



Robert
Cohen

Theatre

BRIEF VERSION 10TH EDITION

Theatre

BRIEF VERSION

Also by Robert Cohen

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BRIEF VERSION 10TH EDITION

Theatre

Robert Cohen

Claire Trevor Professor of Drama
University of California, Irvine





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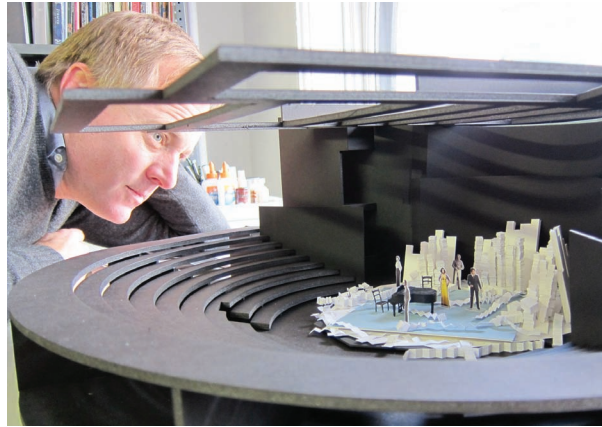
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About *Theatre: Brief Version*

Cohen's insider's guide to the world of theatre
puts students in the front row

INVITING STUDENTS INSIDE THE PROCESS

Coverage of design, acting, and directing, and photo essays, provide a behind-the-scenes look at professional theatre artists performing their craft.



ILLUSTRATING LIVE THEATRE

More than 250 theatre photographs from five continents, most of them showing recent stage productions, bring to life many exciting theatre companies and productions.

What's New

New sections on eight major theatre professionals:

- A photo essay on scene designer Scott Pask (*Hair*, *The Coast of Utopia*, *The Book of Mormon*), in “Designers and Technicians.”
- Full sections on leading contemporary directors Silviu Purcarete (Romanian), Julie Taymor (American), and Katie Mitchell (English), in “Global Theatre Today.”

Full sections on leading contemporary playwrights Theresa Rebeck and Sarah Ruhl, in “The Playwright,” Wendy Wasserstein, in “The Modern Theatre,” and Yasmina Reza, in “Global Theatre Today.”

Entirely new sections on:

- Theatre beyond Theatre—site-specific and “immersion” theatrical formats, in “Global Theatre Today.”
- Directorial Adaptation—how today’s directors increasingly adapt the texts of classic and even modern plays, in “The Director.”
- Performance Studies—the growing study of performance in everyday life, in “The Critic.”
- Puppet Performance—the increasing use of “actors” made of metal, wood, and fabrics, in “Global Theatre Today.”
- Updated scholarship in all areas and extensive revisions, in “Global Theatre Today.”



BRINGING PRACTITIONERS AND STAGING TO LIFE

Spotlight and Stagecraft sidebars offer insights about acting, staging, and theatre history.



ONLINE LEARNING CENTER (www.mhhe.com/cohenbrief10e)

Theatre Brief: Brief Version, 10/e
Robert Cohen, University of California Irvine
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This lively introduction to theatre offers equal measures of appreciation of theatrical arts, history of performance, and descriptions of the collaborative theatrical crafts. The author's enthusiasm for and knowledge of the current theatre, highlighted by contemporary production shots from around the world, put the students in the front row.

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- **Flashcards** help students review and learn important theatrical terms.

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To Michael and Angela Cohen

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Then I would like to acknowledge Scott Pask, the superb scenic designer who invited me to interview him in his New York studio, and to then share with our readers, in the new photo essay in this edition, his experiences and thoughts about working in theatre. And to the other distinguished professional theatre artists who have permitted me to interview them in their workplaces and studios for previous editions, and whose theatrical work continues to dazzle audiences around the world, as have been noted in the updated pages that follow: Susan Stroman, Patrick Stewart, Catherine Zuber, Don Holder, James Calleri, Jerry Patch, Michael McGoff, Mihai Maniutiu, Gabor Tompa, Silviu Purcarete, and Scott Lehrer.

