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Navigating the World of the Theatre

In tribal villages and temples, schools and opera houses, parks and playhouses, people come together all over the world to witness a singular event we call *theatre*. The impulse that draws people to these places of performance is universal and fundamental to the human spirit, but what they see is as varied as the human social experience.

Traveling the global world of theatre today, you might attend the Chinese opera and witness a tradition performed, staged and sung much the way it was 200 years ago. In Africa you could participate in a communal performance celebration paying homage to the king and his ancestors. You might find an abandoned factory in Paris converted into a theatre, where actors rehearse ancient Asian dance movements for their roles in a new production of a 2,500-year-old Greek tragedy. The great diversity of theatrical forms that coexist today is a reflection of the complex global world in which we live. They challenge us to reach beyond the traditions of our own society to embrace the artistic forms of other cultures. Although we hold deep inside us the values and prejudices of our own social experience, we can learn to appreciate the way people in other times and places have told and continue to tell their stories on the stage.

As we study performances around the world, we encounter two basic kinds of theatrical

traditions. The first is based on a **performance tradition**, whose staging, music, dance, characterization, masks, and acting are passed from generation to generation as a totality of expression. Performance traditions are usually rooted in the values and beliefs of the community, are often linked to religious ritual, and sometimes involve total community participation. The second tradition is based on a written **play text** to be interpreted in performance. Although a play is born out of the values of its community, it is not tied to its original concept, time, or place, and it can be passed down for reinterpretation by future generations of performers.

Theatre is a living, vital art in which live actors engage the audience through the energy of their physical presence. Traditions evolve and are renewed through the work of innovative theatre artists who seek new ways to express changing social concerns. No form can be permanent in theatre, the most evanescent of art forms. Each performance lives on only in memory, leaving us free to create again.

1. Why does almost every society have some form of theatrical performance?
2. How do play traditions and performance traditions differ? How are they similar?
3. Why is theatre referred to as "the most evanescent of art forms"?

Theatre as a Reflection of Culture

HOW can we understand how other people portray themselves and tell their stories in performance?

The need to make sense of our world is the driving force behind all theatrical forms, and every culture has developed some form of theatrical presentation through which to examine the mysteries of life and the most pressing concerns of its society. Because the actor on the stage is a live human being, the theatre mirrors our lives more directly than any other art form. It is a glimpse into the meaning of our existence, with its aspirations and disappointments and crises and triumphs. It is also a reflection of our social values.

The mirror is an apt metaphor for the stage. When we look in the mirror, we stand outside ourselves, looking at ourselves, searching for an objective understanding of who and what we are. This is what we do in the theatre. In the theatre we are watching real people play fictions that have a greater reality than our own lives for the duration of the performance. So the image we see on the stage stimulates us to consider our lives more deeply. Theatre can be a spur to social consciousness and political action, and sometimes performance itself can be an act of protest or conscience.

To say that the theatre is a mirror of life does not mean that all theatre is always realistic or must create a replica of the real world on stage. Sometimes the theatre is more like a fun-house mirror, distorting, refocusing, and exaggerating to make us see ourselves in a different light. Although theatrical expression is a universal human activity, each society, culture, and time has its own lens through which it looks at and creates the mirror of the stage. For this reason, theatres in different places and times present different images to their audiences.

“Would art exist at all if men did not desire to live twice?”

—Eric Bentley, *The Life of the Drama*

How can we understand how other people portray themselves and tell their stories in performance? How do we balance time-honored theatrical traditions with the need for innovations that reflect who we are at any given

moment? The journey through this book is an examination of what is universal to all theatre and what is specific to a given time, place, and culture. No book can look at every form of theatre that has ever existed, but in this book we hope to begin to develop a way to approach the unfamiliar. We can develop an understanding of difference that can lead to respect for, and admiration of, other traditions. We achieve this by examining the changing conventions of the theatre as a reflection of our values and beliefs.

Theatrical Conventions and Culture

Every society develops rules of behavior that define the ways individuals conduct themselves. Members of each society tacitly accept and internalize these rules. We learn how to read the significance of a touch, a kiss, a handshake, or a stare. In exchange, we receive tools for communication and conduct that help us interact with others without conscious thought. These behavioral norms are ever-evolving reflections of social values. They vary from era to era and from place to place, even within a specific culture. Theatre, as the most social of all the arts—human beings coming together in the same space to share an event—also has its rules of conduct and understood communication codes. We call these codes **theatrical conventions**, and just as we use social conventions to navigate the larger world, we navigate the world of the theatre according to the conventions of the stage.

Accustomed to the theatre of our own society, we may not realize how odd our own practices might appear in other cultures or eras. Imagine that you are from another planet, sent to observe people on earth. You watch many people approach a building. Each one hands a person standing at the door a small piece of paper that is torn in half. These people are then directed to seats in a large hall and are given larger papers to read. The people talk with one another naturally, but when the lights begin to dim, they all grow silent at once and sit expectantly in the dark. Then some new people enter a lit portion of the room and explain their most intimate feelings in loud voices; these new people live in rooms where all the furniture faces one direction, and they don't seem aware that a thousand eyes are watching them, even if they stand stark naked. The people in the seats, after remaining silent for two hours, bang their hands together, while the people who were talking in loud voices bend at the waist. How could you possibly explain



▲ Director Yukio Ninagawa uses a composite of theatrical traditions and conventions to question the traditions and conventions of samurai warriors and their cult of violence in *Musashi*, 2010.

this behavior? Of course, these are some of our accepted theatrical conventions that allow us to share a common theatre experience. Contemplating the strangeness of our own conventions allows us to understand and accept those of other eras and cultures.

For a theatrical style to be successful, the audience must find it authentic and meaningful so they can engage in what British poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772–1834) called the “willing suspension of disbelief.”

