

Theatre and Acting Terms

Theatre: *No definition of theatre is broad enough, elastic enough, to encompass the entire scope of the dramatic arts in all their diversity -- dance, opera, ballet, worship, pageants, dialogue, acrobatics, circuses . . . the list could be almost endless; for theatre is the art where all arts meet.*

actor: a person who performs in a play

act: A unit or division of a play, each of which is composed of one or more scenes. Originally, Greek plays were continuous and the introduction of divisions was a later development. Plays today may be divided into one, two, or three acts.

action: The movement or development of the plot, or story in a play.

antagonist: The opponent or adversary of the hero or protagonist of a drama.

aside: Sometimes referred to as breaking the proscenium or breaking the fourth wall, the term refers to a speech or comment made by an actor directly to the audience about the action of the play or another character. The audience is to understand that this comment is not heard or noticed by the other characters in the play.

audition: A trial run or "tryout" for a particular part in a play. In earlier theater, actors were often engaged on the basis of hearsay or their performance in other productions, with auditions coming into vogue in the latter part of the 19th century.

bard: A person who composed and recited heroic or epic poems, often accompanied by lyre or harp. "The Bard" is now synonymous with William Shakespeare.

beat: The smallest unit of dramatic action.

blackout: when all lights are simultaneously turned off to indicate the end of a scene

blocking: a plan given by the director that indicates where an actor stands and moves

"Break a leg!": a theatre expression meaning "Good luck!"

business: A bit of action in a play, such as pouring a drink, tuning a radio, cleaning or dusting furniture -- used to establish a character, take up a pause in dialogue, or establish the scene.

cabaret: Originally, a venue where poets, artists and musicians performed their work. Cabarets had a political impact in France, Germany and Russia in the 1920's and 30's. In the modern sense, a cabaret is simply entertainment presented by different artists including song, dance, scenes, monologues or poetry.

character: a person in a story that an actor plays

choreographer: a person who plans and teaches movements - like dances and fight sequences - to actors

climax: In the traditional dramatic sense, the most powerful moment in a play, following which the denouement occurs.

comedy: From the Greek, "revel-song", it originally referred to satiric plays of Aristophanes and Menander, as distinguished from the more pastoral "satyr plays" that may have pre-dated Dionysian tragedies. Often deriving their satirical or humorous nature from topical subjects, comedy is not as "ageless" as tragedies. In the more modern sense, the term applies to any play with a happy ending.

community theatre: In its modern sense, refers to organizations of amateurs in a particular region or community who produce and perform plays. Community theatre as we know it traces its beginnings to the turn of the century and has seen tremendous growth in the last fifty years.

costume designer: a person who designs and makes the costumes actors wear

cue: a signal that tells an actor when to speak or move

curtain call: actors gather on stage at the end of a performance to receive applause

denouement: Also called "falling action", it is the part of the play following the climax, during which events and conflicts are brought to their final resolution.

director: the person who interprets the play and provides direction to the actors, crew and designers

dress rehearsal: the last rehearsal before a play opens with actors in full costume

Equity Actors' Associations: Trade unions formed to oversee and regulate the pay and conditions of those working in the theatre. In the U.S., American Actors' Equity, formed in 1913, deals only with the legitimate theatre.

Fourth Wall: The imaginary fourth wall that is removed from box set to enable the audience to see the action on stage. The term now applies to the "wall" separating audience and performers on any type of stage or even film and television. Thus, the term "breaking the fourth wall" refers to an actor speaking directly to the audience.

French scene: The action which takes place between one actor's entrance and exit.

giving focus: an actor on stage does not move or talk so that audience attention is drawn to another actor who is moving or talking

green room: Room or space near the stage, used by actors and crew between acts or while waiting to go on.

house: The entire theatre beyond the front of the stage.

house lights: The lights used to illuminate the auditorium before and after a performance and during intermission. These can range from simple incandescent lighting to grand chandeliers.

house manager: The person charged with managing the auditorium and anything related to the audience.

improvisation: a drama that is not scripted, but is made up as you go

lighting designer: a person who plans what lights are used and when they are used to help create a setting

limelight: Originally derives from the lime, or calcium flare, first used in the early 19th Century, and which gave off a brilliant white light primarily used for illuminating the chief actor and follow him about the stage -- hence the modern term "in the limelight".

makeup designer: a person who makes actors faces resemble the characters they are playing

monologue: a scene when only one actor speaks or **Soliloquy** is passage of narrative spoken by a single actor in which his or her thoughts are revealed to the audience.

notes: Refers to the notes delivered by a director to the cast and crew during and at the end of rehearsals. These notes assist in developing the characters being portrayed and in unifying the production.

Off Book: The point during rehearsals at which actors have memorized their lines and no longer must read from the script.

pace: The rate at which a scene or act is played.

pantomime: a story performed without words

places: As in "Places, please". The command given by the stage manager directing the actors and crew to assume their positions immediately prior to the commencement of a performance.

producer: the person who arranges the financing of a play

prologue: Introductory speech or poem that introduced the play and explained or commented on the action which was to take place. Together with the epilogue, which closed the play, prologues were used extensively in Restoration theatre, but have fallen into disuse in modern drama.

prop: short for properties. Any object used by an actor.

protagonist: the main character (the central or primary personal figure) of a literary, theatrical, cinematic, or musical narrative, around whom the events of the narrative's plot revolve and with whom the audience is intended to most identify.

script: a play in written form

set: the acting area including props and scenery

set designer: the person who designs the scenery for a play

sound designer: the person who selects the music and sounds used in a play

stage crew: people who set up scenery and change it between scenes of a play

stage directions: instructions given within the script to actors to tell them when and where to move on stage

stage left: the area of stage that is on the actor's left

stage manager: the person who makes sure a performance runs as planned

stage right: the area of stage that is on the actor's right

taking focus: the actor speaks confidently and makes intentional movements in a way that gets the audience's attention

verisimilitude: The appearance of truth. The value that players strive for in their attempt to suspend the audience's disbelief.

