

## I Appendix B

# Major Theatrical Forms and Movements

**Absurdism** See *Theatre of the absurd*.

**Allegory** Representation of an abstract theme or themes through the symbolic use of character, action, and other concrete elements of a play. In its most direct form—for example, in a medieval morality play—allegory uses the device of personification: the characters represent abstract qualities, such as virtues and vices, and the action spells out a moral or intellectual lesson. Less direct forms of allegory may use a relatively realistic story as a guise for a hidden theme. For example, Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible* can be regarded as an allegory of Senator McCarthy’s congressional investigation in the United States after World War II.

**Avant-garde** (“ah-vahn-GARD”) French term that literally means the “advance guard” in a military formation. It has come to stand for an intellectual, literary, or artistic movement in any age that breaks with tradition and appears to be ahead of its time. Avant-garde works are usually experimental and unorthodox. In twentieth-century theatre, such movements as expressionism, surrealism, absurdism, and the theories of Antonin Artaud and Jerzy Grotowski were considered avant-garde.

**Bourgeois drama** See *Domestic drama*.

**Bunraku** (“buhn-RAH-koo”) Traditional Japanese puppet theatre.

**Burlesque** Ludicrous imitation of a dramatic form or a specific play. Closely related to satire but usually lacking the moral or intellectual purposes of reform typical of satire, burlesque is content to mock the excesses of other works. Famous examples of burlesque include Beaumont’s *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* and, more recently, such burlesques of theatre as *Forbidden Broadway*. In the United States the term has come to be associated with a form of variety show which stresses sex.

**Comedy** As one of the oldest enduring categories of western drama, comedy has gathered under its heading a large number of subclassifications. Although the range of comedy is broad, generally a comedy can be said to be a play that is light in tone, is concerned with issues tending not to be serious, has a happy ending, and is designed to amuse and provoke laughter. Historically, comedy has gone through many changes. Aristophanic or Greek *Old Comedy* was farcical, satiric, and nonrealistic. Greek and Roman *New Comedy*, based on domestic situations, was more influential in the development of

comedy during the Renaissance. Ben Jonson built his “comedies of humors” on Roman models. In Jonson’s plays, ridicule is directed at characters who are dominated to the point of obsession by a single trait, or humor. Comedy of manners was made popular in the late seventeenth century by Molière and the writers of the English Restoration. It tends to have a cultivated or sophisticated milieu, witty dialogue, and characters whose concern with social polish is charming, ludicrous, or both. In the late nineteenth century, George Bernard Shaw used comedy for the serious discussion of ideas, and Chekhov wrote plays which he called comedies but others consider tragicomic. The twentieth century saw an expansion in the territory covered by comedy as well as a blurring of its boundaries. The horizon of the comic was expanded by playwrights such as Pirandello and Ionesco, whose comic vision is more serious, thoughtful, and disturbing than that found in most traditional comedies.

**Commedia dell’arte** Form of comic theatre originating in Italy in the sixteenth century, in which dialogue was improvised around a loose scenario calling for a set of stock characters, each with a distinctive costume and a tradi-

tional name. The best-known of these characters are probably the *zanni*, buffoons who usually took the roles of servants and who had at their disposal a large number of slapstick routines, called *lazzi*, which ranged from simple grimaces to acrobatic stunts.

**Cycle plays** See *Medieval drama*.

**Documentary** See *Theatre of fact*.

**Domestic drama** Also known as *bourgeois drama*, domestic drama deals with problems of the middle and lower classes, particularly problems of the family and home. Conflicts with society, struggles within a family, dashed hopes, and renewed determination are characteristic of domestic drama. It attempts to depict onstage the lifestyle of ordinary people—in language, in dress, in behavior. Domestic drama first came to the fore during the eighteenth century in Europe and Great Britain, when the merchant and working classes were emerging. Because general audiences could so readily identify with the people and problems of domestic drama, it continued to gain in popularity during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and remains a major form today.

**Environmental theatre** Term used by Richard Schechner and others to refer to one branch of avant-garde theatre. Among its aims are the elimination of the distinction between audience space and acting space; a more flexible approach to the interactions between performers and audience; and the substitution of a multiple focus for the traditional single focus.

**Epic theatre** Form of presentation that has come to be associated with Bertolt Brecht, its chief advocate and theorist. It is aimed at the intellect rather than

the emotions, seeking to present evidence regarding social questions in such a way that they may be objectively considered and an intelligent conclusion reached. Brecht felt that emotional involvement by the audience defeated this aim, and he used various devices designed to produce emotional “alienation” of the audience from the action onstage. His plays are episodic, with narrative songs separating the segments and large posters or signs announcing the various scenes.