Conventions affect every aspect of a performance; they dictate how actors will move, speak, and be clothed, as well as the form and content of the event, how and where it is staged and designed, and how the audience should respond. Some of these conventions reflect centuries of cultural tradition, and others are recent innovations; some transcend cultural borders, others are culturally specific, and some change according to circumstances within the same culture. The combined effect of these conventions working together is **style**—the manner in which a performance depicts the world. Theatrical styles vary widely in different eras and from one culture to another, so what is considered theatrically true embraces many forms.

Just as knowing your own society’s theatrical conventions enables you to feel comfortable in the theatre and to better understand the embedded values in the performance, learning about theatrical conventions in other cultures and eras enables you to feel at home in the global world of the theatre. Go to the Concert Party Theatre in West Africa, and you will find audience members talking back to the actors, encouraging them to take action, warning them of danger. In contrast, American audiences typically sit silently at the theatre, watching the events unfold and becoming annoyed if other audience members speak out loud. At the Chinese opera, the audience is in constant chatter, while in Bali spectators may sometimes enter a performance-induced trance, absorbing the events through a semiconscious state. In India actors sometimes employ stylized hand movements and positions as an encoded language; throughout Africa, drama tends to incorporate drumming and dance, and a *t’alch’um* performance in Korea uses masks that may be burned in a postperformance ritual fire.

THINK

Why is it important for audience members to understand the conventions of a theatrical event they attend?

GLOBAL TRADITIONS AND INNOVATIONS

The Iranian Ta'ziyeh and Its Conventions

The *Ta'ziyeh*, or tragic play, performed in Shi'a communities in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, Pakistan, and other places around the world, enacts the 680 C.E. martyrdom of Imam Hoseyn, the grandson of the Prophet Mohammad. Hoseyn, his male children, and his male followers were massacred, and the women were captured at Karbala by the followers of Yazid, who sought to head the Islamic community. These events mark the start of the historic division between Sunni and Shiite Muslims. *Ta'ziyeh* audiences regard the performance as a religious event and view it as a form of communal, ritual mourning for Shiite martyrs.

Ta'ziyeh performances take place in both indoor and outdoor venues. A performance may occur at a single location, or episodes may be enacted throughout

the town. These community events involve dozens of actors, musicians, and live animals. They may be performed by professional actors, but most commonly they are performed by local amateurs. The performance indulges in emotion, arouses pity, stimulates religious fervor, and is heightened by dramatic singing. The director is called *mo'in-al-boka*, "the one who helps bring tears."

Ta'ziyeh is governed by a set of specific conventions that reflect the ritual nature of the performance and make the action clear to people familiar with the tradition. For those unfamiliar with the performance, its many theatrical conventions need explanation. Hoseyn and those who support him wear green and sing their lines, while those who are against him wear red and recite their text. Women are played by men who veil their faces. When an actor dons a white shirt, it signifies that the

character will soon be martyred. Circling the playing area on foot or horseback indicates that a character has traveled a long distance to another location, while a diagonal walk across the stage represents a shorter journey. Turning around in place indicates a change of character or locale. Straw is used to place the action in the desert; a tub of water represents the Euphrates River, and a single tree branch indicates a palm grove. The performers, called "readers," carry strips of paper with their lines to which they may refer rather than relying on memorization. The director is visible throughout the performance, handing lines to actors, giving them entrance cues, and placing and removing stage props. *Ta'ziyeh's* traditional audiences also act according to a unique set of conventions. Caught up in the emotion of the event, they wail, weep, and beat their breasts in sorrow.



◀ In accordance with centuries old theatrical conventions, in this 2009 *Ta'ziyeh* performance in Iran the followers of Hoseyn wear green and members of the opposing camp wear red as they re-enact the 7th century battle of Karbala. Women are played by men in veils. The act of circling the space on horseback signifies travel to another location.

The Evolution of Conventions

Because theatre is a reflection of society, it follows that in other historical periods and in other places, we would find theatrical forms and conventions different from those we experience today. In fact, the history of the theatre is really a history of evolving conventions. A good example of this is the exclusion of women from the theatre. In the so-called "golden age" of Greek theatre, during the fifth century B.C.E., women were not considered worthy of participation in theatrical performance. Scholars even debate whether women were allowed in the audience. Women were also excluded from performing in Shakespeare's time; imagine

Juliet played by a boy. Today, in certain societies, women continue to be locked out. The Japanese *noh* and the Indian *kathakali* are examples of centuries-old theatre forms that have continued to exclude women. Envision excluding women from theatrical activity in the United States today. Can you imagine the protests? This could not happen in the American theatre today because it would not reflect our value system and the role of women in our culture. In the United States, there was a long period during which actors of different races did not perform together, reflecting the segregated nature of American society at the time.

HIDDEN HISTORY

African Americans on the American Stage

The history of African Americans on the American stage mirrors the troubled history of race relations in the United States. The exact date when the first black actor appeared on the American stage has not been determined, but it is assumed that black servant parts were played by white actors in blackface during the colonial period and after. In 1816 The African Company became the first-known black theatre troupe. Later renamed The African Grove Theatre in 1821, it provided Ira Aldridge (1807–1867) the internationally acclaimed black tragedian, a start to his theatrical career. In search of opportunities not afforded black actors in the United States, he emigrated to England, where he debuted in 1825 and played leading Shakespearean roles including Othello, Shylock, Macbeth, and Richard II. Even positive reviews of Aldridge in the British press noted his "thick lipped" Othello but reassured the audience that his "labial peculiarity" did not interfere with his pronunciation and elocution.

Back in the United States, prospects for black actors continued to be bleak. The theatre remained a segregated place, with separate black and white theatre troupes, and it was not until 1878 that an integrated production of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* saw white and black actors performing on

the same stage. This remained an anomaly, however, and the American theatre did not integrate until well into the twentieth century. Early integrated dramas cast blacks in roles that reflected the racial stereotypes of the times. It was not until after World War I that the black actor Charles Gilpin (1878–1930) played important roles

.....
"Through my singing and acting and speaking, I want to make freedom ring. Maybe I can touch people's hearts better than I can their minds, with the common struggle of the common man."
.....

