole, overlapping frequently. Shakespeare realized this and frequently overlapped his comic and tragic elements. After Macbeth's murder of Duncan, he provides the audience with the drunken porter. Hamlet converses with two punning gravediggers at the site of a newly dug grave, not yet realizing it is for his beloved Ophelia. Likewise, many comic writers include scenes of true sentiment and poignancy.

In the early 1980s television producers attempted to describe certain new shows as "dromedies," an odd hybrid of comedy and drama. These were basically situation comedies that attempted to handle serious issues with no laugh track. The term never caught on, probably because many dramatists have combined these elements for centuries.

Although there is a tremendous overlap between various forms, there are still terms that may help to delineate the most frequently encountered types of drama.

Tragedy

The earliest form of drama is *tragedy,* which comes from the Greek word *tragoedia,* meaning "goat song." This unusual derivation may come from the tradition of a sacrificial goat being offered to the glory of the winner of ancient Athenian competition. Greek tragedies were unique in their use of a chorus to respond to and interpret the action of the play.

The traditional tragic format was popular for centuries, well through the time of Shakespeare. Although later tragedians did not rely on a chorus, certain aspects of tragedy have remained intact. A traditional tragedy revolves around a single character, the tragic hero. According to tradition, a *tragic hero* must have two qualities; he must be a person of great stature, and he must fall victim to a *tragic flaw* in his own personality. Although there are exceptions, such as Antigone and Medea, the tragic hero was most often a male. He was often a king, such as Oedipus. Even as late as Shakespeare's day, fitting tragic heroes were a prince (Hamlet), a king (Lear), or an ambitious nobleman (Macbeth). The idea that the common man could be heroic or his destruction tragic is a much more recent idea, one dependent upon the ideal that "all men are created equal."

Although the tragic hero may seem to be swept along by circumstances beyond his control, there is some aspect of his own personality that contributes to his downfall. Whether it is Oedipus's stubborn desire to know the truth, Hamlet's inability to take action or Macbeth's vaulting ambition, the tragic flaw is at least partially to blame.

Activity One

Do you have a "tragic flaw"? What is the one aspect of your personality that always gets you into trouble? Write a brief scenario in which a "tragic flaw" leads to someone's downfall or failure in life.

The Comic Difference

There are certain aspects that we associate with tragedy and comedy. But perhaps the most important distinction between comedy and tragedy is where the story begins and where it ends.

In traditional tragedy, the main character starts out in a very enviable position. He is powerful, respected, on the rise. Gradually, his prosperity crumbles until at the end of the play the audience witnesses his downfall, and in some cases, his death.

In comedy the main character or characters start out with a mass of problems and complications. Frequently a character's anguish is caused by love. The earliest Greek comedies usually presented a young couple in love who were kept apart by parental disapproval. After a long series of tricks and incredible plot twists, the couple was eventually united in marriage and the disagreeable parents became happy with the match. In fact, you may hear references to the "dance of comedy," based on the idea that at the end of the comic play everyone is joyously paired off.

In its strictest sense *comedy* refers to any piece of literature that has a happy ending. You could hardly view Dante's *The Divine Comedy,* which deals with the author's three-day journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven as a laughfest, but

it does meet the criterion of a happy ending. Dante escapes the horrors of Hell and sees the glory of Heaven.

But if you look at those grinning and weeping masks again, you see the popular image of tragedy and comedy. Tragedy affects the heart, the emotions. It has the ability to make you identify so strongly with the main character that you weep at his downfall. You experience what Aristotle referred to as catharsis, the cleansing effect of good tragedy.

Comedy affects the head. Whether comedy depends upon broad physical humor or more subtle verbal cues, you must interpret it before you laugh. There is also an element of emotional superiority present in comedy. You can laugh at the characters because you know you would never find yourself in such a ridiculous predicament, and if you did, you would certainly know how to resolve the problem.

Still, comedy and tragedy are closely linked. One old theory holds that if *someone else* slips on a banana peel, it is comic; if *you* slip on that same peel, it is tragic.

Within the vast spectrum of theatre from pure tragedy to comedy there are other labels that may be used to help differentiate some of the styles.

Types of Drama

Realism, as mentioned in Chapter 1, refers to literature that attempts to portray life as it actually is. Often realism in theatre is explained by the *fourth-wall* concept. As the audience of a realistic drama, you feel as though you have the power to watch life unfold through an invisible fourth wall.

Some writers take this concept a step further to *naturalism*. Although naturalism is an extreme degree of realism, there are differences. The writer of realism may compress events, modify dialogue, and fine-tune characters to give the illusion of reality. The naturalistic writer wants to present dialogue and events exactly as they would occur. But, since most lives plod along at a tedious pace, and most conversations do not reveal profound ideas that present major resolutions, naturalistic plays are sometimes talky and slow moving.

This is certainly not the case with *melodrama,* a general term that may refer to any literature in which the emphasis is on heightened, larger-than-life events. Since there is so much emphasis on events, the characters are often *flat* or one-dimensional. The villain is totally evil. The hero always acts in a noble manner. The heroine never stumbles from virtue.

Types of Comedy

Comedy comes in many subcategories. Exaggeration is the key to many types, such as *high comedy,* in which the emphasis is on intellectual appeal. Often there are intricate puns, wordplay, or fancy language, which appeal to the ear of the audience. Characters, usually of the upper class, are very stiff and artificial, doggedly preserving the manners and behaviors expected of them by society. The high comedy, often comedy of manners, was popular at various times in history. Often these plays were parodies of the overblown, artificial periods in which they were written.

Satire is comedy with a bite. It is directly descended from the earliest writer of comedy, Aristophanes. Satire exaggerates the vices of characters and their society and ridicules events and ideas in an attempt to change some aspect of society, or at least the audience's attitude toward the problem.