**Existentialism** Set of philosophical ideas whose principal modern advocate was Jean-Paul Sartre. The term *existentialist* was applied by Sartre and others to plays illustrating these views. Sartre’s central thesis was that there are no longer any fixed standards or values by which one can live and that each person must create his or her own code of conduct regardless of the conventions imposed by society. Only in this way can one truly “exist” as a responsible, creative human being; otherwise one is merely a robot or an automaton. Sartre’s plays typically involve people who are faced with decisions forcing them into an awareness of the choice between living on their own terms and ceasing to exist as individuals.

**Expressionism** Movement that developed and flourished in Germany during the period immediately preceding and following World War I. Expressionism was characterized by an attempt to dramatize subjective states through distortion; striking, often grotesque images; and lyric, unrealistic dialogue. It was revolutionary in content as well as in form, portraying the institutions of society, particularly the

bourgeois family, as grotesque, oppressive, and materialistic. The expressionist hero or heroine was usually a rebel against this mechanistic vision of society. Dramatic conflict tended to be replaced by the development of themes by means of visual images. The movement had great influence because it forcefully demonstrated that dramatic imagination need not be limited to either theatrical conventions or the faithful reproduction of reality. In the United States, expressionism influenced Elmer Rice’s *The Adding Machine* and many of O’Neill’s early plays. The basic aim of expressionism was to give external expression to inner feelings and ideas; theatrical techniques that adopt this method are frequently referred to as *expressionistic*.

**Farce** One of the major genres of drama, usually regarded as a subclass of comedy. Farce has few, if any, intellectual pretensions. It aims to entertain, to provoke laughter. Its humor is the result primarily of physical activity and visual effects, and it relies less than so-called higher forms of comedy on language and wit. Violence, rapid movement, and accelerating pace are characteristic of farce. In bedroom farce the institution of marriage is the object of the fun, but medicine, law, and business also provide material for farce.

**Happenings** Form of theatrical event that was developed out of the experimentation of certain American abstract artists in the 1960s. Happenings are nonliterary, replacing the script with a scenario that provides for chance occurrences. They are performed (often only once) in such places as parks and street corners, with little attempt being made to

segregate the action from the audience. Emphasizing the free association of sound and movement, they avoid logical action and rational meaning.

**Heroic drama** Form of serious drama, written in verse or elevated prose, which features noble or heroic characters caught in extreme situations or undertaking unusual adventures. In spite of the hardships to which its leading figures are subjected, heroic drama—unlike tragedy—has a basically optimistic worldview. It has either a happy ending or, in cases where the hero or heroine dies, a triumphant ending in which the death is not regarded tragically. Plays from all periods, and from Asia as well as the west, fall into this category. During the late seventeenth century in England, plays of this type were referred to specifically as *heroic tragedies*.

**History play** In the broadest sense, a play set in a historical milieu which deals with historical personages; but the term is usually applied only to plays that deal with vital issues of public welfare and are nationalistic in tone. The form originated in Elizabethan England, which produced more history plays than any comparable place or time. Based on a religious concept of history, they were influenced by the structure of the morality play. Shakespeare was the major writer of Elizabethan history plays. His style has influenced many later history plays, notably those by the Swedish playwright Strindberg.

**Impressionism** Style of painting, developed in the late nineteenth century, which stressed immediate impressions created by objects—particularly impressions resulting from the effects

of light—and which tended to ignore details. Its influence on theatre was primarily in the area of scenic design, but the term *impressionistic* is sometimes applied to plays like Chekhov's, which rely on a series of impressions and use indirect techniques.

**Kabuki** The most eclectic and theatrical of the major forms of Japanese theatre. It is a more popular form than the aristocratic *nō* drama and, unlike puppet theatre, which is called *bunraku*, it uses live actors. Nevertheless, kabuki has borrowed freely from both of these forms, particularly *bunraku*. Roles of both sexes are performed by men in a highly theatrical, nonrealistic style. Kabuki combines music, dance, and dramatic scenes with an emphasis on color and movement. The plays are long and episodic, composed of a series of loosely connected dramatic scenes which are often performed separately.

**Masque** Lavish, spectacular form of private theatrical entertainment that developed in Renaissance Italy and spread rapidly to the courts of France and England. Usually intended for a single performance, a masque combined poetry, music, elaborate costumes, and spectacular effects of stage machinery. It was a social event in which members of the court were both spectators and performers. Loosely constructed, masques were usually written around allegorical or mythological themes.

