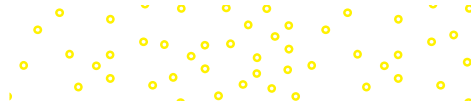




The Theatre Experience







The Theatre Experience

FOURTEENTH EDITION

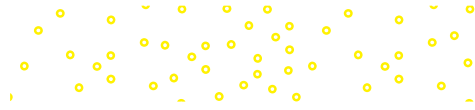
EDWIN WILSON

Professor Emeritus

Graduate School and University Center

The City University of New York





THE THEATRE EXPERIENCE, FOURTEENTH EDITION

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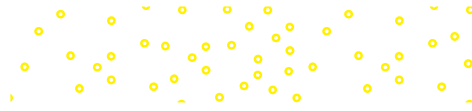
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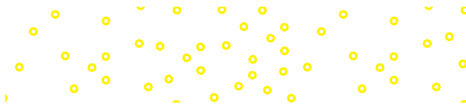




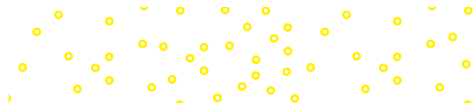
About the Author

Teacher, author, and critic, Edwin Wilson has worked in many aspects of theatre. Educated at Vanderbilt University, the University of Edinburgh, and Yale University, he received an MFA from the Yale School of Drama, as well as the first Doctor of Fine Arts degree awarded by Yale. He has taught at Yale, Hofstra, Vanderbilt, Hunter College, and the CUNY Graduate Center. At Hunter, he served as chair of the Department of Theatre and Film and head of the graduate theatre program. At CUNY, he was executive director of the Center for the Advanced Study of Theatre Arts, later known as the Martin E. Segal Theatre Center. Edwin Wilson served as theatre critic for *The Wall Street Journal* for twenty-three years. In addition to *The Theatre Experience*, he is coauthor with Alvin Goldfarb of *Living Theatre: A History*, published in its first six editions by McGraw-Hill and in its seventh edition by W. W. Norton. He is also coauthor of *Theatre: The Lively Art* and the *Anthology of Living Theater*, both also published by McGraw-Hill. In addition he edited the volume *Shaw on Shakespeare*.

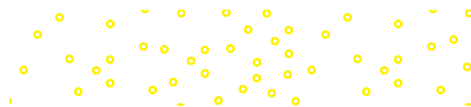
Wilson was president of the New York Drama Critics Circle and served for several terms on the Tony Nominating Committee and the Pulitzer Prize Drama Jury. He is on the board of the John Golden Fund and for thirty years was on the board of the Susan Smith Blackburn Prize. He served for many years on the board of the Theatre Development Fund, of which he was also president. Before turning to teaching and writing, Edwin Wilson was assistant to the producer for the film *Lord of the Flies*, directed by Peter Brook, and the Broadway play *Big Fish, Little Fish*, directed by John Gielgud. He produced several off-Broadway shows and coproduced a Broadway play directed by George Abbott. He also directed in summer and regional theatre, serving one season as resident director of the Barter Theatre in Abingdon, Virginia, and was executive producer of the film *The Nashville Sound*. As a playwright, Wilson has had successful stage readings or productions of a farce, a history play, a musical revue, and a musical version of Dickens's *Great Expectations*, for which he wrote book and lyrics. He also authored a murder mystery, *The Patron Murders*.



v



To the memory of my wife, Catherine.





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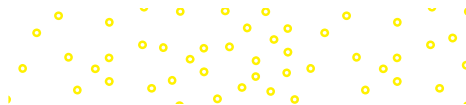
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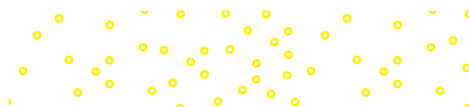
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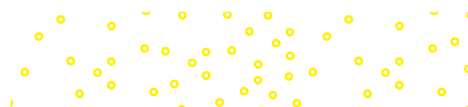
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Preface

ACTIVE AUDIENCE PARTICIPANTS, ACTIVE CLASS PARTICIPANTS

The Theatre Experience prepares students to be well-informed, well-prepared theatre audience members. With an audience-centered narrative that engages today's students, a vivid photo program that brings concepts to life, and features that teach and encourage a variety of skill sets, students master core concepts and learn to think critically about theatre and the world around them. As a result, students are better prepared for class, and better prepared for theatregoing.

Engage with Your Role

- True to its original vision—to focus on the audience's experience of attending a live theatre performance—the 14th edition of *The Theatre Experience* **opens with three chapters that focus on the student as an audience member.** Topics include the difference between being at a live performance and watching a dramatic performance on film, TV, or an electronic device; the enhancement of the experience aided by the proper preparation and background; and the awareness of the role of the audience in live theatre.



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- **Play Links** allow you to read many of the plays mentioned in the text online. Any play referenced in the text that can be found online is highlighted in **blue type-face** when first mentioned in a chapter. Should you want to read one of these plays, you can refer to the list that precedes the Glossary at the end of the book and find its URL. Titles are listed alphabetically.

The plays can be used to highlight key concepts and to complement the discussions found in *The Theatre Experience*, 14th edition. In addition, many of the new “Thinking about Theatre” and “Experiencing Theatre” exercises can also be supplemented and enhanced with examples from these plays.

Master the Basics

Parts Two, Three, and Four cover the important elements of theatre: acting, directing, playwriting, and design. The authors’ efficient structure and succinct style set up students for a clear understanding of the basic concepts, freeing up valuable class time for deeper discussions and more personal engagement with course concepts.

Photo Essays and a dynamic art program allow students to visualize the core theatrical concepts introduced in each chapter. Topics include modern domestic drama (Chapter 8), forms of comedy (Chapter 8), costumes and masks (Chapter 10), uses of stage lighting (Chapter 11), and others.

Think Critically and Engage Actively

Based on feedback from instructors and students, the 14th edition of *The Theatre Experience* offers both time-tested and newly revised text features that help students deepen their understanding and appreciation of the theatrical experience.

- **“Playing Your Part”** is a feature in each chapter that includes two distinct sets of questions and activities that emphasize thinking and engaging critically.
- **“Experiencing Theatre”** activities help students actively engage with the concepts of the text. These exercises ask students to undertake activities within the classroom or to understand how aspects of their everyday lives connect to core concepts discussed in the text.



PLAYING YOUR PART: EXPERIENCING THEATRE

1. If you were to write a play about your life, what would you choose as your opening scene? What would some of your complications be? Would there be a climactic moment?
2. If you were to write a play about a family you know (your own or another), what point of view would you take? Why? Are there strongly opposed forces or balanced forces in this family?
3. If you were told you were going to have to attend a play that lasted over four hours, what would your reaction be? Why? What are your traditional expectations about the space and time of a play?
4. After watching a popular film, describe how the opening scene aids in setting the action. Describe one or two of the complications in the film. Can you discuss the film’s point of view?

- “Thinking about Theatre” questions challenge students to analyze and examine elements of a theatre experience.



PLAYING YOUR PART: THINKING ABOUT THEATRE

1. Think of a play you have read or seen where the main character encounters one impediment or roadblock after another. Describe the various obstacles that must be overcome before the end of the play.
2. Think of a play or musical you have seen or read where two major characters are in conflict with one another. Describe the two characters and explain the source of their conflict. How does it play out?
3. Think of a situation some people saw as very serious, but another person viewed as humorous. Explain what you believe led different people to see it so differently. What was your own feeling—was the incident funny or sad?

- “In Focus” boxes, also appearing in every chapter, help students understand and compare different aspects of theatre. They address historical perspectives on theatre, contemporary applications of technology, issues of theatrical structure, and global and other current issues in theatre, such as color-blind and nontraditional casting. Theatre artists such as Peter Brook and Josef Svoboda are also featured.

WHAT'S NEW IN THE 14TH EDITION OF *THE THEATRE EXPERIENCE*

The 14th edition of *The Theatre Experience* has been updated, taking note of new talent that has appeared on the scene as well as new approaches to writing, directing, acting, and design presented in previous editions. New plays, new productions, new approaches, and new subject matter have all been recognized and explained. At the same time, well-established forerunners in the theatre universe, whether Greek, Roman, Elizabethan, or later, have been looked at anew.

The most significant changes in the 14th edition appear in Part Five, “The Theatre Today.” This has been condensed to two chapters from three, and detailed information on history has been edited and reduced. This movement away from extensive theatre history in Part Five has allowed more space for what is suggested in the title of this section—the theatre today—therefore making this edition of *The Theatre Experience* more relevant to today’s instructors and learners alike.

