

2

The Script: Dramatic Structure, Form, and Style

The play script is the typical starting point for the theatrical production. It is also the most common residue of production, since the script usually remains intact after its performance ends. Because the same script may serve as a basis for many different productions, it has greater permanence than its theatrical representations and therefore comes to be considered a literary work. Consequently, drama is often taught quite apart from theatre, and many people who read plays have never seen a live dramatic performance. Probably the majority of students get their first glimpse of theatre through the reading of plays in literature classes. But the script in itself may seem unsatisfactory or puzzling, for it is essentially a blueprint that demands from both reader and performer the imaginative recreation of much that is only implied on the printed page. Therefore, learning how to read, understand, and fill out the script (either in the mind or on the stage) is essential if the power of a play is to be fully realized.

But the beginner often does not know how to approach reading a play

or watching a performance. Today, many persons experience drama almost entirely through television or film, for which no written script is usually available for reading and in which the camera has screened out all details not thought important by the director. Both reading a play and watching a live performance are quite different from watching a drama performed in an electronic medium; full appreciation of a written script or of a live performance comes only with experience in which concentration and imagination have been primary elements.

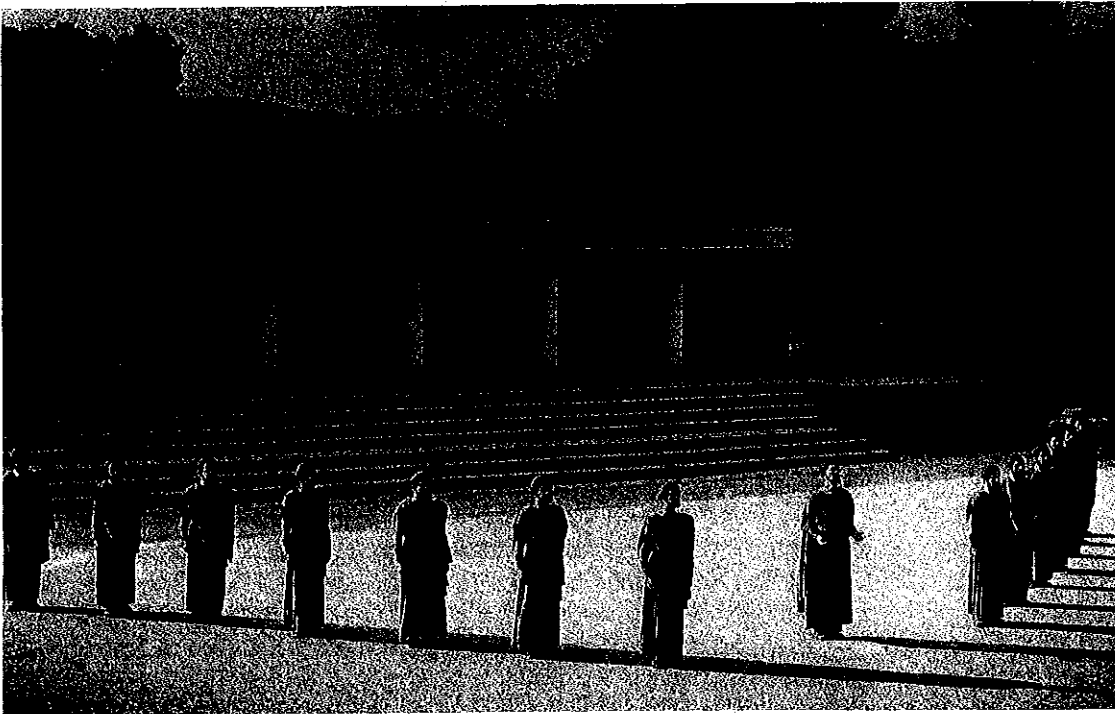
On Reading a Play

There are no rules about how one should read a play. Nevertheless, some observations may be helpful to those for whom play reading is still a new experience. First, one must accept that the ability to read imaginatively and perceptively is a basic skill needed by all persons who seek to become educated, for without it much of human experience is forever lost, and intellectually we remain children suffering from historical and cultural amnesia.

Like all writers, the dramatist in conveying his intentions must resort to symbols—letters grouped into words, words into sentences, sentences into paragraphs. If these symbols are to be intelligible, the reader must transform them into concrete images—that is, he must use his imagination to convert the symbols into objects, actions, and meanings.) His perceptions of these images must approximate those envisioned by the author when he set down the symbols. Without the reader's imagination, word symbols would remain forever inert on the page and reading would be impossible.

Since all writers do not express themselves in the same form, all written works cannot be read in the same way. Each form has its own characteristics, and each makes distinctive demands on the reader. Thus, we cannot read a play in the same way we do an historical treatise, an essay, a biography, a novel, or a poem. To read a play adequately, we must first adjust our minds to the dramatic form so that its contents may be perceived. In other words, the reader must seek to adopt the dramatic point of view (rather than the historical, essayistic, scientific, novelistic, or some other point of view).

Both writing and reading may be viewed as substitutes or alternatives to speaking and listening, for a writer sets down in words what he might communicate orally if everyone he wished ever to reach were in his presence simultaneously. A written passage is an author's way of preserving his perceptions and ideas in a form that can be communicated to others. But when he writes, he typically formulates his ideas and perceptions more precisely than when he speaks, for the spoken word is usually spontaneous, attuned to the immediate sensory responses and visible reactions



Oedipus the King as presented at Epidauros in 1960. (Courtesy of the Greek National Theatre.)

of the auditors, and any misunderstandings can be clarified by additions or alterations. A play is distinctive in part because it is a form made up primarily of dialogue that must be constructed with great care in order to convey its intentions precisely while at the same time creating the sense of being the spontaneous oral utterances of characters involved in a developing action. Thus, it is at once a highly formal structure and a simulated spontaneous reflection of human experience.

Drama requires the reader to contribute more than any other form does. Not only must the reader see and understand what is explicitly said and done, but he must also be aware of all that is merely implied or left unsaid. While the dramatist may use stage directions to clarify setting, situation, or tone, for the most part he conveys his intentions through dialogue. Therefore, in reading a play we should assume that the writer has set down precisely what he wishes to say, but that, because he must convey his intentions through a likeness of conversation, we must be sensitive—as in real life—to the implications, unspoken feelings, and even deliberate deceptions typical of human interaction. Therefore, the reader must be alert to the nuances and shadings of each word and phrase.

It is impossible here to go through one or more plays line by line to explore the problems and pleasures of reading scripts. Rather, this book in its totality is intended to provide the kind of information and to stimulate the kind of imaginative inquiry needed to envision the mimic world

of a play. Nevertheless, some of the problems can be illustrated and some approaches suggested. Take, for example, the opening lines of the oldest play that will be discussed at length in this book, Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* (a Greek tragedy written about 430 B.C. and usually considered one of the greatest dramas of all times).