**Medieval drama** There is only meager evidence of theatrical activity in Europe between the sixth and tenth centuries, but by the end of the fifteenth century a number of types of drama had developed. The first of these, known as *liturgical drama*, was sung or chanted in Latin as part

of a church service. Plays on religious themes were also written in the vernacular and performed outside the church. The *mystery plays* (also called *cycle plays*) were based on events taken from the Old and New Testaments. Many such plays were organized into historical cycles, which told the story of humanity from the creation to doomsday. The entire performance was quite long, sometimes requiring as much as five days. The plays were produced as a community effort, with different craft guilds usually being responsible for individual segments. Another form of medieval drama was the *morality play*. The morality play was a didactic, allegorical treatment of moral and religious questions, the most famous example being *Everyman*. The medieval period also produced several types of secular plays. Other than the *folk plays*, which dealt with legendary heroes like Robin Hood, most were farcical and fairly short.

**Melodrama** Historically, a distinct form of drama popular throughout the nineteenth century that emphasized action and spectacular effects and used music to heighten the dramatic mood. Melodrama had stock characters and clearly defined villains and heroes. More generally, the term is applied to any dramatic play that presents an unambiguous confrontation between good and evil. Characterization is often shallow and stereotypical, and because the moral conflict is externalized, action and violence are prominent, usually culminating in a happy ending meant to demonstrate the eventual triumph of good.

**Mime** Performance in which the action or story is conveyed

through the use of movements and gestures, without words. It depends on the performer's ability to suggest or create his or her surroundings through physical reactions to them and the expressiveness of the entire body.

**Musical theatre** Broad category, which includes opera, operetta, musical comedy, and other musical plays (the term *lyric theatre* is sometimes used to distinguish it from pure dance). It includes any dramatic entertainment of which music and lyrics (and sometimes dance) form an integral and necessary part. The various types of musical theatre often overlap and are best distinguished in terms of their separate historical origins, the quality of the music, and the range and type of skills demanded of the performance. *Opera* is usually defined as a work in which all parts are sung to musical accompaniment. Such works are part of a tradition separate from and much older than the modern musical, which is of relatively recent American origin. The term *musical comedy* is no longer adequate to describe all the musical dramas commonly seen on and off Broadway, but they clearly belong together as part of a tradition that can easily be distinguished from both opera and operetta.

**Naturalism** A special form of realism. The theory of naturalism came to prominence in France and other parts of Europe in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The French playwright and novelist Émile Zola (1840–1902) advocated a theatre that would follow the scientific principles of the age, especially those discovered by Charles Darwin. Zola was also impressed by the work of Auguste Comte (1778–1857)

and a physician named Claude Bernard (1813–1878). According to Zola's theory of naturalism, drama should look for the causes of disease in society the way a doctor looks for disease in a patient. Theatre should therefore expose social infection in all its ugliness. Following Darwin, theatre should show human beings as products of heredity and environment. The result would be a drama often depicting the ugly underside of life and expressing a pessimistic point of view. Also, drama was not to be carefully plotted or constructed but was to present a "slice of life": an attempt to look at life as it is. Very few successful plays fulfilled Zola's demands. Some of the works of Strindberg, Gorky, and others came closest to meeting the requirements of naturalism. In the contemporary period the term *naturalism* is generally applied to dramas that are super-realistic, that is, those conforming to observable reality in precise detail. Naturalism attempts to achieve the verisimilitude of a documentary film, to convey the impression that everything about a play—the setting; the way the characters dress, speak, and act—is exactly like everyday life.

**Nō** Rigidly traditional form of Japanese drama which in its present form dates back to the fourteenth century. Nō plays are short dramas combining music, dance, and lyrics with a highly stylized and ritualistic presentation. Virtually every aspect of the production—including costumes, masks, and a highly symbolic setting—is prescribed by tradition. (Also spelled *noh*.)

**Nonrealism** Also referred to as *departures from realism* or *anti-realism*. Nonrealism includes all

forms of theatre that depart from realism, such as symbolism (in which a sign, object, or action signifies something else) and fantasy (including ghosts or similar otherworldly creatures); and such elements of theatre as masks, poetry, and music. In short, nonrealism is the entire range of aural and visual devices that do not conform to observable reality. In theatre, as in most of the arts, nonrealistic elements have a long history in both the east and the west.

**Pantomime** Originally a Roman entertainment in which a narrative was sung by a chorus while the story was acted out by dancers. Now used loosely to cover any form of presentation that relies on dance, gesture, and physical movement. (See also *Mime*.)