All elements of today’s theatre are covered more thoroughly and clearly. Subjects such as women’s theatre, LGBTQ theatre, global theatre, and theatre of diversity are dealt with in more detail and depth than in previous editions.

Selected Chapter-by-Chapter Changes

In addition to the major changes outlined earlier, we have included significant new material throughout the text, including the following:

Chapter 1: The Audience: Its Role and Imagination

- The opening section of Chapter 1 has been completely revised. In addition, a section titled “The Mediated Arts: Film and Television” has been introduced.

Chapter 3: Theatre Spaces

- New description of the transformation of the Broadway Imperial Theatre for the musical *Natasha, Pierre & the Great Comet of 1812* as an example of how space is a key element of a production.
- The discussion of stage directions has been moved to this chapter from the chapter on scenery to help students better understand the proscenium theatre.

Chapter 4: Acting for the Stage

- More extensive discussion of contemporary acting techniques and actor training.
- New “In Focus” box on technology and the actor.

Chapter 5: The Director and the Producer

- Extensive discussion of the responsibilities of the stage manager and the casting director.
- New “In Focus” box on color-blind and nontraditional casting.

Chapter 7: Dramatic Structure and Dramatic Characters

- Updated “In Focus” box on writing for theatre, film, and television as well as extensive coverage of dramatic structure in all its forms and variations. Also, detailed analysis of dramatic characters, both human and nonhuman. Included as well are such matters as the orchestration and juxtaposition of characters.

Chapter 8: Theatrical Genres

- New “In Focus” box on additional forms and the debate over categorization.

Chapter 9: Scenery

- Enhanced discussion of video and projection design.
- New “In Focus” box on projection design.
- Enhanced discussion of the use of technology to assist the scene designer.

Chapter 10: Stage Costumes

- New “In Focus” box on technology and costume design.

Chapter 11: Lighting and Sound

- New “In Focus” box on rock concert and theatre lighting.
- New discussion of assistive listening devices for audience members who are hearing impaired.

Chapter 12: Theatre Today: Traditional, Musical, Nontraditional, and Political Theatre

- A complete, thorough revision of both Chapters 12 and 13 (reduced from three chapters in previous editions to two in this edition).

- This chapter includes revised coverage of traditional theatre in today's theatre as well as musical theatre. In addition, it covers new material on nontraditional and political theatre.

Chapter 13: Theatre Today: Diverse and Global

- Covers a wide range of contemporary theatre, including new material on feminist and women playwrights, continuing with LGBTQ, African American, Latino/a, and Native American theatre, and concluding with global theatre covering theatrical activity in six continents.
- Questions on how to evaluate a production of a historic play as well as how to evaluate a production of a new or contemporary play.

CONNECT: ENHANCING THE THEATRE EXPERIENCE

Connect combines the content of *The Theatre Experience* with award-winning adaptive tools that help students prepare for their time in class with you. The tools in Connect help students understand and retain basic concepts: parts of the theatre, the creative artists and technicians who make it happen, and the tradition and historical background from which theatre springs. When students successfully master concepts using McGraw-Hill's Connect, you can spend more class time discussing theatre and theatrical performances, fostering a greater appreciation for the course and inspiring students to become lifelong audience members. Connect is reliable, easy to use, and can be implemented on its own or paired with your school's learning management system. Contact your McGraw-Hill Higher Education representative to learn more or to speak with an instructor who already uses Connect for his or her theatre courses.

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- Time-saving tools
- Customized to individual needs

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- Easy-to-read reports
- Individual and class performance data
- Auto grading



Quality Content & Learning Resources

- eBooks available offline
- Custom course content
- Resource library
- Consolidated resources
- Easy course sharing
- Customized to-do list and calendar
- Lecture capture

Trusted Services & Support

- Seamless LMS integration
- Training
- In-product help and tutorials
- 1:1 or group help

Connect for *The Theatre Experience* now includes two ways to read: an eBook and SmartBook. The eBook provides a simple, elegant reading experience, available for offline reading on a tablet. SmartBook creates a personalized online reading experience by highlighting the most impactful concepts that a student needs to learn. Students periodically test their knowledge as they read, and SmartBook adapts accordingly, highlighting content based on what the student knows and doesn't know. Real-time reports quickly identify the concepts that require more attention from individual students—or the entire class.



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DESIGNED FOR

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- Reference
- Offline reading
- Accessibility

SUPPORTS

- Simple, elegant reading
- Basic annotations
- Smartphone and tablet via iOS and Android apps



SMARTBOOK™

Support for Instructors and Students

The Theatre Experience offers a wealth of supplemental materials to aid both students and instructors, including the Instructor's Manual and both computerized and print versions of the Test Bank.

For students, resources keyed directly to this edition include:

- The Theatre Goer's Guide, which is an excellent introduction to the art of attending and critiquing a play. This guide will assist students in everything from making theatre reservations and knowing when to applaud to evaluating a performance and doing web research.

- Detailed explanations and examples of major theatrical forms and movements.
- Synopses of plays.

Craft your teaching resources to match the way you teach! With McGraw-Hill Create, you can easily rearrange chapters, combine material from other content sources, and quickly upload content you have written, like your course syllabus or teaching notes. Search through thousands of leading McGraw-Hill textbooks, and arrange your book to fit your teaching style. Create even allows you to personalize your book's appearance by selecting the cover and adding your name, school, and course information. Order a Create book and you'll receive a complimentary print review copy in 3–5 business days or a complimentary electronic review copy (eComp) via e-mail in about one hour. Go to www.mcgrawhillcreate.com today and register. Experience how McGraw-Hill Create empowers you to teach your students your way.



ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost I wish to thank Professor Alvin Goldfarb for his invaluable and indispensable contribution to this and the previous edition of *The Theatre Experience*. My coauthor on *Living Theatre* and *Theatre: The Lively Art*, Al's ideas, his research and writing skills, his originality and imagination, and his persistence have been indispensable in completing this, the most audience-oriented and concise version of *The Theatre Experience* of the entire series.

I first developed many of the ideas in this book while teaching a course in Introduction to Theatre at Hunter College of the City University of New York. To my former students and colleagues at Hunter, I express my continuing appreciation. Also, to those professors and other experts who have contributed importantly to prior versions, I express my deep appreciation. They include Alexis Greene, Naomi Stubbs, Susan Tenneriello, Donny Levit, and Frank Episale. In addition, I express my gratitude to Professor Jeff Entwistle for his prodigious contribution to the chapters on design, and I also thank Professor Laura Pulio for her helpful suggestions on acting. A special thanks also to Professor Oliver W. Gerland and his fellow teachers at the University of Colorado. I would also like to thank Professor Scott Walters, University of North Carolina–Asheville, for developing the first teacher and student study guide materials for *The Theatre Experience*, and Professor John Poole, Illinois State University, for his revisions that are now found in the instructor resources.

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Jeannine Russell, Wichita State University

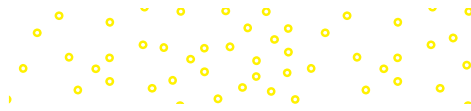
Through twenty-six editions of my three textbooks published by McGraw-Hill, including the previous edition of this text, my colleague Inge King, the incredible photography expert, discovered every photograph that appeared in every edition of every text. Inge is amazing as well as being an irreplaceable colleague and there is no way adequately to acknowledge her taste and abiding loyalty, as well as her creativity. At the same time, a new photography editor, Emily Tietz, has taken over the duties of researching and obtaining permission for illustrations in this edition of *The Theatre Experience*. Emily has proved to be resourceful, energetic, and persistent in these endeavors as well as a person with excellent taste. I am most grateful to her.

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Theatrical Genres

When we attend a theatre performance, within the first fifteen minutes or so, we sense a tone and a mood that are being communicated. We become aware that those presenting the play—the playwright, the actors, the director—are signaling to the audience that they have adopted a definite point of view and attitude toward what is to follow. For example, in the opening scene of Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, the ghost of Hamlet’s father appears to men on guard at the castle. It is an ominous, eerie scene that tells us this will be a serious play, perhaps even a tragedy. On the other hand, at the beginning of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Theseus, the Duke of Athens, says: “Stir up the Athenian youth to merriment, awake the pert and nimble spirit of mirth,” a clear sign that this will be a comedy.

TYPES OF DRAMA

In Greece in the fifth century BCE, where Western theatre began, the actors wore masks covering their faces when they performed. The Greeks took the idea of the mask to create symbols of the two kinds of plays presented at their dramatic festivals—the mask of tragedy and the mask of comedy—symbols that are still used today. Similarly, in Japan in the fourteenth century CE, a theatre called *nō* had become established as the serious form of drama. Alongside *nō*, however, was a comical, farcical type of drama called *kyōgen*.

