

Other Types of Drama

Many plays are difficult to categorize as either comedy or tragedy. Playwrights of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries especially have explored social and psychological themes in great depth.

Social Drama Sometimes called the problem play, social drama will always exist in one form or another as dramatists point out wrongs and injustices. **Social dramas** are frequently comedies in the sense that they offer a solution for the problems they present. Many contain elements of tragedy because the protagonist sometimes loses the battle against evil and may even be destroyed.

Some famous social dramas are Ibsen's *An Enemy of the People*, which shows how a man from a small town stands for

One of the prominent social dramatists of our time is Athol Fugard. Fugard, a white South African, voices in his plays a strong opposition to the South African government's long-time policy of racial segregation called *apartheid*. Many feel that his work was important in focusing opposition to apartheid; the final laws supporting it were repealed in 1991. Fugard's plays include *My Children! My Africa!*, *Blood Knot*, and *Sizwe Banzi Is Dead*.



David Mamet's two-character play *Oleanna* uses personal relationships in a university setting as a forum for exploring current social issues.

civic integrity against all other citizens; Bertolt Brecht's *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, which attacks the selfishness of the elite; and Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun*, which shows an African American family struggling to escape poverty.

CUE

Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*, a melodrama of the "whodunit" variety, holds the all-time record for continuous performances of a play.

Psychological Drama As serious plays, **psychological dramas** are often penetrating and sometimes painful; the playwright battles the complexities of the human psyche and personal relationships. Eugene O'Neill wrote psychological as well as social drama. *Long Day's Journey into Night* was a very personal play, in which O'Neill explores some of the difficulties of his own early life. Tennessee Williams was one of America's great psychological dramatists. With *The Glass Menagerie*, *The Rose Tattoo*, and many other plays, he shows family and personal struggles. Marsha Norman in *'Night, Mother* deals with a troubled woman and her relationship with her mother; in *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Edward Albee explores human weakness and the torment people create when they are unable to accept weakness in those around them.

The "Whodunit" The suspense in a "whodunit" of solving a crime or of a courtroom drama tremendously heightens dramatic effects and hooks audiences. Some popular "whodunits" are *Ten Little Indians*, and *The Mousetrap*.

Allegory A play that teaches moral concepts through characters who personify abstract qualities and concepts, such as truth, justice, love, death, and humanity, can be considered an **allegory**. Allegory has been a popular form of storytelling throughout history. The classic example is *Everyman*. In this medieval play, Everyman is suddenly summoned to meet Death. He must appear before God for judgment on his life. In his desperate need, all his friends—Five Wits, Fellowship, Kindred, Discretion, Beauty, Strength, and Knowledge—fail him. Only his Good Deeds will go with him.

SOME SPECIAL FORMS OF DRAMA

Children's Theater A large part of contemporary theater is devoted to **children's theater**—drama written, designed, and performed for children. Many high school drama groups produce at least one children's play each season. Regional, civic, and professional theater groups often include children's theater as part of their seasons. Some even run a separate children's theater schedule. Many original scripts and new adaptations are available for production.

Puppet Theater Puppets have long been a part of theater the world over. In recent years, however, children's television programs have prompted a

new interest in puppets. Enormous puppets combined with masked actors in the American Repertory Theater production of Andrei Serban's *King Stag* create powerful adult theater. For a special section on **puppet theater**, see page 328.

Monodrama A **monodrama** is a play written to be performed by a single actor. In *Before Breakfast*, an O'Neill tragedy, a nagging wife drives her husband into committing suicide offstage. In *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*, Lily Tomlin created an enormous variety of characters in a series of monologues that were part comedy and part social criticism.

A popular form of monodrama is the impersonation of historical figures: Hal Holbrook as Mark Twain, Cornelia Otis Skinner as the wives of Henry VIII, Robert Morse as Truman Capote, among many.

In the last part of the twentieth century, **performance art** became increasingly popular. This form of monodrama often involves juxtaposing many different elements of theater in a novel way. Performance artists such as Laurie Anderson use video, multiple screens, megaphones, and music to create full-length, loosely constructed theater pieces.

Application ACTIVITY

Using the following situation or one that you create, explain what would be emphasized if it were produced as a social drama or as a psychological drama. How might it be turned into a monodrama? How could it be adapted as a "whodunit" or suspense drama?

Dramatic situation: A couple has adopted and raised a baby. Now the child is ready to start the first grade. Suddenly the birth parents come forward with a legal reason for the child to be given back to them.



Monodrama requires an actor who can single-handedly command the attention of an audience. Here, Ben Kingsley portrays Irish poet William Butler Yeats.