OEDIPUS: My children, . . .
 Why have you strewn yourselves before these altars
 In supplication, with your boughs and garlands?
 The breath of incense rises from the city
 With a sound of prayer and lamentation.
Children,
 I would not have you speak through messengers,
 And therefore I have come myself to hear you—
 I, Oedipus, who bear the famous name.

The surviving manuscripts of this play include practically no stage directions. (Dudley Fitts and Robert Fitzgerald, the translators of the English version quoted here, have prefaced the opening scene with a descriptive passage based on what they have deduced from the dialogue and from information about Greek theatre architecture. Such added stage directions remind us that it is often necessary to reread a play several times before we become fully aware of the implications summed up in such additions, especially if the play is remote from us in time or unfamiliar in style.)

The title of Sophocles' play informs us that Oedipus is the king, and from later lines we learn that the action takes place in front of the palace. But what does this palace look like? Unless in our minds the place of the action is to remain wholly abstract we must form some image of it. We learn almost immediately that there are altars (but where are they placed and what is their physical appearance?) and that those who are assembled are praying for help (but it takes some knowledge of Greek customs to know that the boughs and garlands mentioned in the lines were symbols associated with suppliants and that the incense referred to is rising from altars dedicated to the various gods who are being entreated for mercy). Oedipus immediately assumes the role of father and protector of his subjects, for otherwise he would not address those assembled as "children" (when succeeding lines establish that the crowd ranges in age from young children to old men). The tone of Oedipus' speeches tells us that he rather self-righteously accepts the role of savior of his people. (Only as we read subsequent scenes do we gradually recognize the irony of his attitude, for he himself is the cause of the plague.) Like most plays, *Oedipus the King* immediately raises these questions: How are the characters dressed? How are they positioned? Do they move? If so, when and in what manner? At what tempo does the scene proceed? What is the tone of the scene?

Many other questions could be enumerated, but these illustrate that

inwardly and imaginatively seeing and hearing a script is not a simple undertaking. Yet, it can be done adequately if we cultivate the imagination and develop the understanding appropriate to the task. Perhaps the best place to begin is with a look at how plays are constructed.

Dramatic Action

Broadly speaking, a play is a representation of man in action. But "action" does not mean mere physical movement; it involves as well the motivations (both mental and psychological) that lie behind visible behavior. "Man in action," therefore, includes the whole range of feelings, thoughts, and deeds that define what sort of creature man is—what he does and why he does it. Because the dramatic potentials of this subject are almost infinite, a single play by necessity can depict only a small part of the whole. Furthermore, because each playwright's vision and methods differ somewhat from those of others, each drama is in some respects unique. On the other hand, outstanding plays, no matter when or where they were written, tend to have qualities in common that permit us to draw conclusions about the characteristics of effective dramatic action.

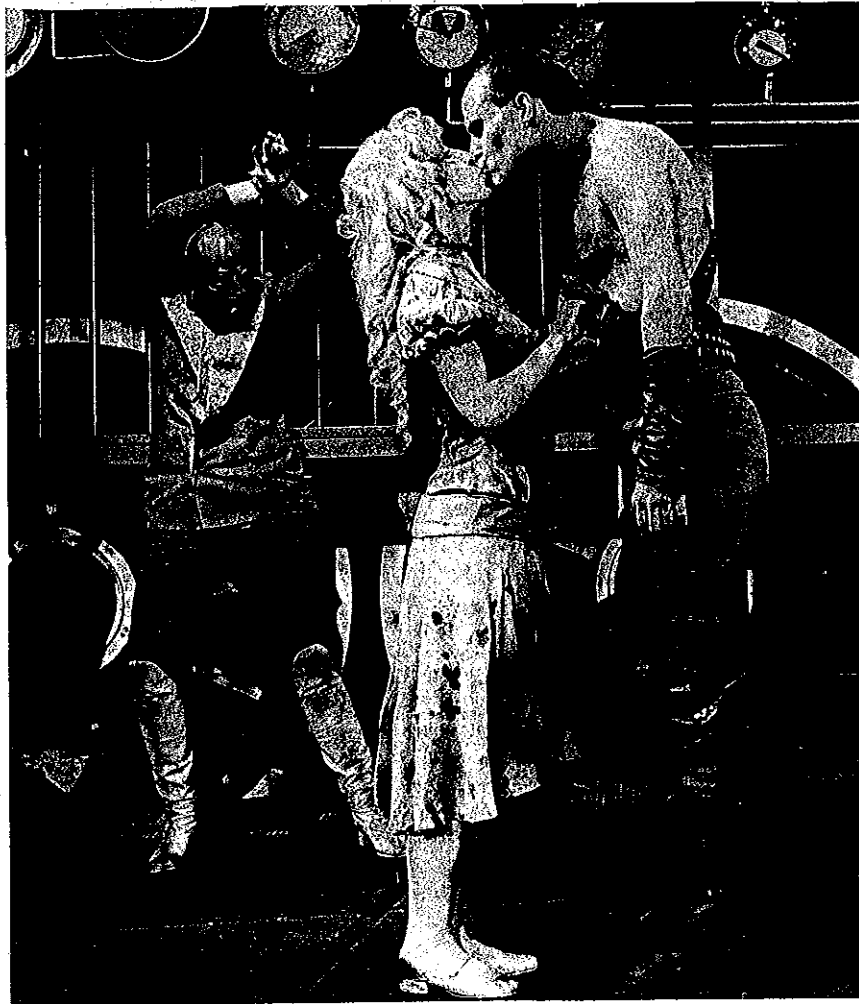
Aristotle (the Greek philosopher of the fourth century B.C.) declares that a play should have a beginning, middle, and end. On the surface, this statement seems obvious and overly simple, but it summarizes a fundamental principle. Basically, it means that a play should be *complete and self-contained*, that everything necessary for understanding it should be included within the play itself. If this principle is not observed, the action will probably be confusing or unsatisfying to audiences.

Dramatic action should be *purposeful*. It should be organized so as to arouse a specific response, such as pity and fear, joy, ridicule or indignation, thoughtful contemplation, or laughter. The purpose may be simple or complex, but the events, the characters, the mood, and other elements should be shaped and controlled with some purpose in mind.

Dramatic action should be *varied*. Although the action should be unified, variety (in plot, characterization, ideas, mood, or spectacle) is also needed if monotony and predictability are to be avoided.

Dramatic action should *engage and maintain interest*. The characters must command the audience's attention, the situation must be compelling enough to arouse interest, the issues must seem vital enough to warrant concern, or the aural and visual devices must be sufficiently novel to excite and hold interest.

