

The Art Form: Theatre

The essence of theatre is captured in the words of modern-day playwright Terrence McNally, "Theatre is the art form most like life as I have so far experienced it." Unlike television or film, theatre is a living, breathing entity. There are many of reasons why human beings create theatre, among them: to escape the realities of the world, to keep important stories alive in our collective consciousnesses, to teach lessons, and to find or create meaning in events that are difficult to understand. We attend the theatre to be entertained, educated, enlightened, and transported. Many of these reasons have always held true, but theatre has undergone much change to become what it is today.

Rites and Rituals:

In primitive cultures, performance grew out of a desire to please the gods, or other mystical powers that were thought to control events crucial to survival. Societies learned and performed ritual dances and dramas in order to feel some measure of influence over their health, the weather conditions, and success in hunting, farming, and warfare. Over time, our ancestors began to use drama as an educational tool as well, enacting their tribal histories and the legends of their gods in order to teach the youngsters, as well as honoring and commemorating the dead. These rites and ceremonies gradually developed into formalized dramatic festivals, and spread across the globe.

It's Greek to me!

The word "theatre" comes from the Greek "Theatron" or "seeing place." Greek drama originated with the *dithyramb*, a choral hymn sung to the god Dionysius by a lead singer and a chorus. In 534 B.C, a lead singer named Thespis introduced an extra character to the chorus, establishing dialogue. Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides – the famous Greek dramatists – continued the tradition adding second and third actors, and drama as we know it was born. These three, and the comic playwright Aristophanes, wrote about important philosophical and political ideas. In fact, theatre was considered such an important public forum in ancient Greece that all citizens were *required* to attend performances!

All Roads Lead to Rome

In Roman times, theater gained popularity as entertainment, and audiences flocked to see both comedy and tragedy in big open-air theatres. Many modern television shows and movies, as well as many of Shakespeare's well-known works, are based on the hilarious stories of mistaken identity and fast thinking dreamed up by Plautus. As the Roman Empire expanded however, theatre declined, and the old theatres were used for the more bloodthirsty gladiatorial contests and spectacles.

As entertainment, theatre was not as popular during the early years of Christianity, but it made a comeback in the Middle Ages as a form of moral instruction. Religion played an important role in public and private life, so there was very little audience for secular (non-religious) theatre. Though some wandering minstrels and folk plays endured, nearly all theatre took the form of religious pageantry, teaching moral lessons to largely illiterate audiences. This is how Mystery, Miracle, and Morality plays were born.

Brush Up on Your Shakespeare

By Elizabethan times, theater was no longer associated with the church. Instead, royal patrons and large enthusiastic audiences supported the art form, now so popular that many competing companies presented plays. Not everyone approved of the theatre, however. In London, theatres were built on the South Bank of the River Thames, the "bad part of town," along with the bars, bear-baiting pits and other lowly amusements. Men and boys played all the roles because the stage was considered too scandalous for women. It was in this world, in the 16th and 17th centuries, that William Shakespeare wrote and performed his many plays.

And Now Presenting...

Since Shakespeare's time, theatre has undergone a number of evolutions. In the 18th century Neoclassicism ruled. The 19th century introduced Realism and Naturalism to the stage, as playwrights, actors, and directors tried to depict life as it is ordinarily lived. Gas lighting finally permitted evening performances. The 20th and 21st centuries have seen much merging of styles. There's been the birth of Vaudeville and the Broadway musical, as well as the more experimental Absurdist, Expressionist, Symbolist and Postmodern theatre. Proscenium stages have become the norm, and advances in technology of lighting, sound, and scenic design have changed the face of modern theatre. One thing remains constant however: theatre is still evolving.



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.