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Letter from the Author

What's it like to be on the inside of a theatrical performance? Have you ever wondered? Well, to those of us who work in theatre, it's called "magic time."

I described such a phenomenon in the preface I wrote for the very first edition of this book, more than thirty years ago.

At this moment, I am sitting in a darkened theatre during a technical rehearsal for a play I am directing. The action onstage has been put on hold for a few minutes while a pair of spotlights are being refocused, and I am trying to use the time to write this preface—but my eye is continually being pulled away from my pages by the dance of light now playing upon the stage. I am dazzled by its violet and amber hues, its sharp shafts of incandescence, and I gaze with admiration at the technicians who, above my head, are adjusting their instruments with precision. Looking around me, I see the sound designer carefully setting controls on her console, the scenery and costume designers seeing how their work appears in the lights and whispering to each other over their headsets, the stage managers recording lighting and sound cues in their promptbooks, and the actors standing patiently on the stage and going over their lines in their heads while they await the stage manager's cue for the rehearsal to resume.

Though all is relatively still and nothing but whispers can be heard, I am utterly hypnotized by these goings-on. The stage seems to be pulsing with torrents of passion and exhilaration just waiting to be unleashed. I am utterly alive with excitement—and can only look back to these cold words I have written with dismay. How can I even think to express my love of theatre in these pages? How can I hope to share with you readers the awe and the thrill that course through my body when I engage in theatre's many mysteries?

For the theatre is not merely a body of plays, a collection of skills, or a collaborative art form. It is a life. It is people. It is people making art out of themselves. It has been the living reenactment of the human adventure for more than three thousand years, and never so alive as it is today. Live theatre transcends by light-years anything that could be said or written about it, and I only hope I can do it justice.



Well, I continue to feel every bit of this exhilaration today. By this time, I have staged more than a hundred productions as a director. But I have also worked as a producer, actor, stage manager, and lighting designer in both professional theatres and universities, and I have published more than four hundred play reviews, articles, plays, and translations, as well as more than a dozen books on acting, directing, and dramatic literature—and just about everything in between. In the theatre, I am a throwback, a jack-of-all-trades in a field that is becoming increasingly specialized.

But my deepest connection to theatre is simply as a playgoer. Having been bitten by the drama bug when seeing my first professional play—the Broadway musical *Where's Charley?* starring Ray Bolger in 1948—I have seen well over a thousand theatre productions, in almost every state in the nation and in thirty-some countries around the world. And in each of this book's editions, I have sought to express the exhilaration I have experienced when seeing theatre as much as when working to create it.

I am always asked how this book has changed over its more than three decades. This edition includes more than one hundred new or significantly revised pages, and eighty new photos that I have personally taken or selected from stage productions mounted during the three years since the previous (ninth) edition went to press. New theatre artists, new technologies, new plays

and productions, and new movements and trends constitute the bulk of the revisions, but the most important overall change in the current era has been the extraordinary increase in theatre as a truly global art. For this edition, for example, I traveled to England, France, Germany, Romania, Poland, and Italy to see and report on new theatre companies and productions—and in the same period I saw at least an equal

number of stunning theatrical events that were touring here to the United States, and to other countries I was visiting as well. The “theatre world” is now a world of theatre, multicultural and accessible, coming to life right before our eyes.

Lights up! Curtain up! Enjoy the show wherever you are!