Dramatic action should be *probable* (that is, all of the elements should be logically consistent). Probability is what most persons have in mind when they speak of a play's believability. But probability, or believability, does not depend upon similarity to real life, for a play that depicts impossible events may be called believable if the incidents occur logically within the framework created by the playwright. (For example, in Iones-



*Dramatic action should be probable. Although they are unusual, the costumes, set, and action in the Chelsea Theatre production of *The Crazy Locomotive* are logically consistent with each other. (Photo by Martha Swope.)*

co's *The Bald Soprano* a clock strikes seventeen times as the curtain rises; Mrs. Smith promptly announces that it is nine o'clock and launches into a bizarre speech on the virtues of English middle-class life. This opening quite obviously warns the audience that this play will not follow normal logic.) As any play progresses, the guidelines are revealed. The audience then expects the playwright to observe consistently the rules he has established. Even if he wishes to show that life is inconsistent or ruled by chance, the dramatist must be consistent in his depiction of inconsistency and chance. Anything that violates a play's pattern of logic (however strange that pattern would be in real life) will seem out of place and, therefore, unbelievable. It is this principle that Kenneth Burke has in mind when he declares that a work's form is created through the arousal and fulfillment of expectation.

Methods of Organizing Dramatic Action

A dramatic action is composed of incidents organized so as to accomplish some purpose. Organization is ultimately a matter of directing attention to relationships which create a meaningful pattern. The most common sources of unity are thought, character, and cause-to-effect arrangement of events.

Traditionally, the dominant organizational principle has been the *cause-to-effect* arrangement of incidents. Using this method, the playwright sets up in the opening scenes all of the necessary conditions—the situation, the desires and motivations of the characters—out of which the later events develop. The goals of one character come into conflict with those of another, or two conflicting desires within the same character may lead to a crisis. Attempts to surmount the obstacles make up the substance of the play, each scene growing logically out of those that have preceded it.

Less often, a dramatist uses a character as the principal source of unity. In this case, the incidents are held together primarily because they center around one person. Such a play may dramatize the life of a historical figure, or it may show a character's responses to a series of experiences. This kind of organization may be seen in such plays as Christopher Marlow's *Doctor Faustus* and *Tamburlaine*.

A playwright may organize his material around a *basic idea*, with the scenes linked largely because they illustrate aspects of a larger theme or argument. This type of organization is used frequently by modern playwrights, especially those of the expressionist, epic, and absurdist movements. It can be seen, for example, in Brecht's *The Private Life of the Master Race*, which treats the rise of the Nazi party in a series of scenes that illustrates the inhumanity of Nazi ideology. Many absurdist plays, such as Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, do not develop a story so much as they embroider upon a concept, mood, or apprehension. Much drama of the 1960s resembles music in its structure since it introduces a theme and then elaborates or improvises on it. *Hair*, for example, has no through-line of action; rather it is a collection of "moments" which together seek to express the anxieties, aspirations, and ideals of youth and to declare opposition to war and to several social conventions. Instead of using linear progression to tell a clear-cut story, it tends to build spirally or vertically out of a set of motifs.

Any organizational pattern other than cause-to-effect is apt to seem loose, often giving the effect of randomness, because its incidents are not related causally. In analyzing a play, therefore, it is often essential to pinpoint the source of unity, however vague it may at first seem, for only then will it appear to be a whole rather than a collection of unrelated happenings.

Most plays from the past rely on *conflict* to arouse and maintain interest and suspense. In fact, one of the most commonly held ideas about drama is that it must involve conflict: of one character with another, of desires within the same character, of a character with his environment, of one ideology with another.

Although overt conflict plays a major role in most plays, there are dramas in which it is of little significance. Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, for example, makes relatively little use of conflict. Instead, a narrator (the Stage Manager) begins scenes at important moments and interrupts them when his point is made. He shows a typical day in the life of a village, Grovers Corners, and suggests that morning, midday, and evening are related to childhood, maturity, and death. Although momentary conflicts occur within individual scenes, there is no major clash. Similarly, in *The Bald Soprano* events seem to occur aimlessly, and clearly they do not depend on overt conflicts.

Whether or not conflict is involved, the action of drama is usually arranged in a *climactic order*—that is, the scenes increase rather than decrease in interest. This effect is achieved through the revelation of new aspects of character or idea, by increasing suspense (the decisive moment is felt to be moving nearer and nearer), by increasing emotional intensity, or in some other way. Although the arrangement is from the lesser to the greater, within this overall movement there are moments of contrast or repose (such as the comic scenes in Shakespeare's tragedies) which afford a temporary change from the dominant pattern.

Organization may also be approached through the parts of drama, which, according to Aristotle, include *plot*, *character*, *thought*, *diction*, *music*, and *spectacle*.

Plot

Plot is often considered to be merely the summary of a play's incidents. But, though it includes the story line, it refers as well to the organization of all the elements into a meaningful pattern. Thus, plot is the overall structure of a play. In some dramas both the story and its arrangement may seem vague, but nevertheless all plays have plots, however tenuous they may be. Because the methods used in organizing plays vary widely, the most typical patterns will be emphasized here, but important deviations will be noted as well.

The Beginning. The beginning of a play usually establishes the place, the occasion, the characters, the mood, the theme, and the scheme of probability. A play is somewhat like coming upon previously unknown places and persons. Initially, the novelty may attract attention, but, as the facts about the people and the place are established, interest either wanes or increases. The playwright is faced, therefore, with a double problem:



Opening scene of *King Lear* at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival, 1958. (Photo by Dwaine Smith)

he must give essential information, but at the same time create expectations or arouse interest sufficient to make the audience desire to stay and see more.

The beginning of a play thus involves *exposition*, or the setting forth of information—about earlier events, the identity of the characters, and the present situation. While exposition is an unavoidable part of the opening scenes, it is not confined to them, for in most plays background information is only gradually revealed.

The amount of exposition required for clarity is partially determined by the *point of attack*, or the moment at which the story is taken up. Shakespeare uses an early point of attack—that is, he begins a play near the inception of the story and then tells it in clear chronological sequence. Thus, he need rely little on exposition. Greek tragedians, on the other hand, use late points of attack, which require that many prior events be summarized, and they actually show only the final parts of their stories. The amount of exposition may also depend upon the complexity of the story and its antecedents. It may vary as well according to an author's estimate of his audience. Currently, a playwright might merely refer to "Watergate" and expect his audience to supply all the necessary information surrounding it; a generation from now, however, this reference may puzzle those without considerable knowledge of history. Many playwrights in recent years have slighted exposition, probably out of the belief that audiences do not really demand that logical antecedents be supplied for everything that happens and that they are adept at picking up clues and making connections among seemingly disparate elements without having them spelled out.

Playwrights motivate exposition in various ways. For example, Ibsen most frequently introduces a character who has returned after a lengthy absence. Answers to his questions about happenings while he was away supply the needed background information. On the other hand, in a non-realistic play essential exposition may be given in a monologue. Many of Euripides' tragedies, for example, open with a prologue in which a single character summarizes past events and bemoans his present plight. In a musical, song and dance may be used for expository purposes. How exposition is used, then, depends on several factors, including: point of attack, complexity of story, scheme of probability, type of play, and the author's estimate of his audience.

In most plays from the past, attention is usually focused early on a question, potential conflict, or theme. The beginning of such plays, therefore, includes what may be called an *inciting* incident, or an occurrence that sets the main action in motion. In Sophocles' *Oedipus the King* a plague is ravishing Thebes; Oedipus has sought guidance from the oracle at Delphi, who declares that the murderer of King Laius must be found and punished before the plague can end. This is the event (introduced in the Prologue) that sets the action in motion.