In other words, wherever theatre has appeared, there has been a tendency to divide it into categories or types, often referred to by the French term *genre* (“JAHN-ruh”). In addition to tragedy and comedy, additional genres have developed: farce, melodrama, tragicomedy, and a number of others.

This tendency to divide dramatic works into categories is not confined to theatre. We find it widespread, not only in the arts, but in many aspects of life. Not only those who create theatre adopt different points of view toward events and toward life in general; all of us do. Depending on our perspective, we can see the same subject as funny or sad, take it seriously or laugh at it, make it an object of pity or of ridicule.

genre A French word meaning “type” or “category.” In theatre, genre denotes the category into which a play falls: for example, tragedy, comedy, or tragicomedy.

◀ DRAMATIC GENRE: COMEDY

Drama is often divided into categories or types, referred to as genres. The Greeks separated tragedy and comedy. To those two genres have been added tragicomedy and others. Shown here are Kristine Nielsen as Mrs. Hardcastle, Jeremy Webb as George Hastings, and Rebecca Brooksher (rear) as Constance Neville in a comedy of wit written by Oliver Goldsmith, She Stoops to Conquer, which the eighteenth-century author called “a laughing comedy.” The production was directed by Nicholas Martin at the McCarter Theatre Center. (©T Charles Erickson)

Just why we look at events from different points of view is difficult to say, but there is no question that we do. The English author Horace Walpole (1717–1797) wrote: “This world is a comedy to those that think, a tragedy to those that feel.”¹

In theatre, this question of viewpoint—looking at people or events from a particular perspective—becomes crucial. Viewpoint is not taken for granted, as it is in everyday life; rather, it is a conscious act on the part of whoever creates the text. To take an example, in most cases death is considered a somber matter; but in *Arsenic and Old Lace* (1941), the dramatist Joseph Kesselring (1902–1967) makes it clear that in his play we are to regard death as comic. Kesselring presents two elderly women who kill no fewer than twelve old men by serving them arsenic in glasses of wine. But because the dramatist removes from the play any feeling that the deaths are to be taken seriously, he engenders in the audience the notion that it is all in fun.

Before examining genre, we should note that often a play does not fit neatly into a single category. Those who create a text do not write categories or types of plays; they write individual, unique works—and preoccupation with genre may distract us from the individuality of a play or a production. Still, if we keep these reservations in mind, we will find that it is helpful to understand the traditional genres into which Western dramatic literature has fallen.

TRAGEDY

Serious drama takes a thoughtful, sober attitude toward its subject matter. It puts the spectators in a frame of mind to think about what they are seeing and to become involved with the characters onstage: to love what these characters love, fear what they fear, and suffer what they suffer. The best-known form of serious drama, to which we turn first, is *tragedy*. Other forms of serious theatre are *heroic drama*, *domestic drama*, and *melodrama*.

tragedy A serious drama in which there is a downfall of the primary character.

Tragedy asks very basic questions about human existence. Why are people sometimes cruel to one another? Why is the world unjust? Why are men and women called on to endure suffering? What are the limits of human suffering and endurance? In the midst of cruelty and despair, what are the possibilities of human achievement? To what heights of courage, strength, generosity, and integrity can human beings rise? Tragedy assumes that the universe is indifferent to human concerns and often cruel and malevolent. Sometimes the innocent appear to suffer, whereas the evil prosper. In the face of this, some humans are capable of despicable deeds, but others can confront and overcome adversity, attaining a nobility that places them “a little lower than the angels.” We can divide tragedy into two basic kinds: traditional and modern. *Traditional tragedy* includes works from several significant periods of the past. *Modern tragedy* generally includes plays from the late nineteenth century to the present day.

Traditional Tragedy

Three noteworthy periods of history in which traditional tragic dramas were written are Greece in the fifth century BCE, England in the late sixteenth century and early seventeenth century, and France in the seventeenth century. Tragedies from these three ages have in common the following characteristics, which are central to traditional tragedy.

Tragic Heroes and Heroines Generally, the hero or heroine of a tragedy is an extraordinary person—a king, a queen, a general, a nobleman or noblewoman—in other words, a person of stature. In Greek drama, Antigone, Electra, Oedipus, Agamemnon, Creon, and Orestes are members of royal families. In the plays of Shakespeare, Hamlet, Claudius, Gertrude, Lear, and Cordelia are also royal; Julius Caesar, Macbeth, and Othello are generals; and others—Ophelia, Romeo, and Juliet—are members of the nobility.

Tragic Circumstances The central figures of the play are caught in a series of tragic circumstances: Oedipus, without realizing it, murders his father and marries his mother; Antigone must choose between death and dishonoring her dead brother; Phaedra falls hopelessly and fatally in love with her stepson, Hippolytus; Othello is completely duped by Iago; and Lear is cast out by the daughters to whom he has given his kingdom. In traditional tragedy, the universe seems determined to trap the hero or heroine in a fateful web and for that character to suffer a tragic fall.

Tragic Irretrievability The situation becomes irretrievable: There is no turning back. The tragic figures are in a situation from which there is no honorable avenue of escape; they must go forward to meet their fate.

Acceptance of Responsibility The hero or heroine accepts responsibility for his or her actions and also shows willingness to suffer and an immense capacity for suffering. Oedipus puts out his own eyes; Antigone faces death with equanimity; Othello kills himself. King Lear suffers immensely, living through personal humiliation, a raging storm on a heath, temporary insanity, and the death of his daughter, and finally confronts his own death. A statement by Edgar in *King Lear* applies to all tragic figures: “Men must endure their going hence even as their coming hither.”²

Tragic Verse The language of traditional tragedy is verse. Because it deals with lofty and profound ideas—with men and women at the outer limits of their lives—tragedy soars to the heights and descends to the depths of human experience; and many feel that such thoughts and emotions can best be expressed in poetry. Look at Cleopatra’s lament on the death of Mark Antony. Her sense of admiration for Antony, and her desolation, could never be conveyed so tellingly in less poetic terms:

Oh, wither’d is the garland of war,
The soldier’s pole is fall’n! Young boys and girls
Are level now with men. The odds is gone,
And there is nothing left remarkable
Beneath the visiting moon.³



**MAJOR CHARACTERS
CAUGHT IN A TRAGIC WEB**

In traditional tragedy, the fall of a hero or heroine has a special significance because of the combination of his or her personality and position. An example of a tragic heroine is the Duchess of Malfi in the play of the same name by John Webster. Despite her title and station in life, the duchess is taunted and destroyed by her evil brothers when she marries someone of a lower social rank. Seen here are Ursina Lardi in the title role and Robert Beyer as Bosola, one of the brothers, in a production at the Schaubühne theatre in Berlin, Germany. (©ullstein bild/Getty Images)

These words have even more effect when heard in the theatre spoken by an eloquent actress.

The Effect of Tragedy When the elements of traditional tragedy are combined, they appear to produce two contradictory reactions simultaneously. One is pessimism: The heroes or heroines are “damned if they do and damned if they don’t,” and the world is a cruel, uncompromising place, a world of despair. And yet, in even the bleakest tragedy—whether *Hamlet*, *Medea*, *Macbeth*, or *King Lear*—there is affirmation. One source of this positive feeling is found in the drama itself. Sophocles, Euripides, Shakespeare, and the French dramatist Jean Racine, although telling us that the world is in chaos and utterly lost, at the same time affirmed just the opposite by creating brilliant, carefully shaped works of art.

There is another positive element, which has to do with the tragic heroes and heroines themselves. They meet their fate with such dignity and such determination that they defy the gods. They say: “Come and get me; throw your worst at me. Whatever happens, I will not surrender my individuality or my dignity.” In Aeschylus’s play *Prometheus Bound* the title character—who is one of the earliest tragic heroes—says: “On me the tempest falls. It does not make me tremble.” In defeat, the men and women of tragedy triumph.

The Greek philosopher Aristotle in *Poetics* (c. 335 BCE) attempted to describe the effect traditional tragedy had on the audience. He suggested that tragedy arouses pity and fear in the audience and that this genre purges the audience of those emotions. Spectators feel pity for the tragic hero caught in irretrievable circumstances and fear that if characters of noble stature can suffer falls so could they. The purgation of these emotions, however, again reflects a positive outcome of tragedy.

As for the deeper meanings of individual tragedies, there is a vast literature on the subject, and each play has to be looked at and experienced in detail to obtain the full measure of its meaning. Certain tragedies seem to hold so much meaning, to contain so much—in substance and in echoes and reverberations—that one can spend a lifetime studying them.