**Performance art** Type of experimental theatre that came to prominence in the 1980s but had its antecedents in previous avant-garde movements of the twentieth century. In its earlier manifestations, it combined elements of dance and the visual arts with theatre. At times, video and film were also added. The focus was not a written text, and the playwright, if there was one, was a relatively minor part of the overall scheme. In one type of performance art, the director is the one who supplies the vision for the production and coordinates the various elements. Performers, rather than playing normal characters, usually function as dancers, acrobats, or parts of a *tableau vivant*—they fit into the visual and choreographic scheme along with music, scenery, and the other aspects of the production. The stress is on picturization, ritual, and choreographed movement. More recently, however, performance art has emphasized

individual performances. A single artist performs, and often creates, the material presented to an audience. Performance art of this type ranges from the storytelling of Spalding Gray to the one-woman compilations of social and political events by Anna Deavere Smith to the protest performances of Karen Finley.

**Play of ideas** Play whose principal focus is on the serious treatment of social, moral, or philosophical ideas. The term *problem play* is used to designate those dramas, best exemplified in the work of Ibsen and Shaw, in which several sides of a question are both dramatized and discussed. A play of ideas is sometimes distinguished from the *pièce à thèse*, or thesis play, which makes a more one-sided presentation and uses a character who sums up the “lesson” of the play and serves as the author’s voice.

**Poor theatre** Term coined by Jerzy Grotowski to describe his ideal of theatre stripped to its barest essentials. According to Grotowski, the lavish sets, lights, and costumes usually associated with theatre merely reflect low materialistic values and must be eliminated. If theatre is to become rich spiritually and aesthetically, it must first be “poor” in everything that can detract from the performer’s relationship with the audience.

**Postmodernism** Many critics, noting the complexity and diversity of contemporary art and theatre, describe a number of contemporary works and artists as *postmodernist*. The term suggests that the “modernist” interest in antirealism is no longer central to art and that artists have moved beyond abstraction. Instead, contemporary playwrights and

theatre artists mix abstraction with realism, so that the works they create cannot be easily classified. Furthermore, the distinction between “high” art and popular art can no longer be clearly defined; postmodernists mix popular concerns and techniques with those of high art.

**Realism** Broadly speaking, realism is an attempt to present onstage people and events corresponding to those observable in everyday life. Examples of realism can be found in western drama—especially in comedies—in the Greek, Roman, medieval, and Renaissance periods. Sections of plays from these periods show people speaking, dressing, and acting in the manner of ordinary people of the time. Certain landmark plays are considered forerunners of modern realism. These include *Arden of Feversham* (c. 1590), an English play about greed and lust in a middle-class family; *The London Merchant* (1731) by George Lillo (1693–1739), about a young apprentice led astray by a prostitute; *Miss Sara Sampson* (1755), by Gotthold Lessing (1729–1781), a German version of *The London Merchant*; and *The Inspector General* (1836), by Nikolai Gogol (1809–1852), exposing corruption in a provincial Russian town. It was in the latter part of the nineteenth century, however, that realism took hold as a major form of theatre. As the middle class came more and more to dominate life in Europe and the United States, and as scientific and psychological discoveries challenged the heroic or romantic viewpoint, drama began to center on the affairs of ordinary people in their natural surroundings. The plays of Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov showed

that powerful, effective drama could be written about such people. The degree of realism varies in drama, ranging from *slice-of-life naturalism* to *heightened realism*. In the latter, nonrealistic and symbolic elements are introduced into a basically realistic format. Despite frequent challenges from other forms during the past 100 years, realism remains a major form of contemporary theatre. (See also *Naturalism*.)

**Restoration drama** English drama after the restoration of the monarchy, from 1660 to 1700. Presented for an audience of aristocrats who gathered about the court of Charles II, drama of this period consisted largely of comedies of manners, which reflected a cynical view of human nature, and heroic tragedies in the neoclassical style.

**Romanticism** Literary and dramatic movement of the nineteenth century which developed as a reaction to the strictures of neoclassicism. Imitating the loose, episodic structure of Shakespeare’s plays, the romantics sought to free the writer from all rules and looked to the unfettered inspiration of artistic genius as the source of all creativity. They laid more stress on mood and atmosphere than on content, but one of their favorite themes was the gulf between human beings’ spiritual aspirations and their physical limitations.

**Satire** Dramatic satire uses the techniques of comedy, such as wit, irony, and exaggeration, to attack and expose folly and vice. Satire can attack specific public figures, or it can point its barbs at more general traits which can be found in many of us. Thus Molière’s *Tartuffe* ridicules religious hypocrisy, Shaw’s *Arms and the Man*

exposes the romantic glorification of war, and Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest* satirizes the English upper classes.