—**Robert Cohen**

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Introduction

IT IS EVENING IN MANHATTAN. On Broadway and the streets that cross it—from 42nd to 54th—marquees light up, “Performance Tonight” signs materialize in front of double doors, and beneath a few box-office windows placards announce “This Performance Completely Sold Out.” At Grand Central and Penn stations, trains disgorge suburbanites from Greenwich, Larchmont, and Trenton; students from New Haven and Philadelphia; day-trippers from Boston and Washington. Up from the Times Square subways troop denizens of the island city and the neighboring boroughs. At the Duffy Square “TKTS” booth, hundreds line up to buy the discount tickets that go on sale a few hours before curtain time for those shows with seats yet to be filled. Now, converging on these few midtown blocks of America’s largest city, come limousines, restaurant buses, private cars, and taxis, whose drivers search for a curbside slot to deposit their riders among the milling throng of pedestrians. Financiers and dowagers, bearded intellectuals, backpack-toting teenagers, sleek executives, hip Harlemites, arm-in-arm widows, out-of-town tourists and conventioners, between-engagement actors, celebrities, honeymooners, and the precocious

young—all commingle in this bizarre aggregation that is the New York Broadway audience. Even during (and perhaps *especially* during) troubled times in this vibrant city, it is as bright, bold, and varied a crowd as is likely to assemble at any single place in America.

It is eight o’clock. In close to forty theatres within two dozen blocks of each other, houselights dim, curtains rise, and spotlights pick out performers whose lives center on this moment. Here a hot new musical, here a star-studded revival of an American classic, here a contemporary English comedy from London’s West End, here a new play fresh from its electrifying Seattle or Chicago premiere, here a one-woman show, here an offbeat off-Broadway musical moving to larger quarters, here a new avant-garde dance-drama, here a touring production from eastern Europe, and here the new play everyone expects will capture this year’s coveted Pulitzer Prize. The hours pass.

It’s 10:30. Pandemonium. All the double doors open simultaneously, as if on cue, and once again the thousands pour out into the night. At nearby restaurants, waiters stand by to receive the after-theatre onslaught. In Sardi’s private upstairs room, an opening-night cast party gets under way; downstairs, the patrons rehash



Plays were often the sources of films in the early days of cinema, but now major films are increasingly turned into plays—and very successful ones (*The Lion King*, *The Producers*, *Newsies*), too. This scene is from the 2012 London premiere of the musical, *Top Hat*, a stage adaptation of the 1935 Fred Astaire–Ginger Rogers RKO movie that brilliantly recreates the original music and lyrics of Irving Berlin. Tom Chambers plays Jerry Travers (center) in the production, which was directed by Matthew White, with scenery by Hildegard Bechtler and costumes by Jon Morrell.

the evening’s entertainment and sneak covert glances at the celebrities around them and the actors heading for the upstairs sanctuary to await the reviews that will determine whether they will be employed next week or back on the street looking for new jobs.

Now let’s turn back the clock. It is dawn in Athens, the thirteenth day of the month of Elaphebolion in the year 458 B.C. From thousands of low mud-brick homes in the city, from the central agora, from temples and agricultural outposts, streams of Athenians and visitors converge on the south slope of the Acropolis, Athens’s great hill and home of its grandest temples. Bundled

against the morning dampness, carrying breakfast figs and flagons of wine, they pay their tokens at the entrance to the great Theatre of Dionysus and take their places in the seating spaces allotted them. Each tribe occupies a separate area. They have gathered for the Great Dionysia festival, which celebrates the greening of the land, the rebirth of vegetation, and the long sunny days that stretch ahead. It is a time for revelry, for rejoicing at fertility and all its fruits. And it is above all a time for the ultimate form of Dionysian worship: the theatre.

The open stone seats carved into the hillside fill up quickly. The crowd of seventeen thousand here today comprises not only the majority of Athenian citizens but also thousands of tradesmen, foreign visitors, slaves, and resident aliens. Even paupers are in attendance, thanks to the two obols apiece provided by a state fund to buy tickets for the poor; they take their place with the latecomers on the extremities of the *theatron*, as this first of theatres is called. Now, as the eastern sky grows pale, a masked and costumed actor appears atop a squat building set in full view of every spectator. A hush falls over the crowd, and the actor, his voice magnified by the wooden mask he wears, booms out this text:

I ask the gods some respite from the weariness
of this watchtime measured by years I lie awake . . .

