A Chinese opera “Dan,” or female-role performer, emerging from a curtain during a ritual (held every 60 years to chase away “ghosts” and maintain peaceful life) at Sheung Shui Heung in the rural New Territories, near Hong Kong.

Some famous film actors also work on the stage. Here, Daniel Radcliffe, best known as the title character in the Harry Potter films, plays Alan Strang, a troubled teenage boy, in Equus at the Gielgud Theatre in London.
INTRODUCTION

YOU WALK INTO A THEATRE full of anticipation. Even if the “theatre” is a chair in front of your DVD player and you have just rented a new movie, you hope to be transported for the next few hours. You hope that the chair is magic, so that you can sit and watch, yet go on a journey—fueled by energy and navigated by imagination—into galactic possibilities. You hope that the show will take you away.

For live theatre, your anticipation may be even greater. This is kind of a special occasion. You may have reserved tickets and gotten dressed up. Most of all, what you and the other audience members are seeing...
tonight will be different from any other performance of the show. Things
could go wrong. They could go spectacularly right. There is danger and
expectation. Great live theatre combines the fun of watching a film with
the thrill of being at an athletic event or concert. You get to sit and be told a
story, right there with the storytellers.

You are breathing the same air as the actors. You are highly aware of
each other’s presence. You have a special relationship with them and other
members of the audience for the duration of the performance.

And you have power. The show is not complete
without your response, without interaction between actors
and audience. Whether you laugh really hard, remain
stony silent, or shift in your chair and cough, you affect
the performance. You can change the actors, how hard
they push or how relaxed they are. You make this show
different than it would have been without you. In turn,
the actors affect you. A performance might start strong
and then lose its way. But then perhaps the actors adjust
to the energy in the room and regain their connection
with the audience. Each group brings energy to the event.
Each charges and stimulates the other.

The physical presence of another human being creates variables. You
may rehearse an important encounter with someone in your life, even
scripting exactly what you intend to say and hoping for a specific response.
But he or she will almost always do or say something that makes it
different from the way you planned it, perhaps giving you that look that
always unhinges you or an answer that you never even considered.

Filmed performances, unlike theatre, are unchanging, but our response
to them can change over time. If you watch the same film at various
stages in your life, it may seem different with each
viewing because you have changed over the years. The
performances are the same, locked in celluloid permanence.
But you aren’t. And live theatre isn’t, either.

This chapter will introduce you to the art of theatre,
help you examine various theatre experiences you
have already had, and prepare you for seeing a live
performance. It will familiarize you with those who do
theatre and with what theatre does for us, as well as offer
some ideas about how it might become even more a part of
your life.

**Lesson Objectives:**
Upon completion of this chapter, you will be able to:

1. Identify the four basic elements of any theatre event.
2. Experience the functions of theatre when you see an event.
3. Recognize the varieties of theatre experience that may be available in
   your own hometown and around the world.
4. Identify the Life Themes that make all human stories universal.
5. Navigate your way to theatre events and read signals about appropriate audience behavior from those sharing the event.
6. Know one way to approach a verbal or written response to a theatre production.

What Is Theatre?

We can strip our definition of theatre down to its most basic elements: actor, audience, space, and story.

Do we need to be in a “real” theatre to do theatre? A big, formal building with an actual stage and a bank of seats? No—theatre is done in warehouses, in basements, on street corners, in churches, and in parks. It’s done in garages, cafeterias, gyms, and playgrounds. Do we need a script? Not always—some theatre is based on improvisation and spontaneous suggestion.

What is needed (according to Shakespeare) is “a board and a passion.” We need a place to perform and the overwhelming impulse to do so, combined with eagerness on the part of others to watch, listen, and participate—a passionate engagement on the part of those who present and those who observe. For an event to be called live theatre, we must have these four elements:

- **Actor:** Performers take on personas other than those of their normal daily existence. They become others, taking the best of childhood “dress up and let’s pretend” into full role-playing. Even in a one-person autobiographical show, the actor assumes the role of narrator and also assumes characters and selves from earlier times in his own life. There will always
be some degree of transformation. Sometimes there is an astonishing transformation—to the degree that the actor is unrecognizable.

- **Audience:** Audience consists of those who agree to witness the enactment, to take the time to experience it with the actors. Most will make an effort to become engaged, to actually lose themselves by being swept up in what is presented. Whether audience members have paid a lot and anticipated this event for months or have just had their attention grabbed by a free performance while out walking, there is now a willingness to suspend the distractions of life’s details and embark on an imaginative journey.

- **Space:** A space is a place transformed for a performance. If it is a large opera house, empty seats will be filled and lights will be dimmed around those seats and come up on a stage. Actors and scenery move around that stage, altering it over and over again. At the other extreme, if the space is a street corner, the audience members may form a circle around the actors, or they may agree to stand near the curb while the actors perform against a storefront. In any case, a place will be altered temporarily to reflect the redefined relationships between those who give and those who receive the performance.

- **Story:** A story is a tale told about the life of someone, real or imaginary, who has experienced or dreamed something worthy of attention. The story may have a fully developed beginning, middle, and end, or it may be incomplete and fragmentary. In some performances, such as a musical revue, there is no discernible plot. There are, however, songs that tell small stories or lay out fragments of stories, allowing the audience to fill in the details from their own lives. In each of these instances, at the very least, the singer says, “This is who I am, this is what is going on with me, let me tell you how I feel.” Here, we get bits and pieces of a larger story. In abstract nonlinear theatre, we get snippets of lives, much like walking down a street, catching bits of conversation and glimpses of people in windows, on porches, or in alleys. We then tend to fill in the gaps according to our own experience and perceptions. In other performances, we get complete details, but there is always an invitation to enter the life of another.

How do these four elements separate theatre from other public events?

If an actor, an audience, a space, and a story are needed, what’s the difference between theatre and a sporting event? Well, no one knows how a game will end. In sports, a planned outcome is unethical, sometimes criminal. Although theatre is not always scripted, it is also rarely completely spontaneous. Even improv troupes, groups of actors (usually comic) who appear to invent their performance before our eyes, have rehearsed and planned for certain desired outcomes and have set ways to check in with each other to move the “discovered” story forward. Their performances are seldom, if ever, completely random. And while some athletes assume a public persona, it is rarely sustained or complex enough to be called acting.
Sometimes a nontheatrical event becomes theatre. Imagine you are at an outdoor political rally where people have come to share their feelings about a war. Strongly opposing opinions are presented with speeches, chants, demonstrations, and debates. Then imagine that someone gets up and says:

This is the character Hector from the play *Tiger at the Gates* by Jean Giraudoux. Hector was the general of the Trojan army and lived over 3,000 years ago. At the moment of this speech, his country has just fought one war and is about to embark on another, the legendary and bloody Trojan War. Hector has just been asked to speak honoring those who have already died.

This commands attention. It is different from what the audience has heard up to now. In the silence, the speaker's voice carries throughout the space:

You want me to give a speech honoring the dead of war? I don’t think so. The speech would be a hypocritical defense of those of us who are still alive, a plea for acquittal. I am not so sure of my innocence. Besides, I have given that speech already. I gave it to them when they were still with me in their last minutes of life, in the aftermath of battle, while they could still give me what was left of their sight and hearing. Want to know what I said to them? There was one completely disemboweled, already turning up the whites of his eyes and I lied, “You’re doing better. Going to get you home soon!” and another with his skull split in two and I said, “You look pretty funny with that broken nose, you know that?” And my aide, barely more than a boy, no really just a boy, with his left arm hanging useless and his last blood flowing out of him and
I said, “Phew. It’s a good thing for you it’s the left arm you’ve splintered.” And he smiled. So, what did I do? I gave them one final swig of life; it was all they asked for; they died drinking it. Now I would just ask them to forgive us, those of us who still have our eyes, feel warmth, and can see the sun. And that’s all there is to say. Let there be no more war. [English text by Robert Barton]

Because the speaker has become an actor by assuming the character of another, and because the outcome of Hector’s story is known rather than random, the tale of his final encounter with his dying men becomes a moment of theatre in the midst of a political gathering. The actor has become someone else, whose story is one of the oldest in Greek mythology. It is no longer just someone expressing an opinion. It is art based on the idea of the unchanging nature of war over the vast expanse of time. It is far more powerful than if he had gotten up and said something like, “You know people have been dying senselessly for thousands of years. It’s time to stop.” It does not matter how many people present know that Hector eventually died a horrific death in the very war he was trying to stop. There is enough of his story here to bring his ideas alive and to bring theatre to the debate.

**What Does Theatre Give?**

What will theatre do for us? What does it offer? In the previous instance, the invasion of a moment of theatre gives those present a chance to move beyond the particulars of the debate and into a more universal place. But what do we reap from regular attendance at the theatre, from making a habit of going to plays? What do those of us who do hope to receive? What, for us, is theatre’s *function*?

1. **Theatre diverts us** and takes us out of our daily grind. Being told stories is good; having them acted out can be sublime. It can delight, distract, transport, and entertain us. Many plays and productions strive for little more than this, and many audiences find it fully satisfying and more than enough, though theatre can be much more.

2. **Theatre gives us an “emotional workout.”** Many theatergoers report laughing and crying more at a performance than they did for weeks before, experiencing more big, intense, and therapeutic emotional releases. Plays tend to take place on the most important days in characters’ lives—when enormous changes take place and powerful feelings are present. These feelings are contagious. The same way that some go to the gym to work out physical muscles, some go to the theatre to work out emotional ones. Theatre can save us from our tendencies to be indifferent or disengaged or to become emotionally unplugged.

3. **Theatre can illuminate some aspect of the human condition**, tackling either important social and political issues or taking on the major questions about the meaning of life. The great plays can provide us with profound insights into the very act of being alive. Theatre can spur us to
take action and bring about change, just as it can lead us to acceptance and peace in our lives. When we can sit and observe others struggling with our major issues and finding resolution, we can go empathically on the same journey and find inspiration for our own.

4. **Theatre is a way for the community to come together and share essential experiences.** C. S. Lewis wrote, “We read to know we are not alone.” It could be said that we go to plays to prove that we are not alone. In our increasingly technological world, we have become isolated—strangers in our own neighborhoods and communities. We are also an increasingly mobile society, some of us changing location so often that we lose touch with our original community—our tribe of origin—and have difficulty accepting and being accepted by our new tribe. Theatre is a live and immediate communal experience. It provides us with the chance to share laughter, ideas, feelings, and wisdom. By sharing, we grow stronger as individuals, and we all can become more fully invested members of the tribe. Sometimes sacred, sometimes profane, live theatre is always about our shared humanity.

5. **Theatre gives us lasting, indelible memories.** Because we were there on a certain night, really there in the midst of the magic, we tend to remember, rehash, and relive our great moments in the theatre like no others. If you are new to theatre, you may have some concert memories of this kind. It did not matter how many CDs you had of a favorite band or how many times you saw them onscreen. Chances are, if you got to experience them in a space you actually shared, you will never forget it. If some of the songs were about deep, personal journeys, you probably felt something close to what happens when story envelops us in the theatre.

The Range of Theatre

All cultures have theatre in some form. People tell their stories and act out their issues. It is powerful to act out a concern, but it can be equally powerful to observe this enactment. Watching someone walk through your experiences clarifies and crystallizes them. At any given moment, all the following theatre groups may be simultaneously telling tales, raising questions, and, in some instances, offering answers:

- **The Bread and Puppet Theater** may be offering biting political satire in an open field, mesmerizing audiences with the use of gigantic and strikingly expressive puppets.
- **The Spiderwoman Theater** may be reviving its classic “Women in Violence” at an international festival, using broad comic devices to make serious points.
part I • What Is Theatre?

• **The New Globe Theatre** (the replica of the theatre used by Shakespeare in the Elizabethan era), may be staging a performance of one of his plays, featuring an all-male cast and rushes on the stage floor in authentic historical recreation.

• **The National Theatre of the Deaf** may be touring one of their adaptations of a classic children’s book with both sign language and spoken sequences for deaf and nondeaf audiences. The Little Theatre of the Deaf is the children’s wing of the National Theatre of the Deaf, formed in 1968 to reach out to young audiences and their families.

• **The Beijing Opera** may be warming up for one of its gymnastic extravaganzas, demanding Olympic-caliber athletic skills and astonishing precision from its cast.

• **The Ridiculous Theatrical Company** may be holding auditions for one of their gay literary satires, inspired by the legendary Charles Ludlam.

• **The Access Theater Company** may be rehearsing an original dance piece partnering disabled with nondisabled performers.

Theatre companies range widely. The National Theatre of the Deaf stages performances incorporating spoken and sign-language sections for deaf and hearing children. Here they perform *Next Stop, Africa.*
National Beijing Opera Company performance of *The Legend of White Snake* at Sadler’s Wells Theatre in London.

- **The Intertribal Theatre Project** may be presenting its *Coyote Tails* shows and workshops to military personnel on a base as part of their diversity training program.

- **The San Francisco Mime Troupe** may be setting up in a downtown park right in your city, where they will present broad farcical characters and get huge laughs while seriously attacking big government policies regarding personal privacy.

- **The National Theatre**, a modern and magnificent theatre in Havana, Cuba, may be presenting a “politically correct” professional production. Meanwhile, a struggling amateur production of a new play goes on in the empty, derelict shell of an old pre-Castro professional theatre, and a polished extravaganza is staged in the new Tropicana complex in Santiago de Cuba, where only foreigners are allowed to see the show.

- **Ogun’s Mysteries**, a tale passed down orally through the generations, may be in preparation outside Dakar, Senegal, and in numerous other locations. The entire community is involved in this annual performance of the story of reunification with God. It is both a
much-anticipated social entertainment and a deeply felt spiritual experience.

- **The Silken Phoenix**—a musical theatre work celebrating three of Asia’s greatest women poets from past centuries—may be touring the world, questioning the stereotype of passive Asian women and showing that accomplishment is possible even in a repressive society.

These are just samplings of theatre occurring globally and simultaneously. All these theatres impact lives.

Some actors never become household names but have a profound impact on live theatre, media, and the personal lives of others. Mako, the Japan-born actor whose birth name was Makoto Iwamatsu, was such a force during his forty-year career, ending with his recent death.

Back when most roles offered to Asian-heritage actors were caricatures or stereotypes, Mako took just such a part and used it to open the doors of Hollywood and Broadway to others. In the film *The Sand Pebbles*, he played the Chinese character Po-han, who spoke pidgin English, called white sailors “master,” and treated them as such. But through the power of his acting, he transformed Po-han, compelled the audience to empathize and identify with his “coolie,” and won an Oscar nomination for Best Supporting Actor. He proceeded to push actively for more and better roles for Asian Americans.

According to George Takei, who played Sulu in *Star Trek*, “Most actors played such parts and did what they were told to do: giggle here, shuffle over there, bow, and go out. He was one of the early truly trained actors who was able to take stock roles, roles seen many times before, and make an individual—a live and vibrant character.”

One of his most important contributions was founding the East West Players, the first Asian American theatre company in the United States. “What many people say is, ‘If it wasn’t for Mako, there wouldn’t have been Asian American theatre,’” says Tim Dang, current artistic director of the company. “He is revered as sort of the godfather of Asian American theatre.”

Mako was a familiar face in film, television, and live theatre. TV roles included appearances on *I Spy*, *M*A*S*H*, and *Walker, Texas Ranger*. He played a Japanese admiral in the film *Pearl Harbor*, a Singaporean in *Seven Years in Tibet*, and Akiro the Wizard in *Conan the Barbarian* and *Conan the Destroyer*. On Broadway, his multiple roles as reciter, shogun, emperor, and an American businessman in Stephen Sondheim’s musical *Pacific Overtures* earned him a Tony Award nomination for Best Actor in a Musical.

As artistic director of East West Players, Mako trained generations of actors and playwrights and staged classics such as Shakespeare’s *Twelfth Night* and Anton Chekhov’s *Three Sisters*. He once devoted an entire season to plays pertaining to the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II to coincide with the start of a national discussion on internment reparations. Asian American theatre artists benefited from his training, his mentoring, and most of all from his example.
Who Makes Theatre Happen?

It takes a village to put on a show. Often, in the final stages of production, we have spent so much time together and so little with others in our lives that we begin to feel as if we have been together forever. Then the show closes and snaps us out of it. Mounting a theatre production is like a game with teams and elaborate rules; and like any team effort, players with complementary, collaborative skills are necessary for the play to be successful.

We will try to deal with nearly all the theatre artists in the course of this book, all of whom are the storytellers. Some are involved in preproduction work long before opening, others become involved as the play moves into rehearsal and production, and still others are involved in postproduction after the show closes. All are necessary to make the specific event happen in its own miraculous way. Look at Table 1.1. It may surprise you to learn that any production can easily involve a hundred people, and some twice that many. The chart omits important assistants who swell the number even more. If you have stayed at the end of a film to read all the credits, you know that, with technicians, this number can multiply several times in the world of film. While live-theatre jobs may be filled by separate individuals, many small theatre productions have only a handful of participants doing the ultimate multitasking. Sometimes the village is very small, with some extraordinarily hearty and versatile villagers.

There are a few grunt jobs in Table 1.1, involving labor without much demand for creativity. For the vast majority of these staff members, however, their job requires a tremendous amount of imagination, as well as the drive to realize fanciful visions in concrete ways. Play productions involve imagination driven by impulse. Webster defines the word imagine as “to form a mental image of something not actually present to the senses.” As are the body and the emotions, the imagination is like a muscle; it needs exercise to stay healthy and strong. It requires engagement and the willingness to meet the object, event, or idea halfway, to participate in the experience. Children have an abundance of it, which, sadly, sometimes goes unnourished.

The imaginative impulse, traceable to the beginning of recorded human history, is a powerful source of joy or release. We use it to let our minds soar above unfortunate circumstances such as an unpleasant family event or a dead-end work situation. Imagination does not necessarily mean action, but for the artists of the theatre, it is all about making imaginative leaps and pushing forward to actualization. From the playwright trying to figure out
Table 1.1  The Production Team

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PREPRODUCTION</th>
<th>REHEARSAL/PRODUCTION</th>
<th>POSTPRODUCTION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>PLAYWRIGHT (author)</td>
<td>ACTOR (performer)</td>
<td>CRITIC (writes journal reviews)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COMPOSER (creator of music)</td>
<td>GRAPHIC DESIGNER (creates images, layouts used in ads)</td>
<td>STRIKE CREW (dismantle and/or store physical production elements: props, costumes, set pieces, lights, etc.)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LYRICIST (author of song lyrics in a musical)</td>
<td>DRESSER (assists actors with preparation)</td>
<td>ALL OF THE ABOVE (memories)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIBRETTIST/BOOK AUTHOR (author of dialogue in a musical)</td>
<td>MAKEUP DESIGNER (designs actors’ makeup)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PRODUCER (makes financial and business decisions)</td>
<td>MAKEUP ARTIST (assists actors in makeup application)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MANAGING DIRECTOR (oversees day-to-day business)</td>
<td>HAIR/WIG ARTIST (designs/assists actors’ hair/wig)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ARTISTIC DIRECTOR (oversees creative staff)</td>
<td>TECHNICAL DIRECTOR (oversees the construction of scenery and placement of light/sound equipment)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GOVERNING BOARD (oversees everything and everyone)</td>
<td>SHOP FOREMAN (oversees craft persons in one of several areas)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DIRECTOR (artistic guide)</td>
<td>SHOPPER (purchases cloth, clothing, and properties)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CASTING DIRECTOR (assists in actor selection)</td>
<td>PATTERN DRAFTER (transfers costume design drawings into working patterns)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MUSIC DIRECTOR (guides the music performers)</td>
<td>CUTTER (cuts patterns and fabrics for costumes)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FIGHT DIRECTOR (creates and coaches stage fight choreography)</td>
<td>DRAPER (sews and fits mock-ups and costumes)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHOREOGRAPHER (designs dance and movement-based sequences)</td>
<td>PROP ARTISAN/MASTER (coordinates all items carried by actors)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VOICE SPECIALIST (trains actors in use of voice, accents, and line interpretation)</td>
<td>SET DECORATOR (coordinates the detailing of the scenic environment)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MOVEMENT SPECIALIST (designs and trains actors in physically demanding use of the body)</td>
<td>MASTER CARPENTER (oversees construction of all built units)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DRAMATURG (research and text specialist)</td>
<td>MASTER ELECTRICIAN (hangs, focuses, maintains lights)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DESIGNERS</td>
<td>SOUND ENGINEER (records sound effects and underscoring)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCENERY/SCENOGRAPHER (designs visual environments)</td>
<td>CREW HEAD (teaches and supervises crew members)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>COSTUME (designs clothing, wigs, masks, etc.)</td>
<td>CONSTRUCTION CREW (builds needed units)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LIGHTING (designs lighting and often special effects)</td>
<td>RUNNING CREW BOARD OPERATOR (makes changes to scenery, costumes, lights, etc., during the production)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOUND (designs auditory environment)</td>
<td>AUDIENCE (us)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FX (devises special effects)</td>
<td>CRITIC (writes newspaper or broadcast review of the production)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
how best to create a story that can be told in a few hours, to all those who figure out how to tell it, all the way to the marketing team who tries to connect the play imaginatively with its intended audience, there is constant envisioning and creative execution. In subsequent chapters, we will try to take you inside each of these artists’ various journeys of imagination and impulse.

