

# Chapter 1

## What Is Theatre?

### Learning Objectives

This chapter introduces the nature and scope of theatre by discussing it in three ways it can be perceived: as a building (the place of theatre), as an activity (the people, ideas, and works of art), and as an occupation (the professional pursuit).

1. Recall the different meanings of “theatre.”
2. Recognize the different aspects of the theatre building.
3. Recall aspects of a theatre company.
4. Recall the different crafts involved in the work of theatre.
5. Recognize theatre’s relationship to art.
6. Recognize the importance of impersonation to theatre.
7. Recognize the wide range of behaviors that can be classified as “performance.”
8. Recall the connection between theatre and playing.
9. Recognize the connections between the origins of theatre and theatrical masks.
10. Recall the two modes of performance in theatre.
11. Recall the qualities of live performance.
12. Recognize the connection between the script and the performance.

### Overview and Outline

What is theatre? To start, let’s look at the origin of the word. Theatre comes from the Greek *theatron*, or “seeing place.” So on a basic level, a theatre is a place where something is seen. Already, with this simple definition, we gain an important clue about what theatre is. For something to be seen, after all, there must be people to do the seeing. So the theatre involves those who watch and those who are watched—the audience and the actors onstage.

Theatre depends on a separation of the viewer and the viewed. This separation need not be literal, however. In fact, some of the most powerful theatre happening today happens very intimately, with performers mere inches away from the audience. And sometimes the separation of actor and audience is more conceptual than physical, as with virtual theatre transmitted into a computer or smartphone. The separation of the theatre is something abstract, a feeling of distance

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between the viewer and what is seen. Theatre can simply be the result of a change in the attitude of the spectator: If I take on the perspective that I am watching life around me as if it were onstage, the everyday can suddenly take on a magical quality.

This kind of theatre—we might call this a theatre of perception—is demonstrated beautifully by a section of the High Line, a public park in New York City built on old railroad tracks elevated above the bustling city streets. In one section of the park, pedestrians can enter an “urban theatre”—a set of benches and aisles in front of a stage. But this “stage” is not typical: it’s a big window that frames a busy intersection. Walkers on the High Line can sit on a bench and watch the spectacle of people rushing to work, hailing a cab, talking on their phones, laughing with their friends, and otherwise carrying on with their lives. When viewed as if they were on a stage, these actions take on a new sense of importance. Their circumstances are heightened. They might not realize it, but they are performing!

Another kind of theatrical separation can exist when audience members might not realize they are an audience. The “invisible theatre” of the Brazilian activist and director Augusto Boal often used this technique. Boal’s actors would stage an altercation on the street, only to reveal to onlookers afterward that they were, in fact, just performing. Suddenly passersby became audience members, where before they were bystanders. And these audience members were forced to question their own “performances” in the play that took place: Did they help the person under attack? Or did they just watch or even inch away?

Most of the time, though, audiences and performers know that they are part of a theatrical event. They have a mutual understanding. The audience will watch and react to the play, and the performers will put on a show. Everyone knows that what happens will be different from everyday existence. Even if the play attempts to emulate real life—and some of the theatre we will examine in this book does exactly that—it still does so in circumstances that make it, in some way, extraordinary.

To summarize our description thus far, theatre describes a set of heightened circumstances that depend on a separation (whether acknowledged or not) of audience and performer. But we also use the word to refer to the physical space in which theatre often takes place. Theatre (the creation of performance and audience) can occur in a theatre (a place). It could also exist elsewhere, though. In this book, we will examine theatre that takes place in streets, in homes, in abandoned weapons factories, online, and in quarries—just to name a few examples. But even then, we refer to these spaces as a theatre. They transform, just as the performers do, from ordinary to exceptional.

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In addition to a theatre building, there's yet another way we can use the word theatre: the collection of artists who create a theatrical work. We call this collection the company. So the theatre can be a physical place, what happens in that place, and the people who create what happens in that place. To take one example, when we refer to the Guthrie Theatre, we refer to (1) the actual building in Minneapolis called the Guthrie Theatre; (2) what happens in that building (the performed actions and the audiences who watch them); and (3) the artists and administrators who create these occurrences.

Finally, we also use the word theatre to summon the professional occupation—and often the passion—of thousands of people all over the world. It is a vocation and sometimes a lifelong devotion. If someone says, “I work in theatre,” they are telling you that they work in a theatre, they participate in the activity of theatre, they collaborate with other theatre artists, and—perhaps most importantly—that they are inspired by theatre. Theatre is an occupation and an art. To work in the theatre is not just to labor, but also to create.

We have already discussed one definition of theatre—the separation of actor and audience—so let's now examine the three other main definitions: theatre as a building, a company, and an occupation.

### What is Theatre?

- I. The Theatre Building
- II. The Theatre Company
- III. The Occupation of Theatre
  - A. Work
  - B. Art
  - C. Impersonation
  - D. Performance
    - 1. Live Performance
    - 2. Scripted and Rehearsed Performance

## Terms

Acting (actor)
Art
Audience
Building
Character
Crew

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Composing
Designing
Directing
Empathy
House management
Immediacy
Impersonation
Mask
Performance
Play
Play script/script
Playwriting (playwright)
Presentational
Production
Representational
Stage management
Suspension of disbelief
<i>Theatron</i>
Troupe

**Suggested Plays and Films**

These plays and films demonstrate different types of theatre, illustrate the difference between representational and presentational performance, and offer a look at life in the theatre.

**Plays and Books on Theatre**

*Antigone* by Sophocles  
*A Streetcar Named Desire* by Tennessee Williams  
*'night, Mother* by Marsha Norman  
*Galileo* by Bertolt Brecht  
*The Dresser* by Ronald Harwood  
*Theatre of the Oppressed* by Augusto Boal  
*A Life in the Theatre* by David Mamet

**Films**

*Antigone*. Dir. Don Taylor. BBC/Bioscope, 1986. Part 2 of "The Theban Plays" series.

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*A Streetcar Named Desire*. Dir. Elia Kazan. Warner Brothers Studio, 1951.

*Theater of War*. Dir. John W. Walter. White Buffalo Entertainment, 2008.

*Los Vendidos*. Dir. Luis Valdez. Part of the 1970 documentary *El Teatro Campesino*.

*Cradle Will Rock*. Dir. Tim Robbins. Cradle Productions, Inc., 1999.