The inciting incident usually leads directly to a *major dramatic question* around which the play is organized—the thread or spine that holds events together—although this question may undergo a number of changes as the play progresses. For example, the question first raised in *Oedipus the King* is: Will the murderer of Laius be found and the city saved? Later this question is modified as interest shifts to Oedipus' own guilt. Not all plays, especially recent ones, include inciting incidents or clearly identifiable major dramatic questions. Nevertheless, all have focal points, frequently a theme or controlling idea, around which the action is centered. Thus, it is always helpful to identify the unifying principle, whether it be a major dramatic question, a theme, or some other element.

The Middle. The middle of a play (at least in most of those from earlier periods) is normally composed of a series of complications. A *complication* is any new element which serves to alter the direction of the action. Complications may arise from the discovery of new information, the unexpected opposition to a plan, the necessity of choosing between courses of action, arrival of a character, introduction of a new idea, or from other sources.

Complications usually narrow the possibilities of action and create suspense. At the opening of a play the potentialities are numerous, since the story might develop in almost any direction. As characters and situation are established and as complications arise, however, the alternatives are progressively reduced. As a result, the audience comes to sense the direction of the action. As the possibilities are narrowed, a feeling of approaching crisis develops. Finally, there comes a moment when the alternatives have been so reduced that the next discovery will answer the major dramatic question. This is the moment of crisis or the peak toward which the

play builds, after which there is gradual release in emotional tension leading to resolution and the play's end.

The substance of most complications is *discovery*. In one sense everything presented in a play is discovery if by that term is meant the revelation of things not previously known. The term is normally reserved, however, for occurrences of sufficient importance to alter the direction of action. Discoveries may involve objects (a wife discovers in her husband's pocket a weapon of the kind used in a murder), persons (a young man



Oedipus (Kenneth Welsh, standing center) learns the truth about his birth and parentage from an old shepherd (Oliver Cliff, kneeling) in the 1973 Guthrie Theater production of Oedipus the King designed by Desmond Heeley.

discovers that his rival in love is his brother), facts (a young man about to leave home discovers that his mother has cancer), values (a woman discovers that self-esteem is more important than marriage), or self (a man discovers that he has been acting from purely selfish motives when he thought that he was acting out of love for his children). Self-discovery is usually the most powerful.

A complication is normally introduced by one discovery and concluded by another. A complication is set in motion by the appearance of some new element which requires a new approach. But the steps taken to meet the new demands give rise to tensions and conflicts which build to a climax, or peak of intensity. The climax is accompanied, or brought about, by still another discovery which may resolve the existing complication but precipitate another. Each complication, thus, normally has a beginning, middle, and end—its own development, climax, and resolution—just as does the play as a whole.

The implications of each discovery are not always followed up immediately. Frequently a playwright is dealing with a number of characters and not every revelation involves all of them. Several complications, therefore, may intervene between the introduction of a discovery and its development. In such cases, the play pursues first one line of action and then another in an alternating or overlapping pattern.

Means other than discoveries may be used to precipitate complications. Natural disasters (such as earthquakes, storms, shipwrecks, and automobile accidents) are sometimes used. These are apt to seem especially contrived, however, if they resolve the problem (for example, if the villain is killed in an automobile accident and the struggle is automatically terminated). Frequently complications are initiated by characters acting out of ignorance. For example, a father arranges a trip for his daughter without realizing that she has fallen in love and wants to stay at home.

In most complications, the event is not as important as its effect upon the characters involved. The attempts of each to meet the situation give rise to the succeeding action and lead to new complications.

The series of complications usually culminates in the *crisis*, or turning point of the action, which opens the way for the resolution. For example, in *Oedipus the King*, Oedipus sets out to discover the murderer of Laius; the crisis comes when Oedipus realizes that he himself is the guilty person.

Not all plays have a clear-cut series of complications leading to a crisis. *Waiting for Godot*, for example, is less concerned with a progressing action than with a static condition. Nevertheless, interest is maintained by the frequent introduction of new elements: Estragon and Vladimir improvise games or plans to pass the time, and the arrival of Pozzo and Lucky creates a diversion. There is no crisis in the usual sense, only the gradual realization that man is to go on waiting, perhaps eternally.

The End. The final portion of a play, often called the *resolution* or *dénouement*, extends from the crisis to the final curtain. Although often

it is brief, it may be of considerable length. It serves to tie off the various strands of action and to answer the questions raised earlier. It brings the situation back to an equilibrium and satisfies audience expectations.

The crisis normally leads to an *obligatory* scene (that is, one which the dramatist must show if the play is to be satisfying to an audience). During much of a play, important facts are hidden or ignored by the characters. The audience senses, however (either consciously or unconsciously), that eventually these facts must be revealed, since the entire action seems to point in that direction. The obligatory scene, then, answers the question: What will happen when all of the facts are revealed? It shows the opposing characters, each now with full knowledge, meeting face to face. Or it may show a single character, now recognizing his own inner conflicts and motivations, coming to grips with the implications. Since the final piece of vital information is usually withheld until the moment of crisis, the obligatory scene normally follows close upon it.

The obligatory scene may be extended over a series of complications. For example, a number of episodes may be used to show the tables being

Final scene from Friedrich Dürrenmatt's The Physicists, as performed at Indiana University. Directed by Gary Gaiser; designed by Richard Scammon.



turned on a man who had deceived everyone. In such cases, the resolution may be as absorbing as the complications which preceded the crisis. Normally, the resolution creates a sense of completion and fulfillment. The audience can see clearly how the ending has come about, even though it could not have predicted the outcome in advance.

Again, many plays deviate from the typical patterns. At the end of his plays, Brecht often poses questions that can only be answered outside the theatre, for he wishes to stimulate thought and action about real social conditions. Many absurdist plays are essentially circular and end much as they began so as to suggest that the events of the play will repeat themselves endlessly. This type of resolution is often found in drama organized around thought, for the ultimate purpose is to stimulate the audience to examine its own situation rather than to view the drama as a diversion from real life. Nevertheless, all plays clearly have resolutions that bring the action to a close, even if they merely imply a new beginning. Furthermore, all of a play's elements should help to create an impression that the ending is appropriate.

Character and Characterization

Character is the primary material from which plots are created, for incidents are developed mainly through the speech and behavior of dramatic personages. Characterization is the playwright's means of differentiating one dramatic personage from another. Since a dramatist may endow his creatures with few or many traits, complexity of characterization varies markedly. In analyzing roles, it is helpful to look at four levels of characterization. (This approach is adapted from a scheme suggested by Hubert Heffner in *Modern Theatre Practice* and elsewhere.)

The first level of characterization is *physical* and is concerned only with such basic facts as sex, age, size, and color. Sometimes a dramatist does not supply all of this information, but it is present whenever the play is produced, since actors necessarily give concrete form to the characters. The physical is the simplest level of characterization, however, since it reveals external traits only, many of which may not affect the dramatic action at all.