Modern Tragedy

Tragedies of the modern period—that is, beginning in the late nineteenth century—do not have queens or kings as central figures, and they are written in prose rather than poetry. For these as well as more philosophical reasons, purists argue that modern tragedies are not true tragedies.

In answer to this, it should be pointed out that today we have few kings or queens—either in mythology or, except in certain places like Great Britain, in real life. At the same time, we may ask: Do we not have characters today who can stand as symbolic figures for important segments of society? Many would answer that we still do. In attempting to create modern tragedy, the question is not whether we view the human condition in the same way as the French did in the seventeenth century or the Greeks did in the fifth century BCE—those two societies did not view life in the same way either—but whether our age allows for a tragic view on its own terms.



A MODERN TRAGIC FAMILY

In Federico García Lorca's play *The House of Bernarda Alba*, a widow who has grown to hate and distrust men keeps her daughters confined as virtual prisoners in their own home. In this production, directed by Elizabeth Huddle at the Madison Repertory Theatre, we see four of the daughters, with the mother in the center. Left to right, the performers are Jamie England, Monica Lyons, Elisabeth Adwin, Margaret Ingraham, and Diane Robinson. (©Zane Williams)

The answer seems to be yes. Compared with either the eighteenth or the nineteenth century—ages of enlightenment, progress, and unbounded optimism—our age has its own tragic vision. Modern tragic dramatists probe the same depths and ask the same questions as did their predecessors: Why do men and women suffer? Why do violence and injustice exist? And perhaps most fundamental of all: What is the meaning of our lives?

On this basis, many commentators would argue that writers like Ibsen, Strindberg, García Lorca, O'Neill, Williams, and Miller can lay claim to writing legitimate modern tragedy. The ultimate test of a play is not whether it meets someone's definition of tragedy but what effect it produces in the theatre and how successful it is in standing up to continued scrutiny. Eugene O'Neill's *Long Day's Journey into Night* takes as bleak a look at the human condition, with, at the same time, as compassionate a view of human striving and dignity as it seems possible to take in our day.

HEROIC DRAMA

The term *heroic drama* is not used as commonly as *tragedy* or *comedy*, but there is a wide range of plays for which *heroic drama* seems an appropriate description. We use the term specifically to indicate serious drama of any period that incorporates heroic or noble figures and other features of traditional tragedy—dialogue in verse, extreme situations, and the like—but differs from tragedy in having a happy ending, or in assuming a basically optimistic worldview even when the ending is sad.

heroic drama Serious but basically optimistic drama written in verse or elevated prose, with noble or heroic characters in extreme situations or unusual adventures.

photo essay

Modern Domestic Drama



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Serious drama in America came of age in the mid-twentieth century, with plays by Eugene O'Neill, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and Lillian Hellman, among others. Though all four experimented with nonrealistic dramatic devices, much of their strongest work was realistic domestic drama. Included here are examples in photographs from recent productions.

Long Day's Journey into Night by Eugene O'Neill with Paul Nicholls as the younger son, Edmund, Jessica Lange as Mary Tyrone, and Paul Rudd as James Tyrone Jr.

Gillian Anderson as Blanche DuBois and Vanessa Kirby as her sister Stella in Tennessee Williams's *A Streetcar Named Desire* in a production at the Young Vic Theatre in London, directed by Benedict Andrews.



(©Robbie Jack/Corbis Entertainment/Getty Images)



(©T Charles Erickson)

Lee Aaron Rosen as Chris Keller, Michael Tisdale as George Deever, and Diane Davis as Ann Deever in *All My Sons*, by Arthur Miller, directed by David Esbjornson at the Huntington Theatre Company.



Seth Numrich (left) and Danny Burstein (right) in a 2012–2013 Broadway revival of *Golden Boy* by Clifford Odets, directed by Bartlett Sher.

(©Sara Krulwich/The New York Times/Redux)

Romanticism

Nineteenth-century dramatic movement that imitated the episodic structure of Shakespeare, and thematically focused on the gulf between human beings' spiritual aspirations and physical limitations.

bourgeois or domestic

drama Drama dealing with problems—particularly family problems—of middle- and lower-class characters. There are serious and comic domestic dramas.

Several Greek plays ordinarily classified as tragedies are actually closer to heroic drama. In Sophocles's *Electra*, for instance, Electra suffers grievously, but at the end of the play she and her brother Orestes triumph. Another example is *The Cid*, written by Pierre Corneille (1606–1684) in France. It has a hero who leads his men to victory in battle but who is not killed; in the end, he wins a duel against his rival. In the late seventeenth century in England, a form of drama that was called *heroic drama*, or sometimes *heroic tragedy*, was precisely the type about which we are speaking: a serious play with a happy ending for the hero or heroine.

Many Asian plays—from India, China, and Japan—though deviating from the usual Western classifications by including, for example, a great deal of traditional dance and music, bear a close resemblance to heroic drama. Frequently, for example, a hero goes through a series of dangerous adventures, emerging victorious at the end. The vast majority of Asian dramas end happily.

A second type of heroic drama involves the death of the hero or heroine, but the overall effect is not considered tragic. Several of the plays of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) follow this pattern. (Many of Goethe's plays, along with those of his contemporaries in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, form a subdivision of heroic drama referred to as *Romantic drama*. **Romanticism**, a literary movement that took hold in Germany at the time and spread to France and throughout much of Europe, celebrated the spirit of hope, personal freedom, and natural instincts.)

A number of plays in the modern period fall into the category of heroic drama. *Saint Joan*, by George Bernard Shaw, is a good example: Although Joan is burned at the stake, her death is actually a form of triumph. As if that were not enough, Shaw provides an epilogue in which Joan appears alive again.

In the history of theatre, the plays we are discussing as *heroic drama* occupy a large and important niche, cutting across Asian and Western civilizations and across periods from the Greek golden age to the present.

BOURGEOIS OR DOMESTIC DRAMA

With the changes in society that resulted from the rise of the middle class and the shift from kings and queens to more democratic governments, we move from classic tragedy to modern tragedy. In the same way, during the past 150 years heroic drama has largely been replaced by *bourgeois or domestic drama*. *Bourgeois* refers to people of the middle or lower-middle class rather than the aristocracy, and *domestic* means that the plays often deal with problems of the family or the home rather than great affairs of state. In the Greek, Roman, and Renaissance periods, ordinary people served as main characters only in comedies; they rarely appeared as heroes or heroines of serious plays. Beginning in the eighteenth century, however, as society changed, there was a call for serious drama about men and women with whom members of the audience could identify and who were like themselves.

In England in 1731, George Lillo (1693–1739) wrote *The London Merchant*, a story of a merchant's apprentice who is led astray by a prostitute and betrays his good-hearted employer. This play, like others that came after it, dealt with recognizable people from the daily life of Britain, and audiences welcomed it.



DOMESTIC DRAMA OF EVERYDAY LIFE

Domestic drama concerns itself with family problems: parents and children, husbands and wives, growing up, growing old. The characters in it are recognizable people, and it has long been a mainstay of modern drama. Shown here in a recent Broadway revival of Lorraine Hansberry's *A Raisin in the Sun* are Denzel Washington, Sophie Okonedo, Latanya Richardson Jackson, Bryce Clyde Jenkins, and Anika Noni Rose. (©Sara Krulwich/The New York Times/Redux)

From these beginnings, bourgeois or domestic drama developed through the balance of the eighteenth century and the whole of the nineteenth, until it achieved a place of prominence in the new realistic works of Ibsen, Strindberg, and Chekhov. In the mid-twentieth century, three major American playwrights of domestic drama emerged: Eugene O'Neill, Arthur Miller, and Tennessee Williams. O'Neill, in such plays as *The Iceman Cometh* and *Long Day's Journey into Night*, probed the depth of his characters' anguish as realistically as any dramatist of modern times. Miller, in *The Crucible* and *Death of a Salesman*, combined the tragic lives of his characters with political and moral investigations. Williams, the most lyrical of the three, in *The Glass Menagerie* and *A Streetcar Named Desire*, explored the limits of human sorrow and endurance.

These three were followed in the decades to come by other important American playwrights such as Lorraine Hansberry, Edward Albee, August Wilson, and Paula Vogel. Problems with society, struggles within a family, dashed hopes, and renewed determination are typical characteristics of domestic drama. When sufficiently penetrating or profound, domestic drama achieves the level of modern tragedy.

In one form or another, bourgeois or domestic drama has become the predominant form of serious drama throughout Europe and the United States during the past 100 years.