—Paul Robeson

.....
in integrated companies, earning praise for his performance in Eugene O'Neill's *The Emperor Jones*. More opportunities for black actors followed in the 1930s, but most plays were written by white playwrights, and the roles presented an outsider's view of black character. The

Federal Theatre Project, which provided employment to theatre professionals during the Great Depression, integrated some productions, but for the most part, the races were separate. The Project had Negro units, the most famous set up in Harlem in 1935, under white directors Orson Welles (1915–1985) and John Houseman (1902–1988).

In 1943, Paul Robeson (1898–1976) became the first black actor to play Othello on Broadway, a role traditionally played by a white actor in blackface. The production with Uta Hagen as Othello's wife Desdemona occurred at a time when interracial marriage was still illegal in most states. It was not until 1953, when Ruby Dee (b. 1924) was cast as an angel in *The World of Sholom Aleichem*, that a black actor was cast in a part without any reference to color, paving the way for colorblind casting. As late as the 1980s, critic John Simon and producer Joseph Papp engaged in a public debate about colorblind casting that now seems impossible to imagine. Theatre can be colorblind only when society is colorblind, as theatrical conventions always reflect the cultural values. Some would argue that we have a long way to go before we see true equality on the stage.

In societies that have retained and maintained performance traditions, theatrical conventions evolve more slowly and elements continue to exist. The *noh* theatre of Japan, first created in the fourteenth century, continues today with many of its original conventions unchanged. Even the most long-lived traditions evolve and experience some changes over the centuries, despite the remarkable

stability of the form. For example, many traditional Asian forms, such as the Indian *kathakali*, had performances that long ago may have lasted from sundown to sunrise; today, although these performance traditions continue, most have abbreviated the performance time to three or four hours to accommodate contemporary lifestyles and new audiences.

Universals of the Theatre

WHAT are the four universals that apply to theatre everywhere?

Although theatrical conventions are specific to time, place, and culture, certain universals apply to all theatre everywhere. These qualities define our experience in the theatre and define the very nature of what theatre is.

Universal Properties of Theatre

- Theatre is *live in the present moment* and requires the presence of a *live actor* and an *audience*.
- Theatre is *ephemeral* in that no performance can ever be totally duplicated or captured.
- Theatre is *collaborative*: It requires the efforts of many people working together.
- Theatre is a *synthesis* of many arts.

Theatre Is Live

A quickening of the heart, a surge of anticipatory excitement—these are our feelings at the start of a performance. Even experienced theatre-goers feel this awakening each time they are in the audience for live theatre. In the movies, we merely reach for more popcorn, sit back, and relax. What is it about the theatre that continues to thrill?

A performer on the stage is alive and vital. We sense the inherent daring and danger as we watch a human being take emotional and physical risks before our eyes. A missed line, a fall, a malfunctioning prop, any unexpected event can strip away the mask and reveal the man or woman beneath the role. Suddenly we are aware of the person we have forgotten under the character. We know that each performance is a triumph over the odds. To go to the theatre is to believe in miracles. We watch in awe as the actor physically transforms and flexes the emotions. Virtuoso performances take our breath away. Every performance is a journey with

infinite opportunity for mishap, and yet, each evening and matinee, all over the world, actors walk the tightrope without a safety net.

The audience is a part of the event. We can alter it by our presence, our actions, and reactions, and we may even be invited to actively participate. We must be vigilant and be ready to play our part.

Without these two elements—the live actor risking all and the live audience responding and creating invisible lines of communication—theatre cannot exist. Today, as we spend more and more time alone, confined to rooms with televisions and computers, the theatre has become one of the few places where we must come together, form a community, and become live witnesses to acts of daring.

As television and the Internet are increasingly called upon to bring us events “live,” the definition of *liveness* itself must be reexamined.

Theatre Is Ephemeral

Theatre is live, in the moment, and no element can be exactly replicated because it depends on the interaction of live actors and audience and what they bring to uncapturable moments in time and space. The word *ephemeral* means *fleeting*. Theatre’s time is the present. If you record it or film it, the reproduction is not a theatrical event; it is film or video. It is not what the audience experienced. A theatrical event is specific to a set time, place, audience, and performers. Move a production to a larger theatre, and the entire dynamic changes. See the same production on a different night, and the actors will have made infinite small adjustments to the new audience. Have the understudy step in, and the entire cast must accommodate the change. Actors also deal with

Thinks TECHNOLOGY

Live in a Wired World

The idea of theatre as live performance is challenged in today's wired world. Increasingly, theatrical performances incorporate film and video, taped sound, amplified voices, and recorded music to replace the live orchestra. Computerized characters can inhabit the same space as live actors. In

the early 1990s, avant-garde artists began exploring *telematic performances*, which bring together actors and audience members at different locations through the use of high-speed Internet, allowing for long-distance collaboration. The Gertrude Stein Repertory experimented with "distance puppetry"

through video conferencing. Using simultaneous performance venues in Iowa and New York, the company projected the faces and bodies of actors at one location as masks and costumes on actors at the other venue, creating characters who were amalgamations of live actors and virtual images.

physical and emotional stresses in their daily lives, and these affect each performance. Although the basic outlines of a production remain the same, you never see exactly the same event twice.

THINK

Why is it impossible to completely capture a theatrical performance on film?

Theatre Is Collaborative

How is it that lines are so seldom flubbed, props are rarely out of place, scenery almost never falls, the light and sound cues go off on time, costumes fit flawlessly, and actors appear on cue? The success of the theatrical event is the result of a community of people working toward a common goal, creating a seamless imaginary reality. Everyone in this collaborative effort is a valued contributor. Some are part of the creative team; others are support staff—stage managers, crew, and technicians. But all are equally necessary if the production is to be successful. A bonding occurs among members of a theatre company. This sense of family is what draws many people to the theatre. Shared creation is a joyous activity.