The second level is *social*. It includes a character's economic status, profession or trade, religion, family relationships—all those factors that place him in his environment.

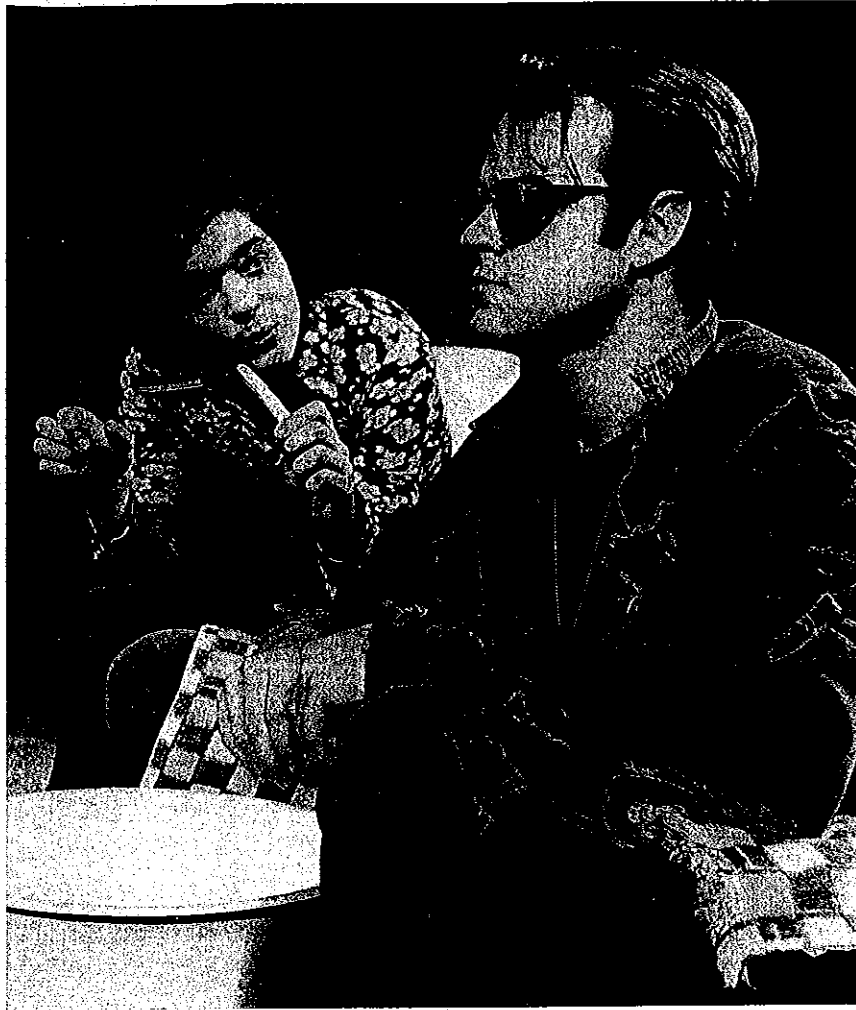
The third level is *psychological*. It reveals a character's habitual responses, attitudes, desires, motivations, likes and dislikes—the inner workings of the mind, both emotional and intellectual, which precede action. Since habits of feeling, thought, and behavior define character more fully than do physical and social traits, and since drama most often arises from conflicting desires, the psychological is the most essential level of characterization.

The fourth level is *moral*. All plays at least imply moral concern, although they do not always emphasize it. It is most apt to be used in serious plays, especially tragedies. Although almost all human action suggests some ethical standard, in many plays the moral implications are ignored and decisions are made on grounds of expediency. This is typical of comedy, since moral deliberations tend to make any action serious. More significantly than any other kind, moral decisions differentiate characters, since the choices they make when faced with moral crises show whether they are selfish, hypocritical, honest, or whatever. A moral decision usually causes a character to examine his own motives and values, in the process of which his true nature is revealed both to himself and to the audience.

A playwright may emphasize one or more of these levels. Some writers pay little attention to the physical appearance of their characters, concentrating instead upon psychological and moral traits; other dramatists may describe appearance and social status in detail. In assessing the completeness of a characterization, however, it is not enough merely to make a list of traits and levels of characterization. It is also necessary to ask *how the character functions in the play*. For example, the audience needs to know little about the maid who only appears to announce dinner; any detailed characterization would be superfluous and distracting. On the other hand, the principal characters usually need to be drawn in greater depth. The appropriateness and completeness of each characterization, therefore, may be judged only after analyzing its function in each scene and in the play as a whole.

A character is revealed in several ways: through *descriptions in stage directions, prefaces, or other explanatory material* not part of the dialogue or action; through *what the character says*; through *what others say about him*; and, perhaps most important, through *what he does*. It is not enough, however, for a dramatist to assign characteristics to his personages; some action must be motivated, or some idea clarified, by each quality if it is not to be irrelevant or even misleading. The relative importance of each trait, therefore, must be assessed in terms of its function in the play.

It is not always easy to perceive a character's true nature, since information about him is usually given in fragments scattered throughout the play. Furthermore, many different or even contradictory images of him may be presented. For example, a character may see himself as a certain kind of person; for one reason or another, however, he may try to project a different image to others; in turn, each of the other characters will see him from a different angle. Because the dramatist builds character through this composite approach, the audience must always watch for clues that indicate which statements and actions are to be accepted as accurate revelations of character. Sometimes, however, as in Harold Pinter's plays, it is virtually impossible to resolve the ambiguities, and, in fact, the uncertainty may be an important ingredient in the playwright's outlook and method.



*Alan Cauldwell (left) as Rick and Drew Snyder as David in a climactic moment of Rabe's *Sticks and Bones*. (Photo by Friedman-Abeles.)*

Characters are defined in much the same way as are words: First they are placed in a broad category (typified), and then differentiated (individualized) from other examples of the same type. *Typification* is necessary if characters are to be placed in the context of human experience. If a character were totally unlike any person the spectators had ever known, they would be unable to understand him. Most characters may be placed in a category, such as the doting mother, the bashful young man, or the ambitious executive. But if the playwright goes no further, the audience will probably find the personages oversimplified and will see them as "type" characters. Therefore, most dramatists assign several traits which serve to *individualize* characters within the broad categories. Thus, typifying qualities make a character recognizable and familiar, while individualizing traits make him unusual and complex.

A playwright may be concerned with making his characters *sympathetic* or *unsympathetic*. Most frequently, sympathetic characters are created by assigning traits admired in real life, but many modern playwrights have created sympathy for anormative characters by exploring the reasons behind behavior, showing characters as rebels against a hypocritical society or as victims of circumstances more worthy of compassion than vilification. Normally, however, sympathetic characters are given major virtues and lesser foibles, while the reverse procedure is used for unsympathetic characters. The more a character is made either completely good or bad, the more he is apt to become unacceptable as a truthful reflection of human behavior.