**Street theatre** Generic term which includes a number of groups that perform in the open and attempt to relate to the needs of a specific community or neighborhood. Many such groups sprang up in the 1960s, partly as a response to social unrest and partly because there was a need for theatre which could express the specific concerns of minority and ethnic neighborhoods.

**Surrealism** Movement attacking formalism in the arts. Surrealism developed in Europe after World War I. Seeking a more profound reality than that presented to the rational, conscious mind, the surrealists replaced realistic action with the strange logic of the dream and cultivated such techniques as automatic writing and free association of ideas. Although few plays written by the surrealists are highly regarded, the movement had a great influence on later avant-garde theatre—notably theatre of the absurd and theatre of cruelty.

**Symbolism** Closely linked to symbolist poetry, symbolist drama was a movement of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century which sought to replace realistic representation of life with the expression of an inner truth. Hoping to restore the religious and spiritual significance of theatre, symbolism used myth, legend, and symbols in an attempt to reach beyond everyday reality. The plays of Maurice Maeterlinck (1862–1949) are among the best-known symbolist dramas.

**Theatre of the absurd** Term first used by Martin Esslin to describe certain playwrights of the 1950s

and 1960s who expressed a similar point of view regarding the absurdity of the human condition. Their plays are dramatizations of the authors' inner sense of the absurdity and futility of existence. Rational language is debased and replaced by clichés and trite or irrelevant remarks. Repetitious or meaningless activity is substituted for logical action. Realistic psychological motivation is replaced by automatic behavior, which is often absurdly inappropriate to the situation. Although the subject matter is serious, the tone of these plays is usually comic and ironic. Among the best-known absurdist authors are Beckett, Ionesco, and Albee.

**Theatre of cruelty** Antonin Artaud's visionary concept of a theatre based on magic and ritual which would liberate deep, violent, and erotic impulses. He wished to reveal the cruelty that he saw as existing beneath all human action—the pervasiveness of evil and violent sexuality. To do this, he advocated radical changes in the use of theatrical space, the integration of audience and performers, and the full utilization of the affective power of light, color, movement, and language. Although Artaud had little success implementing his theories himself, he had considerable influence on other writers and directors, particularly Peter Brook, Jean-Louis Barrault (1910–1994), and Jerzy Grotowski.

**Theatre of fact** Term encompassing a number of types of documentary drama that developed during the twentieth century. Methods of presentation differ. The "living newspaper" drama of the 1930s used signs and slide projections to deal with broad social problems; other documen-

tary dramas have taken a more realistic approach. Contemporary theatre of fact tries to portray actual events with an appearance of authenticity.

**Theatricalism** Style of production and playwriting which emphasizes theatricality for its own sake. Less a coherent movement than a quality found in the work of many artists rebelling against realism, it frankly admits the artifice of the stage and borrows freely from the circus, the music hall, and similar entertainments.

**Tragedy** One of the most fundamental dramatic forms in the western tradition, tragedy involves a serious action of universal significance and has important moral and philosophical implications. Following Aristotle, most critics agree that a tragic hero or heroine should be an essentially admirable person whose downfall elicits our sympathy while leaving us with a feeling that there has in some way been a triumph of the moral and cosmic order and that it transcends the fate of any individual. The disastrous outcome of a tragedy should be seen as the inevitable result of some flaw, either in the character of the hero or in his or her situation, including forces beyond the character's control. Traditionally, tragedy was about the lives and fortunes of kings, queens, and nobles, and there has been a great deal of debate about whether it is possible to have modern tragedy—tragedy about ordinary people. The answers to this question are as varied as the critics who address it, but most seem to agree that although such plays may be tragedies, they are of a somewhat different order.

**Tragicomedy** During the Renaissance the word *tragicomedy* was used for plays that had tragic

themes and noble characters yet ended happily. Modern tragicomedy combines serious and comic elements. Tragicomedy is, in fact, the form increasingly chosen by “serious” playwrights. Sometimes comic behavior and situations have serious or tragic consequences—as in Dürrenmatt’s *The Visit*. At times the ending is indeterminate or ambivalent—as in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. In most cases a quality of despair

or hopelessness is introduced because human beings are seen as incapable of rising above their circumstances or their own nature; the fact that the situation is also ridiculous serves to make their plight even more horrible.

**Well-made play** Type of play popular in the nineteenth century and early twentieth century which combined apparent plausibility of incident and surface realism with a tightly constructed, contrived

plot. Well-made plays typically revolved around the question of social respectability, and the plot often hinged on the manipulation of a piece of incriminating evidence which threatened to destroy the facade of respectability. Although the tightly constructed well-made play is less popular now, many of its techniques continue to be used by modern playwrights.