And the entranced spectators settle in, secure in the knowledge that today they are in good hands. Today they will hear and see a new version of a familiar story—the story of Agamemnon’s homecoming and his murder, the revenge of that murder by his son, Orestes, and the final disposition of justice in the case of Orestes’ act—as told in the three tragedies that constitute *The Oresteia*. This magnificent trilogy is by Aeschylus, Athens’s leading dramatist for more than forty years. The spectators watch closely, admiring but critical. Tomorrow they or their representatives will decide by vote whether the festival’s prize should go to this work, or whether the young Sophocles, whose plays were presented in this space yesterday, had better sensed the true pulse of the time. Even forty years later, the comic playwright Aristophanes will be arguing the merits and demerits of this day’s work.

It is noon in London, and Queen Elizabeth I sits on the throne. Flags fly boldly atop three of the taller buildings in Bankside, across the Thames, announcing performance day at The Globe, The Rose, and The Swan. Boatmen have already begun ferrying theater-goers



Theatre is not always—or even often—grandiose. New York actress Andrea Caban wrote, produced, and performed the only role in this acclaimed solo performance of *Questions My Mother Can't Answer*, which was seen on an American tour in 2012, following its much-lauded Manhattan debut. The production may have cost less than a thousandth of the production of *Top Hat*, but its theatrical thrills were every bit as high.

across the river, where The Globe will present a new tragedy by Shakespeare (something called *Hamlet*, supposedly after an old play by Thomas Kyd), and The Rose promises a revival of Christopher Marlowe's popular *Dr. Faustus*.

Now, at The Globe, two thousand spectators have arrived for the premiere. A trumpet sounds, then sounds again, then builds into a full fanfare. Members of the audience, standing on the ground before the stage or seated in bleachers overlooking it, exchange a few final winks with their friends old and new—covert invitations to postperformance intimacies perhaps—and turn their attention to the platform stage. Through a giant door a guard bursts forth, lantern in hand. “Who’s there?” he cries. In two thousand

imaginings, the bright afternoon has turned to midnight, London’s Bankside has given way to the battlements of Denmark’s Elsinore, and a terrified shiver from the onstage actor has set up an answering chill among the audience. A great new tragedy has begun its course.

It is midnight in a basement in the East Village, or in a campus rehearsal room, or in a coffee shop in Pittsburgh, Seattle, Sioux Falls, or Berlin. Across one end of the room, a curtain has been drawn across a pole suspended by wires. It has been a long evening, but one play remains to be seen. The author is unknown, but rumor has it that this new work is brutal, shocking, poetic, strange. The members of the audience, by turns skeptics and enthusiasts, look for the tenth time at their programs. The lights dim. Performers, backed by crudely painted packing crates, begin to act.

What is the common denominator in all of these scenes? They are all theatre. There is no culture that has not had a theatre in some form, for theatre is the art of people acting out—and giving witness to—their most pressing, most illuminating, and most inspiring concerns. Theatre is at once a showcase and a forum, a medium through which a society displays its ideas, fashions, moralities, and entertainments, and debates its conflicts, dilemmas, yearnings, and struggles. Theatre has provided a stage for political revolution, for social propaganda, for civil debate, for artistic expression, for religious conversion, for mass education, and even for its own self-criticism. It has been a performance ground for priests, witch doctors, intellectuals, poets, painters, technologists, philosophers, reformers, evangelists, jugglers, peasants, children, and kings. It has taken place in caves, fields, and forests; in circus tents, inns, and castles; on street corners and in public buildings grand and squalid all over the world. And it goes on incessantly in the minds of its authors, its actors, its producers, its designers, and its audiences.

Theatre is, above all, a *living* art form. It does not simply consist of “plays” but also of “playing,” and a play is not simply a series of “acts” but a collectivity of “acting.” Just as *play* and *act* are both noun and verb, so theatre is both a thing and a happening, a result and a process: fluid in time, rich in feeling and human experience.