Having identified the personnel, let’s now turn our attention to what theatre is likely to be about.

The Content of Theatre

One of the best things about theatre is its ability to show us both the surface differences and the essential sameness of human experience. It gives us windows into the lives and traditions of unfamiliar others (thereby reducing our fear of the unknown) and builds bridges into those same lives (as we see how much we all have in common).

Life Themes

Sometimes surface differences between us are so strange or exotic that it seems that we have little in common. But theatre always makes us aware that whatever we are experiencing in life, others are as well. Playwrights choose certain topics over and over, within which they explore human experience. We will address six of the most common, along with some film and play titles that you might recognize. Don’t be surprised if you would put a particular film in a different category; it’s all about the experience you had. (In our list, we include both films that are much honored and those that are much maligned, since art does not have to be great to deal with universal themes.)

1. **Love**: It makes the world go ’round, and it’s never easy. (Films: *The Young Victoria*, *The Curious Case of Benjamin Button*, *Brokeback Mountain*, *27 Dresses*, *All About Steve*, and *The Sea Within* [Mar adentro]; plays: *Much Ado About Nothing* and *M. Butterfly*.)

2. **War**: It invigorates hope. It destroys life. (Films: *The Hurt Locker*, *Inglourious Basterds*, *Jarhead*, *Dear John*, and *Pan’s Labyrinth*; plays: *Arms and the Man* and *Necessary Targets*.)

3. **Generations**: Parents want their children safe and secure. Children want an exciting new world. Or sometimes it’s vice versa. (Films: *Meet the Fockers*, *Because I Said So*, and *The White Ribbon*; plays: *King Lear* and *Roosters*.)

4. **Rebellion**: The status quo isn’t working. Social, cultural, or political upheaval may make things better. Or not. (Films: *Invictus*, *Milk*, *Don’t Mess with the Zohan*, *Underworld*, and *The Secret in Their Eyes*; plays: *Antigone* and *Master Harold…and the boys*.)
5. Dreams: All of us have ambitions, fantasies and hopes. They may barely resemble the lives for which we settle. (Films: *Up*, *The Blind Side*, *Slumdog Millionaire*, *Step Up*, and *Glitter*; plays: *The Three Sisters* and *Bitter Cane*.)

6. Values: What if your most powerful beliefs about what is true are the exact opposite of those with whom you must coexist? (Films: *An Education*, *The Reader*, *Bringing Down the House*, and *Bad Education [La Mala educación]*; plays: *He and She* and *The Piano Lesson*.)

We will explore each of these life themes by examining the two play scripts in Dramatic Interludes, after each set of two chapters of this book. In each set of featured plays, the first is a Western European classic and a source of many of our theatrical traditions. The second is a contemporary play by or about underrepresented peoples: women, persons of color, and challenged or disenfranchised voices. Each pair of scripts will give us an effective taste of the best of the old and the new, the long-honored and the long-overdue.

**Opposites**

The universal symbol for the theatre is a set of two masks: one **tragic** and one **comic**. We can take any of the six life themes just described and decide to laugh or cry about them, and many artists challenge us to do both. In tragedy, death is nearly inevitable, but in comedy, life is. Characters in both can gain self-knowledge, but in tragedy, it often comes just too late to transform what is left of life, while in comedy, it is never too late to change perceptions and alter the future. The overwhelming presence of death or life tends to dominate.

The main character in a comedy is likely to make and be around friends (or at least amusing companions), while the tragic journey is a lonely one. Often, we in the audience seem to be the only true friend and confidant of the tragic hero. Comedy has a healthy, robust feeling to it, as if the actors have really big appetites and cannot wait to devour an enormous banquet right after the show. There’s no such stomach for food in tragedy—too much anguish deep in the gut, too many heavy burdens. These contrasting interior landscapes affect the kind of light in the actors’ eyes, the energy in their bodies, and the overall relationships that occur between characters and between actors and audience.
There are two other opposing, but coexisting, components of theatre. While we are audiences, we choose to believe that we are watching real people experiencing real life. This is called **suspension of disbelief**. We take our tendency to disbelieve and temporarily suspend it. At the same time, a part of us never forgets that we are watching a show and that messages are being conveyed to us. This is called **aesthetic distance**. These two concepts intermingle in intriguing ways. One allows us to forget ourselves and project ourselves into the lives of the characters on stage, while the other allows us to step back and gain insight into our own behavior—all at the same time.

**Getting to the Theatre**

Now, while you are studying the art form of theatre, is the perfect time to experience it firsthand. Here are some tips for finding information and obtaining tickets:

1. **Listings:** Your local newspaper probably has an Arts and Leisure section once a week, where information about play performances appears. Mid-sized and large cities also often have a free, widely distributed *Weekly Guide* with theatre listings. Most theatres have online listings, and all theatre departments have a central bulletin board with information about local productions.

2. **Free admission:** Most nonprofessional theatres need ushers and almost always give them free admission to the show. You sign up in advance to work a performance. You need to be there about 45 minutes before the show to be trained, but it is an easy and enjoyable job. It is fun to be part of the preperformance energy and to interact with people with whom you will be sharing the show. Also, if your school paper does not have a regular play reviewer and you are interested, you could offer to write a review for a production, in which case you are almost invariably given a complimentary press seat. This could be the beginning—in a few years, you could be the next Roger Ebert.

3. **Full-price tickets:** The cost to attend a show can vary widely. Tickets for students at a college theatre production average about $10, while some Broadway shows have ticket prices of $130 or even more.

4. **Cheap tickets:** Many productions have preview performances for several days before they actually open. The show may...
not be quite as polished as it will be, but these tickets are less expensive. Most theatres have a student discount, which is often not advertised, so always ask about it. Some theatres also schedule special student performances, usually weeknights or matinees. Chances are that some funding for the theatre is included with your student fees, so you should receive a standard discount with your student ID.

5. **Rush tickets:** Rush tickets are bought the day of the performance, often an hour before curtain, when seats may be discounted to fill the house. There are some touring shows (like *Rent*) that have a built-in clause requiring rush tickets for students at significantly reduced prices. In large theatres, tickets in the upper balcony are less expensive, and some venues also sell standing room, which allows you to lean on a platform at the back of the auditorium. Almost all theatres have group rates starting at 10 people, so if you can organize nine of your friends, it may be worth it. If you are attending as a class, your teacher may purchase clusters of tickets at group rates. Sometimes these are already built into the course fee.

6. **Ticket booths:** Located in large cities (in both London and New York, for example, the discount ticket booth is called TKTS), these booths offer reduced (often half-price) tickets for professional productions available for that day’s performance. Even a highly successful show may release discounted tickets if that day’s performance looks as if it will fall short of a sellout. For a Broadway show, there are numerous alternatives to those $130 seats. The Web site Broadway Box.com collects discount codes found on posters, mail fliers, and other Web sites. The Frugal TheaterGoers Guide to Discount Tickets (http://home.nyc.rr.com/frugaltheatergoe) contains dozens of links to discount sites. The Theatre Development Fund (http://www.tdf.org) offers a buying service for students, teachers, and seniors for greatly reduced prices. However, many sites claiming to sell discount tickets actually have inflated prices, so it is always a good idea to go right to the site of the play itself for what may actually be the best price.

7. **Reservations:** Getting advance theatre reservations may well be your best plan if you do not need a super-cheap, same-day-only seat. If you want security, you will probably be happiest if you reserve by phone, online, or at the box office in advance because this allows you to choose exactly the seats you want (except for general-admission shows). Most audience members prefer to be in the middle of the house on an aisle. But if the show is a lavish spectacle or splashy musical, you can sit far back and still get the full effect.
Theatre Protocol

Appropriate behavior at a play will vary widely from place to place and culture to culture, as well as by the nature of the production. At some theatre events, an audience sitting quietly in the dark with their hands in their laps signals to the performers that they are failing to reach them. In another, the same behavior is considered to be the only appropriate response. Let your sensitivity to others guide your general behavior. You are not alone. Rude, distracting behaviors are not acceptable. You can subscribe to temporary membership in the tribe by paying attention to its protocol.

Certain rules are fairly universal. They may seem obvious. Theoretically, no one needs to be told about simple courtesies, but unfortunately, this is not always true.

1. Turn off any electronic devices that make noise so that all can have an event without interruption. Under no circumstances is it OK to text during a performance. You may not be making any noise, but your obvious discourtesy and lit phone screen are annoying and distracting to those around you.

2. No productions can be recorded on video, camera, or any other image-capturing system unless with the explicit written permission of the production. In most cases, attempts to do so would not only be rude, but illegal.

3. Respecting the work is important. Attention must be paid. If your personal mood or lack of interest prevents you from engaging in the work, let others around you enjoy their experience by not drawing attention to yourself by eating, talking, or texting.

4. If you have been required to report on the play as a class assignment, try not to take notes during the performance. It is distracting to the actors, the audience around you, and yourself. Sit back and experience the event. Trust that you will remember things until intermission or the final curtain.

5. If you are someone who does not retain impressions and you feel you must jot down notes or you will lose your insights forever, do so briefly, discreetly, and quietly. Never show up with a full-size notebook or clipboard. A few notecards or a small pad that fits in your pocket is all you need. Better yet, just take notes on the program, possibly checking names of those you wish to praise or putting question marks around those who made decisions with which you disagree. In any case, these should be nothing more than brief reminders to help you fill in details later, and never to the extent that writing takes you out of the performance.

OSCAR WILDE
PLAYWRIGHT

The stage is not merely the meeting place of all the arts, but it is also the return of art to life.
Responding to Theatre

A fully realized response to theatre requires time and study. In the final chapter of this book, we provide guidelines for writing an informed critical review based on some exposure to the full spectrum of the world of the theatre. Like anything else, the more you know about the theatre, the more you can appreciate its nuances. A few of us, touched by genius in a particular area, can see, hear, and understand a great work in that field at first glance. For the rest of us, it takes time and study, just as it does to understand the power of a great abstract painter, an elegant mathematical formula, or the magnificent scale of molecular biology.

Nevertheless, you may well be asked to attend and respond to a show early in the term, so it is valuable to have a useful framework for doing so, one that allows an honest first impression without in-depth knowledge. If you are to be involved in extensive written analysis early in the term, we suggest that you skip to Chapter 12 and review that material. However, it is placed at the end of the book in the hope that after a full exposure to theatre, you will feel ready to provide informed, detailed criticism. Here, we will provide twelve questions that can enhance a response at the beginning of your exposure to live theatre. This list does not require expertise—just an honest willingness to access your own experience.

1. How do you think your mood may have influenced your response to the performance?
2. What, if anything, seemed particularly noteworthy about the space in which the piece was performed?
3. What was the story? What happened? How did people change?
4. Was there a central conflict? Did someone win? How did you feel about his or her victory?
5. How did the time in which the play was set influence your response?
6. How did the setting or use of space work?
7. Were there significant ideas shared or lessons to be learned?
8. Which of your five senses were most and least stimulated by the event?
9. What did you think were the major strengths of this production?
10. What seemed to you to be its major weaknesses?
11. Did you have any prior experience with this play or this kind of play? If so, how do you think it influenced your response?
12. How, if at all, did this production make you interested or eager to attend more theatre?

(A more detailed list is available in Appendix A, and a response form can be found in Appendix B.)
Organizing Your Thoughts

Your response can be deeper and clearer by having guidelines around which to organize your thoughts.

1. **How will your familiarity with the material affect your response?**
   Have you seen this play or film before? Having the exact experience as the first time is impossible. Or have you, for example, studied a play by Shakespeare as literature and are so familiar with the text that you already have strong expectations? Or is the material completely new to you, so the freshness of your response will be unique to this production? You’ll not see the same play in the same way ever again. You get only one first kiss in life.

2. Your response to a theatre event will more often be “mixed” than all good or all bad. We often “liked but didn’t love” or “didn’t enjoy but found interesting.” Rating an event on a scale of 1 to 10 can be a useful initial step in examining our experience. Don’t be surprised to find that you seldom give theatre a 1 or a 10.

3. Having established a production’s place on your scale of 1 to 10, explain why you feel that way. You should be able to discern and articulate the conditions of both the event and you. We are all willing to critique other people’s work, but sometimes we forget to critique ourselves:

   YOU—What mood or state of being did you bring into the theatre space? Were you focused or distracted? Eager or resigned? Physically well? Did you have dinner and a couple of drinks right before, or were you dying of hunger and couldn’t wait to get out of there and have dinner? Did the event happen to intersect with things going on in your personal life in either a positive or negative way?

   THE ENVIRONMENT—What factors in the space contributed to your experience? Was it too hot or cold? Were the seats comfortable or cramped, or did you have to stand? Did you have an obstructed view? Did the people sitting near you share your experience, or did they irritate and distract you?

The Production

Having critiqued factors beyond the production’s control, you can confidently move on to the show itself. The first set of questions, “The Story,” can be applied to the specific show that you are critiquing. The second set, “The World of the Play,” can apply not just to the production, but to the culture of origin of the text or event. Application 1, at the end of Dramatic Interlude 1: Love following Chapter 2, will show how these questions can be answered for a classic play by Shakespeare and a popular contemporary play.

The Story

1. **What happened?** Sometimes this is clear, sometimes not. In our personal theatre, we often get a befuddled feeling after an encounter, asking
ourselves, “What just happened?” In live theatre, some stories are down-right formulaic, while others are challenging.

2. **What was the central conflict?** How much was at stake? Which characters took what side in the conflict? Who played on each team? What prize was at stake? Who won, who lost, who gave up, who changed sides?

3. **What was the primary emotional mood?** Tragic? Silly? Intellectual? Hectic? Sly? This is not about the emotions of the characters, but the overall emotional mood of the event (that is, the playwright’s mood). Was there an overall mood, or did the production shift and alter unexpectedly?

### The World of the Play

1. **Time:** When in history is the play written or evolved, set, and performed? How far does this production move away from the time period that the piece was originally set in? How familiar or unfamiliar are you with the time period?

2. **Space:** How is the space defined and viewed? What kind of space did the production use?

3. **Values:** What beliefs seem most widely shared by characters in this play? Which truths, ideals, and traditions are deemed to be self-evident?
4. **Structure:** What is the social and familial structure? How strictly enforced are the standards of behavior? What is the hierarchy of authority?

5. **Pleasure:** What is considered beautiful and desirable by these characters? What is the collective attitude toward sexuality and sensuality? What's hot and what's not?

6. **Senses:** Which, if any, of the five senses are most frequently and effectively stimulated? What is the quality of light, sound, and patterns that constitute the play’s sensory world?

You will not be able to answer all the questions. But just considering them helps you enter the world of the play more openly, without the tendency to impose your own world on it. What things are so familiar that you wouldn't have noticed them ordinarily? Where do your personal and social norms bump up against those in the play? Is the world offering a “homecoming” or an adventure in an exotic alternative world? Let the event tell you what is important. “Loved it!” or “It sucked!” are legitimate immediate responses, but when sharing your response with others, something more thoughtful is needed. Exploring **why** you loved, hated, or felt ambivalent is interesting and illuminating.

---

**Three Kinds of Theatre**

In this book, we will examine the theatrical experience from three perspectives: **live theatre**, or performances with actors physically present; **media** or **screen theatre**, where electronics take the place of living human beings; and **personal theatre**, where we will ask you to consider theatrical elements in your own life. We will present these as featured boxes: **Theatre in Media**, which will examine our electronic theatrical experiences; and a two-part **Theatre in Your Life** feature, which will explore how your offstage or everyday existence involves theatrical elements and ways to consider your possible participation in the actual production of plays.

In a book about theatre, why will we spend time discussing filmed performances? Because many of our formative theatrical experiences have been with TV and film. Media are a crucial part of our private histories and personal mythologies. Many of our ideas about drama and life were formed in front of a screen. Most of us will spend many more hours of our lives there than in a theatre, particularly as home media centers and screening rooms become more common and the cost of attending live theatre continues to rise.

---

**ROBERT TOWNSEND**,
**POPULAR CULTURE EXPERT, FILMMAKER**

For many young people, life has been documented almost as if it were their own personal movie. Dad had a camera aimed right at them when they exited the womb. Then every time they took a first step or blew out the candles on their birthday cake, somebody was videotaping it. This is very different from those who just have their memories and a few photos.

---

**LEONARDO DICAPRIO**,
**ACTOR**

I used what would later be my emotional range as an actor to fake the greatest illnesses or family tragedies to prevent me from exploring algebra.

---

**DEREK LUKE**,
**ACTOR**

I lived in tough neighborhoods and the older boys picked on me, so I had to learn how to street-fight. That’s when I became an actor. I studied the cool guys with their hard faces, hard walk, and hard talk.

---

**JULIA STILES**,
**ACTOR**

Even when I was just a kid, I could walk around the city by myself and no one would mess with me. I learned to act tough and use my killer look.
Theatre in Media

Film Audiences

Are you a video baby? Has your entire life been a theatrical event, in the sense that the camera has been your audience? Did you know that others would watch your “performances” at a later time? Did you watch your favorite videos hundreds of times, memorizing every line and frame? If so, your digital adventures have formed who you are and how you will respond to any theatre event. And your experiences as both audience and actor have been very different from those of other generations.

Because cinematic experiences have been such a deep, rich part of our heritage, and because we all have such a powerful memory bank of screen references, we will use these resources throughout the book to enrich your future live theatre and media experiences.

Our experiences are also often not as simple as whether they are live or on film. We often experience a blended event, where both canned and live elements are present. During interactive performances of The Rocky Horror Picture Show, the constancy of the film projected is challenged and enhanced by the variety of live performances and audience participation in front of it. Also, more and more plays and performance art presentations incorporate prerecorded media into the overall experience, whether as part of the scenic design or actual dramatic interludes.

When we experience a film, it can result in a “half-and-half” theatre event—one-half (actors and story) unvarying and one-half (space and audience) live and variable. Imagine seeing a film for the first time:

- In a classroom with other students engaged and informed on the subject, all eagerly taking notes and looking forward to a lively discussion afterward.
- At the Cineplex on opening night, after waiting in a long line, in a packed house, surrounded by hysterical fans of the leading actor or this series of films.
- In your own living room, surrounded by rowdy, imbibing friends, often loudly dissing and shouting back at the characters in the film and at each other.
- In the private screening room of your most hypercritical acquaintance, who will stop the film frequently to offer devastating critiques of the work of everyone involved.
- At your parents’ home, after you just bought them this film in the hope that they will love it as much as you do (but you’re not so sure about that).
- In a bunker near Mosul, Iraq, with soldiers from two different cultures and some recently rescued civilians, with the sound of explosives going off in the distance (and some here do not understand the language of the film, but all are grateful for the diversion).
- In a village in Uganda, where some of the film was shot, with a sheet serving as the projection screen and villagers seeing themselves for the first time, some delighted, others disturbed, some having to be cautioned by the tribal elders to quiet and calm themselves for the duration of the showing.

Think about your actual first exposure to one of your favorite films. Then think of all the other ways that that might have happened. Variations in space and audience can alter—in a live, interactive sense—your perceptions of the film and even how much of it you actually see and hear.
Summary

Your anticipation of a theatre experience tends to rise in proportion to the commitment that you have made to having it. Although most of our formative experiences as audience members were with media, the interaction of live actor and audience is often the source of our most indelible memories. We all also have elements of theatre in our everyday lives, where we decide how to act just to survive. Every culture has had theatre for as far back as recorded time and probably long before that. There are numerous participants on the producing team of a play, but the essential ingredients are at least one actor and an audience sharing a space and telling a story. Some themes are so universal that they are chosen for plays over and over. You
will probably be going to a live theatre event in the near future. There are ways to attend the theatre at a reasonable cost. You can take your cues from the audience around you, but remember certain behaviors are never appropriate. You may be asked to respond to a particular production, either formally or informally. Familiarity of the material, your mood, the environment, and other factors affect your response to the production. Guidelines to think about when forming a response to a production are time, space, values, structure, pleasure, and the senses. Even our film experiences can have live elements sometimes. Theatre in your life can involve both an increased awareness of the theatrical elements in our everyday existence and an expanded sense of how to become engaged in the art form itself.

**Suggested Assignments**

These questions may be used simply for reflection. They might also be handled as short writing assignments or discussion topics shared in small groups.

1. Have you ever been in an audience and known that your reaction and that of those around you was actually influencing and changing the performance itself? Describe the experience.