Acceptability, however, is in part determined by the type of play or the scheme of probability. Melodrama, for example, oversimplifies human psychology and clearly divides characters and actions into good and evil. Tragedy, on the other hand, normally depicts more complex forces at work both within and without man, and requires greater depth of characterization than does melodrama, which may function very well with type characters. The audience usually expects only that characterization be appropriate to the play's action and thought.

Thought

The third basic element of a play is *thought*. It includes the themes, the arguments, the overall meaning, focus, or significance of the action. It is present in all plays, even those that seem to be without purpose, for a playwright cannot avoid expressing ideas through the events and characterizations of the play, which always imply some view of human behavior. Thought is also one of the major sources of unity in drama, for action may be organized around a central idea, motif, or concern. This kind of unity is typical of much recent drama.

In thought, a play is both general and specific. For example, *King Lear* dramatizes in part the general topic of child-parent relationships, but it does so through the complex story of intrigues among the ruling class in England's legendary past. Thus, the general topic, or theme, serves as a point of focus around which events cluster, while the specific story gives concreteness to ideas which otherwise would be too abstract. Although a play may have a number of themes, one is usually dominant. One key to a play, therefore, lies in its thought. By identifying the major motifs and examining how they have been embodied we can recognize the author's over-all purpose and methods.

The general and specific subjects of a play are related to the concepts of universality and individuality. *Universality* is the quality that enables a play to communicate with audiences, even though centuries may have passed since it was written. To say that *Hamlet* has universal significance does not mean that we should be able to put ourselves in Hamlet's posi-

tion as a prince or as the avenger of his father's death. The universal elements are to be found in the conflict between a son's duty to his father and his feelings for his mother, between personal integrity and religious faith, between justice and corrupt political power, and between the "under-dog" and overwhelming forces. These are situations that might confront human beings of any social class in any period. They provide points of contact between Hamlet and the audience.

On the other hand, every story must be *individualized* if it is to be believable and interesting. *Hamlet*, therefore, has many elements that depart markedly from normal experience and keep the story from being hackneyed and overly familiar. However, some modern dramatists, such as Wilder and Ionesco, have reversed the normal process. They have chosen the most commonplace events, but have treated them in such a way as to make them seem strange. Thus, they force the audience to view the familiar in a new light.

The significance, or "meaning," of a play is normally implied rather than directly stated. It is to be discovered in the relationships among characters, the ideas associated with sympathetic and unsympathetic characters, the conflicts and their resolutions, the spectacle, and such devices as music and song. Sometimes, however, the author's intention is clearly stated in the script. The characters may advocate a certain line of action, point of view, or specific social reform. Dramas using such methods used to be called *propaganda* or *social problem* plays because of their aim to persuade an audience to act or think in a particular way. Although these terms are no longer in wide use, the type of play they describe has continued to be popular, perhaps most notably with radical theatre groups of the late 1960s.

An author wishing to persuade an audience has two paths open to him. He may subordinate his message and depend upon the implications to be sufficiently persuasive. In this case, he risks being misunderstood. Or, he may make his position quite clear (usually through a direct statement by an admirable character or by oversimplifying the issues to make the choices clear). In this case, while the dramatist leaves no doubt as to his purpose, he may alienate his audience, who may conclude that the play has been an excuse for delivering a sermon or social message. In the hands of the unskillful dramatist such sermonizing is frequently the result. Expert dramatists, however, like Ibsen and Shaw, have made themselves relatively clear while creating compelling and vital plays.

The dramatist who is intent upon achieving *complete* clarity must restrict the meanings of words and actions and in doing so may eliminate those connotations and implications which suggest that the significance of the drama extends far beyond the immediate story. Yet ambiguity is basic to human experience: Life does not come equipped with meanings which are unmistakable; we ponder over our experience and try to find significance in it, but we can never be certain that we have solved the riddles. Since human experience is the raw material of drama, the playwright who

sees no ambiguities in life may well create a world on the stage which is too simple for an audience to accept. On the other hand, everyone simplifies experience in the process of seeking its significance. Since the dramatist is usually concerned with the patterns behind the infinite detail of life, he must eliminate what he considers irrelevant. His selection, nevertheless, must command belief.

Dramatists in different periods have used various devices to project ideas. Greek playwrights made extensive use of the *chorus*, just as those of later periods employed such devices as *soliloquies*, *asides*, and other forms of *direct statement*. Still other tools for projecting meaning are *allegory* and *symbol*. In allegory, characters are often personifications (good deeds, mercy, greed, and so on), and the meaning of the play can usually be reduced to a clear moral statement. Its use can be seen most clearly in a play such as *Everyman*. A symbol is a concrete object or event which, while meaningful in itself, also suggests a concept or set of relationships. For example, the orchard in Chekhov's *The Cherry Orchard* is both a real object and a symbol. As an object, once useful, then admired merely for its beauty, it is finally destroyed to make way for homes that will be occupied by merchants. As a symbol, it represents the Russian aristocracy, which, having lost its usefulness, must make way for the more vigorous middle class. The orchard takes on a double meaning—literal and symbolic—enabling it to comment not only on the characters in the play but also on Russian society in general. The symbol has been a favorite device with modern writers, for it allows them to suggest deeper meanings even within a realistic framework. Contemporary dramatists have made considerable use of such devices as songs and projections to convey or induce thought. Thus, although approaches vary widely, all plays comment on human experience in some way.

Diction

Plot, character, and thought are the basic ingredients of drama; to convey these to an audience, the playwright has at his disposal only two means—sound and spectacle—since the spectator takes in a theatrical experience almost wholly through the ear and the eye. Sound includes language, music, and other aural effects; spectacle includes all the visual elements of a production (physical movement and dance, costumes, scenery, properties, and lighting).

Although it has been fashionable in recent years to denigrate the importance of words in the theatre, language is still the playwright's primary means of expression. When a play is performed, other expressive means (primarily music and spectacle) may be added, but to convey his conceptions to others, the dramatist depends almost entirely on dialogue and stage directions. Thus, language (or diction) is the dramatist's most essential tool.



Diction serves many purposes. First, it is used to *impart information*. Through it, the playwright sets forth the essential facts, ideas, and emotional responses of characters in each scene.

Second, diction is used to *characterize*. It is from his speeches that we perceive the emotion and intellectual motivations and responses of each character in a play.

Third, language is used to *direct attention* to important plot elements. Since significant information and responses must be emphasized, dialogue points up conflicts and complications and prepares for further developments. It builds suspense by making the audience aware of potential outcomes, for while scenes always occur in the present, they constantly direct attention toward possible future results and create a sense of forward movement and expectancy.

Fourth, diction is used to *reveal the themes and ideas* of a play. It provides clues to significant meanings while it is revealing character and developing action.

Fifth, language helps to *establish tone and scheme of probability*. It indicates whether the play is comic or serious, farcical or tragic. It also suggests the degree of abstraction from reality. Sometimes the use of poetry indicates that the play will not follow ordinary causality. The choice of words, the number of colloquialisms, the length of lines, and other linguistic devices are clues to the scheme of probability within which the play is operating.