And above all, theatre is *live*: an art that continually forms before our eyes and is continually *present* to an



Lee Breuer is one of America's most celebrated avant-garde stage directors, so it was a surprise when France's Comédie Française, the oldest classical repertory theatre in Europe (founded in 1680), invited him in to stage their first-ever non-European play: Tennessee Williams's great—and very *non-avant-garde*—American classic, *Streetcar Named Desire*. Breuer's 2012 production went yet further abroad, transporting the play's setting to classical Japan, with exquisitely painted *dogugaeshi* screens, lavishly embroidered kimonos, and masked *kuroko* stagehands.

audience even as it is *presented* by its actors. In fact, this very quality of “presentness” (or, in the actor's terminology, “stage presence”) defines every great theatrical performance.

Unlike the more static arts, theatre presents us with a number of classic paradoxes:

- It is spontaneous, yet it is rehearsed.
- It is participatory, yet it is presented.
- It is real, yet it is simulated.
- It is understandable, yet it is obscure.
- It is unique to the moment, yet it is repeatable.
- The actors are themselves, yet they are characters.
- The audience believes, yet it does not believe.
- The audience is involved, yet it remains apart.

The theatre's actors “live in the moment” during performance yet carefully study, plan, and rehearse the details of their roles beforehand. And the audience responds to this performance by rooting for dramatic “characters” to achieve their goals, then applauding the “actors” who play those roles during the curtain call. Yet these paradoxes do not represent a flaw or weakness in

the logic of theatrical construction; rather, they show the theatre's essential strength, which lies in its kinship and concern with the ambiguity and irony of human life. For it is *we*—the people of the real world—who are at the same time spontaneous yet premeditating, candid yet contriving, unique yet self-repeating, comprehensible yet fundamentally unknown and unknowable. The theatre shows us, and *is* us, in all of our living complexity.

Theorists of dramatic literature and of dramatic practice often ignore the theatre's paradoxes in their attempts to “explain” a play or the art of the stage. In this they do a disservice to art as well as to scholarship, for to “explain” the theatre without reference to its ambiguities is to remove its vital dynamic tension—in other words, to kill it. And although much valuable information can certainly be discovered at an autopsy table, it is information pertinent only to the appearance and behavior of a corpse.

In this book we shall not be concerned with corpses. Our task will be the harder one—to discover the theatre in being, *alive* and with all its paradoxes and ambiguities



Theatre is, above all else, a living art, and its greatest performers live their roles physically, emotionally, and often passionately while playing them. In this internationally celebrated Australian production of Anton Chekhov's *Uncle Vanya*, which was brought to New York by the Lincoln Center Festival in 2012, Richard Roxburgh and Cate Blanchett throw both their bodies and feelings into the desperately confused characters of Uncle Vanya and his ex-brother-in-law's wife Yelana, whom the hapless Vanya loves. Guided by acclaimed Hungarian director Tamas Ascher, the production creates a stunning *mélange* of tragic despair and rip-roaring humor. Chekhov, as Ms. Blanchett says in a TV interview, "creates epic moments in peoples' very small domestic lives," and these veteran actors fill such epochal instants with their own flesh and blood eight times a week.

intact. From time to time it will be necessary for us to make some separations—between product and process, for example—but we must bear in mind at all times that these separations are conveniences, not representations or facts. In the end we shall be looking

at the theatre as part of the human environment and at the ways in which we fit into that environment—as participants and observers, artists and art critics, role models and role players, actors and persons. As such, this book about the theatre is also about ourselves.



What Is Theatre?

WHAT IS THEATRE? The word comes from the Greek *theatron*, or “seeing place.” A theatre is a place where something is seen.