One often-overlooked part of the collaborative process of theatre is the one that occurs between the audience and the performers; the spectators' responses help shape the rhythm of a theatrical event. In communities all over the world, wherever people can come together, they make theatre. This book examines the roles of all the various contributors to explain exactly how theatre happens.

Theatre Is a Synthesis of Many Arts

Many people are involved in theatrical creation because theatre involves many artistic materials. Actors give life to a text or an idea through movement, dance, speech, and song, with the aid of directors, playwrights, musicians, and choreographers. They do this in a space that must be determined

and designed, so theatre also relies on the spatial arts. The stage set is designed, painted, or sculpted. The set is lit to enhance the environment for the performance; the lighting designer sculpts and paints with light. The actor wears something or not; even the decision for nudity reflects an artistic choice of the costumer and director. Masks are made. Faces are painted. The audience hears music and sound effects, and each element must be composed or designed and executed by artists and technicians. All these elements unite to form a single vision of another world that is organized by the director or someone serving in that function. The theatrical form is a synthesis of many art forms and the work of many artists. Theatrical performances employ language, painting, sculpture, costume, music, dance, mime, movement, light, and sound to create effects.

“ Theatre art has several voices no one of which is necessarily more important than the rest. . . . The importance or expressiveness of . . . the word, the music, the visual will vary according to what is to be expressed.”

—Stark Young, *The Theatre*

Tradition and Innovation

HOW do forces such as postmodernism, globalization, multiculturalism, interculturalism, postcolonialism, and performance studies shape contemporary performances?

Theatre is not a static art. Forms change over time, and even long-revered performance traditions can accommodate innovation. Theatre practitioners reach out to their public, inventing new forms, borrowing techniques from other cultures, reinterpreting plays, and integrating new technologies. With the ease of global exchange today, tradition and innovation transform each other and coexist around the world. In the United States, where innovation and reinvention are a way of life, theatrical forms transform and evolve rapidly, reflecting changing demographics, economics, and politics. To understand today's theatre, we must consider the forces that shape contemporary performance, including movements such as postmodernism and performance studies, as well as realities such as globalization, multiculturalism, and postcolonialism.

Postmodernism

Postmodernism, which evolved during the worldwide political and social changes of the late twentieth century, is a complicated concept that does not have a single definition. It encompasses a variety of ideas and trends in different disciplines and has had an enormous impact on the theatre. In contrast to the view of a world with fundamental truths, postmodernism poses a world of contradiction and instability, with no grand scheme of meaning or universal understanding. The "truths" of the past are seen as constructions of those in power, typically the Eurocentric, white, male, heterosexual establishment that excluded and invalidated the perspective of groups outside the power structure.

**Postmodernism recognizes that
what seems true to a master
might not seem true to a slave;
what seems true to a man
might not seem true to a woman;
what seems true to a
heterosexual might not seem
true to a homosexual.**

Today we realize that the cultural dominance of some groups can lead to the exploitation and even obliteration of others. Postmodernism has invited those whose views were not included in the old world order to construct their own histories, philosophies, and art forms, and it considers all

constructions of equal validity. This has called into question divisions between what used to be labeled "high art"—for which there were established formal aesthetic standards—and "low art"—the vernacular culture that surrounds us. By defying these divisions, postmodernism has helped the artistic expressions and voices of previously marginalized or disenfranchised groups to garner more general attention.

THINK

How would you define what constitutes a work of art?

Postmodernism has cast the long-standing question of what constitutes "art" in a new light. It has also engendered debate about what happens to aesthetic criticism in a world without absolute values: Can anyone say that a work of art is "good" or "bad" without being accused of cultural bias? Once there was an acknowledged canon, a list of unquestioned great works; today we question whether any such canon exists, and if it does, what it should include. What should be the place of the old traditional canon, and what time-honored works should be replaced by new ones? If postmodernism is to truly embrace a multiplicity of viewpoints, it must allow the great works of the old traditions to stand as important objects of study, even as we make room for new voices to be heard.

Although much of theatre today continues older traditions, postmodernism has changed the way we look at the world by creating an openness to other cultures as well as an awareness of how older structures impeded the development of particular ideas and forms. Aided by globalization, we live in an era that prizes the cultural contributions of all people.

Globalization

The expression "the global village" captures the reality of contemporary life. It is impossible to live in cultural isolation in a world where time and space are compressed through modern transportation and communication. People travel from place to place, bringing their cultural traditions with them, so we are all exposed to diverse theatrical forms in a way unheard of in past generations. Yet despite this constant contact, we still encounter forms that seem strange to us, that perplex us and defy comprehension.

GLOBAL TRADITIONS AND INNOVATIONS

Postmodern Eclecticism

Relinquishing fixed forms or traditional styles, postmodernists feel free to mix styles and genres to create new forms. This can be seen clearly in many recent theatre productions. It is not unusual today to see film and video combined with live action in a work by Canadian director Robert Lepage (b. 1957); acting, text, and dance together in a performance by Belgian Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui (b. 1976); or puppets on the Broadway stage with live actors, as in *Avenue Q*. There is also a free borrowing of styles from other cultures that were once seen as inferior but are now valued for their difference, as seen in the *Kathakali King Lear* at London's Globe Theatre, which incorporated stylized Indian theatrical movement, costumes, makeup, and songs with Shakespearean text. Along with these new styles have come new organizational systems and new ways of creating and collaborating to make theatre.

► The Comédie Française, the bastion of French theatrical tradition, did its first production of an American play in 2011. Lee Breuer's production of *Un Tramway Nommé Désir* (*A Streetcar Named Desire*) by Tennessee Williams used Japan as a metaphor for the American South and featured an eclectic mixture of styles.