Characterization occurs on several levels. In Sticks and Bones, produced by Joseph Papp in 1971, the bodily postures, facial expressions, and costumes give the audience many insights into the characters.

Sixth, diction helps to *establish tempo and rhythm*. Tempo is the pace at which a scene is played. The tempo of a love scene is apt to be much more leisurely than that of a dueling scene, for example, and the diction usually reflects and helps to create the proper tempo. Rhythm is the recurring pattern which results from the flow of speeches. Halting speech gives rise to one rhythmical pattern, and animated, excited speech to another. Tempo and rhythm together create a sense of forward movement or of retarded action. When the rhythm of each scene is built to a climax (much like a movement in a symphony), it helps to hold attention and arouse expectancy.

The diction of every play, no matter how realistic, is more abstract and formal than that of normal conversation. A dramatist always selects, arranges, and heightens language more than anyone ever does in spontaneous speech. Consequently, in a realistic play, although the dialogue is modeled after everyday usage, the characters are more articulate and state their ideas and feelings more precisely than their real-life counterparts do. On the other hand, realistic dialogue may retain the rhythms, tempos, and basic vocabulary of colloquial speech.

The dialogue of nonrealistic plays may deviate markedly from normal speech. Sometimes, everyday patterns are reduced to a mere skeleton, as in expressionistic drama, the dialogue of which is sometimes labeled "telegraphic" because every superfluous word has been eliminated. At other times, the clichés of ordinary conversation are emphasized until they become ludicrous, as in many of Ionesco's plays. More frequently, however, nonrealistic drama employs a larger vocabulary, abandons the rhythms of conversation, and makes considerable use of imagery and meter. A larger vocabulary allows a more precise choice of words, avoids the repetitiveness typical of colloquial speech, and permits more forceful expression when characters must transcend the ordinary.

Imagery is always found in poetic drama, but it may appear in realistic prose plays as well. The simile is widely used even in everyday speech ("He was as mad as a hornet," or "She's as nervous as a cat on a hot tin roof"). A simile makes a direct comparison between two qualities or things and helps to point up likenesses which reveal character, situation, or meaning. A metaphor makes an indirect comparison between dissimilarities ("God is my fortress"). There are many other kinds of imagery, but all point to comparisons, connotations, or implications which enlarge or alter the literal meaning. Furthermore, the use of a large number of similar images affects the tone of a play. The dark, somber quality of *Hamlet*, for example, is partially explained by the overwhelming number of images in it concerned with death and decay. Although an audience may not be aware of images, it is unconsciously influenced by them.

Diction, like the other elements of a play, uses both the familiar and the unfamiliar, the typical and the individual. Aristotle states that good dialogue should be both *clear* and *distinctive*. He goes on to explain that clarity depends upon the use of ordinary words, but warns that familiar

words used alone may lead to dullness. He observes, "Diction becomes distinguished and nonprosaic by the use of unfamiliar terms, i.e., strange words, metaphors, lengthened forms, and everything that deviates from the ordinary modes of speech. But a whole statement in such terms will be either a riddle or a barbarism." Good diction, then, usually strikes a middle ground between overly familiar and overly strange language. The familiar gives clarity, the strange or unusual adds variety.

Diction should also be *adapted to the stage*. Sometimes a dramatist writes speeches which sound stilted and unnatural when spoken because he has failed to take into account both the possibilities and the limitations of the voice and ear. The good playwright is concerned with how dialogue will sound, and how the human voice will affect the written word.

The basic criterion for judging diction, however, is its *appropriateness* to the characters, the situation, the scheme of probability, and the type of play. Almost any dialogue will be acceptable to an audience if it is in keeping with the other elements in the script.

Music

Music, as ordinarily understood, is not a part of every play. But, if the term is extended to include all patterned sound, it may be considered an important ingredient in every production. In this expanded sense, music includes all sound effects, the actors' voices, songs, and instrumental music.

In the preceding section, language was described as the playwright's primary means of expression. But a written script (like a musical score) is not fully activated until the performers—through the elements of pitch, stress, volume, tempo, duration, and quality—transform print into sound. It is also through the manipulation of these elements that meaning is conveyed. Although the words of a speech may remain constant, their implications can be varied considerably by altering one or more of the elements. For example, note the numerous shades of meaning that may be imparted to so simple a speech as "You say he told her" by shifting the emphasis from one word to another, or by altering the tone from anger to sarcasm to questioning or wonder. A playwright may know precisely what he wishes to convey in speech, but a director or actor may not perceive this intent, and therefore may give the speech a quite different interpretation. A dramatist cannot guard against all misinterpretations, but he can lessen them if he writes for the voice and ear as well as for the eye.

Dialogue varies considerably in its formal qualities. In some plays, it simulates the loosely controlled rhythms of everyday speech, but in others, such as in Shakespearean drama, it is shaped into a highly formalized pattern. In delivery, the effective actor respects the pattern, for it is one of the devices used by the playwright to define characters and their world. It is not always easy, however, to accept or render patterns that deviate from



Cast members at the climax of a production number in A Little Night Music. (Photo by Martha Swope.)

normal speech. For example, it is often said that contemporary American actors have lost the art of speaking Shakespearean verse and that they convert it into prose.

Song formalizes speech even more than does verse. A musical setting usually supplies rather precise directions as to how the words are to be rendered: the key signature and the melody specify at what pitch each syllable is to be uttered, and the notation prescribes the duration of each sound; directions for tempo and volume are also normally given by the composer; and the combination of elements determines the over all mood or tonal quality. Thus, the writer of songs goes much beyond the writer of dialogue in specifying the pattern of sound to be heard in performance. The actor is permitted considerably more discretion in vocal delivery than is the singer, although some musical compositions allow the singer room for vocal embellishments and similar personal touches.

Instrumental music may accompany lyrics or be used to underscore dialogue, but it may dispense with words altogether. It may be played by a single instrument or many. Since each instrument has distinctive tonal characteristics, the mood and texture of instrumental music may be varied almost endlessly by using a solo instrument or by varying the types and numbers of instruments in combination.

A play, then, may use no formal music, may introduce one or more incidental songs, or may utilize (as in musical comedy and opera) song and instrumental accompaniment as integral structural means.

Music serves many functions. First, it can *establish or enhance mood and create expectations*. The overture to a musical (or the incidental music used to precede scenes in a nonmusical drama) usually reflects the tone of what is to follow and thereby increases the audience's receptivity. In the nineteenth century, music was used regularly (as it now is in movies) to underscore and build the emotional qualities of scenes. While contemporary playwrights usually avoid the obvious sentimentality of early melodrama, many nevertheless rely heavily on music to create mood and tone.

Second, music can help to *establish the scheme of probability*. The liberal use of music is normally an indication that the playwright is departing markedly from the patterns of everyday life and that the audience should not expect the incidents to be entirely realistic. On the other hand, music may be used extensively in realistic drama, provided its inclusion is logically explained.

Third, music can *characterize*. Melody, rhythm, and tempo (in combination with lyrics) can establish the traits of a dramatic character, often in a single song.

