

The Art Form: Musical Theatre

What is theatre? Webster's dictionary says, "a dramatic performance." But what is dramatic? What is drama? Drama is any kind of performance that presents a character through action and dialogue (talking) and tells a story. Some say that theatre portrays life—either as it is or as it might be. But one of the things that makes theatre different from real life is that things can happen in theatre that cannot happen in real life—in other words, things that appear to be magical. In the play *Peter Pan*, the children fly through the air, for example. In traditional Chinese theater, a warrior might kill a dragon. Mythical creatures of all kinds appear in the dramatic performances of cultures around the world.

It is believed that people have been acting out stories forever. It is likely that ancient hunters returned from the hunt and told the story of their hunt by acting it out in front of the rest of the village. Singing and dancing also celebrated the harvest and told stories of the gift of grain to the people. All over the world, people have also performed stories as part of their religious traditions. In all cultures around the world—Africa, Asia, the European continent, the Americas—people performed for each other by acting out stories they knew by heart because they'd heard them or seen them acted out by others, or because the event happened to them. It wasn't until about 2,500 years ago (500 B.C.E.) that some Greek playwrights wrote down the conversations they wanted others to say. These are believed to be the first written plays and mark the beginning of the western theater as we think of it today.



But what about musical theater? Although it is likely that people have been singing and dancing and making music to accompany their stories for as long as they've been acting them out—all over the world—American musical theater, like theater itself, has more recent roots.

Many cultures have evolved formal dramatic presentations in which the characters sing very specific songs (India, Africa, and China all have such traditions). In the west, Greek drama included spoken choruses, medieval dramas included songs, Shakespeare sometimes broke up his plays with someone singing. And then there was opera, which became a "high art" form in contrast to the songs of the people, less formal, and often more fun and silly. Because the United States since its beginning has always included people from many countries and many backgrounds, the art forms that have developed here reflected this richness. The American musical grew out of a unique combination of different traditions—and not everyone agrees about how these wave together.

Vaudeville, operetta, and the Yiddish theater have all been cited as significant influences.

In opera, characters communicate mostly by singing. In musical theater, actors communicate mostly by speaking and secondarily by singing (and dancing). The songs tend to express the feelings of the characters or to move along the action. The defining characteristic of musical theater may be that the music—and often dance—and the drama are inextricably linked. The story depends upon the songs as much as the songs depend on the story; without either one, the drama as a whole—the musical theater—would not exist.



The Language of Theatre

Apron The part of the stage that is in front of the curtain and proscenium.

Auditions The process in which an actor parades his talents before a production team, in order to win a part in a show.

Backstage The parts of the theater the audience never sees, including the wings and the dressing rooms, behind and to the sides of the stage.

Blocking The arrangement of the performers' movements onstage, with respect to each other and to the set.

Border A horizontal strip of drapery, usually black, used to block the audience's view of lighting instruments or other items hanging above the stage.

"Break a leg!" The "good luck" wish for a performer before a show. There are many theories behind the history of this term. Some say the tradition dates back to ancient Greece when it was believed that evil spirits inhabited theatres and would cause the opposite of one's wishes to happen. Others claim that during Elizabethan times, when audiences both clapped and stamped their feet in response to a good performance, an audience member broke his leg from stamping so enthusiastically, and now we wish each other the kind of performance that would cause someone to clap or stamp that hard. Still others say that "bend one's leg" and "break one's leg" were phrases that meant to take a bow. (Bows in Elizabethan times were executed with a bent — or broken — knee.) Thus the wish is for a performer to have to take an extra bow.

Choreographer The person who creates dances and teaches them to the performers.

Company All the performers involved in a production.

Crew The backstage team responsible for carrying out the technical parts of a production, like the lighting, sound, set, and prop movements.

Critic A person who writes opinions about the quality of performances.

Curtain Call The bows by performers at the end of a production.

Director The person with the overall vision for the production, who creates the blocking, and helps the performers to fully realize their characters.

Downstage A stage direction that means the front of the stage, toward the audience. The words "downstage" and "upstage" come from a time when stages were angled ("raked") so that the front of the stage actually was lower down than the back.

Drop A large piece of fabric hung at the back of the stage, usually to serve as the back of the scene. (Thus "backdrop".)

Fly Loft The area above the stage that conceals curtains, drops, and other scenery out of sight of the audience by means of ropes and pulleys. In the Flynn's *MainStage*, the actual height of the roof over the stage is more than twice the distance between the floor of the stage and the top of the red velvet curtain, because of the fly loft.

Green Room A room backstage where performers can wait or relax. Before electricity, lime was used in stage lighting. At this time, the sitting room was just to the side of the stage and consequently the ambient glow of the limelight caused the waiting actors to appear green. The Flynn's *MainStage* "green room" is actually on a separate floor downstairs from the stage.

House The part of the theater where the audience sits. A "full house" refers to a performance in which all seats are full. To "paper the house" is to give away many free tickets to a show.

Legs Strips of drapery that hang vertically along the sides of the stage, obscuring the wings from audience view.



Ovation Prolonged fervent applause.

Pit The floor of the house in a theatre. The Flynn has a pit that can raise up to extend the apron, or descend to keep the orchestra below audience level, so that they do not block our view.

Props Objects used by performers onstage. Props can be as small as ice cubes or as large as furniture.

Proscenium The arch or frame that surrounds the stage opening. The term also refers to the physical layout of the Flynn's *MainStage*, in which audience members all face one direction, towards the stage. *FlynnSpace* is not (and does not have) a proscenium.

Run The number of days, weeks, months, or years that a show is performed continuously. Its "running time" is the length of time it takes to perform the show.

Stage Manager The supervisor of both actors and crew. Once the show has opened, the stage manager is in charge, and responsible for everything happening as planned.

Tech Director The person who directs technical aspects of the production, like lights, sound, & special effects.

Thespian A synonym for actor, derived from Thespis, who is considered the first actor.

Upstage The back of the stage.

Wings The areas offstage to the left and right of the stage.