The theatre as a direct reflection of cultural values is often the most enigmatic of the arts, and today, more than ever, we need to understand and appreciate difference.

Ironically, while some societies are abandoning their traditional forms, globalization has awakened others to the beauty and interest of these forms. One culture may be borrowing or appropriating what another culture is rejecting or forsaking. Sometimes this brings increased communication, but many fear it will dilute or destroy many traditional theatrical forms whose very survival may now depend on their ability to adapt to the contemporary world. When today's theatre moves away from its intimate communal roots, much of the community-based audience for traditional theatre may be excluded.

In a world without boundaries, where we watch each other's films, eat each other's food, and use each other's

Globalization has often had a negative impact on less modernized societies. Those societies have traditionally been held together by an ancient cultural glue of community values and ritual performance, which are threatened by new socioeconomic structures and exposure to "modern" lifestyles. Much traditional theatre, born in the premodern era, was part of the fabric of community life on which it depended for its sustenance. Today in these societies, a new generation questions the significance of traditional values and the ancient theatre forms that embody them. As a result, traditional performance may lose its place as an integral part of daily existence and an expression of communal values. These forms are often relegated to museum status in state-run or university theatres, used as cultural symbols and assertions of identity, or presented to attract tourists. Unlike other art forms that can be preserved in museums and libraries or on CDs, theatre lives only in the moment of active exchange with a live audience. Once a performance form fails to engage its public, its survival is threatened, and many ancient forms have been forced to adapt to changing times in order to continue.



◀ Once all politics was local; today politics is global. We are united by shared problems, tensions, dilemmas, and fears. As the contemporary theatre seeks to address our common concerns, it is engaging similar themes and bringing similar forms to urban audiences the world over. In Tokyo, New York, Paris, Seoul, or Sydney, an educated, largely middle-class audience sees much of the same commercial theatre—big, corporate-sponsored productions that tour worldwide, American musicals, or performances of the established avant-garde that travel a circuit of international theatre festivals and centers. Pictured here is a scene from the musical *The Fantasticks* performed at the Setagaya Public Theatre in Tokyo.

goods, we also see an increasing homogenization of culture. Those who value cultural difference fear the eradication of many performance forms in favor of globally disseminated mass popular entertainment. Theatre itself may be an endangered art in the global electronic era.

THINK

What do you think are the benefits and disadvantages of globally disseminated mass entertainment?

EVE ENSLER— The Personal is Political

Eve Ensler's (b. 1953) 1996 solo performance piece *The Vagina Monologues* was assembled from more than 200 interviews with women around the world who discussed their relationship to the most intimate part of their bodies. In so doing, she revealed thoughts about gender, love, marriage, and sexuality, as well as experiences of rape, incest, abuse, and mutilation. By simply breaking the social taboo against uttering any word for the female genitalia in a public forum, Ensler unveiled some of the most pressing issues of our time. The work is ultimately a poignant reminder that women suffer the consequences of world events, social repression, and domestic dysfunction in the most private places of their being. Women, long taught to think of their bodies as obscene and even not as their

ARTISTS IN PERSPECTIVE

▼ Eve Ensler in *The Vagina Monologues*, King's Head Theatre, London.



own, were empowered by the performance to take back this forbidden identity with pride.

Ensler has used the piece as the inspiration for a crusade to stop violence against women and girls around the world. On V-Day, February 14, benefit performances by local groups and college students raise funds that have helped start organizations to protect women in 76 countries. In 2010, more than 5,400 V-Day benefit events took place. This amazing story of the work of an avant-garde solo performer spawning a global movement is testimony to the continuing power of theatre to transform our lives. In the era of globalization, the most private story can reverberate around the world.

GLOBAL TRADITIONS AND INNOVATIONS

Multiculturalism

Groups not fully represented in the majority culture have a long tradition of forming theatre companies to produce works that speak to the particular needs of their communities. These productions are often a source of pride in identity and can reshape public perceptions.

2011 Stewart Goldstein



▲ The Saint Louis Black Repertory Company provides theatre from the African American perspective. In Sherry Shephard-Massat's *Waiting to Be Invited*, middle-aged black women attempt to integrate a department store lunch counter during the civil rights movement.

► *Canta y no llores (Sing and Don't Cry)* a bilingual celebration of the Day of the Dead was created by Martín Milagro and directed by Olga Sanchez at the Miracle Theatre Group, an Oasis of Latino culture in Portland, Oregon.

Multiculturalism

Multiculturalism calls for a respect for neighboring cultures living under the same political system. Multiculturalism grew out of the social and political awakening of the 1960s and 1970s, when the civil rights movement, the women's movement, and the protests against the war in Vietnam raised the consciousness of marginalized groups. The past few decades have been an era of identity politics, and minority populations in North America have felt increasingly empowered. Parallel political trends spread across Europe, Asia, South America, and Australia.

Pride in identity found expression in the theatre because the theatre enabled particular communities to represent and "re-present" themselves. Multiculturalism is

▼ A man and his two sons confront identity and duty in Julia Cho's *Durango* at East West Players. This important Asian American Theatre in Los Angeles has given voice to the Asian Pacific American experience since 1965.



linked to postmodernism because those whose viewpoints were overlooked or marginalized by mainstream theatre—women, the elderly, the disabled, African Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, Latinos, and gays and lesbians, for example—can create theatre pieces that speak to their concerns. In turn, as you will see, theatrical forms have been reconfigured to best give voice to the needs of particular communities. Detractors of multiculturalism claim that it has often led to a separation of various communities rather than fostering a deeper cultural exchange. At the same time, multicultural theatre has undeniably provided a valuable forum to affirm, explore, or challenge group identities, beliefs, and practices and has allowed new voices to be heard in the theatre.