2. What is your earliest memory of an encounter that could become the first scene in the play of your life?

3. As an audience member, what is your most memorable live theatre experience so far? Your most memorable media experience? How do they compare to each other?

4. What, so far, has been the best (offstage, personal theatre) performance of your life? Why do you consider it a personal triumph?

5. What has been the worst? What caused you to bomb?

6. What is your most memorable experience of seeing someone only on film and then experiencing that person live?

7. Interview an acting student (or, if you can find one, a professional actor) and ask what he or she loves most and least about practicing this art form.

8. Pick a movie or personal theatre event and discuss it with friends following some of the guidelines provided in this chapter. Alternatively, discuss with friends your shared senses of time, space, values, pleasure, structure, and the senses.

9. Examine each of the major topics chosen for dramatic conflict (life themes). Which of these have you already experienced in your own life that might provide the basis for a play someday?

10. Survey your own key relationships in life. Which of these people are you more likely to act for or to pretend to feel other than you really do? With which persons are you most authentic and real when you are around them?
Suggested Activities

1. **Individual:** Make a list of five to 10 films that have had a profound impact on you at various times in your life. Choose one or two from early childhood, grade school, middle school, high school, and the current year.

2. **Group:** Make an entire evening out of going to the theatre with several friends or with classmates you have just met. Agree to have dinner together before the play and dessert and coffee afterward. Discuss your anticipation beforehand and share your collective responses to the production.

3. **Long-term:** Start a Personal Theatre journal. At least twice a week, note a performance that you observed and one that you gave. That is, write down instances where the behavior exhibited (yours or another’s) would have been entirely different if some kind of “audience” had not been involved.

4. **Large lecture:** Form the class into groups of 10, and then share the list you created in Exercise 1 with your group. Do a quick assessment of the films that had the most impact on the group. Select a spokesman to share your group results as others in the room do the same.

Key Words and Ideas

Theatre = actor, audience, space, story
Imagination
Impulse
Comic/tragic
Suspension of disbelief

Aesthetic distance
Theatre protocol
The world of the play
Three kinds of theatre: live, media, and personal
A group of Korean women perform as part of Chinese New Year celebrations on the streets of Beijing.
INTRODUCTION

HOW DID THEATRE BEGIN? For many years, historians claimed that it started in Athens in the fifth century B.C.E., with the first reported tragic playwright being Aeschylus, and then the genre developed in Europe and spread to the New World. We call this the Dead European White Guy (DEWG) syndrome, a perspective that has afflicted many disciplines. We now recognize that theatre is immeasurably older than 2,500 years and far more geographically diverse than one peninsula on the edge of Europe. We also now know more about how early
contributions from women and non-Europeans have influenced global theatre.

Why was Western theatre scholarship dominated by cultural chauvinism for so long? Eurocentric scholars came from a patriarchal literary tradition that had little or no knowledge of other cultures grounded in oral traditions. Knowledge was based on what was familiar to the scholars themselves. In all fairness, it is far easier to research available evidence than to pursue less tangible sources. Our intention is not to show disrespect or ingratitude to the DEWGs. They have given us towering genius and profound wisdom. Some of the greatest works of dramatic art and some of the most meaningful insights into the human condition have come out of their tradition and perspective. They were presenting the truth as they knew it. Most of us would have not done any better in their situation. We will turn to them constantly for information and inspiration. We have all been DEWGs in some aspect of our lives. The term is created with affection, gratitude, and a bit of irreverence. Our goal in this book is to expand beyond their insights to embrace a wider perspective not available to them but revealed by more recent research.

This chapter will offer varying cultural perspectives, share some of the very earliest theatrical offerings, identify major theories about how theatre came to be, demonstrate the importance of ritual in our personal and theatrical lives, and establish the rules of make-believe that we all accept as part of the theatre experience.

Lesson Objectives:
Upon completion of this chapter, you will be able to:
1. Compare oral and written storytelling traditions, recognizing the importance of translation in interpreting meaning.
2. Identify four theories of the origins of the theatre and determine what makes sense to you.
3. Recognize the importance of ritual in your communal and private life.
4. Identify and say “yes” to any production’s conventions.

Translation Power

Here is a vivid example of how cultural bias can alter meaning. One of the more common shared experiences among Christians is the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer in unison in a place of worship. This event has theatrical elements, where all present usually stand and take part in a public performance of worship. But what exactly are we saying? Here is the version from the King James Bible (Matthew 6:9–13):

Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.
And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil: For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

Here is the original Aramaic version:

Abwoon d’bwashmaya
Nethgadash shmakh
Teytey malkuthakh
Nehwey tzevyanach aykanna d’bwashmayo aph b’arha
Hawlvan lachma d’sunganan yaomana
Washboglan khauboyn (wakhtahayn)
Aykana daph khnan shbwogan l’khayyabayn
Wela tachlan l’nesyuna. Ela patzan min bisha
Metol dilakhie malkutha wahayla wateshkhta l’ahlam amin
Ameyn.

When material is translated, the translator can’t help but filter the words through a cultural bias that is so ingrained that he may not even notice it. What follows is a careful attempt to translate the words as closely as possible to their original meaning rather than imposing values from another time, place, and perspective:

O Source of wisdom and life,
Carve out a space within us where your Presence can abide.
Fill us with imagination to be empowered on our mission.
Endow us with the wisdom to produce and share what each of us needs to grow and flourish.
Untie the tangled threads that bind us, as we release others from the entanglement of past mistakes.
Do not let us be diverted from our true purpose, but let us ever be aware.
For you are power and fulfillment, as all is gathered and made whole once again and for all time.
Amen.

(translated by M. Shani Illahan)¹

¹NOTE: Biblical translations are challenging and controversial. The Syrian Aramaic texts that survive are not in the dialect spoken by Jesus or his followers. Published English versions are often adaptations, not translations. The above is offered not as a claim to historical authenticity, but simply as an example of how the same passage can change when filtered through different contexts.
Not only are the words different, but the meanings have changed as well. It would be absurd to conclude that the original English translators got it “wrong” because what emerged is one of the most powerful, beautiful, profound, and inspirational documents in Western history. This does not, however, make it any less intriguing to imagine translation with fewer cultural filters.

Time, translation, and perception can transform writing beyond its original context.

If the written word, which is at least captured on the page, can change so much with interventions, what about the unrecorded and ever-elusive spoken word?

The First Plays

What really was the first play? The first recorded drama is not from Greece, but North Africa. Fragments of a work called the Abydos Passion Play have been traced back at least 1,500 years before Athenian drama emerged. It was elaborately staged on boats, stopping at various locations along the Nile and concerned the murder, mourning, and resurrection of the wheat god, Osiris. It is our first documented production through literary testimony. Plays of the oral tradition go back far more, although that tradition, by its very nature, resists empirical evidence. Two things are likely to be true about the first play:

1. It was about the changing of the seasons, an explanation of why we have to endure winter to experience spring.

2. It was about the relationships of gods and humans and how what was going on between them may have influenced these seasonal shifts.

Why are these issues likely to have been central to a play? One or both of them emerge in every discovered work from times gone by. These are the two overwhelming concerns. Much preliterate evidence has been neglected and now, sadly, is lost. But scholarship is finally finding, recording, and preserving rich theatrical heritages of cultures with sophisticated oral traditions. A growing body of archeological artifacts also reveals contributions from women and non-European artists. A more global and inclusive view of the art form continues to emerge.

Because we cannot with certainty identify the first play, we will share two contenders that are so old, their origins are lost in the mists of time. One example preserved by oral tradition is Uzume’s Trance, a Japanese folk comedy that has been performed in one form or another for many centuries and
continues today. This theatrical ritual is enacted each year on the winter solstice and is designed to ensure and celebrate the return of spring, regardless of scientific evidence that seasons are brought by annual rotations of the Earth around the Sun. It features a woman performer known as a miko, or female shaman, who plays the title character, a young mischievous goddess named Uzume. What follows is the story in a bare-bones outline.

**Uzume’s Trance**

Once upon a time, Amateratsu, the sun goddess, was so offended by a remark her consort made about her beauty that she shut herself in a cave. Suddenly the sun was gone from the sky. The entire world turned dark. The people began to suffer. Crops died. The village elders tried to coax her out of the cave, but she would not budge. Suddenly a young playful goddess, Uzume, leaped in front of the cave, danced in a wild and funny way, sang bawdy songs, and flung her skirts over her head, making everyone laugh. Intrigued by the laughter of the people, Amateratsu came out of the cave, returned to the sky, and light and warmth were returned to the people.

Your first response might be that *Uzume’s Trance* is a story, not a play. In oral-performance tradition, a narrator has memorized the basic story, without setting the words. Others are selected to enact various named characters. The performance includes the core narration, pantomimed action by other actors, and interludes where improvised dialogue is inserted. Many lines will be spontaneous, while some may also be considered important enough to be passed on exactly from one generation to the next. The “script” often does not exist on paper, but in the imaginations and memories of the performers and the audience.

Each year, as the sun hides herself in the long nights of December, people gather together and let a miko play the role of Uzume and make them laugh, knowing that the sun will soon return to her place in the sky. In this early piece of theatre, we find the healing power of comedy, the link between sex and comedy, the necessity for female energy in many performance traditions, and the satisfaction derived from ancient and enduring traditions.

What follows is an adaptation that might be performed by an American acting troupe. Because the oral tradition continually adapts and evolves, performances—while respecting Amateratsu Appearing from the Cave by Yoshitoshi in Japan’s creation myth, from the series Dai nippon meisho Kagami, "Mirror of Famous Generals."
traditional ideas—may involve contemporary dialogue, and if the story is basically comic, it may include slang and pop culture references. The following script would provide a starting place from which a contemporary company can build and expand.

**Uzume’s Trance***

(to be performed by 10 actors)

**CHARACTERS:**
- Narrator
- Amateratsu, Sun Goddess
- Consort/Boulder
- Elders
- Children
- Uzume

**NARRATOR:** Once upon a time, long, long ago, Amateratsu, the sun goddess, was travelling in her usual course across the sky when her consort made an unforgivably rude remark about her beauty. *(Amateratsu and her consort appear.)*

**CONSORT:** You’re looking old today, baby.

**AMATERATSU:** What????!!!! *(She strikes him hard enough that he falls down, then kicks him, and he curls into a ball, becoming a boulder.)* Let’s see how you like life as a boulder! I cannot shine under these conditions. I’m going to go in that cave and never come out. *(Two actors form an arch, like the entrance to a cave.)*

**NARRATOR:** Amateratsu was so angry that she retired to a cave and rolled an enormous boulder across the mouth of the cave.

**AMATERATSU:** Get over here, Boulder, and cover my entrance! *(The “consort” rolls across the stage and fills the entrance created by the other two actors.)*

*A performance of *Uzume’s Trance*, a story that is part of Japan’s oral tradition.*
NARRATOR: Suddenly the sun was gone from the sky and the people began to suffer. Their crops died in the fields. The children cried from hunger and cold. All the village elders went up to the cave where Amateratsu was sulking, and they tried everything they could think of to coax her out of the cave.

VILLAGERS: (ad-lib moaning, pleading, and supplicating) Please come back and give us light! We miss you so much! We brought you rice and sweet treats! You are so beautiful!

AMATERATSU: Not everyone seems to think so (kicks the boulder).

VILLAGERS: Your consort is a jackass!!!

AMATERATSU: Well, now he's just a boulder. Okay, maybe a jackass boulder. But I am here to stay.

NARRATOR: They wept and wailed, but Amateratsu sniffed imperiously and ignored them. The cold and dark continued, and the suffering of the people grew. Soon the whole village gathered in front of the cave, begging and praying.

VILLAGERS: (again, largely ad-lib) We will do anything. Anything! We cannot live without your light! Have mercy! You are the most beautiful goddess ever!

NARRATOR: But Amateratsu, still angry in her cave, only harrumphed.

AMATERATSU: Go away and stop bothering me!

NARRATOR: The people were in despair, and they simply sat in a circle in front of the cave and waited to die. (Actors form a circle and sit.) Suddenly, a young goddess named Uzume jumped into the center of the circle and began to dance and sing. (Uzume leaps from offstage into the middle of the gathering.) At first, the people were too sad to notice her. But she only danced more wildly and sang more raucously until the people stared at her in amazement. She began to twirl in place, round and round, until all were dizzy watching her. She danced and twirled and sang bawdy songs until the people slowly began to smile, and a few clapped their hands in time to her song.

UZUME: (singing; she may also improvise dialogue between her ventures into song)

Roll me over in the clover.
Roll me over and over and do it again.
I'm just a girl who can't say no.
I'm in a terrible fix.
I always say come on, let's go, just when I ought to say nix!
I want your sex. I want your sex. I want your sex!

(Uzume, in an inspired state, continues to sing snatches of racy songs, perhaps encouraging the audience to shout out requests.)

NARRATOR: Finally, she picked up her skirts, flinging them over her head, showing Amateratsu and everyone else her underpants... and the people began to laugh. (Uzume has, under her very full skirt, petticoats and bloomers or some other amusing kind of underwear, so what she shows is funny and not particularly revealing.) They laughed and laughed as she twirled with her skirts over her head until Amateratsu heard the laughter.

AMATERATSU: All right, what is so damn funny, anyway?? Move it, Boulder. Let me take a look. (Boulder obligingly rolls out of her way.) Oh my God, that is hilarious!! (She doubles over with laughter)

NARRATOR: She laughed so hard, she almost missed the small mirror Uzume had placed in a nearby tree.

CONSORT: You're lookin' good, baby!!

AMATERATSU: Yeah, well, I don't need you to tell me that. (Villagers cheer her on. She ad-libs lines about her own beauty, perhaps culminating with a claim like “I am the original bling!”) Come on, Uzume, let's leave this loser and dance! (She and Uzume join in a joyous dancing circle, with all the other actors doing the same movement in unison.)

NARRATOR: And so Uzume once again teased Amateratsu out of her cave and twirled her way into the hearts of the people, proving once again that a girl with a mirror and a great pair of underpants can accomplish anything!
A second drama, this one from West Africa, transmitted orally between generations for thousands of years, helps us understand the early traditions of tragedy. The following is *Ogun’s Sacrifice*, one part of a large body of works known collectively as *Ogun’s Mysteries*. In Yoruban culture, the Mysteries detailed the many adventures of Ogun. While the culture of ancient Greece identified the first actor as Thespis of Icaria, for the Yoruban people of West Africa, there is no doubt that the first actor was someone named Ogun. (Note: The terms *griot/griotte* are French terms meaning male and female *praise singers*. The title denotes both a storyteller and something much more sacred. The *griot/griotte* is the living memory of the people, the keeper of the communal consciousness.)

This ancient ritual drama holds many essential elements of tragedy: the suffering of a people, the rise of a *hero*, the willingness to sacrifice for the good of others, and ultimate redemption. Many hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of years later, Aristotle would describe this process in his work *Poetics*.

---

**Ogun’s Sacrifice***

(to be performed by 10 actors)

**CHARACTERS:**
Griot (narrator)
Obatala
Babalu Aye
Ogun
Other gods
Humans

GRIOT: In the beginning, there was only the One, encompassing all Creation in divine harmony. One day, as he tended his garden, his slave rebelled and rolled a huge boulder down upon him, sending him crashing into the abyss, where he shattered into 1,001 pieces. (Other actors enact this event in an abstract way, coming tightly together and then bursting apart and collapsing at various points on the stage.) From these shards of the One came all things, including the gods. One god was Obatala, who became the Creator.

(Throughout the following, the actors often use large, stylized, dance-inspired movements to represent the eternal qualities beyond everyday behavior that identify them as gods.)

OBATALA: I am the fabric that binds the universe together. Each day, my hands form new children to be born into the world. (As he speaks, he spreads his legs and moves his hands as various actors emerge from beneath him and are released by his hands into the world.) All the people are made by the hands of me, Obatala.

GRIOT: Obatala is the essence of passive creation, serene, unchanging, and unmoving. Sadly, Obatala’s great weakness is drink. (Obatala mimes rapidly downing huge quantities of alcohol), and when he is drunk on palm wine, his creations become a little wobbly, so that some among us are blind or lame. (He begins swaying. Actors now appear to limp or struggle to find their way when released by his hands.) Obatala, in his serene composure, goes on making children. Babalu Aye is the god of suffering.

BABALU AYE: I am the god who teaches the people to cope with misfortune, to learn patience and forbearance without despair. I am calm in the face of all the tides of fate. (He/she embraces each child as he/she is born.)

GRIOT: Ogun is the warrior god, the first actor, the dispenser of justice both gentle and harsh.

OGUN: I am the embodiment of force, energy, and most of all, the power of Will.
GRIOT: Long ago, as the ages passed, Ogun noticed discontent and sadness in his fellow gods. (Other actors mingle around Ogun.)
OGUN: What ails you, my friends? What is the source of this overwhelming grief?
OTHER GODS: (divide and ad-lib the lines as needed)
We feel lonely for human men and women.
The great abyss separates us from the people.
We wish we could have them in our lives.
But the abyss saddens and frightens us.
It is a place of chaos, terror, and annihilation.
OGUN: Let us go through the abyss and see our little brothers and sisters. Let’s go right now.
OBATALA: I would go with you, my old friend, but the business of Creation itself is in my hands. It is my destiny to remain unchanging.
GRIOT: Simple consciousness was all Obatala could manage. Or maybe he was drunk that day. I don’t know. What did Babalu Aye say?
BABALU AYE: Suffering is to be endured. It cannot be avoided, so maybe it would be better to just be quiet.
GRIOT: Babalu Aye believed one could only wait and endure, that we simply must manage with our lot. But Ogun, warrior and first actor, felt differently.
OGUN: I cannot stand it anymore. I will do whatever it takes to bring us all—gods and humans—together. I will go to the worst possible place and find out.
GRIOT: And as the other gods watched in horrified amazement, Ogun poised on the edge of the abyss, and gathering all of his Will, he threw himself in. (Ogun thrusts himself forward to the ground, where he is barely caught by other actors. All the actors continue to act out the chaos that surrounds him, pummeling him, then lifting and even throwing him high into the air.) The terrors he experienced in the chaos can only be imagined. The pain he suffered was not to be imagined. He was torn and shredded, but he endured and struggled on. At last, one day at the end of long days and ages of pain and hardship, he landed at the bottom of the abyss and shattered into 1,001 pieces. (The actors lift him high above the ground, from which point he jumps down and falls to the ground and appears to be dead.) Then slowly, agonizingly, Ogun began to pull the pieces of himself together again (the actor performs a painful resurrection), and he began the long and painful climb up the other side of the abyss, cutting a path through the terrible abyss and calling for his fellow gods to follow him. From that day until this, we, the people, live among the ancestors and the unborn. (The other actors form a wide circle and, slowly, all go down on their knees to pay homage to Ogun, who stands in the center.)
OGUN: We will all now live together, the gods and the demons, the good and the evil, the strong and the weak, all living fully in the universe with all that exists available to us if we only have the Will to act.
GRIOT: And we all now know the power of our own will, thanks to the hero-god, Ogun.

*English adaptation by Annie McGregor and Robert Barton

How Did Theatre Begin?

Identifying the first play, while an enjoyable quest, is ultimately a purely academic one. We know that plays existed long before Western tradition and that we can move beyond our known canon to include the world at large. We have only theories about the origins of theatre. Here are four of the best.

1. Spontaneous Inspiration

Robert Edmond Jones’s seminal work, The Dramatic Imagination, offers a possible story of the first play:

Let us imagine ourselves back in the Stone Age. It is night. We are all sitting together around a fire—Ook and Pow and Pung and Glup and Little Zowie and
all the rest of us. We sit close together. We like to be together. It is safer that way, if wild beasts attack us. A lion has been killed today, and it is all anyone wants to talk about. The lion’s skin lies close by, near the fire. Suddenly the leader of the tribe jumps to his feet. “I killed the lion! I did it! I followed him! He sprang at me, I struck at him with my spear! He fell down! He lay still.”

He is telling us. We listen. But all at once an idea comes to his dim brain. “I know a better way to tell you. See! It was like this! Let me show you!” In that instant, drama is born.

The leader continues, “You, Ook, over there, you stand up and be the lion. Here is the lion’s skin. You put it on and be the lion and I’ll kill you and we’ll show them how it was. . . .” And now these two men—the world’s first actors—begin to show us what the hunt was like. They do not tell us. They show us. They act it for us. The lion growls. The hunter poises his spear. The lion leaps. The spear is thrown. The lion falls and lies still. The drama is finished.

Now Ook takes off the lion’s skin and sits beside us and is himself again. Just like you. Just like me. Good old Ook. No, not quite like you or me. Ook will be, as long as he lives, the man who can be a lion when he wants to.