MELODRAMA

melodrama Dramatic form made popular in the nineteenth century that emphasized action and spectacular effects and also used music to underscore the action; it had stock characters, usually with clearly defined villains and heroes.

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, one of the most popular forms of theatre was *melodrama*. The word, which comes from Greek, means “music drama” or “song drama.” Its modern form was introduced by the French in the late eighteenth century and applied to plays that had background music of the kind we hear in movies: ominous chords underscoring a scene of suspense and lyrical music underscoring a love scene.

Among the effects for which melodrama generally strives are fright and horror. It has been said that melodrama speaks to the paranoia in all of us: the fear that someone is pursuing us or that disaster is about to overtake us. How often do we have a sense that others are ganging up on us or a premonition that we have a deadly disease?

Melodrama brings these fears to life; we see people stalked or terrorized, or innocent victims tortured. Murder mysteries and detective stories are almost invariably melodramas because they stress suspense, danger, and close brushes with disaster. This type of melodrama usually ends in one of two ways: Either the victims are maimed or murdered (in which case our worst paranoid fears are confirmed) or, after a series of dangerous episodes, they are rescued (in which case the play is like a bad dream from which we awaken to realize that we are safe in bed and everything is all right).

Probably the easiest way to understand melodrama is to look at film and television examples. Among the kinds of popular melodramas we are familiar with are *westerns*, *science fiction films*, *horror films*, *superhero films*, and *detective* or *spy films*. All of these emphasize heroes and villains, other stock characters such as sidekicks and love interests, as well as spectacular events and special effects. But the key to the melodramatic form, onstage and in film and television, is that good is almost always victorious over evil. These characteristics are also present in melodramatic plays.

Still another form of melodrama argues a political or moral issue. Melodrama invariably shows us good characters against bad characters. Therefore, a playwright who wants to make a strong political case will often write a melodrama in which the good characters represent his or her point of view.

Traditional melodrama with its moral outlook, happy ending, stock characters, use of background music, and emphasis on spectacle developed in the nineteenth century. Still, a list of significant melodramas could range over most of theatre history and could include writers from Euripides through Shakespeare and his contemporaries to modern dramatists throughout Europe and the Americas because many types of serious drama, tragic and nontragic, frequently have strong melodramatic elements as well.

Aside from those taking a basically serious point of view, there are two other fundamental approaches to dramatic material. One is *comedy*, with its many forms and variations; the other is a mixture of the serious and the comic, called *tragicomedy*.

COMEDY

People who create *comedy* are not necessarily more frivolous or less concerned with important matters than people who create serious works; they may be extremely serious in their own way. Writers of comedy like Aristophanes, Molière, and George Bernard Shaw cared passionately about human affairs and the problems of men and women. But those with a comic view look at the world differently: with a smile or a deep laugh or an arched eyebrow. Writers like these perceive the follies and excesses of human behavior and develop a keen sense of the ridiculous, with the result that they show us things that make us laugh.

It should also be noted that there are many kinds of laughter. They range all the way from mild amusement at a witty saying or a humorous situation to a belly laugh at some wild physical comedy to cruel, derisive laughter. Theatre, which reflects life and society, encompasses comedies that display a similar range, from light comedies to outrageous farces.

Characteristics of Comedy

If we cannot fully explain comedy, we can at least understand some of the principles that make it possible.

Suspension of Natural Laws One characteristic of most comedy is a temporary suspension of the natural laws of probability, cause and effect, and logic. Actions do not have the consequences they do in real life. In comedy, when a haughty man walking down the street steps on a child's skateboard and goes sprawling on the sidewalk, we do not fear for his safety or wonder if he has any bruises. The focus in comedy is on the man being tripped up and getting his comeuppance.

In burlesque, a comic character can be hit on the backside with a fierce thwack, and we laugh, because we know that it does not hurt anything but his or her pride. At one point in stage history a special stick consisting of two thin slats of wood held closely together was developed to make hitting someone more frightening. The stick was known as a *slapstick*, a name that came to describe all kinds of raucous, physical, knockabout comedy.

Prime examples of the suspension of natural laws in comedy are found in film and television cartoons. In animated cartoons, characters are hurled through the air like missiles, are shot full of holes, and are flattened on the sidewalk when they fall from buildings. But they always get up, with little more than a shake of the head. In the audience, there are no thoughts of real injury, of cuts or bruises, because the cause-and-effect chain of everyday life is not operating.

Under these conditions, a significant accident, resulting in physical harm, itself can be viewed as comic. In the 2015 award-winning London backstage comedy *The Play That Goes Wrong*, created by members of the Mischief Theatre Company, a cast member of a disaster-prone fictional production is knocked unconscious but miraculously revives only to find that her replacement, a technician, will not give up the role. We do not really think of the character as being rendered unconscious, and we have none of the feelings one usually has for an accident victim. The idea of suffering and harm has been suspended, and we are free to laugh at the irony and incongruity of the situation.

comedy In general, a play that is light in tone, is concerned with issues that point out the excesses and folly of human behavior, has a happy ending, and is designed to amuse.

slapstick Type of comedy, or comic business, that relies on ridiculous physical activity—often violent in nature—for its humor.



SUSPENSION OF NATURAL LAWS IN COMEDY

Frequently in various kinds of comedy, particularly in farce, our natural reaction to events is reordered to achieve a comic effect, and the audience accepts this. An excellent example is the play *Arsenic and Old Lace* by Joseph Kesselring, in which two elderly women, who appear to be helpless and harmless, actually murder a number of old men by giving them elderberry wine laced with poison. Because we have accepted the comic premise of the play, however, we do not condemn their acts, as we might in a melodrama, but rather become amused. Shown here, from left to right, are: Michael von Rospatt, Gerda Gmelin, and Eva Maria Bauer in a 2001 production directed by Christoph Roethel at the Komödie Winterhuder Fährhaus in Hamburg, Germany (©Moenkebild/ullstein bild/Getty Images)

comic premise Idea or concept in a comedy that turns the accepted notion of things upside down.

The Comic Premise The suspension of natural laws in comedy makes possible the development of a *comic premise*. The comic premise is an idea or concept that turns the accepted notion of things upside down and makes this upended notion the basis of a play. The premise can provide thematic and structural unity and can serve as a springboard for comic dialogue, comic characters, and comic situations.

Aristophanes, the Greek satiric dramatist, was a master at developing a comic premise. In *The Clouds*, Aristophanes pictures Socrates as a man who can think only when perched in a basket suspended in midair. In *The Birds*, two ordinary men persuade a chorus of birds to build a city between heaven and earth. The birds comply, calling the place Cloudcuckoo Land, and the two men sprout wings to join them. In another play, *Lysistrata*, Aristophanes has the women of Greece agree to go on a sex strike to end a war: They will not make love to their husbands until the husbands stop fighting and sign a peace treaty with their opponents.

Techniques of Comedy

The suspension of natural laws and the establishment of a comic premise in comedy involve exaggeration and incongruity. **Incongruity** usually refers to a character's inappropriate behavior or actions for a specific circumstance resulting in our laughter. The contradictions that result from these show up in three areas—verbal humor, characterization, and comic situations.

Verbal Humor Verbal humor can be anything from a pun to the most sophisticated discourse. A *pun*—usually considered the simplest form of wit—is a humorous use of words with the same sound but different meanings. A man who says he is going to start a bakery if he can “raise the dough” is making a pun.

Close to the pun is the *malaprop*—a word that sounds like the right word but actually means something quite different. The term comes from Mrs. Malaprop, a character in *The Rivals* by the English playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan (1751–1816). Mrs. Malaprop wants to impress everyone with her education and erudition but ends up doing just the opposite because she constantly misuses long words. For example, she insists that her daughter is not “illegible” for marriage, meaning that her daughter is not “ineligible,” and when asked to explain a situation she says that someone else will provide the “perpendiculars” when she means the “particulars.”

A sophisticated form of verbal humor is the *epigram*. Oscar Wilde (1854–1900), a man devoted to verbal humor, often turned accepted values upside down in his epigrams. “I can resist anything except temptation,” says one of his characters; and “A man cannot be too careful in the choice of his enemies,” says another.⁴

Comedy of Character In comedy of character the discrepancy or incongruity lies in the way characters see themselves or pretend to be, as opposed to the way they actually are. A good example is a person who pretends to be a doctor—using obscure medicines, hypodermic needles, and Latin jargon—but who is actually a fake. Such a person is the chief character in Molière's *The Doctor in Spite of Himself*. Another example of incongruity of character is Molière's *The Would-Be Gentleman*, in which the title character, Monsieur Jourdain, a man of wealth but without taste or refinement, is determined to learn courtly behavior. He hires a fencing master, a dancing master, and a teacher of literature to teach him these skills, but in every case Jourdain is ridiculed.