Ethnic Theatres: What's New Is Old

In the early twentieth century, ethnic theatres in the United States and Canada provided entertainment to immigrant groups in their native languages. These theatres served as cultural hubs and meeting places and presented the aspirations and idealism of new Americans at a time when assimilation and abandoning of old traditions was demanded. Some early ethnic

theatres used the theatrical forms of the dominant American and Canadian theatre culture; other groups used theatrical forms that they brought with them from their homelands. Few of these original ethnic theatres continue today because the subsequent generation of actors was assimilated into mainstream culture and lured by Broadway and Hollywood.

Today new immigrant groups bring with them the theatre traditions of their native countries, but they come to an America that is more open to difference. These groups have developed new kinds of multicultural performance, in which they can celebrate their own traditions within an American context and still attract audiences outside the immigrant community.

Theatre is a place to explore who we are. What does it mean to be American? Female? Gay? Disabled? Latino? Of color? Don't we all possess multiple identities and belong to several defining groups? Is identity something we carry inside or something projected onto us by others? These

▼ As other countries grow more heterogeneous, with increasing immigrant populations, multicultural theatre has spread the world over. Here Shabana Rehman presents what it is like to be of Pakistani origin living in Norway.



questions have been the subject matter of many contemporary theatre works. New theatrical forms and texts explore these and other multicultural issues. Danny Hoch and Sarah Jones's performance pieces explore the perception of identity as they seamlessly slip into and out of Middle Eastern, Chinese, Black, Jewish, Latino, Caribbean, and gay characters, among a host of others, challenging audiences to question what constitutes a racial or ethnic identity if it can be taken on as a role. Other artists have explored the identity inherent in their own groups, as playwright Hanay Geiogamah does for Native Americans and Cherrie Moraga does for Chicanos.

Postcolonialism

Postcolonialism explores identity within the geographic boundaries of formerly colonized states in Latin America, Asia, and Africa. Former colonies that lived under the oppression of colonialism are still reacting to that legacy. Where once an imposed imperial power sought to eradicate or exploit indigenous cultural forms, formerly subjugated populations now seek to understand their own cultural heritage and the impact of colonial rule on their traditions and self-image.

As Europeans colonized the world, they brought their dramatic literary tradition with them. Indigenous performance traditions were often suppressed and feared, or exploited for political purposes. Generations of theatre artists were taught that their homegrown forms were inferior and that they should emulate European models. Shakespeare was mandatory for high school plays in the British colonies, just as Corneille and Molière played in the parts of the world dominated by the French. Latin American colonies adopted the genres of the Spanish Golden Age that flourished at the time of conquest. Often, indigenous playwrights inserted local color, costume, or dialects, as in the *costumbristas* of South America, but the forms of plays remained fundamentally European and were written in the language of conquest.

WOLE SOYINKA

Between Cultures

ARTISTS IN PERSPECTIVE

The theatre work of Nigerian playwright, poet, novelist, essayist, and Nobel Laureate Wole Soyinka (b. 1934) marries African and Western European influences as it addresses Nigeria's evolving political conditions, its legacy of colonialism, and the power of its rituals and Yoruba belief in the flow between past, present, and future. Soyinka's life and works embody the conflicts and dilemmas faced by many postcolonial artists.

Born in Western Nigeria, Soyinka received a college education in Nigeria and then completed a degree in drama at Leeds, in England, in 1957. In 1960, when Nigeria won its struggle for independence from British rule, Soyinka returned to Nigeria, where he founded a theatre company that produced his first major play, *A Dance*

► European and African belief systems clash as Sergeant Amusa, a uniformed officer, confronts the Yoruba women in their traditional dress in Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* at the National Theatre, London, 2009.

of the Forests, as part of the country's celebration of independence. The play warned of coming political corruption if Nigerians did not develop the wisdom necessary to exercise self-rule. His use of European forms, which some called an elitist aesthetic, and his rebuke of Nigerian politics garnered criticism on many fronts.

Soyinka was arrested for his political activism in 1965 and again in 1967, during Nigeria's civil war. On his release, Soyinka

left Nigeria and went into voluntary exile in England, where he completed his doctoral degree. He wrote important plays during this period, as well as critical essays on literature, politics, and ritual. In 1986 Soyinka was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature. He now splits his time between his homes in Nigeria and the United States. He continues to write plays that are performed throughout the world and to speak out on political issues through his works.



Costumbrista theatre, which began in nineteenth-century Spain, portrayed local customs and folklore. Latin and South American theatre celebrated local culture through this European genre in the period following colonial rule.

Today artists in postcolonial states find themselves in a position of contradiction. While they are now free to celebrate native culture, many choose by habit or education to use the very European forms they once rejected to expose the hypocrisy and moral bankruptcy of imperialist rule. The result has been a tension between the imposed culture

and native traditions. Many artists find that both forms live within them and that they are actually hybrid cultural beings. Try as they may to throw off the influence of the European theatrical tradition in favor of local performance styles, the imposed colonial forms have a hold on their consciousness that is reinforced by the idea of progress in today's global world. For this reason, when we look at the theatre in former colonies, especially in Africa, we often see the two traditions either mingling or standing side by side. Some view African theater pieces that mix indigenous performance with the written word as a way of taking control of the instruments of oppression to construct one's own narrative, writing in the stories of the people who were written out, or written off, by European history.

Most African performance was not text based, and many dialects had no written language.

Interculturalism

The blending of traditions from various cultures is called **interculturalism**. It goes beyond multiculturalism in that it promotes an exchange and interaction among various cultures in order to ignite interest or friction. Vibrant indigenous performance traditions somehow survived the colonial era, and in a peculiar reversal of history, they are now prized in Europe and America for their inherent theatricality and the communal values they embody. Theatre artists through the twentieth century to the present have been haunted by the belief that in ancient performance traditions based in ritual lies a theatre that connects to our deeper spiritual nature and can provide a universal human language. In a bit of historical irony, traditions that were once each other's scourge now stand side by side as a source of inspiration to today's theatre artists, who now blend, borrow, insert, and interweave each other's theatrical conventions in mutual appreciation.