Jones theorizes a spontaneous “light bulb” moment when Ook decides to show the lion hunt rather than tell about it. Theatre is then born in pure inspiration. The Ooks of the world were unable to send out mass e-mailings to share their discoveries and are unlikely to have had direct contact with more than a few hundred people during their whole lives. The notion of just getting up and performing stories must have inspired countless actors in different places and times. Could it be that the need and ability to create theatre is inherent in each of us?
2. Imitation to Ritual

Internationally renowned mythologist and anthropologist Joseph Campbell, inspired by a fascination with Native American culture in his youth, sought to unify all myths. His theory, the second that we will discuss, says that the human capacity to imitate and fantasize leads to the creation of myth and ritual.

Campbell observed that children everywhere need to imitate behavior, learning to talk, walk, play, read, and sing by watching and mimicking. As our imitations become more complex, we practice playing “house,” “school,” or “war.” We may then create long dramatic scenarios, like television series, returning to the same game (and exploring behaviors and consequences) in episode after episode.

We then move to complex dramatic situations, beyond our known worlds. Campbell noted that once children are engaged beyond their own living room, tent, or cave, they begin to fantasize about worlds that are partly real and partly invented. Did you play “Ninja Warrior,” act out stories with a My Little Pony™ collection, or play in a fort in your backyard or under the dining room table? You probably went beyond imitation to playing out roles that existed only in your imagination.

Combining imitation with fantasy is universal. In Dakar, Senegal (West Africa), every boy has a ball, bundle, or tin can with which he plays soccer endlessly, dreaming of one day becoming star of the Senegalese national soccer team. Boys may not have player cards to collect or a television to watch the games, but they can recite the names of current and former team members and their vital statistics. Girls play house in courtyards and enclosed spaces, dreaming of being the first (and, hence, the most important) wife of...
a rich man (in Senegal, a man can have up to four wives if he can afford to care for them). Less popular girls have to play second or third wives. A favorite war game for all is still “rebellion against the French,” which exerted colonial control over the country into the 1970s. An actor who pretends to be Hamlet, prince of Denmark, existing purely in imagination, is only a more sophisticated version of children playing El Hadji Diouf (the great soccer star), Mom, Fidel Castro, or Spongebob SquarePants.

Campbell understood that for the childhood impulse to construct drama to become the art of the theatre, community engagement is crucial. Childhood games explore the mysteries of life, but long after childhood, we still want answers. The mysteries—our purpose in life, our relationship to higher powers, why we suffer, and whether true justice exists in this world or the next—simply grow more complex. We imagine answers through myth, ritual, and community—moving from childhood imitation to theatre art.

The source of all mythology is need. Long before science and technology, we depended on the autumn harvest to see us through winter, with meat brought home by hunters and roots and plants harvested by gatherers, preserved to prevent starvation during the lean months. But what if one year, the hunters come home empty-handed time and time again? They have roamed far and wide but have seen no sign of the much-needed herds. The community is afraid. We gather together to decide why this is happening. An elder suggests that the animals have left us because our creator is angry with us. What could we have done? Can we appease the anger and bring the herds back? Someone suggests an offering of something precious to us. We agree, we make the offering, and within days, the hunters return loaded with meat for the winter and we can see the returning herds from our own home. Coincidence? Maybe. Maybe not.

According to Campbell, a mystery like the absence of animals will cause us to do something. If that something has the desired results (bringing the animals back), we repeat it. To make the mystery plausible, we evolve stories about the creator/spirit, the people’s response to divine anger, and heroes who solved the mystery. We continue the behavior that worked the first time we needed it. Each generation may make the event bigger, developing elaborate stories of life and death, seasonal renewal, plenty, and starvation—called myths—our way of comprehending the unknowable. Long after we evolve past the hunter/gatherer stage, our myths and rituals are preserved and passed on. A sacrifice that involved five minutes and minor effort in the beginning may now include elaborate effects and community-wide participation with many roles to be cast. Cultural identity is reaffirmed through mythic reenactment, with diverse peoples creating drama dealing with the same essential mysteries.

3. Stepping Out

Our third theory is from Aristotle’s fourth-century B.C.E. document Poetics, the first known Western analysis of a body of dramatic literature. His essay is often used to define the very nature of Western theatre.
he wrote of a specific culture, place, and time, his theory can be applied to any community. (More about Aristotle and Greek tragedy can be found in Chapter 7.)

Aristotle believed that theatre evolved out of religious rituals known as **dithyrambs**. The dithyramb involved the entire community gathering on occasion to sing songs and recite words in unison. One day, according to Aristotle, a man named Thespis stepped forward and began speaking to the community and letting the community respond in unison. This changed the nature of the event. Instead of a group **monologue**, a dialogue was created between speaker and community. The dynamic of a man standing alone on the stage speaking to the community is changed. Now the man is impersonating a mythological or historical figure (a character), and the community is represented by a group of actors known as the chorus.

Thespis has been immortalized in Western theatre culture. His name has been adopted to represent not only actors but also members of any dramatic society, who are called **thespians**. The likelihood is strong that other performers in other and earlier cultures also one day stepped outside the group and created dialogue. Thespis was the lucky one whose name is remembered.

### 4. A Divine Gift

A fourth theory comes from ancient India and encompasses much of the Asian theatre-dance tradition. The Hindu theorist **Bharata** wrote even earlier than Aristotle about what theatre is and should be. The god Brahma (“the breath of the world”) is one of a triumvirate of primary gods, including Shiva and Vishnu, and is believed to have commanded the first drama. When
humans desired to imitate the experience of the gods, Brahma confided his secrets to Bharata, whose seminal work is *Natya Shastra*, or the *Canons of Dance and Drama*. He was trying to identify the crucial components of Sanskrit drama.

Plots for many plays in this tradition were originally based on two epic poems: *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, religious and ethical works that still are primary sources in classical and modern dance dramas, including contemporary filmmaking in India.

Music and dance are required in much of Asian drama, and according to Bharata, language must be poetic, plots familiar, and narrators must define the outline of a performance while actors perfect *gesture* and physical nuance to express the writer's intent. Sometimes the use of puppets allows the expression of something beyond the capacity of human performers.

Acting, dancing, and puppetry, according to the *Natya Shastra*, attempt to reach beyond the natural world, and in this effort, trance states are sometimes induced. The puppet (in some ways akin to a mask) cannot act poorly or tell a lie, but rather represents “the symbol of man in the great ceremony of life and eternity.” The puppet can teach the actor simplicity, precision, and a lack of affectation, just as a character may teach the actor how to expand her view of life in general. Appreciation of the divine gift and magical transformative states gives theatre its profound power.

The theories of Jones, Campbell, Aristotle, and Bharata are plausible and compatible. The sudden spontaneous “Ook” impulse is common among adults and children in the midst of discussion or at play. Rituals are often fully communal. Participation in them is a crucial rite of passage. And each
culture’s Thespis could easily make the inductive leap from stepping up around the fire, recreating the beast, to stepping out of the chorus to create character. The magical components of theatre, its trancelike moments, and the fusion of the actors with any and all around them may indeed be divine gifts.

Rituals of Life

Each of these four origin theories focuses on ritual. Rituals are central to the theatre, just as they are to everyday life. A ritual is any act that is repeated over and over in a very specific way. When you wake up, you may proceed to a series of ritualistic preparations for your day: which foot you put in which slipper first, the way in which you brush your teeth, and the way you gather what you need to venture into the world. Rituals center us. The more difficult the day ahead or behind, the more we value comfort rituals.

A ritual with an audience, even an audience of one, becomes a performance. In your offstage life, you may have repeatedly performed private rituals, such as a particular way of putting on your socks or taking off your jeans. When you do any of these in front of a new roommate, it suddenly turns theatrical. Your audience may comment on the weird way that you do it and make you realize that not everyone else in the world handles socks and jeans as you do. So you reconsider your choices. You may decide to (1) only change clothes in private from now on, (2) change how you do it, or (3) enjoy your own individuality, maybe even flaunt it, encouraging other comments from your roommate, in fact “performing” on a regular basis. If you choose (3), you might consider becoming a theatre major.

We have official rituals from birth to death. Most cultures have some kind of ceremony welcoming and/or naming a newborn child in the village, followed by other religious and secular celebrations, graduations, and other rites of passage; games, pageants, sports events, dances, awards ceremonies, weddings, public hearings, presentations, debates, trials, and finally, funerals and memorial services. These all have strong theatrical elements and defined performer and audience roles. Sometimes we skip or reject rituals and then regret it deeply later, saying how much we now wish we had shown up. Why? Because the ritual may have allowed them to let go, gain peace, and move ahead.

Theatre people are often superstitious. Backstage rituals abound. Many actors arrive at the theatre at precisely the same time each day; put on their makeup in an exact, perfected pattern; and converse with others in the cast in a predetermined sequence. Many athletes have their own set of rituals, all aimed at maintaining a sense of continuity.
Riten Growth

In the theatre of our lives, rituals can be not only our comfort but sometimes our salvation. The Wounded Knee Massacre is an example of how the elements of theatre have formed an annual event of great healing:

Wiping Away of Tears

In 1890 at Wounded Knee Creek, the U.S. Cavalry opened fire on and exterminated almost 350 women, children, and elders, all members of the Lakota Tribe. One of their chiefs, Big Foot, was attempting to bring them to shelter after the assassination of their leader and greatest war chief, Sitting Bull, who had defeated the cavalry repeatedly in the past. They had traveled hundreds of miles to seek refuge at Pine Ridge Reservation and were just 20 miles short of their destination before being rounded up and shot. This incident remains one of the most questionable events in our military history in terms of judgment and compassion.

After this, tribal elder Black Elk predicted, “seven generations of anguish and then regeneration.” The remaining Lakota were stripped of their lands and placed on reservations, beginning a downward spiral of despair, poverty,
and unemployment. Similar conditions permeated the lives of other tribes on the 314 reservations in our country, but no single incident exemplifies total devastation as does Wounded Knee. Many descendants believed such conditions were simply their destiny. An enervating sense of futility pervaded a population that felt stuck and without hope.

As the hundred-year anniversary of the massacre approached, something remarkable happened. Tribal elders decided they needed to break the cycle. They revived an old public ritual, called “Wiping Away of Tears,” to release the collective grief of their people. Tribal members now repeat the long, cold ride of their ancestors with eagle feathers on the staffs they are carrying. Since the windchill factor makes temperatures dip well below zero, the ride is grueling. It is observed and assisted by other tribal members at various places along the journey.

Each of the six days of the original ride began in a specific prayer for members of the tribe: day 1, children and orphans; day 2, the elderly and shamans; day 3, the physically and mentally sick; day 4, prisoners; day 5, women; day 6, the spirits of those who have died and the hope for an end to war. The ritual has expanded to fourteen days, focused more and more on children and has been renamed “Future Generation Ride.” Those who have taken part report a renewed sense of hope and a greater commitment to education and success.

It is as if many Lakota felt trapped by a single moment in history and were released by acting it out. It was not enough to tell the story. It had to be fully ritualized. It had to be experienced and felt. It had to be performed. Many of us experience this phenomenon in our personal history, but in this case an entire population felt an identical and overwhelming frustration, ritual absorption, and release. Sitting Bull’s direct descendent, Ron His Horse Is Thunder, not only serves as one of the leaders of the ride but is president of one of 37 tribal colleges, spearheading a campaign to build a new educational and financial future for young and newly ambitious tribal members. A new generation of American Indians is turning the event into one of healing and redemption.

You may ask if this is a theatrical performance or a spiritual event. Is it theatre? We believe that, yes, this is theatre functioning at its most serious and spiritual level. We have performers playing the roles of their ancestors, audiences participating fully in the event, a designated space (vaster than most conventional theatres but still a performance space), and a story. As Uzume’s Trance is performed as a comic expression about serious issues of survival, the Future Generations Riders is performed as a tragic expression of regeneration and renewal.

**VINA WHITE HAWK, TRIBAL ELDER**
The grieving helps the children to accept who we are and to grow from that.

**ALEX WHITE PLUME, TRIBAL MEMBER**
This journey has helped us rebuild in the seventh generation. It has allowed us to find the peace within ourselves and to extend that peace to others, even those who have hurt us.

**MELANIE KUNTZ, TEENAGE RIDER**
I didn’t really want to do it, but my Dad wanted me to, so I did. Then I got to talk to the older people who know the history of this place. They told me our ancestors were watching as we rode through the hills—and you know, I truly felt it. Now I’m interested in learning more about my heritage. And I feel like maybe I can do a lot more things with my life than what I thought before.
Embracing Womanhood—The Quinceañera

Rituals may include an entire culture or be focused on the life stages of an individual. The transition out of childhood is honored by Jewish bar and bat mitzvahs for 13-year-old boys and 12-year-old girls, as does the Vision Quest embarked on by some Native Americans on the brink of adulthood. However, there is probably no more vivid ceremonial transition than the Quinceañera, which celebrates the 15th birthdays of young Latina women. This event often involves formal wear and up to eight young men in attendance, men designated as guardians—or chambeles—for the honored young woman. It may also involve a court of young female attendants called damas. Events move from the solemnity of Mass, prayers, ceremonial gift giving and vows, through a formal procession, to festive banqueting and dancing. The Quinceañera starts with a deeply spiritual ritual and ends with a vibrantly secular fiesta celebration.

While the specifics vary among communities, traditional elements include a special headpiece worn by the honoree, known as a diadema (much like a tiara), ornamental altar pillows, pastel colors, a birthstone ring, and a libro y rosario (a missal and a rosary).

DAN WOJCIK, FOLKLORE SCHOLAR

Most Caucasian Americans fail to recognize this key rite of passage, making a challenging life transition even more difficult and confusing for all involved.

PANCITA DAVILA, QUINCEAÑERA PLANNER

From this important day on, the sweet-15 girl can find a good path to become a better person with new ideas.
The *Quinceañera* can be traced all the way back to the first encounters between Spanish explorers and Aztecs in Mexico over 500 years ago. Both of these cultures already had ceremonies recognizing the coming of age of young women. The two traditions intermingled and evolved into a daylong celebration. While not all elements of the *Quinceañera* are readily understood by those outside the culture, at least two of the key rituals can be universally appreciated. At one point in the ritual, the honored young woman gives away a doll to a younger girl; at another, she accepts the gift of a pair of high heels.

**Theatre vs. Ritual?**

Both the Future Generations Riders and the *Quinceañera* have the basic elements of theatre: performers and audience, costumes and props, and a definite progression from a beginning to a symbolic final curtain. Most important, lives are touched by the event.

Because of the profound connection between ritual and theatre, the question inevitably arises, “What is the difference?” When is one not the other? While there is some disagreement among theatre practitioners, our bias is in favor of not quibbling. We would say that a ritual is not theatre if it is private or unobserved (no audience), if the participants remain entirely themselves with no hint of dressing up or role playing (no actors), and if the ritual act is functional, utilitarian, or both, rather than narrative (no story). We would say theatre may not be a ritual if it is a single, one-time-only event, particularly if presented with largely improvisational elements. Repetition of the kind that occurs in rehearsals and multiple performances is essential. The one-shot ritual is an oxymoron. The Future Generations Riders will extend its run with new casts. While each young woman will experience her own *Quinceañera* only once, the ritual, with many of the same participants shifting roles, will occur over and over again within the community.

It is often said that theatre is built on illusion, on things not being what they seem. It is also based on an agreement to pretend, to choose to see or not see, which we will now discuss.

**Conventions**

In each piece of live theatre, we are asked to accept theatrical conventions, which are conditions of make-believe that demand our willing suspension of disbelief. Some conventions are so familiar to us that we don’t even notice them. We often use the term *realism* to describe a play in which
Sign language is in itself a convention, with visual signals substituting for auditory ones. When American Sign Language (ASL) is employed by a company of deaf actors, audiences readily accept the convention of using their eyes to “hear.” But when a deaf actor speaks, the convention is broken. This is an issue of some controversy within the deaf theatrical community, which feels that it is not just broken but violated.

In 2006, Darren Fudenske, a deaf actor, was cast as Tilden in the Nicu’s Spoon Theater Company’s production of *Buried Child*, by Sam Shepard. In this case, the production team made the decision that if Tilden were born deaf, the family would not insist that he be educated in sign language, and they would never learn it themselves. The family would just force him to speak as best he could. This family is beyond dysfunctional, with dark secrets including incest, alcoholism, murder, and, of course, the ominous implication of the title. No accommodation is made for any family member—ever. According to director Stephanie Barton-Farcas, “This choice underlies the family’s state of denial. No one here would speak ASL. There was no deaf community for Tilden.” But not everyone was happy about casting a deaf actor in a role that required him to speak.

For decades, there has been a sharp division of opinion between those who believe in manualism, or the teaching of sign language as the primary means of communication, and oralism, or teaching spoken-language skills through speech production and lip-reading. According to New York Deaf Theatre board member Dave Bowell, “There are many people who feel that all deaf people should embrace and use ASL in every facet of their lives. Many nondeaf people do not believe deaf people should speak at all. But many deaf people also feel that way.”

Darren Fudenske saw being cast in this role as a chance to move beyond the confines of signed productions, with such theatres as the National Theatre of the Deaf and Deaf West, or traditional productions where he would always play a character written deaf.

For this role, it was a challenge for him to improve his enunciation so other cast members and the audience could understand him, as well as for him to lip-read in performance so he could understand them, especially if a fellow actor had a moustache. He ended up having to learn the parts of the other actors as well as his own to keep up with cues.

**Close-Up**

**Speech as a Second Language—Darren Fudenske on Broadway**

Darren Fudenske, a deaf actor, was considered by some a controversial choice to play a deaf role in Sam Shepard’s *Buried Child* in the Nicu’s Spoon Theater Company production, directed by Stephanie Barton-Farcas, 2006.

Because only a few performances of the play were scheduled to be ASL-interpreted, some of his compatriots felt the excitement of the Broadway debut of a fellow deaf actor was diminished by their not being able to understand or follow the production.

It will be interesting to see how this issue plays out in future productions. In the meantime, Jim Williams, with whom Fudenske has most of his scenes, makes a constant effort to keep his moustache trimmed.

Fudenske says, “I have to keep working to make myself understood without hands. I am so used to using my hands. I love to use my hands. That’s my first language. But at the same time I’m an actor, so I have to separate the two and learn to speak.”
people act much the way we do in life and style or stylization for those in which they do not. In a modern realistic play, presented in a traditional theatre space, the setting, the performances by the actors, and the way the story unfolds might seem very like our own everyday experiences. But the most realistic performance is still subject to conventions. We may look through an opening called a proscenium arch, the frame (much like a picture frame) that defines the acting space. The space within that arch is called the fourth wall, which has been left open so we can peek through it. We act as if this fourth wall has magically opened for us or that we are flies on that wall. In either case, we’re going to pretend that the wall is there and that we are not.

On stage, everything represents something else. Iced tea may stand in for bourbon, a blinding light for God, a specific hand gesture for love, a sharp light and sound change for a character’s emotional distress, a wild dance for a character’s ecstatic inner thoughts, or ketchup for blood. Blood may also be a red ribbon suddenly revealed, a scarlet sheet dropping over a victim, or a wash of crimson light on the back wall. We accept these symbols.

The more unfamiliar the style of a play, the more we are asked to say yes to new conventions. The actors are playing “dress up and let’s pretend,” and we are joining in the “let’s pretend” part. In less realistic plays, we accept the convention that the actors may ignore us for much of the evening and then occasionally turn to us and comment (called asides) or speak their thoughts aloud with no one else on stage able to hear them (called soliloquies). In some plays, we accept a constant interweave of actors speaking directly to the audience, acknowledging our presence for a time, and then

One widely accepted convention is the fourth wall, which allows the audience to observe the scene without being acknowledged by the actors. The set of Noises Off by Michael Frayn, shown here at the Birmingham Repertory Theatre in England is a good example.
Musical theater audiences will accept strange conventions. After all, how often do people spontaneously break into song and dance in real life, a commonplace occurrence in musicals like *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*. At Broadway’s Richard Rodgers Theater, directed by Des McAnuff and choreographed by Wayne Cilento, 1995.

Going into intimate, private scenes where they ignore us. And we have no problem being there and then not being there. In theatres around the globe, audiences readily pretend that masks are faces, men are women, extravagantly bewigged and painted actors are animals, precise synchronicity among many actors is natural, percussive instruments are the human heart beating, and mortals are gods.

If conventions of other cultures are challenging to us, we need to remember that our own theatre can be as strange as any in the world. Musicals are widely believed to have originated in the United States, and yet musical theatre is a feast of outrageous conditions of belief that is readily accepted by the audience. When we go to a madcap musical, we agree to pretend, for example, that it is perfectly normal to wear tap shoes and even sequins to the office and to totally color-coordinate your shiny outfit with that of all your coworkers, and that the most reasonable behavior in the world, when someone says, “I’ve got an idea!!” is for everyone in the office to lean way into him suddenly and shout in unison “What???” We accept that his idea (perhaps for improving sales for the company) will naturally be expressed in song.