VERBAL HUMOR

One key element of comedy is verbal wit. No one was more the master of wit than playwright Oscar Wilde, whose epigrams and clever word play are still quoted today. Shown here is a scene from his play *The Importance of Being Earnest* in a production at the Aldwych Theatre in London featuring Maggie Smith and Richard E. Grant. (©Robbie Jack/Corbis Entertainment/Getty Images)

incongruity In comedy, incongruity usually refers to a character's inappropriate behavior or actions for a specific circumstance resulting in our laughter.

Comedy of character is also a basic ingredient of Italian commedia dell'arte and all forms of comedy where stock characters, stereotypes, and characters with dominant traits are emphasized.

We can also find examples of comedies of characters today in film and on television. The popular TV show *The Big Bang Theory* focuses on quirky scientists and much of the comedy is created by their unusual exaggerated behaviors and relationships.

Plot Complications Still another way the contradictory or the ludicrous manifests itself in comedy is in plot complications, including coincidences and mistaken identity. A time-honored comic plot is Shakespeare's *The Comedy of Errors*, based on *The Menaechmi*, a play of the late third century BCE by the Roman writer Titus Maccius Plautus (c. 254–184 BCE). *The Comedy of Errors* in turn was the basis of a successful American musical comedy, *The Boys from Syracuse*, with songs by Richard Rodgers (1902–1979) and Lorenz Hart (1895–1943). In *The Comedy of Errors*, identical twins and their identical twin servants were separated when young. As the play opens, however, both masters and both servants—unknown to one another—are in one place. The confusion among the twin brothers and the twin servants leads to an endless series of comic encounters.



PLOT COMPLICATIONS: A HALLMARK OF FARCE

Frequently used devices of comedy include twists and turns in the plot, mistaken identity, unexpected developments, and ridiculous situations. Michael Frayn's comedy *Noises Off* contains an abundance of these elements. The production shown here was directed by Lindsay Posner in London. (©Geraint Lewis)



PLAYING YOUR PART: EXPERIENCING THEATRE

1. What recent event in everyday life has been described as a “tragedy”? Would that event meet the traditional definition of tragedy? Does it have the elements of traditional tragedy?
2. Is there a contemporary figure whose life you believe could be dramatized as a “modern tragedy”? Describe.
3. Have you seen a film or television show that could be categorized as “domestic drama”? What are its characteristics that lead you to that categorization?
4. Have you seen a recent film that you would categorize as a “melodrama”? What are its characteristics that lead you to that categorization?
5. Have you seen films or television shows that could be categorized as farce, burlesque, satire, domestic comedy, comedy of manners, comedy of characters?
6. Can you describe any current events that might be dramatized as tragicomedy? Why or why not?

A classic scene of plot complication occurs in Sheridan’s *The School for Scandal*, written in 1777. Joseph Surface, the main character in the play, is thought to be an upstanding man but is really a charlatan, whereas Charles, his brother, is mistakenly considered a reprobate. In a famous scene called the “screen scene,” both Lady Teazle, a married woman visiting Surface, and her husband, Sir Peter Teazle, are hidden, one behind a screen, one in a closet. When the honest Charles suddenly appears he discovers both of them, exposing their deceptions at a single moment.

Forms of Comedy

Comedy takes various forms, depending on the dramatist’s intent and on the comic techniques emphasized.

Farce Most of the plays previously discussed on plot complications are *farces*. Farce thrives on exaggeration—not only plot complications but also broad physical humor and stereotyped characters. It has no intellectual pretensions but aims rather at entertainment and provoking laughter. In addition to excessive plot complications, its humor results from ridiculous situations as well as pratfalls and horseplay, not on the verbal wit found in more intellectual forms of comedy. Mock violence, rapid movement, and accelerating pace are hallmarks of farce. Marriage and sex are the objects of fun in *bedroom farce*, but farce can also poke fun at medicine, law, and business.

farce A subclass of comedy with emphasis on exaggerated plot complications and with few or no intellectual pretensions.

Burlesque *Burlesque* also relies on knockabout physical humor, as well as gross exaggerations and, occasionally, vulgarity. Historically, burlesque was a ludicrous imitation of other forms of drama or of an individual play. A recent example is the takeoff of the hit musical *Hamilton*, titled *Spamilton*. In the United States, the term *burlesque* came to describe a type of variety show featuring low-comedy skits and attractive women.

burlesque A ludicrous, comic imitation of a dramatic form, play, piece of literature, or other popular entertainment.

Satire A form related to traditional burlesque, but with more intellectual and moral or political content, is *satire*. Satire uses wit, irony, and exaggeration to attack or expose evil and foolishness. Satire can attack specific figures; for example, the continuously updated and revised revue *Forbidden Broadway* makes fun of the more

satire Comic form, using irony and exaggeration, to attack and expose folly and vice.

photo essay

Forms of Comedy



(©Donald Cooper/Photostage)

Comedy takes a number of forms, depending on whether the emphasis is on verbal wit, plot complications, or the characters' eccentricities. It can range all the way from intellectual comedy, to high comedy (dealing with the upper classes), to domestic comedy (similar to sitcoms on TV), to slapstick farce. Shown here is a variety of types of comedy.

Shown here is Owain Arthur as Francis Henshall in *One Man, Two Guvnors*, a farce by Richard Bean after Goldoni's *The Servant of Two Masters*, in a production directed by Nicholas Hytner at the National Theatre, London.



(©Sara Krulwich/The New York Times/Redux)

Shown here are David Shiner (left) and Bill Irwin (right) performing in *Old Hats*, a slapstick comedy they created at the Pershing Square Signature Center, directed by Tina Landau.



COMEDY OF MANNERS

Comedy of manners usually deals with the upper class in a given society. It stresses verbal humor, repartee, and irony. The precursors of modern comedy of manners were the Restoration comedies popular in London in the late seventeenth century. In the nineteenth century, Oscar Wilde was a master of comedy of manners, and in the twentieth century it was Noël Coward. One of Coward's best-known plays is *Private Lives*, about two upper-class couples whose marriages become comically entangled. Shown here from left to right are: Richard Teverson as Victor, Laura Rogers as Amanda, Tom Chambers as Elyot, and Charlotte Ritchie as Sybil in a 2016 touring production in England. (©Rex Features/AP Images)

flamboyant or excessive stars as well as plots and storylines of Broadway musicals. It can also be more inclusive, as in the case of Molière's *Tartuffe*, which ridicules religious hypocrisy generally.

Domestic Comedy The comic equivalent of domestic or bourgeois drama is *domestic comedy*. Usually dealing with family situations, it is found most frequently today in television situation comedies—often called *sitcoms*—which feature members of a family or residents of a neighborhood caught in a series of complicated but amusing situations. Television shows such as *The Simpsons*, *Modern Family*, and *Black-ish* are examples. This type of comedy was once a staple of theatre and can still be found onstage in the frequently revived plays by Neil Simon (1927–2018).

Comedy of Manners *Comedy of manners* is concerned with pointing up the foibles and peculiarities of the upper classes. Against a cultivated, sophisticated background, it uses verbal wit to depict the cleverness and expose the social pretensions

comedy of manners

Form of comic drama that became popular in the English Restoration, that is set within sophisticated society, while poking fun at its characters' social pretensions, usually through verbal wit.

comedy of ideas A comedy in which the humor is based on intellectual and verbal aspects of comedy rather than physical comedy or comedy of character. A drama whose emphasis is on the clash of ideas, as exemplified in the plays of George Bernard Shaw.

tragicomedy During the Renaissance, a play having tragic themes and noble characters but a happy ending; today, a play in which serious and comic elements are integrated. Many plays of this type present a comic or ironic treatment of a serious theme.

of its characters. Rather than horseplay, it stresses witty phrases. In comedy of manners, pointed barbs are always at a premium. In England a line of comedies of manners runs from William Wycherley, William Congreve, and Oliver Goldsmith (1730–1774) in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to Oscar Wilde in the nineteenth century and Noël Coward (1899–1973) in the twentieth.

Comedy of Ideas Many of George Bernard Shaw's plays could be put under a special heading, *comedy of ideas*, because Shaw used comic techniques to debate intellectual propositions and to further his own moral and social point of view. Though witty and amusing, Shaw's plays frequently include provocative discussions of controversial social issues. *Mrs. Warren's Profession*, for example, about a woman who runs a house of prostitution, deals with hypocrisy in society, and *Arms and the Man* is not only an amusing story of a pompous soldier but also a treatise on war and heroism.