Fascination with other cultures is not a new phenomenon. Travelers to other lands from as far back as we have documentation marveled at the traditions they discovered, and many artists have acknowledged the influence of foreign forms and ideas on their work. Globalization has intensified our exposure. What was once haphazard and crude cultural tourism has become a conscious borrowing, blending, absorption, and appropriating of other cultures'

art forms into new hybrid forms. Interculturalism is not without dangers. There is the risk of stereotyping, of misusing and denigrating cultural symbols, and of engaging in a kind of cultural imperialism.

THINK

Can traditional forms be used simply for their artistic expression, with artists borrowing freely from other cultures, or should the political and historical context always be taken into account?

Early explorations in intercultural theatre began at the start of the twentieth century, by European avant-garde artists who were intrigued by Asian performance that had begun touring the continent. During the 1920s in France, director-critic Jacques Copeau (1879–1949) used Asian movement techniques to train French actors. While these borrowings often occurred without understanding, even the misinterpretation of other cultures' forms can sometimes be a vital source of artistic renewal. Bertolt Brecht's inadequate knowledge of Chinese opera helped him shape his concept

GLOBAL TRADITIONS AND INNOVATIONS

Peter Brook's *Mahabharata* and Intercultural Theatre Practice

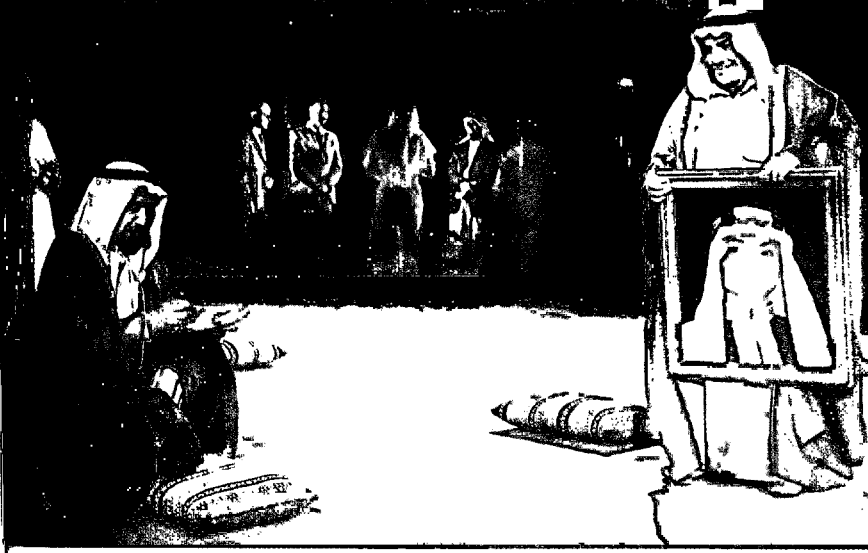
The controversy that erupted over English director Peter Brook's 1985 production of *The Mahabharata*, the foundational Hindu epic, crystallizes many issues surrounding intercultural performance. Already well known, Brook began a new period of theatrical exploration in 1970, when he founded the Centre International de Recherche Théâtrale in Paris. With an international company of actors, Brook sought a universal form of theatrical expression and communication.

The nine-hour *Mahabharata* premiered at the Avignon Festival in France in 1985. The production whittled down the enormous epic to events leading up to and including the monumental battle between the Pandavas and Kauravas and focused on the theme of war and destruction. The piece toured Europe, the United States, Australia, and Japan.

In Avignon and Australia, the performance took place in stone quarries, where the resonating sounds and the natural, open-air environment lent the production a primal intensity. The natural elements of fire, earth, and water were used to astonishing effect, with a real river on stage and, in one scene, a wall of flames. The Indian-inspired costuming was generally simple, and stage properties were few: mats and banners were used to help set the scene and actors' gestures replaced elaborate stage devices. Japanese composer Tsuchitori Toshi united international musical effects using eastern horns, Aboriginal didgeridus, conches, Japanese kodo drums, Indian tabla drums, gongs, and other instruments, for a score that was partly improvised in performance. Brook again created an exceptional theatrical experience.

Many Indian critics and South Asian scholars, familiar with performances and oral tellings of this epic in its home

country, although affected by Brook's theatricality, found his presentation a superficial "orientalist" view of the profound Hindu epic. Stories about Brook's disrespect for the indigenous tradition while doing research in India—his slighting of Indian village performers and his demands for performances at times and in ways out of sync with ritual and artistic considerations—compounded the feeling that Brook had stolen a central piece of Indian cultural heritage for his own purposes—oblivious to the culture, religion, or people who gave it birth and for whom it remained an important and living tradition. The British colonization of India served as backdrop to this cultural exchange, which seemed to replay that earlier exploitation and domination. The production did, however, provoke interest in Hindu philosophy and the *Mahabharata* text and raised consciousness of this ancient tradition. The production inspired much debate about intercultural practices.



▲ Intercultural borrowings go in all directions as seen in this production of *Richard III: An Arab Tragedy*. In this adaptation by Kuwaiti director Sulayman Al Bassam, Shakespeare's play about a dictator's bloody rise to power is set in an oil-rich kingdom and becomes an allegory for our own times.

of epic theatre, which we will discuss in the next chapter. Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein used ritual Asian dance forms in *The King and I*. The term **orientalism** refers to this kind of exoticizing of Asian arts and now implies an imposition of a Western perspective on Asian forms.

Performance Studies

The scope of theatre studies has been widened by the new field of **performance studies**, which views theatre as only one of a continuum of events that possess "performative" elements. Other activities—such as religious rituals, storytelling, sports events, games, striptease, parades, lectures, and political conventions—also have a set space, a set duration, actors, audience, and the awareness that something outside the ordinary is occurring. The field of performance studies has given us a vocabulary with which to discuss these forms.