If his idea goes over, the whole office staff will of course join in that song and naturally start dancing on the desks and file cabinets to express their joy and relief at the brilliance of the plan. As an audience member, you agree to pretend that this is reasonable behavior, even though you would (and should) have serious second thoughts about trying it in your own workplace. In subsequent chapters, we will deal with the variety of conventions from different cultures and time periods.
Theatre in Media

Conventions of Film and TV

How do these conventions extend to media? As we watch a film, we pretend that life has a musical underscore that swells up to stir our emotions. We pretend that everyday people played by our favorite superstars can naturally wear the hottest designer clothes to their minimum-wage job and rent a huge Manhattan or Parisian apartment without any predictable, constant source of income.

We adjust our sense of reality to serve our desire to be swept away. Have you noticed the haircut transformation phenomenon? In almost any film, if a character decides to change her hair, she or a friend will just cut randomly away, perhaps with a kitchen shears, and the result is always fabulous. Has anyone ever had this experience in life?

Theatre in Your Life

Conventions of Daily Life

What about personal theatre? How often have you laughed politely at what was supposed to be a funny story or joke, but you just didn’t get it, or you got it but found it lame? How often have you and a whole roomful of people done this? We accept the convention of responding as we ought to rather than as we want to. And you may live with family conventions that dictate how you are always expected to respond to any news. In some families, only polite reserve is acceptable, while in others, unbridled, gushy enthusiasm or confrontation is the norm.

We usually adjust to our space being invaded and pretend it’s okay. When on a crowded elevator, with personal space at a premium, a common choice is to pretend that the other people aren’t there, avoiding any kind of eye contact to compensate for the fact that some stranger may actually be pressed physically against our privates. The art of public privacy is highly developed in parts of China, where masses of people push together when a scarce commodity like transportation becomes available. The more crowded the space, the more intense the rules of make-believe.

When someone says or does something reprehensible in the grocery store, the most common choice is to pretend that it did not happen and hope the offender will just go away. This may go on for some time as the offensive behavior escalates. Finally, someone’s patience vanishes, at which point the convention is dropped and confrontation occurs.

The conventions of daily life are as many and varied as those in a theatrical production. We all pretend so we can make life better. If it is disappointing, we pretend to make it bearable; if it is good but not great, we do what we can to convince ourselves that it is full of magic, passion, and wonder.

Summary

For years, the origins of theatre were believed to be a distinctly Western, male, literary phenomenon. Now scholars are looking to other cultures, the contributions of both sexes, and oral traditions to find universal impulses that lead and have always led to theatre everywhere. Four major theories of how theatre began include (1) spontaneous inspiration, the acting out
of the day's events to make them come alive again; (2) imitation to ritual, the impulse of children acting like adults evolving into repeated acts and expanding beyond the home to embrace the community in an act of communion; (3) stepping out, the practice of someone taking part in a group activity, emerging from that group one day, and turning a choral monologue into a dialogue where ideas are not merely expressed but also exchanged and a character emerges; and (4) divine gift, the idea of accepting magic, trance, and communion with inanimate objects as a reality far beyond ordinary life. Theatre grows out of an intense desire for ritual in all aspects of our lives, from the mundane daily comforts to life-changing ceremonies.

In performance, something always represents, stands in for, or symbolizes something else. Performance is defined by ritual conventions, which are the rules by which we all play make-believe at the theatre and in everyday encounters.

**Suggested Assignments**

For reflection, short writings, and discussion:

1. How does the image of the deity being addressed and the specific requests being made alter between the English King James version of the Lord's Prayer and a more direct translation from Aramaic? What shifts in values appear to have occurred?

2. What are the most crucial rituals in your life, the ones you could not possibly live without?

3. Now that you're learning more about how theatre started and starts, what was the biggest misconception you brought into this course? How is actual theatre most unlike what you expected?

4. What was the most memorable moment in your life when you found that your ritual choices were not those that very many other people make? What was your response?

5. What is your strongest superstition, and how does this influence your behavior? How does this become a ritual? Are any of these done with observers? How do they then become theatre?

6. In your personal theatre, what is the most consistent performance you give? Where are you most in the pretend mode?

7. Where in your own public life is there the largest set of conventions? At what kind of occasion or group gathering is there the most agreement about what is real and what we are going to pretend is real for this event?

8. Does your family have any rituals that are unique to them? When did you discover this, and how did you react?
9. As a child, when you role-played based on TV shows or movies, what were your most popular choices?

10. How did you take the basic details of the shows that you listed in Question 9 and embellish them into fantasy?

**Suggested Activities**

1. **Individual**: Go back and look over the list of childhood game enactments shown earlier in this chapter. Make your own list of what you acted out most often.

2. **Group**: In groups of five, agree on a role-playing childhood event that several of you took part in earlier in life. Take 10 minutes to cast the roles, play out the event, and present it as close as possible to your best memory of how you did it back then.

3. **Long-term**: Start a ritual journal, with sections such as private, public, theatrical, ceremonial, and communal. Observe and record the degree to which ritual is a crucial part of life.

4. **Large lecture**: Identify and perhaps even change a ritual annoyance in your community. Find a ritual that the class can identify with, such as standing in line at the registrar’s office or dealing with nasty roommates. Figure out together what your specific goal is and what is blocking you from that goal. Get four or five volunteers to act out the usual response. Is it passive or self-defeating? Have the whole class shout out alternative approaches. Act them out to discover the results. Continue until a truly viable alternative is found. If you have an idea, join the volunteers. Work as a community to solve a problem. (This exercise is adapted from the works of Augusto Boal, who is featured in Chapter 11.)

**Key Words and Ideas**

- *Abydos Passion Play*
- oral tradition
- *miko (Uzume’s Trance)*
- dialogue
- *griot/griotte (Ogun’s Mysteries)*
- hero
- myth
- Aristotle (*The Poetics*)
- dithyramb
- monologue
- thespian
- Bharata

- *Natya Shastra*
- gesture
- ritual

*Conventions:*
- realism
- stylization
- proscenium arch
- fourth wall
- asides
- soliloquies
Love

Featured plays:

**Much Ado About Nothing** by William Shakespeare (1598)

**M. Butterfly** by David Henry Hwang (1988)

(Note: The scripts for these plays, along with additional background information, are available in the companion anthology to this text, *Life Themes: Major Conflicts in Drama*.)

Love. It makes the world go ‘round and it’s never easy. It may be intoxicating and enthralling, but most of us live out the old adage, “The course of true love never did run smooth.” Some of us do not dance and twirl toward love. We stumble and limp. *Much Ado About Nothing*, one of Shakespeare’s most delightful and popular plays, explores not just the joy but the agony, not just the rewards but the risks of falling in love. Although over 400 years old, it is strikingly contemporary in its portrayal of how our defenses and neuroses can prevent us from openly connecting from the heart. *M. Butterfly* also explores the complexities and unexpected turns of love. Because a man falls into a deeply intimate relationship with another man (masquerading as a female Beijing Opera singer) and never realizes it for many years, a masterful deception occurs. To what degree do all of us agree to be deceived for love?

**Much Ado About Nothing** (1598)

**Setting:** Messina, a seaport town in Sicily

**Major Characters:**

* Benedick, a lord of Padua, in a battle of wits with Beatrice
* Beatrice, niece to Leonato, in verbal combat with Benedick
* Don Pedro, Prince of Aragon, recently victorious over his brother in battle
* Don John, his bastard brother, looking for vengeance
* Claudio, a lord of Florence, in love with Hero
* Leonato, governor of Messina, host to all the visiting soldiers above
* Hero, daughter to Leonato, in love with Claudio

In this romantic comedy, every kind of love goes awry—that between brothers, friends, colleagues, and parents and children, but most of all, lovers. Why? Because characters succumb to lying and spying. They are constantly overhearing others, believing slander, jumping to conclusions, and making a fuss over imagined facts with nothing to support them. Elizabethans pronounced “nothing” very much like “noting,” a word they used for “paying attention” (as in “note me”), so the title’s pun envelops both our capacity to fail to note and our willingness to react to nothing.

*Much Ado* also satirizes the ridiculous extremes of chivalric love to which many of Shakespeare’s contemporaries succumbed. Elaborate rituals of poetic courtship prevailed, many of them a lot of fancy nothings in which suitors, caught up in the act, failed to really note the object of their affection. Unlike Shakespeare’s other romantic comedies, which are heavy on verse (with its strict rhythmic structure and elevated language), this one is nearly 80 percent prose; therefore, it is far more blunt and down to earth. At the center are two of Shakespeare’s most famous battling lovers, who have been waging a war of words for years. At one point, he says to her, “Thou and I are too wise to woo peaceably.” They are the first in a
long line of “oil and water” partners (eventually perfected onscreen by Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn, among others) who spit and spar until something makes them collapse into love.

The avowed central plotline involves another younger, naive couple, Claudio and Hero, who fall in love without any knowledge (or genuine “noting”) of each other. Hero is then falsely accused of being unfaithful, is rashly rejected by Claudio, and only when the truth of her innocence is revealed are they reunited. Their relationship is overshadowed, however, by their more worldly and combative companions.

When they run into each other, these two very strong personalities say things such as:

BEATRICE: I wonder that you will still be talking, Signior Benedick. Nobody marks you.
BENEDICK: What, my dear Lady Disdain! Are you yet living?
BEATRICE: Is it possible disdain should die while she hath such food to feed it as Signior Benedick? Courtesy itself must convert to disdain, if you come in her presence.
BENEDICK: Then is courtesy a traitor. But it is certain I am loved of all ladies, only you excepted: and I would that I had not a hard heart; for, truly, I love none.
BEATRICE: A dear happiness to women. I thank God, I am of your humor for that: I had rather hear my dog bark at a crow than a man swear he loves me.
BENEDICK: God keep your ladyship still in that mind! So some gentleman or other shall escape a scratch'd face.
BEATRICE: Scratching could not make it worse, if 'twere such a face as yours.

The way they talk about each other is even worse than what they say to each other. Here is an example of Beatrice describing Benedick:

He is the prince's jester: a very dull fool; his only gift is in devising impossible slanders: he both amuses men and angers them, and then they laugh at him and beat him.

Benedick in turn describes her thusly:

Every word she speaks stabs: if her breath were as terrible as her words, there were no living near her; she would infect to the North Star. While she is here, a man may live as quiet in hell as in a sanctuary and I would sin on purpose, because I would rather go to hell than endure her!

Only when their friends conspire to trick them by getting Beatrice to overhear her women friends talking about how hopelessly in love with her Benedick is, while Benedick’s male friends are playing the same trick on him about her, do they succumb. Then they sound quite different. When they are apart, they say:

BEATRICE: What fire is in mine ears? Can this be true? Stand I condemn'd for pride and scorn so much? Contempt, farewell! and maiden pride, adieu...!
And, Benedick, love on; I will requite thee, Taming my wild heart to thy loving hand: If thou dost love, my kindness shall incite thee to bind our loves up in a holy band.
BENEDICK: Love me! Why, it must be requited! I will be horribly in love with her! I may chance have some odd quirks and remnants of wit broken on me, because I have rail'd so long against marriage: but doth not the appetite alter? A man loves the meat in his youth that he cannot endure in his age. The world must be peopled! When I said I would die a bachelor, I did not think I should live till I were married!

And when they are alone together, they have this exchange:

BEATRICE: Will you go with me, Signior?
BENEDICK: I will live in thy heart, die in thy lap, and be buried in thy eyes.

This last tribute from Benedick is one of the most romantic of all time. Elizabethans used the term die to mean orgasm, so the sexual implications make the speech even more wholeheartedly and aggressively loving. Their bumpy ride from cynically denying romance to this moment is rough, hilarious, moving, and exhausting. One can easily imagine Beatrice and Benedick, indeed “too wise to woo peaceably,” engaging instead in joyous loving combat for the rest of their days.

Here is a combined scene from Much Ado, edited and adapted by Robert Barton, excerpted from the companion anthology to this text, Life Themes: Major Conflicts in Drama.

BENEDICK: I do much wonder that one man, seeing how much another man is a fool when he dedicates his behaviours to love, will, after he hath laugh’d at such shallow follies in others, become the source of his own scorn by falling in love: and such a man is Claudio. I have known when there was no music in him but the drum and the fife; and now had he rather hear the lute and the pipe. I have known when he would have walk’d ten miles to see a good armour; and now will he lie ten nights awake, carving the fashion of a new doublet. He was wont
to speak plain and to the purpose, like an honest man and a soldier; and now is he turn’d orthography; his words are a very fantastical banquet, just so many strange dishes. May I be so converted? I think not. Love shall never make me such a fool. One woman is fair, yet I am well; another is wise, yet I am well; another virtuous, yet I am well; but till all the graces be in one woman, one woman shall not come in my grace. Rich she shall be, that’s certain; wise, or I’ll none; virtuous, or I’ll never cheapen her; fair, or I’ll never look on her; mild or come not near me; noble, of good discourse, an excellent musician, and her hair shall be what colour it please God!

BENEDICK: Lady Beatrice, have you wept all this while?
BEATRICE: Yea, and I will weep a while longer.
BENEDICK: I will not desire that.
BEATRICE: You have no reason; I do it freely.
BENEDICK: Surely I do believe your fair cousin is wrong’d.
BEATRICE: Ah, how much might the man deserve of me that would right her!
BENEDICK: Is there any way to show such friendship?
BEATRICE: A very even way, but no such friend.
BENEDICK: May a man do it?
BEATRICE: It is a man’s office, but not yours.
BENEDICK: I do love nothing in the world so well as you: is not that strange?
BEATRICE: As strange as the thing I know not. It were as possible for me to say I loved nothing so well as you: but believe me not; and yet I lie not; I confess nothing, not I deny nothing. I am sorry for my cousin.
BENEDICK: I protest I love thee.
BEATRICE: Why, then, God forgive me!
BENEDICK: What offense, sweet Beatrice?
BEATRICE: You have stay’d me in a happy hour; I was about to protest I loved you.
BENEDICK: And do it with all thy heart.
BEATRICE: I love you with so much of my heart, that none is left to protest.
BENEDICK: Come, bid me do anything for thee.
BEATRICE: Kill Claudio.
BENEDICK: Not for the wide world.
BEATRICE: You kill me to deny it. Farewell.
BENEDICK: Tarry, sweet Beatrice.
BEATRICE: I am gone, though I am here—there is no love in you—nay, I pray you, let me go.
BENEDICK: Beatrice.
BEATRICE: In faith, I will go.
BENEDICK: We will be friends first.
BEATRICE: You dare easier be friends with me than fight with mine enemy.
BENEDICK: Is Claudio thine enemy?
BEATRICE: Is he not approved in the height a villain, that hath slander’d, scorn’d, dishonour’d my kinswoman? O that I were a man! What, bear her in hand until they come to take hands; and then, with public accusation, uncover’d slander, unmitigated rancor—O God, that I were a man! I would eat his heart in the market place.
BENEDICK: Hear me, Beatrice—
BEATRICE: Talk with a man out at a window! A proper saying!
dramatic interlude 1 • Love

BENEDICK: Nay, but, Beatrice—
BEATRICE: Sweet Hero! — she is wrong’d, she is slander’d, she is undone.
BENEDICK: Beatr—
BEATRICE: Princes and counties! O that I were a man for her sake! Or that I had any friend would be a man for my sake! But manhood is melted into curties, valour into compliment, and men are only turn’d into tongues. I cannot be a man with wishing; therefore I will die a woman with grieving.
BENEDICK: Tarry, good Beatrice. By this hand, I love thee.
BEATRICE: Use it for my love some other way than swearing by it.
BENEDICK: Think you in your soul the Count Claudio hath wrong’d Hero?
BEATRICE: Yea, as sure as I have a thought or a soul.
BENEDICK: Enough. I am engaged; I will challenge him. I will kiss your hand, and so I leave you. By this hand, Claudio shall render me a dear account. As you hear of me, so think of me. Go, comfort your cousin: I must say she is dead. And so, farewell. [Exeunt]

M. Butterfly (1988)

Much darker than Shakespeare’s vision, though similarly based on deception, David Henry Hwang’s play explores the ways in which we fall in love with our own fantasies rather than a human being.


Major Characters:
René Gallimard, a French diplomat in China
Song Liling, a performer in the Beijing Opera and Gallimard’s lover

Minor Characters:
Helga, Gallimard’s wife
Various friends of Gallimard (Marc/Man #2/Consul Sharpless)
Women Gallimard meets or imagines (Renee/Woman at Party/Girl in Magazine)
Chinese contacts of Song (Comrade Chin/Suzuki/Shu Fang)
Men of authority to Gallimard (M. Toulon/Man #1/Judge)

Hwang was inspired by a factual 1986 newspaper brief, but he chose to use fictional names and details to create his drama. When Gallimard meets Song, he is immediately smitten with “her.” Song is deliberately courting him under orders from the government, but Gallimard can only see romantic, passionate fantasies coming true through their affair. While Song spies on him, there is an undeniable and powerful love between them. The play begins in 1988 Paris with Gallimard in his prison cell, reliving the 20 years of happiness he experienced with Song, a performer in the Beijing Opera. Through flashbacks, we go to China during the 1960s and follow their intensifying romance. An intentional plot to get political information out of him dupes Gallimard. He believes Song’s many deceptions (including gender) because Song’s behavior matches his perfect Asian woman stereotype and he wants badly to be the dominating male lover of his imagination. Their first encounter foreshadows much of what comes later. Song has just performed an aria from Madama Butterfly:

GALLIMARD: A beautiful performance.
SONG: Oh, please. . . . You make me blush. I’m no opera singer at all.
GALLIMARD: I usually don’t like Butterfly. What I mean is, I’ve always seen it played by huge women in so much bad makeup.
SONG: Bad makeup is not unique to the West.
GALLIMARD: But, who can believe them?
SONG: And you believe me?
GALLIMARD: Absolutely. You were utterly convincing. It’s the first time . . .
SONG: Convincing? As a Japanese woman? The Japanese used hundreds of our people for medical experiments during the war, you know. But I gather such an irony is lost on you.
GALLIMARD: No! I was about to say, it’s the first time I’ve seen the beauty of the story. Of her death. It’s a pure sacrifice. He’s unworthy, but what can she do? She loves him . . . so much. It’s a very beautiful story.
SONG: Well, yes, to a Westerner.

They embark on a long-term affair. At one point, after he has not visited for some time, Song writes him letters. One ends with a phrase repeated over and over in the play: “What do you want? I have already given you my shame.” Shame becomes an ongoing part of their lives. The affair continues with Song employing age-old techniques of deception and never disrobing during their relations. One day, Galliard demands to see her naked:

SONG: Well, come. Strip me. Whatever happens, know that you have willed it. Our love, in your hands.
GALLIMARD: Did I not undress her because I knew, somewhere deep down, what I would find? Perhaps happiness is so rare that our mind can turn somersaults to protect it.

They move to Paris, living together for some years before both are arrested and tried for espionage. Only at the trial, when Song removes her clothes, does Gallimard realize that the love of his life is a man. Yet his illusions are so central to his identity, he cannot let them go. By the end of the play, he realizes that he did live a Madama Butterfly dream life, but he cast himself in the wrong role.

He realizes that he was the dominated one, but even after the humiliation, he is so trapped in his illusions that he still can say:

I've become patron saint of the socially inept! Men like that—they should be scratching at my door, begging to learn my secrets! For I, René Gallimard, you see, I have known and been loved by . . . the Perfect Woman.

Gallimard takes his own life exactly as Butterfly does in the opera. The play is a harsh indictment of the Western tendency to draw conclusions about the East without going beyond its mask to explore its mysteries. It is also, first and foremost, a story of passionate love.

Here is a scene from M. Butterfly available in Life Themes:


[Lights fade up to reveal RENÉ GALLIMARD, 65, in a prison cell. He wears a comfortable bathrobe and looks old and tired. The sparsely furnished cell contains a wooden crate upon which sits a hot plate with a kettle and a portable tape recorder. GALLIMARD sits on the crate staring at the recorder, a sad smile on his face. Upstage, SONG, who appears as a beautiful woman in traditional Chinese garb, dances a traditional piece from the Beijing Opera, surrounded by the percussive clatter of Chinese music. Then, slowly, lights and sound cross-fade; the Chinese opera music dissolves into a Western opera, the “Love Duet” from Puccini's Madama Butterfly. SONG continues dancing, now to the Western accompaniment. Though her movements are the same, the difference in music now gives them a balletic quality. GALLIMARD rises, and turns upstage towards the figure of SONG, who dances without acknowledging him.]

GALLIMARD: Butterfly, Butterfly . . .

[He forces himself to turn away, as the image of SONG fades out, and talks to us.]

