



Introduction

Five minutes to curtain! You are about to go onstage. For some of you it will be your first venture on *the boards*. For some it will be your first formal study of a subject you have been eager to know more about. For others it will be an opportunity to learn about the aspects of the theater that you have grown to love as an actor, as a member of a backstage crew or committee, or as a member of an audience. It can be the chance to fulfill a dream for those of you who have seen an incredible performance by an actor, an exciting play or musical, or a television program that left you saying to yourself "If only I could do that!"

Regardless of your reason for showing interest in this course, you probably have questions and apprehensions. The purpose of this introduction is to answer some of those questions and to ease some of those fears. Answering one question might generate additional questions. Prepare yourself, because the curtain is going up, and this is your chance to get your answers.

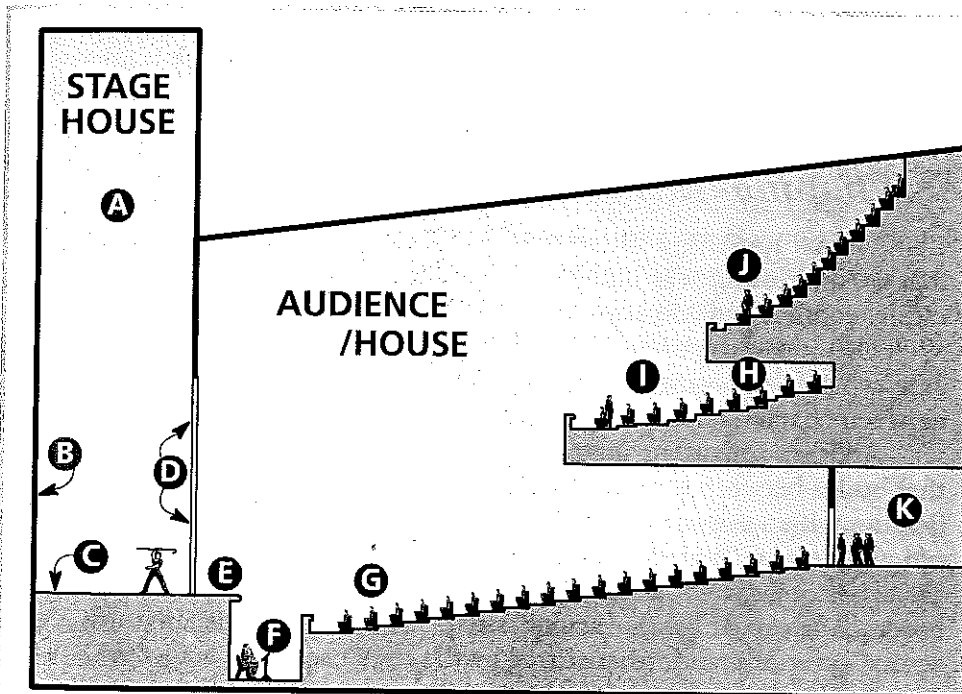
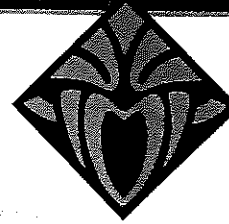
☞ *What is theater?*

This book will focus primarily on what is normally referred to as legitimate theater. Although the term was originally applied to the live professional stage, it is now used to distinguish onstage acting from other media forms, such as motion pictures and television. Most theatrical performances are seen in buildings called theaters, which were constructed primarily for dramatic presentations. In a school, this facility is usually the auditorium. Actually, to create a positive experience in theater, you do not need a building with permanent seating, or a stage, or a script of a play, or special lighting equipment. All you really need are actors and an audience.

☞ *What are they talking about?*

Theater has a language all its own, as does any specialized field. For example, a theater crew will still say "curtain going up," although most theaters today have curtains that open from side to side. Because theater has many conventions, or traditional ways of doing things, you will be introduced to key ideas and to theater vocabulary. Some chapters have lists of specialized vocabulary within them. You will also find at the end of the text a glossary with definitions of these terms.

TERMS FOR THE THEATER INTERIOR



- | | |
|--------------------------|----------------------------------|
| A Fly Space | G Orchestra Section |
| B "Back Wall" | H First Balcony |
| C Stage Floor | I Mezzanine |
| D Proscenium Arch | J Upper or Second Balcony |
| E Thrust or Apron | K Lobby |
| F Orchestra Pit | |

How did drama come into being?

The word *drama* comes from an ancient Greek word meaning "to do" or "to act." That is why you are here—to *do*. Acting, building, designing, directing, producing—*doing* is what drama and theater are all about.



Drama has its origins in the human impulse to imitate. Judging from archeological evidence such as cave drawings, early humans imitated significant events in their lives. Perhaps around a campfire or within a circle of viewers, people acted out successful hunts and victorious battles. Since not all hunts were successful and life was not always positive, early actors used pantomime, dance, and chant to express the way they wished things had turned out. This was the forerunner of ritualistic drama.