Performance studies has enabled us to move beyond a narrow view of what constitutes a theatrical event to examine performance in cultures using forms outside the typical European and American experience, as well as unusual forms within the Western tradition. An example of this might be the study of an African festival or a Balinese clown ritual in a theatre class. Or we might look at how a World Wrestling Entertainment match uses elements of theatre: It is live; it has actors playing roles before an audience; it is scripted, of set duration, and in a particular space; there is an interaction between the actors and the audience; and it cannot be exactly repeated.

Performance studies can provide a basis for understanding human behavior and social interaction. We are actually "performing," acting with a conscious awareness that we are in a role, a good deal of the time. In fact, we prepare ourselves for various roles every day, as we choose appropriate clothes, hairstyles, and demeanors for particular activities. To think we are "performing" our

own lives at first seems contrary to our sense of having a stable, fixed identity. But when we consider how we "act" in different situations, it becomes clear that we don different masks for different occasions and interactions. The idea that we construct our identities—even things as basic as our gender and sexuality—has, in turn, influenced the contemporary theatre. Constructing and deconstructing identity has become a recurrent theme in contemporary theater, dissolving traditional notions of character. However, while theatre is an interesting metaphor for life, life is not theatre. Theatre is heightened, objectified, aestheticized, framed, delimited, and controlled.

THINK

What differentiates "real" life from performance?



▲ The growing use of theatrical elements—processional puppets, costumes, and music—in political protest reinforces the connection between theatre and other performative acts. In this London demonstration, Iranians voice opposition to President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

The human exchange between an actor and an audience is so central to the theatrical experience that we often think of science and machines as antagonistic to live performance. Yet in every period of theatre history, the stage has made use of available technology to heighten its expressive power. Technology is a force in our lives, and theatrical forms use, reflect, and comment on its power. Today theatre has unprecedented technical means at its disposal that expand creative possibilities and

force theatre practitioners to rethink the limits of theatrical performance.

Technology is also competing with theatre through easily accessible media such as film, television, video, and the Internet. These forms of media employ storytelling techniques and thrilling special effects that in the past were the sole possession of live theatre. Early film often imitated theatre. Early television producers called television dramas "theatre in your living room." Once a good play might have served as the basis for a

movie or television series; today movies are being turned into Broadway shows, such as *The Lion King*, *Sister Act!*, and *Catch Me If You Can*. The types of stories and scenarios produced in other media now guide the creation and appreciation of much theatrical fare. The Disney corporation produces its own shows based on its hit movies, such as *Beauty and the Beast*. There is concern that the commercial theatre increasingly resembles the corporate mass entertainment forms that permeate our culture.

Why Theatre Today?

WHAT is the role of the theatre in today's world?

Despite the easy accessibility of electronic media, people continue to be drawn to this ancient art form. Nothing can replace the vitality and thrill of live performance. The existence of MTV does not stop the lines of people buying tickets to hear Madonna live. When Lady Gaga appeared on *Saturday Night Live*, fans camped out on New York City streets for a week in order to get a place in the studio audience, rather than watch on TV. In fact, electronic media feed our desire to be present in the same space with the performer we long to touch. When film stars perform on Broadway, they attract crowds of theatre-goers who could more easily rent a video to see them. Theatre is about the immediacy and presence found in the reciprocal communication between the actor and the audience, and all electronic forms of entertainment are one-way streets. Here our fundamental yearning to respond and be felt is fulfilled. Rather than supplant theatre, electronic entertainment serves as a potent reminder of the living and immediate human essence of theatre and what it can and must provide in an increasingly depersonalized world.

There is great joy in working with others toward a shared goal. Facing the danger of opening night together is a bonding experience. This sense of belonging that comes from working on a production is especially pleasurable in a world in which our sense of community is increasingly eroded. For the individual, theatre provides a form of self-expression, use of every part of one's being. It tests our limits and our courage. It is a place to explore our inspirations, ideas, and values. It is a place to find appreciation, emotional reinforcement, and applause.

As you begin your study of theatre, you will see the history of civilization reflected in theatrical forms and find social concerns illuminated. You will learn how theatre is created, the potential of the art form, and what kind of theatre appeals to you most. You may even decide to participate. But, assuredly, you will become what every theatre artist desires most—an informed and passionate audience member.

Summary

HOW can we understand how other people portray themselves and tell their stories in performance? p. 4

- ▶ The theatre is a mirror of life because it allows us to look at ourselves with an objective understanding of who and what we are, but it is not necessarily a replica of the real world.
- ▶ Theatrical conventions govern every aspect of the art form and establish its boundaries.
- ▶ Theatrical conventions vary from one culture and historical period to another and evolve along with social values.

WHAT are the four universals that apply to all theatre everywhere? p. 8

- ▶ Throughout the world, all theatre is live; it requires the presence of an actor and an audience; it is ephemeral, collaborative, and a synthesis of many arts.

HOW do forces such as postmodernism, globalization, multiculturalism, interculturalism, postcolonialism, and performance studies shape contemporary performances? p. 10

- ▶ Tradition and innovation exist in a dynamic tension in the theatre, as artists adapt to changing times and audiences.

▶ The diversity of today's theatre is the product of many forces, including postmodernism, globalization, multiculturalism, interculturalism, and postcolonialism.

▶ Performance studies is an academic field that looks at theatre as one kind of performance on a continuum with other kinds of performance, such as ritual and sports events. It helps us understand and discuss today's varied theatrical forms.

WHAT is the role of the theatre in today's world? p. 18

▶ Despite the ready availability of easily consumable popular culture and electronic entertainment, theatre continues to draw audiences because of its immediacy and liveness, as well as the thrill of direct contact with the performers.

▶ Theatre remains an art that binds a community of people in a collaborative effort in an increasingly depersonalized world.

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