GALLIMARD: The limits of my cell are as such: four-and-a-half meters by five. There’s one window against the far wall; a door, very strong, to protect
me from autograph hounds. I’m responsible for
the tape recorder, the hot plate, and this charming
coffee table. When I want to eat, I’m marched off
to the dining room—hot, steaming slop appears
on my plate. When I want to sleep, the light bulb
turns itself off—the work of fairies. It’s an enchanted
space I occupy. The French—we know how to run
a prison. But, to be honest, I’m not treated like an
ordinary prisoner. Why? Because I’m a celebrity.
You see, I make people laugh. I never dreamed this
day would arrive. I’ve never been considered witty
or clever. In fact, as a young boy, in an informal
poll among my grammar school classmates, I was
voted “least likely to be invited to a party.” It’s a title
I managed to hold onto for many years. Despite
some stiff competition. But now, how the tables
turn! Look at me: the life of every social function in
Paris? Paris? Why be modest? My fame has spread
to Amsterdam, London, New York. Listen to them!
In the world’s smartest parlors. I’m the one who lifts
their spirits!

[With a flourish, GALLIMARD directs our attention to
another part of the stage.]

[A party. Present. Lights go up on a chic-looking parlor,
where a well-dressed trio, two men and one woman,
make conversation. GALLIMARD also remains lit; he
observes them from his cell.]

WOMAN: And what of Gallimard?
MAN 1: Gallimard?
MAN 2: Gallimard!
GALLIMARD: [To us] You see? They’re all determined to
say my name, as if it were some new dance.
WOMAN: He still claims not to believe the truth.
MAN 1: What? Still? Even since the trial?
WOMAN: Yes. Isn’t it mad?
MAN 2: [Laughing] He says . . . it was dark . . . and she
was very modest!

[The trio breaks into laughter.]

MAN 1: So—what? He never touched her with his
hands?
MAN 2: Perhaps he did, and simply misidentified the
equipment. A compelling case for sex education in
the schools.
WOMAN: To protect the National Security—the Church
can’t argue with that.
MAN 1: That’s impossible! How could he not know?
MAN 2: Simple ignorance.
MAN 1: For twenty years?
MAN 2: Time flies when you’re being stupid.
WOMAN: Well, I thought the French were ladies’ men.
MAN 2: It seems Monsieur Gallimard was overly
anxious to live up to his national reputation.
WOMAN: Well, he’s not very good-looking.
MAN 1: No, he’s not.
MAN 2: Certainly not.
WOMAN: Actually, I feel sorry for him.
MAN 2: A toast! To Monsieur Gallimard!
WOMAN: Yes! To Gallimard!
MAN 1: To Gallimard!
MAN 2: Vive la difference!

[They toast, laughing. Lights down on them.]

[M. GALLIMARD’s cell.]

GALLIMARD [smiling]: You see? They toast me. I’ve
become patron saint of the socially inept. Can they
really be so foolish? Men like that, they should be
scratching at my door, begging to learn my secrets!
For I, René Gallimard, you see, I have known, and
been loved by . . . the Perfect Woman. Alone in
this cell, I sit night after night, watching our story
play through my head, always searching for a new
ending, one which redeems my honor, where she
returns at last to my arms. And I imagine you—my
ideal audience—who come to understand and even,
perhaps just a little, to envy me.

[As GALLIMARD describes the opera, the tape segues in
and out to sections he may be describing.]

GALLIMARD: And why not? Its heroine, Cio-Cio-
San, also known as Butterfly, is a feminine ideal,
beautiful and brave. And its hero, the man for whom
she gives up everything, is—[He pulls out a naval
officer’s cap from under his crate, pops it on his
head, and struts about]—not very good-looking,
not too bright, and pretty much a wimp: Benjamin
Franklin Pinkerton of the U.S. Navy. As the curtain rises, he's just closed on two great bargains: one on a house, the other on a woman—call it a package deal.

[MARC, wearing an official cap to designate SHARPLESS, enters and plays the character.]

SHARPLESS/MARC: Pinkerton!
PINKERTON/GALLIMARD: Sharpless! How's it hangin'? It's a great day, just great. Between my house, my wife, and the rickshaw ride in from town, I've saved nineteen cents just this morning.

SHARPLESS: Wonderful. I can see the inscription on your tombstone already: “I saved a dollar, here I lie.”

[He looks around] Nice house.
PINKERTON: It's artistic. Artistic, don't you think? Like the way the shoji screens slide open to reveal the wet bar and disco mirror ball? Classy, huh? Great for impressing the chicks.

SHARPLESS: “Chicks”? Pinkerton, you’re going to be a married man!
PINKERTON: Well, sort of.

SHARPLESS: What do you mean?
PINKERTON: This country—Sharpless, it is okay. You got all these geisha girls running around—

SHARPLESS: I know! I live here!
PINKERTON: Then, you know the marriage laws, right? I split for one month, it's annulled!

SHARPLESS: Leave it to you to read the fine print. Who's the lucky girl?
PINKERTON: Cio-Cio-San. Her friends call her Butterfly. Sharpless, she eats out of my hand!

SHARPLESS: She's probably very hungry.
PINKERTON: Not like American girls. It's true what they say about Oriental girls. They want to be treated bad!

SHARPLESS: Oh, please!
PINKERTON: It's true!

SHARPLESS: Are you serious about this girl?
PINKERTON: I’m marrying her, aren’t I?

SHARPLESS: Yes—with generous trade-in terms.
PINKERTON: When I leave, she’ll know what it’s like to have loved a real man. And I'll even buy her a few nylons.

SHARPLESS: You aren't planning to take her with you?
PINKERTON: Huh? Where?

SHARPLESS: Home!
PINKERTON: You mean, America? Are you crazy? Can you see her trying to buy rice in St. Louis?

SHARPLESS: So, you’re not serious.

[Pause.]

PINKERTON/GALLIMARD [As PINKERTON]: Consul, I am a sailor in port. [As GALLIMARD] They then proceed to sing the famous duet, “The Whole World Over.”

[The duet plays on the speakers. GALLIMARD, as PINKERTON, lip-syncs his lines from the opera.]

GALLIMARD: To give a rough translation: “The whole world over, the Yankee travels, casting his anchor wherever he wants. Life’s not worth living unless he can win the hearts of the fairest maidens, then hotfoot it off the premises ASAP.” [He turns towards MARC.] In the preceding scene, I played Pinkerton, the womanizing cad, and my friend Marc from school . . . [MARC bows grandly for our benefit] played Sharpless, the sensitive soul of reason. In life, however, our positions were usually—no, always—reversed.
Here are examples that expand ideas from the past two chapters. If you were to attend productions of *Much Ado* or *M. Butterfly*, we cannot determine what you may experience. However, we can offer observations and predictions based on the scripts and production traditions.

**Familiarity**

You already know the parameters of both plays from these synopses. You have a basic idea of the plot and can appreciate how the show may develop similarly to or differently from what you anticipated. It would be fun to debate and predict with a friend what the production will be like and see who comes closer.

**Story**

Beyond the facts and arcs described previously, *Much Ado* is straightforward, and most questions are answered to our satisfaction at the end. *M. Butterfly* leaves certain offstage actions and some of Song’s motives a mystery.

**Conflict**

Both plays deal with the conflict between truth and illusion and between stubbornness and sensitivity. Beatrice and Benedick use conflict as a way of communicating; in fact, they use it as a way of entertaining themselves. Until their last encounter, Gallimard and Song avoid conflict at all costs.

**Emotional Mode**

*Much Ado* is largely a rollicking comedy until the exposure of Hero, at which point there is a stretch of dark, very serious scenes until all is again released into buoyant comic energy. *M. Butterfly* remains consistently dramatic, intriguing, and thought-provoking with no real comic relief. It probably does not reach traditional tragic levels because Gallimard never has the greatness needed for his downfall to feel profound.

**The World of the Play**

- **Time:** *Much Ado* is timeless and not tied to any specific historical event. The action takes place in linear fashion over about two weeks. *M. Butterfly*’s narrative takes place in the “present” (1988) with flashbacks over the preceding 20-odd years. While one play was written over 400 years before the other, there is not a sense of a classical versus a modern perspective. In fact, the central characters in the older play support breaking old customs, while those in the newer one cling to them.

Gallimard’s (Mark Capri) illusion is broken when Song (Francis Jue) reveals that he is a man. *M. Butterfly* at TheatreWorks in Palo Alto, directed by Robert Kelley. Unlike *Much Ado About Nothing*, this love story ends tragically, with Gallimard recollecting his romance from prison.
these through scenic detail. Both are often performed on a large unit set, perhaps with ramps and platforms and lighting being the primary means of suggesting a change in locale. Much Ado’s action takes place within (at most) a few acres in Sicily, while M. Butterfly veers between multiple Chinese and French locations, so one play feels contained/local and the other expansive/global.

- **Values:** Both plays support our collective beliefs that love is tough but worth it and that lies of all kinds often lead to disaster. M. Butterfly challenges the widespread Western belief that we know what is right for other people even when we do not really know them (although we may think we do).

- **Structure:** In both worlds, women are not allowed to be aggressive in demanding their rights. Even someone as strong as Beatrice must ask Benedick to revenge Hero’s wrongs. For this reason, Much Ado, while presented in many time periods, is rarely set before the widespread impact of feminism.

- **Pleasure:** A great love of beauty permeates both worlds. In Much Ado, the greatest pleasure is repartee, the well-turned phrase and brilliant retort. Forthright, bawdy sexual references abound. M. Butterfly remains more delicate and elusive, with sex as an art and nakedness in any form is too much. Beatrice and Song represent almost polar opposites in terms of the ideal woman.

- **Senses:** Both plays are likely to be sumptuously produced, with beautiful costumes, music, and striking visuals throughout. Both are likely to make you feel that you have taken a sensual journey with unfamiliar textures, patterns, and delights.

**Conclusions**

Both writers, while having compassion for those who succumb to deception, present strong arguments in favor of straightforward truth and relationships based on candor rather than denial. Each central love affair is unconventional and, for better or worse, original.

We share some other thoughts related to the past two chapters.

**Ritual and Convention**

Beatrice and Benedick mock blind, elaborate courtship rituals in favor of confrontation and disclosure. They have probably invented a whole new fight/flirt ritual code of their own. Gallimard believes that he loves Eastern ritual, but he never fully comprehends the culture that so enamors him. Beijing Opera performers live by tradition and illusion and are sustained through ritual. In Much Ado, as in all Shakespeare, multiple characters sometimes speak directly to the audience (asides); while in M. Butterfly, only when Gallimard is in present-tense narrator mode does this occur (breaking the fourth wall).

**Translation**

Some consider Shakespeare’s language difficult and dense, almost like a foreign language and hard to interpret. Fortunately, this may be his most easily comprehensible play in terms of both words and contemporary values. M. Butterfly focuses on the elusive challenge of translating levels of meaning between cultures; in a way, it is about a failure of translation.

**Stage to Screen**

Both plays have been filmed, and both had film versions that were released in 1993. Kenneth Branagh’s Much Ado About Nothing was a critical and popular success. The script was cut down to well under two hours, adapted to make the language even easier to understand, had a glorious setting and rousing music, and was acted with gusto. (Even though Keanu Reeves was in the cast, he did not have very many lines.) The cinematic M. Butterfly was far less successful and panned by many critics, many citing this movie as probably the weakest film David Cronenberg had directed to date. This was due in part to a bizarre rethinking of the ending, in which Gallimard (Jeremy Irons), in full, grotesque quasi-geisha drag, takes his life in front of hundreds of other prison inmates. Critics also almost universally pointed out that the actor playing Song (John Lone) had a distractingly large bone structure.
and strong male features, making the onscreen deception unconvincing. A work so strongly invested in illusion may have been doomed from the start from the scrutiny of the camera and the tyranny of the close-up.

DAVID HENRY HWANG, PLAYWRIGHT

I wrote this play as a plea to all sides to cut through our respective layers of cultural and sexual misperception, to deal with one another truthfully for our mutual good, from the common and equal ground we share as human beings.
chapter 3

Storytellers and Stories

(Left to right) Playwright and V-Day founder Eve Ensler, actor Meryl Streep, and Association of the Women of Afghanistan member Sahar Saba, during a press conference that was part of the Afghan women's summit presenting a proclamation for reconstruction of Afghanistan to the U.N. Security Council.

Director-playwrights like Athol Fugard continue the ancient theatrical storytellers' tradition. Here, Fugard works with actors Marius Weyers and Jennifer Steyn in rehearsal for his *Sorrows and Rejoicing* at the Tricycle Theatre in London.
INTRODUCTION

ONE OF THE MOST POWERFUL HUMAN IMPULSES is to tell stories: from our own lives, the lives of others who have touched us in some way, or simply from our imagination. Skilled storytellers are honored in any culture. In this chapter, we will look at the people who create theatrical stories in Africa, Asia, Europe, and the Americas; examine differences between oral and written traditions; and provide methods for analyzing plays in all forms.
Lesson Objectives:
Upon completion of this chapter, you will be able to:
1. Identify different types of oral storytellers.
2. Identify the elements that compose a “good play.”
3. Explore ideas that might inspire you to try playwriting.
4. Analyze plays using dramatic structure and character analysis as tools.
5. Articulate, in written or verbal form, what the playwright is trying to accomplish.

Griots/Griottes, Sutradharas, and Bards

The first authors of plays in every culture were masters of oral tradition. In Africa, this tradition continues today as a primary means of communicating stories of the people. Storytellers there are often called griots/griottes (or “praise singers”; also see Chapter 2), and they are legendary for their musical skill, dramatic intensity, and endurance. One famous oral narrative from West Africa, called Ozidi, is an epic tale of the communal history of the region’s people. Ozidi, or parts of it, is still used as a foundation for some emerging new theatre in Africa. Griots who tackle Ozidi must be true masters of their art: it lasts for twenty-four full hours, and the griot plays all the parts.

Most performers of the oral tradition needed to master the arts of music and dance as well as characterization and narration. In China, Buddhist
monks spread the teachings (the Sutra) of the Buddha through memorized song. Later, secular artists added verses, dance, movement, and more songs influenced by contact with Indian and central Asian Sanskrit dance/drama. These narrators are sometimes called *sutradharas* (or “string pullers,” from the tradition of puppetry, because the narrator also “pulls the strings” of the story and sometimes guides or manipulates other performers). Not only did the *sutradharas* have to memorize long, intricate texts, but they also had to interpret the work for audiences who did not know Sanskrit as a language but could appreciate the beauty of its sounds. The *sutradhara* was also required to play at least one musical instrument and to guide the dancer/actors into correct visual presentation of their work.

In numerous ancient cultures, including those in Europe and the Middle East, the presence of a *bard* was an essential part of existence. Often associated with the ruling family, the bard was expected to capture the events and stir the emotions of the people, just as Ook did with his recounting the story of the lion (as discussed in Chapter 2). Working with a single musical instrument, playing male and female characters, and sometimes employing song, chants, and narrative poetic forms, the bard would help inspire and excite the people for an upcoming battle or long journey. At the end of a difficult or significant event, after an evening’s meal, the bard would put what had happened in perspective and shape it into meaning through theatrical means. For many, it was as if the events were not finalized until the bard captured them.
Each of these storytellers could function as creator and memorizer, entertainer, and communal historian. Some 20th-century recordings have captured the artistry of the oral performer. While not being live causes them to lose something in translation, they nevertheless reveal multidimensional performance skills and give us a glimpse into the selection and training of oral storytelling masters.

In Europe, after the fall of the Roman Empire, our best guess is that professional actors/entertainers, having been banished from Rome, spread out across the wilderness that was Europe and made their way beyond the reach of Catholic Rome. If they were lucky, they found patrons to protect and nourish them and became vassals of their liege lords. Displeasing your lordship was a risky business, and many of our most beloved stories, plays, and films are romanticized versions of events created by bards in honor of their chieftains/lords. Training was by apprenticeship, and it is likely that minstrelsy or court performing ran in families as other trades did. Perhaps the best-known use of the term bard is in reference to England’s beloved William Shakespeare. He is sometimes referred to as “the Bard of Avon” or simply “The Bard” even today.

In Africa, the griot/griotte was trained by the elder storytellers, and selection was based on both suitability and a sacred spiritual calling. A few years ago, Habibu Selemani, one of the masters of the art in Tanzania, died, leaving no trained survivors to carry on his work. He had learned the art by watching his masters from the time he was five until he started performing himself at age fourteen. His passage without a successor is felt as a great loss in his culture even though he left many performances captured on audiotape. Some of the stories have survived, but no one now knows everything he remembered, including his mastery of the music, movement, impersonation, and character. One of his eulogists declared that the griot tradition is dying out in postcolonial Africa, but others believe that it may simply be changing. Contemporary playwright Ngugi wa Thiong’o of Kenya, for example, has been imprisoned for his plays, which are critical of the dictatorial government of Kenya. Today, his plays are being spread across the country by griots and griottes who enter a town, recite the script, shape the performance elements, and then slip away to avoid arrest and prosecution.

In India, young girls were dedicated to religious communities where they were raised and initiated by the priestesses into the mysteries of dance/drama that were learned through exhausting repetition of each tiny gesture.
While Mark Lewis rarely performs around a campfire, in most ways he practices this ancient profession just as the earliest tellers of tales did. He performs in meeting places: community centers, churches, schools, restaurants, parks, and family rooms. He does not use props and rarely appears on a stage. When he does, he demands that all the houselights be turned up, and he is likely to move up and down the aisles, eliminating any distance between actor and audience. The magic is all in the telling. He transforms the space with the power of his ability to challenge the imagination of his listeners.

Mark has won two Emmy awards for his storytelling show *Word Pictures*, has appeared on *The Tonight Show*, and has hypnotized live audiences around the world. When auditioning for traditional roles earlier in his career, he was often told that his performance was too “big,” and then he realized that the ability to play big is part of the game in storytelling, where it takes a large presence and dynamic choices to hold an audience captive. It was when working Renaissance fairs as an actor that he discovered his profession. “We performers would gather together at the end of the day and regale each other with tall tales. I realized that this was what I was supposed to do.” Mime training and working on character voices and accents (he supplies three of the voices on Disney’s “Pirates of the Caribbean” ride) helped because the storyteller suggests every setting physically, plays all the characters, and needs to create change in an instant.

Can one find sufficient storytelling work living in Eugene, Oregon, a town of 150,000? No, so Mark is frequently on a plane pursuing his motto: “*Carpe per Diem.*” While his travels take him far and wide, he primarily works in Los Angeles and, surprisingly, Las Vegas, where some audience members see storytelling as an alternative relative to stand-up comedy. While half his audiences are children, adults holding parties with storytelling as the after-dinner entertainment is one of his most common venues.

Unlike the culture surrounding *griots*, for most of Mark’s audiences storytelling is such a rare treat that instead of breaking into the performance, they tend to watch and listen in a state that might start as silent skepticism and then move swiftly to enraptured attention. He employs what he called “old-wave special effects,” often creating astonishing imitations of wind and storms. While he finds audiences who seek most of their entertainment through technology to be increasingly challenging on first contact, once he lures them in, they tend to give themselves up completely. “The most important thing,” he says, “is that you have to allow the listeners to make it their own.”

The stories may run for just a few minutes, or in the case of some long-form epics, up to an hour and a half. While he writes quite a few himself, his most requested “greatest hits” include “The Highwayman,” “Jabberwocky,” and “How the Grinch Stole Christmas.” For new ones, he says, “In my mind there is a house, with a hallway and different rooms. I step into one and the story is all there, characters and details swirling all around me, but in a chaotic way. It is then my job to take what is in the room and create something linear.”
and sound until perfection was achieved. Into the twentieth century, in some Asian cultures, the tradition of adopting very young children into a sacred or theatrical house continued, sometimes with painful and cruel deprivation as part of the training. In ancient Persian and Arab cultures, female bards were considered essential to the well-being of the empire and of individual clans.

Although earliest dramas were developed in the oral tradition, with each culture’s stories taught to succeeding generations, the transition to written narrative was inevitable. The balance between written and oral narrative today will vary depending on the traditions of a region or country. Some believe the emergence of rap and hip-hop represent a renaissance of the oral tradition in a new form.

More traditional storytelling has experienced a revival in part due to the National Storytellers Festival in Jonesborough, Tennessee, which attracts 10,000 visitors each fall and features such renowned performers as Emmy-winning contemporary storyteller Mark Lewis. It is a gathering place, not just for those wishing to listen but for those very much committed to keeping the form alive.

In most parts of the world today, some form of playwriting is the starting point for most productions. We will identify key elements of the playwright’s work and ways that we can analyze those works to understand them better.

### Playwrights

Most productions start with plays, but how do plays start? Some are commissioned, in which case a theatre picks a theme, an occasion, or an issue on which to take a stand and then hires a **playwright** to produce a script. This process begins with those who manage the company itself, so the playwright is second on board.