Today we use the word *theatre* in many ways. We use it to describe the building where plays are put on: the architecture, the structure, the space for dramatic performance—the place where “something is seen.” We also use it to indicate where films are shown, as in “movie theatre.” And we use it metaphorically to refer to a place where wars and surgeries occur: the “theatre of operations” and the “operating theatre.” These are all examples of the “hardware” definition of *theatre*.

The “software” definition—the *activity* involved in theatre—is far more important. For *theatre* also refers to the players (and owners, managers, and technicians) who perform in such a space and to the plays that such a company produces. When we speak of “the Guthrie Theatre,” we are referring not merely to a building in Minneapolis, but also to the stage artists and administrators who work in that building and to the body of plays produced there. We also are referring to a body of ideas—a vision—that animates the Guthrie Theatre artists and the plays they produce. *Theatre*, in this sense, is a combination of people and ideas—and the works of art that result from this collaboration. ►

We also use the word *theatre* to summon the professional *occupation*—and often the passion—of thousands of men and women all over the world. It is a vocation and sometimes a lifetime devotion. *A Life in the Theatre* is the title of one theatre artist’s autobiography (Tyrone Guthrie, in fact, for whom the Guthrie Theatre in Minneapolis is named), as well as the title of a play about actors by the contemporary American dramatist David Mamet. But *A Life in the Theatre* could also be the title for the unrecorded biographies of the theatre artists who have dedicated their professional lives to perfecting the special arts of acting, directing, designing, managing, and writing for “the theatre” in all the senses described above.

Theatre as a building, a company, an occupation—let’s look at all three of these usages more closely.

THE THEATRE BUILDING

A theatre is not always an enclosed structure. The most ancient Greek *theatron* was probably no more than a circle of bare earth, where performers chanted and danced before a hillside of seated spectators. The requirements for building such a theatre were minimal: finding a space to act and a space to watch and hear.

As theatre grew in popularity and importance, however, its simplicity required further elaboration. Attention had to be given to seating larger and larger numbers of people, so the hillside soon became an ascending bank of seats, each level providing a good view of the acting area. And as the *theatron* grew, attention had to be paid to *acoustics* (from the Greek *acoustos*, “heard”), so the sounds coming from the stage would



National theatre buildings in many European countries, generally supported by their governments, are often palatial. The National Theatre in Cluj, Romania, is regarded as the most beautiful building in this Transylvanian capital, which indicates the prominence of live theatre in that country.

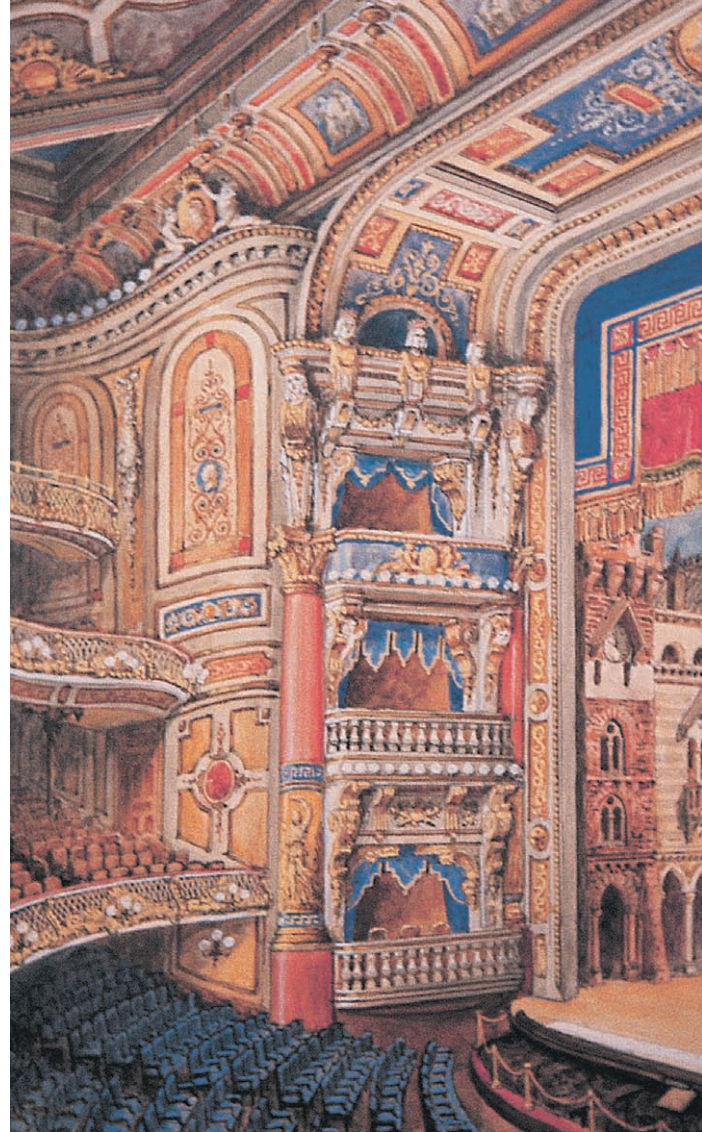
be protected from the wind and directed (or reflected) toward the *audience* (from the Latin *audientia*, “those who hear”).