What makes a drama effective?

Good drama must be built around situations—problems or challenges—that are interesting to an audience. Two ingredients make situations interesting: conflict and empathy.

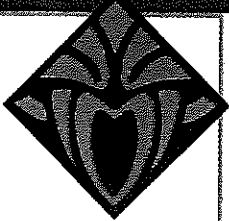
The most important ingredient of drama is conflict—a struggle between two opposing forces. This struggle can be within a character, between characters, or between a character and an outside force.

Another important ingredient of drama is empathy—a relationship that builds between actor and audience. Empathy is the emotional identification with someone or something outside oneself. It is “feeling with,” not “feeling for,” the character—empathy, not sympathy. The energy of theater is generated when an audience enters the world of the play, becomes involved in the actors’ struggles, and responds. In turn, the actors’ emotions are further stirred by the response of the audience.

Am I the only one who is a little frightened?

One of the problems you might face is the nervous anticipation of going onstage to perform, which is called stage fright. Nervousness or fear causes your body to release adrenaline, which increases the heart’s action and enlarges the blood vessels to allow a greater supply of blood to flow. This extra blood flow may cause a strange feeling in the stomach, sometimes referred to as butterflies, one of the many symptoms of stage fright. Some people pace nervously, some break out in a cold sweat, some begin talking or laughing more loudly than normal, and a few experience nausea.

Be assured that most performers experience stage fright before going onstage, particularly for the first performance. Some performers might say that a certain amount of stage fright is good for your performance because it means that you are concerned about doing a good job. To channel stage fright into positive energy, concentrate on your performance and character and use the energy to give your performance a special lift.



☞ *Why and by whom are performers evaluated?*

Performers are evaluated as they perform—by the director, by fellow performers, and by the audience. You must learn what audiences like, accept, and reject, because they are there to be pleased and challenged. Theater is presented to and for an audience. Simply doing what you want to do in performance, design, or writing is not good theater if it fails to communicate with the audience.

An actor or technician who wishes to improve accepts and seeks positive criticism. A director may give many critical notes or comments, but the intent is to improve the performance, not to belittle the actors or crews. Sound criticism should not be aimed at you as a person and should not be taken personally. When you are given the opportunity to evaluate a fellow actor's performance, first try to find something that deserves praise, such as the voice, animation, or interpretation. Then comment on the things that can be improved.

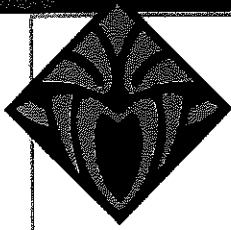
☞ *What is expected of me?*

Whatever role you fulfill in a stage production, others have expectations of you. The most important expectation is that of discipline, which can be an intimidating word. Discipline is the heart of theater, and theater discipline is self-discipline. Here are a few things that will be expected of you as an actor:

- Do your physical, vocal, and relaxation exercises regularly.
- Be on time.
- Learn lines on schedule.
- Make quick, efficient scene changes.
- Be where you are supposed to be.
- Demand excellence from yourself and from those around you.
- Pick up cues.
- Make every performance appear fresh and sharp.
- Be willing to accept criticism intended to help you grow as a performer.

☞ *What will this class do for me?*

Your studies in drama will bring several benefits. You will come to know more about yourself, your strengths and weaknesses, your talents, and your effect on those around you. You might also learn to understand others better. An actor must become a student of human nature in order to present a



truthful and realistic performance. Therefore, you will learn to observe real people and begin to understand the motivations behind their behavior.

Your study of the theater will also help you become a more expressive, communicative person both onstage and off. You will learn to share your talents, insights, and excitement with others.

What am I bringing to the class?

Since most relationships are reciprocal, you will probably get more from the class by considering those things you are bringing to the class. Keep in mind that everyone arrives with different experiences and different expectations, so there is much to share. It might prove beneficial to answer the questions below and to discuss your answers with the class and your teacher. You probably have more to give than you think.

Personal Inventory

1. What previous study of drama have you had?
2. What do you think of when you hear the words *drama* and *theater*?
3. What plays and musicals have you seen?
4. Which of those were professional productions?
5. Have you ever been part of a production staff? If so, what were your duties?
6. Have you ever performed onstage? If so, what experience have you had?
7. If you have performed, did someone evaluate your performance? If so, what was your response to being evaluated?
8. What stage conventions or traditions do you know about?
9. What theater vocabulary are you familiar with?
10. Have you read any plays? If so, how do you expect the experience in this class to be different from your previous reading?
11. What particular aspect of producing a play interests you more than other aspects?
12. What personal goals do you have for studying drama?
13. What do you hope to learn from this class that will help you grow as a drama student, a performer, and a person?