But far more often the playwright is first, working in isolation, creating something on paper which may or may not end up as theatre magic and which in fact may never be produced. If a theatre company decides to mount a new play, the script can go through a long evolution process, ending with an opening, where critics pass judgment and audiences may flock to the theatre or stay away. The play can close after a single performance or run for years.

What about the weird spelling? A “wright” is by definition “a construction worker, a carpenter, mechanic, or manufacturer, a skilled craftsman.” Throughout history, there have been boatwrights and also book-, cart-, coach-, gate-, house-, mill-, plow-, ship-, wagon-, and wheelwrights, among
others. What does the person who makes plays have in common with these artisans? Another definition is “one who makes or contrives, a deviser or inventor.” The playwright is different from the novelist, poet, essayist, short-story writer, biographer, or other literary figures because what is being “wrought” is the first step in a crafting process where these words will not stay on the page for silent reading but will be molded into a living, breathing performance. The playwright makes a play as the plow-wright makes the plow, crafting ingredients sturdily, readying the product for years of use by others. The playwright shapes words to be spoken by people in costumes and makeup, lit a particular way, walking on a stage, in the presence of other actors, crews, and audiences, in places that the playwright will never visit in any way except through this script. The playwright makes words to be contemplated exclusively in cozy solitude or the occasional public reading, nor does he create words to be taken in parts at one’s leisure and put aside for periods of reflection. The playwright prepares for an event that, once it starts, will proceed with or without intermissions until it is over.

Most writers need to consider only the reader. The playwright needs to consider all participants and elements of theatre as the script evolves. The “wrighter” needs to envision a finished product that will be used, that will in fact move, like a boat, a plow, or a wheel. At her desk at home, she needs to hear the words spoken and to see them enacted, projecting forward through collaboration and evolution. Many brilliant writers from other literary backgrounds fail as playwrights.

Playwright Suzan-Lori Parks working with director Michael Greif on 365 Days/365 Plays at the Public Theatre. From November 2002 to November 2003, Parks wrote one short play a day, resulting in 365 Days/365 Plays.

STEVEN DIETZ, PLAYWRIGHT

“There’s no fast way to make plays. It takes just as long and is just as hard as it was a thousand years ago.”
Their words do not leap off the page and across the stage. Their texts have not been built to be used, and used hard, by others.

In early theatre models, the playwright (including Kan’ami Kiyotsugu of Japan, Sophocles of Athens, and Shakespeare of England) was often the primary production guide, coaching and cajoling the actors, structuring the event, and steering the play toward its opening. The creator of the script continued to create through the performance. Nowadays, playwrights are often excluded from the final process except when the director needs advice or script changes. So, while they are in some ways the most central figures in the theatrical process, they can also be the ones who feel most outside that process in its final stages. Others may change what they had in mind, shift the emphasis of their words, minimize their themes, and even seem to sabotage their ideas. What they experience on stage may be far from what they envisioned at their word processor or legal pad back home.

A Good Play

It is sometimes difficult to separate a play from its production. Let’s examine what constitutes a strong script, which makes for a good story, no matter how it is told.

A successful theatre script must have five essential ingredients:

1. **Action** moves the play forward. A script needs to move. Something important must happen. Sometimes what happens is physical, sometimes psychological. Even in Theatre of the Absurd, a style of theatre in which characters may wait endlessly for something that never happens, it is likely that this is the most compelling day in their wait, perhaps the one in which they finally realize that things will never change and they have to deal with it. Plays take place at crucial and active life moments.

2. **Suspense** keeps us wondering. In some plays, it has to do with twists and turns of plot. But in many of the great classical plays, the audience knows the entire story, so suspense is about smaller surprises and discoveries, the creative variations that pop up along the journey. A good play keeps us engaged by the possibility that what we think will happen might not.

3. **Believability** makes us accept the world of the play and its inhabitants as enough like us that we recognize their struggles, successes, and failures. No matter how unfamiliar the situation (a well-known Nigerian play features the King of the Cockroaches trapped in a bathtub), we must feel that it is true to its own conventions and experiences. Each person (or metaphorical being) should be fully realized, whether man, goddess, or cockroach. Many of us can write about people like us, but to write with empathy and truth about those beyond our comfort zone is a true gift.
4. **Fluidity** allows the events of the play to occur smoothly from beginning to end. The playwright considers where actors will enter and exit, where there will be breaks between scenes, where acts will end and intermissions occur. The playwright considers how the evening will shift and turn through various handlings of the text. She must be aware of audience and cultural expectations as to length, tempo, and rhythms in the style of play “wrighting.” The best scripts are clear roadmaps for the actor in terms of what is essential to the author’s vision and what is open to creative interpretation.

5. **Compression** transforms events into condensed and compelling forms. Because the story needs to unfold publicly over the course of an expected period of time (rarely more than a few hours), the playwright has to edit and reduce details to the essential. She needs to consider constantly the mechanics of the theatre and, whenever possible, streamline and make choices that focus our attention on the exact part of the story that is important.

**Freedom and Influence**

When a new play is being produced, the playwright may be expected to do revisions as the show passes through readings, rehearsals, and even previews. This process can be electrifying and frustrating.

This is, however, the only time the author is obligated daily to meet the scheduling needs of others. For the rest of the process before this, the tradeoff for being isolated is that the playwright is the most free of all theatre artists. Unlike the rest of them, she can work when she wants. She can pick the time of day, place, and circumstances, without concern for inconveniencing an army of collaborators. The playwright also has the freedom, if a script gets published, not to be involved in any way with subsequent productions and yet still earn an income. When shows close, most participants’ experiences can be put in a single envelope: opening-night notes, telegrams, reviews, maybe some pressed flowers, a souvenir program. This huge experience leaves almost no lingering evidence. The only lasting tangible element is the script.

Every other person connected with the show needs to go on to a new job when the play closes. After closing night and strike (the process of tearing down the set), these other participants just have memories. But if the play is successful, it may be published and produced for many years in many places without the playwright even knowing about it except through royalty checks. Just as you are reading this book without the authors having direct contact with you, someone is mounting many playwrights’ work without their direct involvement, though their sphere of influence continues.

Playwrights also have the power of being listened to. Their ideas are shared, discussed, and passed along. People pay attention and pay to pay...
attention. They can have profound impact on the thoughts and actions of others. For this reason, we revere our successful playwrights as highly as any artist in the theatre. While the fame of others fades, the playwright has a chance at genuine immortality as scripts live on long after their deaths. Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Zeami Motokiyo (Zeami) are alive again in theatre after theatre and in the pages of this book. Tennessee Williams, Eugene O’Neill, and Thornton Wilder have long ago passed on, but they are at the center of our culture. The more recently deceased Arthur Miller, August Wilson, Wendy Wasserstein and Augusto Boal have joined them. Living legends like Wole Soyinka of Nigeria, Marie Irene Fornes of Cuba, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o of Kenya are only steps behind. You may not recognize all these names, but you probably recognize some of them, which would be unlikely for other theatre artists, except actors. Playwrights change lives and reinvigorate cultures.

Some claim that the playwright has become less central to the theatrical process as more and more scripts are evolved through improvisation and games or created by entire performance companies instead of a single writer, and as texts have sometimes been altered through deconstruction (taking the play apart and reinventing it in a particular way) or problematizing an isolated issue (making one possibly minor problem in the script major in the production). But these processes and the scripts resulting from them are simply redefining what it means to have “wrought” a play. Even in a work devised through collaborative group play, the entire gang is essentially functioning as collective playwrights. Rather than diminishing the role of the playwright, these theatre groups are sometimes renewing oral and collaborative traditions that long preceded written text.

Getting Started

The oldest and wisest advice in the world is “write what you know.” Playwrights need to dig into their own life experiences and imaginations to find what they know that might become electrifying theatre. What you know does not have to be what you have experienced firsthand in an autobiographical sense, but it should be about what you know deep inside so that it may reflect a personal powerful fantasy or an imaginative journey that is as much a part of you as the mundane details of your actual
life. It should have happened in your mind and heart. You may just start hearing words in your head.

There are also 10 other possible springboards that might be the beginning of a script:

1. A character who fascinates you, real or imagined
2. A family or group whose interaction intrigues you
3. A startling event in the news or the transcript of an actual trial
4. A real or imaginary world or place that seems exotic to the degree that you want to set a story and imagine life there
5. A controversial issue in which you wish to explore various positions and points of view
6. A life-changing event that happened to you or someone close to you
7. A famous person or fictional character whose biography or story intrigues you
8. A brief encounter that you overhear on the street or in a store, which keeps replaying in your head so that you are fascinated enough to create the back story and the rest of this relationship
9. An imaginary encounter between two famous people who probably never met, but could have
10. A personal encounter that you wanted to have but never did, but which could happen now as drama

**Other Writers: Composers and Lyricists**

In musical theatre, the play script is traditionally called the libretto or book and the playwright the librettist or book writer. While spoken words are important, no one leaves the theatre humming the book. In some musicals, it may be just a way to get from song to song as swiftly as possible. In many parts of the world, the entire play is sung or chanted to musical accompaniment. While all composers conceive music that will be performed by others, the musical-theatre composer, like the playwright, needs to envision and hear (in his head) the collaboration of soloists and chorus and to imagine that what is on paper is being taken to another level by aggressive participation. The lyricist essentially writes poetry to be set to music or to match music already written, with a particularly necessary flair for expressing ideas that rhyme and are revealed through a character, just as Shakespeare has characters suddenly rhyme when they are making a particularly crucial point at the end of a scene or speech. When characters are so full of emotion that mere speech will no longer suffice, they break into song. Both the words

**ALAN BENNETT, PLAYWRIGHT**

I can’t write about any place where I don’t understand the social structure as it is expressed through the way people speak. I can write in posh, public school English, but not in American.
and the tune that they perform should reflect who they are, show how they function in the world, and capture an emotional wave to be shared with the audience.

These positions are often filled by two different artists, both of which need to virtually personify the word collaboration by being in sync with each other. When we think of the legendary partnerships of the American musical theatre (Rodgers and Hammerstein, Lerner and Loewe, Kander and Ebb), it is as if they are one unit. And Stephen Sondheim, perhaps our most revered living writer of musical theatre, does both.

**Story Anatomy**

All artists use available tools to tell their truth. “True” is not the same as “real.” Many use fanciful variations of the real world to communicate their ideas. Their truth may move far beyond facts or evidence. Plays can be realistic or abstract. They may be simple or complex. They may speak in poetry or prose. They may be a combination of any of these elements. Playwrights make choices, each one opening some doors and closing others. By trying to be aware of the choices made, by analyzing the playwright’s construction process, we can better understand each script, starting with the choice of medium, mood, and dramatic action.
Medium

The first choice any artist makes is medium, the raw materials (such as oil or watercolor for a painter, or clay or marble for a sculptor), or method of presentation (such as media or live theatre). The playwright choosing live theatre accepts both benefits and challenges. Large epic visual events (the opening scene of the D-Day landing in Saving Private Ryan or almost anything in The Lord of the Rings trilogy) are not suited to the theatre medium. On the other hand, live theatre gives the playwright a personal connection with the audience, allowing intense and active interaction. Finding communion and connection in film is challenging, in part because of the technology that stands between the performance and the audience. We are not unaffected by film events, but we cannot influence them.

While both mediums allow intensely intimate glimpses into the lives of characters, live theatre will more often demand more dialogue by its very nature. In the film Lost in Translation, Bill Murray’s character, in Tokyo, receives constant faxes from his wife. Both the content of these messages and his reaction to them are shown in subtle silence. In a live performance of a play, a similar action would require that the actor read the messages out loud or for them to be projected on a giant screen, changing these moments altogether.

The playwright can expect the play to be produced by living, breathing human beings in a special space designed or designated as a theatre. His audience will probably expect to listen carefully, experiencing the event in a more auditory, less visual way. Because playwrights do not work in watercolors or marble but with words, they have a number of decisions to make about those words. Will some of them be set to music, or will it be a straight text? Will some of them rhyme, appear in some other form of verse, or be prose? Will the words be elevated and formal or street-talk colloquial? Will the language be sacred, profane, or both? Will the characters have the gift of gab or struggle and stumble to say what must be said? Will speakers generally be allowed to finish, or will characters continually interrupt and unsettle each other? Will the language choices be widely shared by all in the play or represent startling diversity? Here is tremendous power and responsibility.

Mood

Storytellers must decide on the mood early in the process: how closely they will be working to comic or tragic space. The comic mood assumes that while something is wrong in the world, the characters are going to struggle through to a new and better place—or at least find a way to tolerate their lives with less strain. The most common plot in comic mode is the love story. Two people fall in love, obstacles make their union seem impossible, but love triumphs in the end. What is wrong is not insurmountable.

TINA HOWE, PLAYWRIGHT

I have my white-glove plays about aging WASPs recalling better times and my bare-hands plays about women blasting into the light now. I tend to alternate my WASPy plays with my frisky ones.
Though Chekhov’s plays are seldom laugh-out-loud funny, he calls each of his four masterworks comedies, including *The Three Sisters*. The designation “comedy” suggests that by the end of his play, the world will be different, fresh, or maybe even better, but Chekhov’s plays have a tendency to end with a sense of melancholy, as few of his characters are able to overcome inertia, social restrictions, or their own natures to succeed. However, they *endure*, go on with their lives, and do the best they can with the little they’ve got.

Tragic mood assumes that the world (or cosmos) is thrown out of order by the actions of an individual or group. Tragic drama frequently involves characters who have power and use it to make others’ lives miserable. In *Antigone*, a young woman challenges the authority of the new king of Thebes, her uncle Creon, and his reactions disrupt the lives of the entire community. He doesn’t intentionally bring pain and suffering to his people, but his goal (maintaining an appearance of control no matter the cost) causes the known world to careen out of control for a moment. Only when he realizes and attempts to correct his errors can the community, the world, the cosmos return to balance and order. In the tragedy, characters must alter their behavior and relationship with the cosmos to survive and thrive. Sometimes (such as in *M. Butterfly*, *King Lear*, and *Antigone*) a character must die to restore the natural balance of the universe, but other times (such as in *Roosters*, *The Piano Lesson*, and *He and She*), a character can learn and change his or her behavior before the final reckoning.

The same actual story can be told in either comic or tragic mood, although the choice will alter the result beyond recognition. At times, the two are kept distinctly separate. During the 14th century, the venerated,
classical Japanese playwright Zeami divided drama into serious or tragic—known as *Noh*—and comic or romantic—known as *Kyogen*. To this day, the two are performed in different types of theatres, use different conventions, and rely heavily on different styles of theatricality. French neoclassicism of the 17th century dictated equally strict divisions in content, style, and production venues.

These two still tend to dominate the playwright’s range. Comedy is found throughout the world, from biting satire to gentle romance. Tragedy also thrives as we try to make sense of our complex and dangerous world. Increasingly, however, contemporary playwrights blend and distort mood to create tragicomedies or dramedies within a deconstructed, rediscovered, or simply absurd universe. Often works will switch gears and even layer one mood on top of another. The comic/tragic contrast is simply a starting point for increasingly complex, overlapping, and still-evolving forms.

**Dramatic Action**

The playwright decides on the action of the drama, guided by three major principles.

1. All **dramatic action** involves **conflict**. Human encounters are most interesting when we do not agree. On a normal day in real life, we may be able to avoid conflict in every interaction. But no one writes plays about
normal days. Plays are about days when something of critical importance is being confronted. Identifying the central conflict is crucial to understanding.

2. Dramatic action always occurs in the present tense. The play must occur before us as if it were happening right now. If a playwright needs us to know something about the past, the characters may talk about previous events or actually experience a flashback where they are not reminiscing but living the earlier event as it happens.

3. Most stories use the same structural elements. In Poetics, Aristotle claimed that each play must have a beginning, middle, and end. If you write a play or if you are the great storyteller in your family or tribe, knowing where to start, building intensity for exactly the right amount of time, and then ending it with the only possible outcome or the most surprising one is half the battle.

Play Analysis

The arts share a peculiar place in the human heart. Many of us are drawn to them, and some of us want to be artists, but few of us have both the genius and the luck necessary for a successful career. Those who choose this path must have a strong need that overwhelms uncertainties and failures. For the playwright, that need might be to give voice to ideas, feelings, or important events. Comedy may offer a chance to satirize idiots and oppressors, while tragedy helps us cope with suffering. The playwright leaves a legacy for us to experience here and now. The text is that legacy.

In the following section, we offer two avenues for analyzing script structure and character.

Dramatic Structure

Ten basic elements define the structure of a dramatic work. While some playwrights may twist or exclude some of them, the act of searching for them gives us insight into the work as a whole.

1. **Point of attack:** Where in the larger story of a life does the playwright choose to start this work? The story of Ogun has many episodes, starting from the moment of his creation and continuing into the present. A playwright working in Nigeria today might want to write a new play that will inspire people to continue the work of moving past the colonial era. He could look at the entire Ogun epic and choose one episode to retell, updating it to reflect current and local events. The point of attack is that choice of where in the longer story to start this play. In Greek tragedy, Sophocles wrote of Oedipus, the king of Thebes, part of a story that is many generations long. Long before the birth of Oedipus, one
of his ancestors offended the gods; the family was cursed through all
generations, and Oedipus is the recipient of a fate that he did nothing to
deserve. Likewise, his children are cursed, and their misfortunes carry
through generations to come. Many plays continue to be written about
this family and each playwright chooses a point of attack. Sophocles’
*Oedipus the King* starts on the last day of Oedipus’ reign. The same
playwright wrote *Antigone*, a play about the daughters of Oedipus in
which the point of attack chosen is after the exile of their father and a
civil war between their two brothers. Both plays tell the same big fam-
ily story, but different points of attack focus the audience on specific
incidents of the playwright's choosing. (For more about *Antigone*, see
Dramatic Interlude 4.)

The following three elements, while content-related, help reveal how the
work as a whole is constructed.

2. **Protagonist:** Who is the central charac-
ter in the play? In some forms of playwrit-
ing (such as the *Noh* drama and Elizabethan
tragedies), the protagonist is the tragic hero
defined as a well-born, good man who com-
mits an error from which catastrophe ensues.
In modern plays, men and women, high-born
and low-, good and flawed, function as protag-
onist. Which character does the playwright
want us to follow? Who changes the most in
the play? Which character would you want to
hire a top-dollar movie star to play him or her
in your movie? Who wins the contest/conflict
or loses most spectacularly? More important,
who does the playwright think *ought* to win,
lose, or change?

3. **Antagonist:** Who is the character most
actively trying to prevent the protagonist
from achieving his goals? Antagonist does not
equal “villain” or “bad guy” except in a simple
form of storytelling called melodrama. Maybe
the antagonist is trying to protect the pro-
tagist by blocking his actions. Maybe the
protagonist’s goal is one that the playwright
believes should be challenged.

4. **World of the play:** What are the basic facts
about the characters and particular uni-
verse given to us by the playwright? *Much
Ado About Nothing* (discussed in Dramatic
Interlude 1) is set in Messina, a vague, exotic,
romantic locale in the home of its governor,
Leonato. His estate is large and luxurious. The season seems to be spring or summer. The well-to-do characters are experiencing a period of leisure. We identify what is known, without immediate judgment. The basic categories introduced in Chapter 1—time, space, values, structure, pleasure, and the senses—are always worth investigating. (Appendix A offers extensive questions within each of these general topics.)

The playwright may also need to tell us about the past or warn us about the future using the two structural elements discussed next.

5. **Exposition:** Information about past events is given by the playwright through character conversation. One of the challenges of performing exposition is for the actor to make telling the story active and alive. Telling is inherently less compelling than doing. *Master Harold . . . and the boys* is an example of a play that relies heavily on exposition. (For more about the play, see Dramatic Interlude 4.) Characters Sam and Hally spend their afternoon together relating stories about the good old days when they lived in the Jubilee Boarding House, telling us critical information about their past experiences together and the evolution of their relationship. But for the characters, these are not simple reminiscences. Sam uses the stories to calm and encourage Hally, or to help him cope. In the hands of a good actor, exposition serves an active function in the present tense as well as clueing us in to past events.

In contrast, Shakespeare uses little exposition in *King Lear* (see Dramatic Interlude 3). We learn nothing about the history of the family, about the mother, childhood, or recent behavior of the three daughters. By not sharing the characters’ history with us, Shakespeare forces us to concentrate on their present behavior. We may learn a tidbit, such as that Lear always loved Cordelia best, and we may make connections between that and the current anger of her sisters, Regan and Goneril. But neither we nor they are allowed to spend much time justifying their harsh treatment of their father. Shakespeare seems to want to make them (and by extension us) accountable for each choice made in the present, focusing on what they do rather than why they do it.