In all its forms, comedy remains a way of looking at the world in which basic values are asserted but natural laws are suspended in order to underline human follies and foolishness—sometimes with a rueful look, sometimes with a wry smile, and sometimes with an uproarious laugh.

TRAGICOMEDY

In twentieth-century theatre a new genre came to the forefront—*tragicomedy*. In this section, we examine this form that has proved so important in the modern period.

What Is Tragicomedy?

In the past, comedy has usually been set in opposition to tragedy or serious drama: Serious drama is sad, comedy is funny; serious drama makes people cry, comedy makes them laugh; serious drama arouses anger, comedy brings a smile. True, the comic view of life differs from the serious view, but the two are not always as clearly separated as this polarity suggests. Many comic dramatists are serious people; “I laugh to keep from crying” applies to many comic writers as well as to certain clowns and comedians. A great deal of serious drama contains comic elements. Shakespeare, for instance, included comic characters in several of his serious plays. The drunken porter in *Macbeth*, the gravedigger in *Hamlet*, and Falstaff in *Henry IV, Part 1* are examples.

In medieval plays, comic scenes are interpolated in the basically religious subject matter. One of the best-known of all medieval plays, *The Second Shepherds' Play*, concerns the visit of the shepherds to the manger of the newborn Christ child. While they stop in a field to spend the night, Mak, a comic character, steals a sheep and takes it to his house, where he and his wife pretend that it is their baby. When the shepherds discover what Mak has done, they toss him in a blanket, and after this horseplay the serious part of the story resumes.

The alternation of serious and comic elements is a practice of long standing, particularly in episodic plays; but *tragicomedy* does not refer to plays that shift from serious to comic and back again. It is a view in which one eye looks through a comic lens and the other through a serious lens; and the two points of view are so intermingled as to be one, like food that tastes sweet and sour at the same time. In addition to his basically serious plays and his basically comic plays, Shakespeare wrote others that seem to be a combination of tragedy and comedy, such as *Measure for Measure*



COMBINING TRAGEDY AND COMEDY

Tragicomedy has become more and more prominent in the modern period, and has taken its place alongside traditional tragedy, comedy, and other genres as a major form of our time. In several of Shakespeare's so-called problem plays, comic and serious elements are intermixed in the manner of contemporary tragicomedy. A good example is *All's Well That Ends Well*, which features a strange, almost bizarre, mixture of fairy-tale elements with cynical realism. Shown here is James Gannon as Parolles in a London production at Shakespeare's Globe Theatre, directed by John Dove. (©Geraint Lewis)

and *All's Well That Ends Well*. Because they do not fit neatly into one category or the other, these plays have proved troublesome to critics—so troublesome that they have been officially dubbed *problem plays*.

The “problem,” however, arises largely because of difficulty in accepting the tragicomic point of view, for these plays have many of the attributes of the fusion of the tragic and the comic. A sense of comedy pervades these plays, the idea that all will end well and that much of what happens is ludicrous or ridiculous; at the same time, the serious effects of a character's actions are not dismissed. Unlike true comedy, in which a fall on the sidewalk or a temporary danger has no serious consequences, these plays contain actions that appear quite serious. And so we have tragicomedy.

Modern Tragicomedy

In the modern period—during the past 100 years or so—tragicomedy has become the primary approach of many of the best playwrights. As suggested in the chapter “[The Audience: Its Role and Imagination](#),” these writers are not creating in a vacuum; they



COMEDIES OF MENACE

Comedies range widely, from the pure entertainment of farce and light comedy to more substantive and probing comedies with a strong serious component. The playwright Harold Pinter calls many of his plays comedies of menace, meaning that they can provoke laughter but also have a deeper, more disturbing, sometimes frightening element. One of Pinter's best-known plays exemplifying this is *The Birthday Party*. Shown here are Timothy West as Goldberg and Nigel Terry as McCann in a production of the play at the Piccadilly Theatre in London. (©PA Images/Alamy Stock Photo)

are part of the world in which they live, and ours is an age that has adopted a tragicomic viewpoint more extensively than most previous ages. As if to keynote this attitude and set the tone, the Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855) in 1842 wrote: “Existence itself, the act of existence, is a striving and is both pathetic and comic in the same degree.”⁵

The plays of Anton Chekhov, written at the turn of the twentieth century, reflect the spirit described by Kierkegaard. Chekhov called two of his major plays *comedies*; but Stanislavski, who directed them, called them *tragedies*—an indication of the confusion arising from Chekhov's mixture of the serious and the comic.

An example of Chekhov's approach is a scene at the end of the third act of *Uncle Vanya* (1899). The lives of Vanya and his niece, Sonya, have been ruined by Sonya's father, a professor. At the moment where

Sonya tells her father how cruel and thoughtless he is, Vanya comes in, waving a pistol in the air, and shoots twice at the professor, but misses both times. There is some doubt that Vanya honestly means to kill the professor and the scene itself is both tragic and comic: The two elements are inextricably joined together.

Theatre of the absurd (discussed below) is an example of modern tragicomedy. It probes deeply into human problems and casts a cold eye on the world, and yet it is also imbued with a comic spirit. The plays of Harold Pinter (1930–2008), a writer associated with theatre of the absurd, have been called *comedies of menace*, a phrase suggesting the idea of a theatre simultaneously terrifying and entertaining.

THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

After World War II, a new type of theatre emerged in Europe and the United States, which the critic Martin Esslin called *theatre of the absurd*. Although the dramatists whose work falls into this category do not write in identical styles and are not really a “school” of writers, they do have enough in common to be considered together. Esslin took the name for this form of theatre from a quotation in *The Myth of Sisyphus* by the French writer, dramatist, and philosopher Albert Camus (1913–1960). In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus says that in the modern age there is a separation between “man and his life, the actor and his setting,” and that this separation “constitutes the feeling of Absurdity.”⁶

theatre of the absurd Twentieth-century plays expressing the dramatists' sense of absurdity and futility of human existence through the dramatic techniques they employ.



THEATRE OF THE ABSURD

Non sequitur, nonsensical language, existential characters, ridiculous situations—these are hallmarks of theatre of the absurd, which can also be viewed as a type of tragicomedy. One example is Eugene Ionesco’s *Exit the King*. Shown here, left to right, are Lauren Ambrose (as Queen Marie), Geoffrey Rush (King Berenger), William Sadler (the Doctor, in the background), and Susan Sarandon (Queen Marguerite, the king’s wife) in a 2009 Broadway production adapted and directed by Neil Armfield. (©Joan Marcus)

Plays falling into the category of absurdism convey humanity’s sense of alienation and its loss of bearings in an illogical, unjust, and ridiculous world. Although serious, this viewpoint is generally depicted in plays with considerable humor; an ironic note runs through much of theatre of the absurd.

A prime example of theatre of the absurd is Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. In this play Beckett has given us one of the most telling expressions of loneliness and futility ever written: two tramps on a barren plain waiting every day for a supreme being called “Godot,” who they think will come but who never does. At the same time, they themselves are comic. They wear baggy pants like burlesque comedians, and engage in any number of vaudeville routines. Also, the characters frequently say one thing and do just the opposite. One says to the other, “Well, shall we go?” and the other says, “Yes, let’s go.” But having said this, they don’t move.



TRAGICOMEDY: FUNNY AND SAD AT THE SAME TIME

Several plays by the Russian writer Anton Chekhov could be described as tragicomedies containing elements of both comedy and tragedy, mixed together in a profound way. The scene here is from Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya* with June Watson as Marina, Ken Stott as Vanya, Paul Freeman as Serebryakov, and Anna Friel as Yelena. Directed by Lindsay Posner, the production was at the Vaudeville Theatre in London. (©Robbie Jack/Corbis Entertainment/Getty Images)

Absurdist plays suggest the idea of absurdity both in what they say—that is, their content—and in the way they say it, their form. Their structure, therefore, is a departure from dramatic structures of the past.

Absurdist Plots: Illogicality

Traditional plots in drama proceed in a logical way from a beginning through the development of the plot to a conclusion, an arrangement that suggests an ordered universe. In contrast, many absurdist plays not only proclaim absurdity but also embody it.

An example is *The Bald Soprano* by Eugène Ionesco. The very title of the play turns out to be nonsense; a bald soprano is mentioned once in the play, but with no explanation, and it is clear that the bald soprano has nothing whatever to do with the play as a whole. The absurdity of the piece is manifest the moment the curtain goes up. A typical English couple are sitting in a living room when the clock on the mantle strikes seventeen times; the wife's first words are, "There, it's nine o'clock."