Often these spaces—for performing and for seeing and hearing—can be casually defined: the audience is up there, the actors are down there. Occasionally, the spaces are merged together, with the actors mingling—and sometimes interacting—with the watchers and listeners. When the practice of selling tickets and paying actors began (more than twenty-five hundred years ago), these spaces became more rigidly separated.

Theatre buildings may be elaborate structures. Greek theatres of the fourth century B.C.—the period immediately following the golden age of Greek playwrights—were gigantic stone edifices, some capable of holding up to seventeen thousand spectators. Magnificent three-story Roman theatres, complete with gilded columns, canvas awnings, and intricate marble carvings, were often erected for dramatic festivals in the later years of the Republic—only to be dismantled when the festivities ended. Grand free-standing Elizabethan theatres dominate the London skyline in illustrated sixteenth-century pictorial maps of the town. Opulent proscenium theatres were built throughout Europe and in the major cities of the United States in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Many remain in full operation today, competing with splendid new stagehouses of every description and serving as cultural centers for metropolitan areas around the world. Theatres (the buildings) are fundamental to urban architecture, just as theatre (the art) is to contemporary life.

THE COMPANY, OR TROUPE, OF PLAYERS

Theatre is a collaborative art, usually involving dozens, even hundreds, of people working closely together on a single performance. Historically, therefore, theatre practitioners of various specialties have teamed up in long-standing companies, or troupes. Since the fourth century B.C., such troupes of players (actors or, more literally, “playmakers”) have toured the countryside and settled in cities to present a repertory of plays as a means of earning a livelihood. Generally such players have included actor-playwrights and actor-technicians, making the company a self-contained production unit capable of writing, preparing, and presenting whole theatrical works that tend to define the company itself. Some of these troupes—and the works they produced—have become legendary: for example, the Lord Chamberlain’s Men of London, which



This watercolor depicts the opulent interior of Booth's Theatre in New York at its 1869 opening. This grand “temple of theatre” was built by America's finest actor of the time, Edwin Booth (the brother of Lincoln's assassin). Booth staged and performed in a classical repertory of Shakespearean plays at his theatre for four years. The side boxes, similar to those that still exist in older Broadway theatres, had poor sight lines: spectators electing to sit there were interested more in being seen than in seeing the play. The luxurious seating in the orchestra made this a particularly comfortable and elegant place to see classic theatre. Charles Witham, Booth's original stage designer, painted this watercolor; part of Witham's scenery (a street scene) is visible onstage.

counted William Shakespeare as a member; and the Illustrious Theatre of Paris, founded and headed by the great actor-writer Molière. The influence of these theatre companies has proven more long-lasting than the theatre buildings that, in some cases, physically survived them. They represent the genius and creativity of theatre in a way that stone and steel alone cannot.