6. **Foreshadowing:** Does the play contain a warning about something in the future? In film, foreshadowing is often accomplished by soundtrack music. In *Jaws*, the heavy heartbeat sound, “Baaah-dum, baaah-dum,” signals the approach of the shark (or teases us into tensing up only to release us with a fake cardboard shark fin). In our personal theatre, a friend may casually mention, “So-and-so might be at the party tonight” or “Your mom called, she didn’t say what about,” and in your head, you may hear the traditional “uh-oh” music soundtrack. In live theatre, characters who receive warnings are less likely to be supported by ominous sound cues. More often, they and the audience don’t realize the significance of the clue until later in the play, when a jolt of recognition goes through them and us.
Both exposition and foreshadowing can occur at any point in a play. The playwright chooses when to reveal or conceal, when to tease or fulfill, to build suspense and sustain conflict.

The following four elements help define the shape of the story.

7. **Inciting incident**: Which event changes the life being portrayed in the play? At some point near the beginning of the story, an *inciting incident* gets things rolling. In *M. Butterfly* (see Dramatic Interlude 1), David Henry Hwang reveals one possible inciting incident in Gallimard’s life through a flashback to the first time he laid eyes on the “perfect woman,” when Song performed at an embassy function. Until that moment, Gallimard’s life had been depressingly ordinary. Only through his involvement with Song did his life become interesting enough for someone to write a play about him.

Sometimes the inciting incident is more difficult to identify. In *The Three Sisters* (see Dramatic Interlude 5), a play characterized less by dynamic than reflective action, the inciting incident, which makes this day different from every other day, occurs in the first act—but exactly where? It might be Irina’s birthday party and the fact that she turns 20 (thereby feeling a need to grow up), or when Masha meets her future lover, Vershinin, for the first time, or when the unsuitable Baron Tusenbach declares his love for Irina. At first glance, any of these might function as the inciting incident, but careful study is needed to ensure that the chosen event leads to rising and falling actions and eventually to the climax when performed. One method for finding or confirming the inciting incident is to identify the climax of the play and work backward from there, tracing the plot back to the beginning to see if the chosen incident is the mechanism triggering the climactic outcome.

8. **Rising and falling actions**: Where does tension build and release in the text? Good storytelling always involves this alternation. **Rising action** is an event that increases tension, while falling action temporarily decreases it, allowing characters and audience a moment to breathe. Identifying rising actions is particularly critical as the central conflict is intensified and complicated.
Falling action is an event that relaxes us and gives us a moment of respite, but it doesn’t drive the action forward. A much-used diagram of basic storytelling structure is shown in Figure 3.1.

In some plays, the playwright challenges the normal storytelling arc, so analyzing structure helps us discover what the organizing principle is.

9. **Climax:** What is the moment of peak struggle or encounter in the central conflict of the play? It is often the final confrontation between the protagonist and the antagonist, when one of them wins and the other loses. The climax is often the place where we learn the purpose in telling this tale. If the play was a comedy, the climax will usually lead to the victory of good over evil. If it was tragic, good may still triumph, but only at a tremendous cost. Particularly in contemporary drama, if the “wrong” side wins, the meaning of the work may be showing us the strength needed to even attempt to overcome evil. Sometimes the meaning of our lives is not found in our victories, but in our willingness to fight unbeatable foes.

10. **Resolution:** At the end, there may be a new world, circumstances, or understanding created by actions of characters. In a standard television drama, the resolution takes place after the last commercial break, when the characters wrap up loose ends, ponder the outcome of the conflict, or move on to a new adventure. In live theatre, we may celebrate the victory of love with a dance (as in *Much Ado About Nothing*), or try to make sense of the suffering of the characters (as in *Antigone*). Some playwrights refuse to give clear, comfortable resolution. In *Master Harold . . . and the boys*, Athol Fugard denies us the “ahhh” scene in which Sam and Hally repair their relationship with a hug. Instead, Hally exits before they can make up, and we are left with an uneasy sense that nothing is ever going to be the same for them, but we don’t know if that’s going to be a good thing or a bad thing. All we are given, perhaps as an antidote to despair, is the vision of Sam and Willy dancing, attempting to keep their hopes alive despite the ugly, destructive climax of Sam’s fight with
Hally. Fugard refuses to give easy answers to racism and apartheid as complicating factors in loving relationships, but he also refuses to leave us without any hope at all.

**Character Analysis**

While the 10 elements of dramatic structure help us comprehend the play as a whole, **character analysis** helps us understand the individuals who inhabit it. These five inquiries help reveal the *who, what, how,* and *why* of each character.

1. **Given circumstances** (*who*): What are the facts given by the playwright about this character? We might be told that a character named Chata is a woman in her late twenties of Mexican-American heritage, sister to the husband of the family and living in New Mexico in the present day; she has lived a rough-and-tumble life as a prostitute among migrant farm workers (see *Roosters* in Dramatic Interlude 3). If we take any of this further and start making judgments like “She’s a slut” or “She’s immoral,” we are no longer considering facts, but only opinions. Another character calls her a “tramp,” but that too is opinion, not fact.

2. **Values** (*who*): All persons have values, what we believe to be true and important. Conflicts often arise in life and art because of opposing
value systems. In *Necessary Targets* (see Dramatic Interlude 2), the conflict in values between a privileged American aid worker (democracy, freedom, education, material possessions) is inevitably going to conflict with the values of Bosnian refugees (survival, food, clean water, shelter). One person may value peace at any cost, another winning at any cost. One may value the family or community first, another only himself. With a character whose values are different from your own, try not to dismiss the values, but rather work to understand them. Our most important life lessons can come from exposure to the value systems of others.

3. **Superobjective** *(what)*: Most of us have a driving ambition that determines our day-to-day choices. You may want to get married, start a lucrative career, or simply graduate on time. This would be called your current superobjective. In a play, the character's superobjective drives her through most of the play. In *Necessary Targets*, a young American aid worker in a Bosnian refugee camp wants and needs “to make a name for herself” or “to teach the Bosnian women how to heal themselves.” In *King Lear*, Lear wants to retire from the pressures of ruling the kingdom, but he's accomplished that during the first scene of the play, so we must continue searching for his overriding need or want, which might be something like “to shed the burden but keep the privileges of kingship.” In some plays, superobjectives of main characters reveal the central conflict. In *The Piano Lesson* (see Dramatic Interlude 6), Boy Willie wants to sell the family piano so he can buy...
the farm he is sharecropping. His sister, Berniece, wants to preserve the family history, which is carved on the piano. They can’t both get what they want.

4. **Actions** *(how)*: What are characters willing to do to get what they want, and what strategy and tactics do they employ? Search for verbs that describe each character’s “tool kit.” Examples might include arguing, whining, sulking, killing, waiting, observing, or accusing. In *He and She* (see Dramatic Interlude 6), both Tom and Ann want to succeed at their careers while maintaining the health of the family, so their actions reveal the central conflict. While he asserts, rejects, ignores his child, demands, and assumes, she hides, struggles, supports, and finally gives up. He proclaims and she questions. They want the same thing but use different and conflicting actions to achieve that goal.

5. **Motivation** *(why)*: We often must engage our intuition to determine why a character makes the choices that she does. Characters seldom discuss their motivations openly, and frequently they seem unaware of them. Why would a king divide his kingdom into three parts? Perhaps he’s motivated by a desire to weaken the authority of each child, thereby setting himself up as the better ruler. Perhaps he is motivated by an urge to prove to the world that he is the most fair and honorable father/king ever known. Perhaps he is insecure about his children’s love and wants them to make public statements of adoration and loyalty. Applying psychological motivations that were unheard of in the world of the artist and/or characters is dangerous. We now have a tendency to attribute almost all bad or self-destructive behavior to a lack of self-esteem. To an Elizabethan, filled to the brim with self-esteem, the idea of a king making a world-altering decision because he wasn’t feeling very good about himself would be incomprehensible.

### The Playwright’s Plan

For many artists, we can never be absolutely sure what they were trying to communicate. Playwrights themselves frequently can’t identify in objective language what message they hoped to share. August Wilson said he often started a new play because of a song he happened to hear, or a phrase he overheard while passing someone on the street. The artist has a burning need to communicate truth but may be the last person to ask what that truth is. Her plan may come from some other place than consciousness. Art is born deeper in the heart and mind of the creator than language can articulate. Our work as audience members and as participants in the pageant of life is to try to understand what others are trying to tell us. Identifying the playwright’s plan is part craft and part art.

Professional critics, though paid to write or talk about the work of artists, all too often are untrained or too lazy to focus on the artist’s plan. We have
all read movie or play reviews that are mere plot summaries and personal opinion. Frequently, critics simply stop short of true exploration by listing topics found in the play, such as “this is a play about love, family, and suffering.” We would like to challenge such critics to find a play that is not about love, family, or suffering. The playwright’s plan can be broken down into the following three elements.

1. **Issue:** What are the real subjects being dealt with, sometimes lurking below the level of the simple story? What questions that emerge out of these subjects? In *Master Harold . . . and the boys*, racism and apartheid are central issues, but so are love and the pain that we cause those we love the most. A play may ask lighthearted questions such as, “What is the very best way to spend your free time?” It may also ask, “How much abuse should you tolerate from someone you love?” or “When is it justified to take someone else’s life?”

2. **Point of view:** What is the artist’s take on the issue in question? A work of art may declare that love is a miracle worth any sacrifice, or that love stinks and is not worth the effort. One artist might explore the enduring and loving bonds of family, telling us that we should always put the needs of our family first, but another might share the awful things that family members can do to each other and encourage us to leave our family baggage behind. To the serious questions asked earlier, one play might answer “None” or “Never” to the issues of abuse and murder, while another might offer a far more complex answer such as, “As much abuse as you can take without having your heart broken or losing hope for change,” or “To protect those close to you, but never simply for revenge.”

3. **Support from the text:** Are the conclusions drawn in categories 1 and 2 supported by the words and actions of the characters? Examples of well-constructed and poorly constructed arguments follow:

   *In Master Harold . . . and the boys*, one of the ideas explored by Athol Fugard is the issue of fatherhood. What makes a good father (*issue*)? Fugard seems to be saying that a good father is one who is sensitive to the feelings and needs of the child, someone who spends time caring for the child and worrying about his or her well-being. The biology of parenthood does not necessarily make one a good father (*playwright’s point of view*). This is supported in the play by the consistent contrast between Hally’s biological father and Sam. Hally’s father is absorbed in and consumed by his own needs. He is in fact absent from the play, as he seems to be absent from his son’s life except as a problem. In contrast, Sam is the man who makes sure that Hally eats, does his homework, and grows into a strong, proud man. As Sam relates in the “kite story,” he was the one who carried Hally’s drunk father home from the bar and then built a kite so that the boy would look up and find something to be proud of after the humiliating behavior of his father. Throughout the play, Sam is actively engaged in raising Hally, while the boy’s biological parents are busy dealing with their own problems (*Support from the text*).
You may or may not agree with the conclusion reached by this writer, but crucial elements—issue, point of view, and support from the play—are all there.

The play, *M. Butterfly*, is about a French diplomat who falls in love with a Beijing Opera singer and pretends he's a character in an opera called *Madama Butterfly*. He is in jail for treason at the beginning of the play. It turns out that his lover is actually a man, not a woman, which would seem to be impossible to notice. It makes one wonder if the diplomat was really gay or what. I think he was both wrong and stupid to pass government secrets to a Chinese man pretending to be a woman. It also seems like a very unlikely story to me.

This is an oversimplified plot summary and personal opinion by the author of the argument. Personal opinion is best saved for later. Anyone may find a playwright’s plan boring, stupid, or even offensive. Such response, while legitimate, does not belong in the description of the plan itself. In a critical review, it is essential to identify what the artist was trying to do before evaluating how well it was done or whether it was worth doing.

Work with an open mind and heart and try to understand the playwright’s ideas. Avoid imposing opinions. Understanding another’s heart makes us more aware of our own beliefs and ideas, allowing us to stay open, without losing those parts of ourselves that we cherish and wish to sustain.

The central issues of Athol Fugard’s *Master Harold… and the boys* are racism and apartheid. Here are Hally (Jonathan Broadbent) and Sam (Edward James Walters) in a production at London’s Southwark Playhouse, directed by Joyce Branagh.

**Rachel Weisz**, Actor

Everyone walking around the planet is the hero of their own story. It is the actor’s job to get into people’s skin, and not judge them but to see things from their point of view.
Theatre in Media

The Screenwriter

How does the role of the live theatre writer compare with that of the media writer? The screenwriter (notice the difference in spelling from “playwright”) has far less need to address how transitions occur and can actually have events juxtaposed in wildly different settings without concern for the limitations of a stage. Many sequences in a screenplay are merely suggested, particularly action scenes involving battles, explosions, aerial shots, and extended chases. Entire scenes where a character reflects silently on what has happened or is observed going on a journey are common. There may be no dialogue at all. Most of the time, film scripts will have fewer words than plays.

Those words that do exist will be far more vulnerable. While the Dramatists Guild of America (essentially the playwrights’ union) requires as part of its standard contract that no changes are to be made in dialogue, no such protection is afforded the screenwriter, whose words may be altered by almost anyone involved on or off the set. The screenwriter is also less likely to achieve legendary status. In the medium of film, it is actors and directors who achieve immortality.

The cinema is indelibly, even profoundly, visual and less tied to text. Unless screenwriters are auteurs (think Clint Eastwood) who also direct and even perform in what they write, they tend to be relegated to a back seat behind their more glamorous colleagues. For how many films can you name the screenwriter? The American Film Institute asked critics to select the 100 best films of the past century, and only six of the winners had started as plays. This may reflect the idea that plays are often too talky for “the talkies” and that the entire experience of primarily listening versus primarily watching is distinctly different.

TUBE STORIES—SHORT, SHORTER, AND SHORTEST

Plays and films are often highly condensed adaptations of novels or biographies. Entire characters and episodes may be cut or blended. Yet the final product is still comparable, in theatrical terms, to a book, or in television terms, to a short story (sometimes shorter than short, in fact). With the exception of episodic epics like Desperate Housewives, most tales on television are told in miniature. All elements need to be presented, explored, and wrapped up in highly condensed time frames. The point of attack needs to be near the climax, the protagonist immediately recognizable, the exposition minimal, and foreshadowing nonexistent. The inciting incident may be the only one, rising and falling action must be without digression, and resolution must be instant and complete. The actions (how) and motivation (why) of central characters must be absolutely clear.

The hour-long (which is often actually 48 minutes, factoring in commercials) crime drama may allow for a few false leads before resolution. However, with some exceptions, here is what has to happen in tight time frames:

- Sitcom: Often 23 minutes (8 minutes of the half hour often will be commercials or credits) for the central character to make a bad mistake, get caught in comic ramifications, somehow survive through the help of friends or family, and maybe even learn an obvious moral lesson.
- Music videos: Usually under three minutes for the pop star to experience loneliness, encounter a hot love goddess who gives life meaning, and be left behind and desolate again so he can write more sad songs.
- Commercials: Often 30 seconds to discover laundry or carpet damage, get advice from a wise friend, try a new product, and experience the sheer ecstasy and enlightenment that comes from something being really clean—maybe for the first time ever.

The limits of time frame and need for instant clarity often lead to overly familiar, cliched characters and situations because confusion and ambiguity do not work well in this art form. When originality appears, we are doubly impressed because of the limited parameters. People who write for this medium consider exposition, character development, and digression to be luxuries outside their universe. We tend to discount their work as lightweight—and certainly not great art—but it does take a certain very specific skill to get everything compact, condensed, and clear to fit into the confines of “tube time.”
Theatre in Your Life

Scripting Our Lives

In this epic called My Life, when do you tend to write the script? For most of us, it is in preparation for an important encounter with an authority figure (boss, parent, or teacher) or companion (friend, lover, or potential lover), where we do not want to mess it up. Therefore, we may even write out what is to be said; or we may just write it in our head and practice saying it over and over. So in many ways we become playwrights in circumstances where we are not comfortable or where the stakes are very high. Unfortunately, the other person, the recipient of these brilliantly crafted words, usually does not respond with the lines that we have written for them. Even if they say what we think they’ll say, they might not say it in the way we pictured. If only we could control their script as well as ours. We also tend to eventually “script” stories that we love to tell over and over, as we refine the rising and falling action and master the climax or punchline.

A POSSIBLE PLAYWRIGHT?

Are you someone who is frequently quoted by others because you have a flair for phrasing things well? Do you have an ear for the rhythm and word choices people make? Can you empathize to the degree that you are able to express the feelings of those whom you may dislike or with whom you disagree? Do you prefer ideas to be expressed by exchanges of dialogue rather than in essay form? When reading the “Getting Started” section of this chapter, did you find yourself eager to try a number of the ways of creating a script? If so, playwrighting may be something you should explore.

Summary

Much unscripted storytelling tradition continues to thrive around the world. In scripted work, the playwright is usually the first to struggle in isolation, creating words that must survive the collaboration and intervention of countless others. The more we understand the decisions made by the writer, the better we comprehend the work itself. A medium, mode, and course and pattern of dramatic action are chosen. Decisions are made in terms of the point of attack, protagonist, antagonist, world of the play, exposition, foreshadowing, inciting incident, rising and falling action, climax, and resolution. A storyteller may choose to scramble the order of plot events, leave out structural elements, or create unexpected outcomes to conflicts. When analyzing the play, we assume that every choice has a reason.

We can understand the work more fully by analyzing characters and asking the who (given circumstances and values), what (superobjective), how (actions), and why (motivations) questions that define and drive each of them. While some writers cannot identify their intentions, we can make every effort to unearth the playwright’s (sometimes unconscious) plan by looking at issues, point of view, and textual support for any conclusions that we may draw.
Suggested Assignments

1. When have you been faced with a challenge to create something artistic and had to choose a medium? Consider not only classroom assignments but social events. What influenced your decision to go with one medium as opposed to another?

2. Consider the comic versus the tragic mood in your day-to-day existence. When have you chosen one over the other? Have you gone through phases where your life was a tragedy and other phases when it was a comedy? Have you experienced other phases where it was a hysterical blend of both? How much of this was caused by external events and how much was due to your own choices? If you could go back and do it all over, how might making a different choice change the events?

3. Both media and live theatre have the potential for overwhelming spectacle and extraordinary intimacy. In a media event, what was an experience you had as an audience member that simply blew you away with the scope, majesty, and detail of the spectacle or the deep, personal connection of the intimacy?

4. Answer Question 3 for a live- or personal-theatre event.

5. Because dramatic action requires conflict, consider your own life. If someone were to create a play or film based on your experiences so far, what would be the primary conflicts that would provide them with an immediate inspiration? What were the main moments in the journey that brought you to who you are now?

6. In this event, My Life, what would be your answers to fill in the 10 elements of dramatic structure? To tell your story most effectively, for example, what should be the point of attack, how much foreshadowing is needed, and who is the antagonist (assuming that you are the protagonist)?

7. Take a recent film or play and answer these same questions for an event created by a writer.

8. Because foreshadowing is such a key element in analysis, as you examine your own history, what were the primary clues (alas, minus the hints given by the Jaws soundtrack) which, had you recognized them earlier, would have saved you from grief and regret later?

9. Compare yourself with a character in a play or film in terms of the five basic elements of character analysis. Come up with a brief answer for each. How have your insights about the character changed as a result of doing the analysis? What new insights do you have into your own character that you might not have noticed before?

10. Try to find an example of an instance where a critic has successfully examined and revealed a playwright’s plan before going on to make
judgments about it. Also, find an example where the writer limits himself to identifying the issues and quickly jumps to personal opinion regarding the work itself.

Suggested Activities

1. **Individual:** Try your hand at writing dialogue, picking two of your friends and creating a conversation which, to your knowledge, they have not had but could have. Be sure to capture the way each of them uses or hesitates to use language.

2. **Group:** Pick a very familiar story and discuss what it would take to define the event clearly as comedy, tragedy, or a surprising blend.

3. **Long-term:** Using the list of starters on p. 79, start a play ideas journal, jotting down something each day from your imaginary life, real life, or the news that could be the beginning of a script.

4. **Large lecture:** Have someone who considers himself or herself a skilled storyteller volunteer to be narrator. Let the class vote on a fairy tale or other universal story. Divide the group into four parts: (1) sounds of nature such as wind, (2) interior sounds such as doors slamming, (3) repetition of key phrases in the story to emphasize them, and (4) overt active audience sounds such as gasps, shrieks, and giggles to accompany key plot moments. The storyteller will point to each group during the telling of the tale, at which point the group provides the sound supplement to make it come fully alive.

Key Words and Ideas

- **griot/griotte**
- **sutradhara**
- **bard**
- **playwright**
- **deconstruction**
- **problematizing**
- **medium**
- **mood**
- **dramatic action**
- **conflict**
- **present tense**
- **structural elements**
- **point of attack**
- **protagonist**
- **antagonist**
- world of the play
- exposition
- foreshadowing
- inciting incident
- rising action
- falling action
- climax
- resolution
- character analysis
- given circumstances
- values
- superobjective
- actions
- motivation