

# Theatre

The word “theatre” comes from the Greek word *theatron* (THAY-uh-trahn): the area of the Greek theatre building where the audience sat. Its literal meaning is “a place for seeing.” Like the other PERFORMING ARTS, theatre is an interpretive discipline, because between the playwright and the audience stand the director, the designers, and the actors.

## Genres

As in music, our enjoyment of theatre can be enhanced by understanding the genre—that is, the type of play—from which the performance evolves. We are probably most familiar with the genres of TRAGEDY and *comedy*, but there are others.

We commonly describe a tragedy as a play with an unhappy ending, and typically, tragic heroes make free choices that cause suffering and defeat or sometimes triumph out of defeat. Often, the hero—the *protagonist*—undergoes a struggle that ends disastrously. In many respects, comedy is much more complex than tragedy and even harder to define. Comedy embraces a wide range of theatrical approaches, and when it is defined in its broadest terms, comedy may not even involve laughter. Although we can say, probably with some accuracy, that humor forms the root of all comedy, many comedies employ satire, and comedies often treat serious themes while remaining basically lighthearted in spirit.

These and the other genres of theatre guide our expectations as we witness a production. If we know the genre in advance, our responses move according to those expectations. If we do not know the genre, we have to work it out as the production unfolds.

## Plot, Character, Thought, and Visual Elements

Technically, theatrical productions are shaped to a large degree by *plot*—that is, the structure of the play—the skeleton that gives it shape. The plot determines how a play works—how it moves from one moment to another, how conflicts are structured, and, ultimately, how the play comes to an end.

Plays also turn on *character*: the motivating psychological makeup of the people in the play. Although many plays focus on visual elements such as settings, lighting, and costumes, we find theatre engrossing because of the way plays reflect human behavior and conflict in human decisions and actions. Thus, when we attend a performance of a play, our primary attention focuses on how dialogue reveals character and how actors portray actions. Most plays hinge on the actions and decisions of one major character, called the *protagonist*, and when we follow his or her development and the consequences of his or her actions, we are led to an understanding of the play’s meaning.

The meaning of the play—sometimes called its *thought*—like the meaning of any work of art, reveals what artists are trying to communicate to us about our universe.

The visual elements of a play comprise a number of factors including the relationship of the audience to the acting area—for example, the arena form in which the audience surrounds the stage area. Visual elements also include scenery, costumes, lighting, and actor movement.