PLAYING YOUR PART: THINKING ABOUT THEATRE

1. A play by Henrik Ibsen, Anton Chekhov, Tennessee Williams, Lorraine Hansberry, or August Wilson might be set in a time 50 or 100 years ago. What do you think it is about these dramas that allow audience members in the twenty-first century to identify strongly with the characters and the situations in the play?
2. Which kind of play do you prefer: a classic tragedy, a serious contemporary drama, a knockabout farce, a comedy, a musical? Can you explain why you prefer one type over the others?
3. Do you favor a play with a strong storyline, a tight plot, and unexpected twists and turns? Or do you prefer a looser play that reflects the randomness of everyday life? What do you think attracts you to these characteristics?

Absurdist Language: Nonsense and Non Sequitur

Events and characters are frequently illogical in theatre of the absurd, and so too is language. *Non sequitur* is a Latin term meaning “it does not follow”; it implies that something does not follow from what has gone before, and it perfectly describes the method of theatre of the absurd. Sentences do not follow in sequence, and words do not mean what we expect them to mean.

An example of the irrationality or debasement of language is found in Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*. The character of Lucky does not speak for most of his time onstage, but at the end of the first act he delivers a long speech consisting of incoherent religious and legalistic jargon. The opening lines offer a small sample:

Given the existence as uttered forth in the public works of Puncher and Wattmann of a personal God quaquaquaqua with white beard quaquaquaqua outside time without extension who from the heights of divine apathia divine athambia divine aphasia loves us dearly with some exceptions for reasons unknown but time will tell.⁷

Numerous examples of such language appear not only in Ionesco’s and Beckett’s plays but in plays written by many other absurdist writers.

Absurdist Characters: Existential Beings

A significant feature of absurdist plays is the handling of characters. Not only is there an element of the ridiculous in the characters’ actions, but they frequently exemplify an *existential* point of view. In theatre, existentialism suggests that characters have no personal history and therefore no specific causes for their actions. The two main characters in *Waiting for Godot*, for example, are devoid of biography and personal motivation; we know nothing of their family life or their occupations. They meet every day at a crossroads to wait for Godot, but how long they have been coming there, or what they do when they are not there, remains a mystery.

In addition to the plays of the absurdist, other modern plays also incorporate the tragicomic spirit. In *The Visit*, by Friedrich Dürrenmatt (1921–1990), a Swiss dramatist, a wealthy woman returns to her birthplace, a small, poverty-stricken village. She offers a huge sum of money to the village on the condition that the citizens murder a storekeeper who wronged her when she was young. The townspeople express horror at the idea, but at the same time they begin buying expensive items



IN FOCUS: MANY ADDITIONAL FORMS AND THE DEBATE OVER CATEGORIZATION

As can be seen in our discussions of tragicomedy and theatre of the absurd, dramas often defy categorization. Plays frequently mix genres and styles. We have noted how Shakespeare wrote plays that did not clearly fit into either tragedy or comedy and some earlier critics referred to them as “problem” plays.

In the late twentieth century, theorists who are referred to as *postmodernists*, and whose concepts we will discuss more fully later, questioned the validity of categorizing dramas by genre. They argued that such categorization led to a hierarchy that was built on sociopolitical and aesthetic biases. Why should tragedy or comedy be privileged over melodrama or domestic drama? Does privileging traditional tragedy over modern tragedy have sociopolitical (and in many cases, gender) implications? Can we really distinguish between any of these genres and do such broad categories even make sense? Do audiences or authors differentiate in this fashion or does each playwright create a unique work and does each audience member have his or her own unique reaction to that work? Is there really a distinction between more popular theatrical forms and entertainments and so-called high art?

We can clearly see the problem of trying to categorize drama since the end of the nineteenth century. Throughout this time period there have been many avant-garde and popular theatrical forms that do not neatly fit into any of the categories discussed in this chapter.

Expressionism and surrealism, forms that developed early in the twentieth century, tried to capture the inner workings of the human mind: expressionism presenting drama from the point of view of the protagonist and

surrealism trying to mimic the dream and other subconscious states.

The German playwright Bertolt Brecht, between the two World Wars and shortly after World War II, created what he called “epic” theatre, in which audience members were constantly reminded they were in the theatre. Songs broke up the action of his plays and underscored his political messages, and narrators were used to comment on the sociopolitical meaning of the dramatic action.

In the past half century, many playwrights have written documentary plays based on actual historic events, using testimonies and archival documents as their dramatic material. Since the 1960s, moreover, there have been experimental companies that staged communally created performance pieces that engaged audiences in a variety of ways. As we shall see in the chapter “[Global Theatre Today: Diverse and Global](#),” contemporary multicultural, feminist, LGBTQ, and global playwrights, as well as solo performance artists, have experimented with a multitude of styles and forms.

And, of course, over the past 100 years, there have been many popular theatre forms. One example is musical theatre (discussed more fully in “[The Theatre Today](#)”), which incorporates plot (referred to as the *book* of a musical), songs, and dance to tell a story. There are also many subcategories of musical theatre.

While we will discuss the development of these and other forms more fully in the final two chapters of our text, the key question that these examples raise is: Can we actually categorize plays and are there theatre works that defy categorization?

on credit—some from the man’s own store. There is a comic quality to these scenes, but the conclusion is not funny, for the man is eventually murdered by his greedy neighbors.

In tragicomedy, a smile is frequently cynical, a chuckle may be tinged with a threat, and laughter is sometimes bitter. In the past, the attitude that produced these combinations was the exception rather than the rule. In our day, it seems far more prevalent, not to say relevant. As a result, tragicomedy has taken its place as a major form alongside the more traditional approaches.

SUMMARY

1. Tragedy attempts to ask very basic questions about human existence: Why do men and women suffer? Is there justice in the world? What are the limits of human endurance and achievement? Tragedy presupposes an indifferent and sometimes malevolent universe in which the innocent suffer and there is inexplicable cruelty. It also assumes that certain men and women will confront and defy fate, even if they are overcome in the process.
2. Tragedy can be classified as traditional or modern. In traditional tragedy the chief characters are persons of stature—kings, queens, and the nobility. The central figure is caught in a series of tragic circumstances, which are irretrievable. The hero or heroine is willing to fight and die for a cause. The language of the play is verse.
3. Modern tragedy involves ordinary people rather than the nobility, and it is generally written in prose rather than verse. In this modern form, the deeper meanings of tragedy are explored by nonverbal elements and by the cumulative or overall effect of events as well as by verbal means.
4. There are several kinds of nontragic serious plays, the most notable being heroic drama, bourgeois or domestic drama, and melodrama.
5. Heroic drama has many of the same elements as traditional tragedy—it frequently deals with highborn characters and is often in verse. In contrast to tragedy, however, it has a happy ending or an ending in which the death of the main character is considered a triumph, not a defeat.
6. Bourgeois or domestic drama deals with ordinary people, always seriously but not always tragically. It stresses the problems of the middle and lower classes and became a particularly prominent form in the twentieth century.
7. Melodrama features exaggerated characters and events arranged to create horror or suspense or to present a didactic argument for some political, moral, or social point of view.
8. Comedy takes a different approach from serious forms of drama. It sees the humor and incongruity in people and situations. Comic dramatists accept a social and moral order and suspend natural laws (a man falls flat on his face but does not really hurt himself).
9. Comedy is developed by means of several techniques. *Verbal humor* turns words upside down and creates puns, malapropisms, and inversions of meaning. *Comedy of character* creates men and women who take extreme positions, make fools of themselves, or contradict themselves. *Plot complications* create mistaken identity, coincidences, and people who turn up unexpectedly in the wrong house or the wrong bedroom. There are also physical aspects to comedy: slapstick and horseplay.
10. From these techniques, the dramatist fashions various kinds of comedy. For instance, depending on the degree of exaggeration, a comedy can be *farce* or *comedy of manners*; farce features strong physical humor, whereas comedy of manners relies more on verbal wit.
11. Another type of comedy is *domestic comedy*, which deals with ordinary people in familiar situations.
12. Depending on its intent, comedy can be designed to entertain, as with *farce* or *burlesque*; or to correct vices, in which case it becomes *satire*. Many of Shaw's plays represent *comedy of ideas*.

13. Serious and comic elements can be mixed in theatre. Many tragedies have comic relief—humorous scenes and characters interspersed in serious material.
14. Authentic tragicomedy fuses, or synthesizes, two elements—one serious, the other comic. We laugh and cry at the same time. Chekhov, Beckett, Dürrenmatt, and writers of theatre of the absurd use tragicomedy in their plays. Some commentators feel that this is the form most truly characteristic of our time.

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