Fourth, music can be a *medium for ideas*. Brecht often uses songs to raise questions or to reflect on events. He often deliberately uses musical settings at variance in tone with the lyrics in order to create conflict in the mind of the audience about the song's intent. Somewhat similarly, many contemporary playwrights have used song as a medium for protest, questioning, or agitation.

Fifth, music can *condense*. It can speed up characterization, and provide exposition quickly (as is typical of the opening scenes of musical comedy). It may also be used to telescope processes which otherwise occur over a long period of time. (For example, in *My Fair Lady*, the transformation of Liza Doolittle's speech patterns is shown primarily through a single musical number, "The Rain in Spain.") Furthermore, if early in the play the composer relates certain melodies or musical motifs to specific events or characters, the mere playing of a melodic phrase later will remind the audience of earlier occurrences.

Sixth, music can *lend variety*. Not only can music itself be endlessly varied, it can provide far greater variety to a play than is possible with the spoken word alone.

Seventh, music can be *pleasurable in itself*, for it is enjoyable quite apart from its dramatic uses.

As with spectacle, music is not always clearly specified in a script. In fact, except in the case of operas and musical comedies, a musical score seldom accompanies the printed text. Even then, unless one has the training to read music and the ability mentally to translate a score into sound, it is difficult to apprehend how music will alter the effect gained from a reading of the play. Therefore, in analyzing scripts, critics usually ignore the musical element, although when they write about the same plays in performance, they may say much about it.

Spectacle

After sound, the visual elements of a play are the dramatist's principal means of expression. But, since he normally depends upon others to supply these elements when the play is produced, the author does not have full control over them. In recent years, as the importance of language has been challenged, the visual element has often dominated the aural. Because the playwright seldom describes spectacle precisely, other theatre artists, even when they wish to be entirely faithful to his intentions, must base their work on deductions gained from analyzing plot, characterization, thought, and dialogue.

The functions of spectacle are several. First, spectacle *gives information*. It helps to establish where and when the action occurs (a living room, a castle, a prison, or a composite of many places; the historical period, the time of day, the country), or it may indicate that time and place are irrelevant.

Second, spectacle *aids characterization*. It helps to establish such social factors as the economic level, the class, and the profession to which the characters belong. It aids in projecting the psychological aspects of character by demonstrating tastes (in the clothes worn, the rooms in which the characters live, and the like). Psychological factors are also revealed through the spatial relationships among characters (not always apparent in a script but always seen in a production).

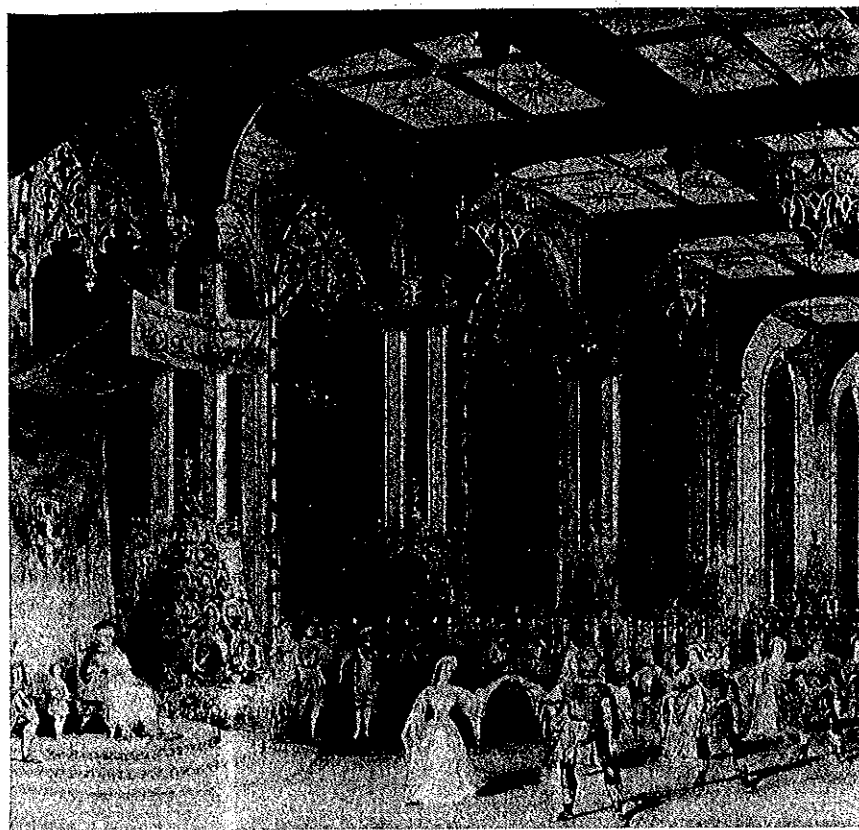
Third, spectacle helps to *establish the scheme of probability*. An abstract setting suggests one scheme, while a completely realistic setting may indicate another. Costumes, lighting, the actors' gestures and movement all establish the play's context of reality.

Fourth, spectacle *establishes mood and atmosphere* by giving clues about the relative seriousness of the action, and by providing the proper environment in relation to a play's form and style.

Spectacle, like the other elements of a play, should be *appropriate, expressive of the play's values, distinctive, and practicable*. (The problems of transferring the written script to the stage are treated at length in Part 3 of this book.)

Form in Drama

These six parts—plot, character, thought, diction, music, and spectacle—make up every play. But they may be combined and varied in ways almost infinitely. Nevertheless, certain basic patterns have recurred sufficiently often to permit us to divide plays into a limited number of dramatic forms. Because as a term it has been used to designate a variety of concepts, *form* is difficult to define. Basically, however, it means the arrangement (or overall pattern) of a work of art.



Charles Kean's production of Shakespeare's Henry VIII in 1859. The scenery and costumes typify the antiquarian approach in vogue at that time. (Courtesy of the Victoria and Albert Museum. Crown Copyright.)

There are three principal determinants of form. First, form is affected by the material being shaped. In actuality, it is difficult, if not impossible, to separate form and matter, since no one can comprehend a formless object or idea. Nevertheless, the matter (the action, characters, mood, and thought) of comedy differs sufficiently from that of tragedy to indicate that one has been shaped to arouse laughter or ridicule while the other is designed to create pity or fear.

Second, the writer (or the maker of an artistic object) is a determinant of form. Each man's view of life and art differs somewhat from that of others, and his own peculiar talents and intentions show in his work. Thus, while both Sophocles and Euripides wrote tragedies, the forms of their plays show certain differences. Third, the intended purpose of an object helps to determine its form. Just as a chair's shape differs from that of a desk because it is created to fulfill a different need, so the design of a tragedy differs from that of a comedy.

Since no two plays ever have the same material, author, and purpose, each play is unique. On the other hand, plays share many qualities. Because each play is both unique and similar to other works, two major

approaches to form have developed: one treats form as *fixed* and the other as *organic*. The doctrine of *fixed forms* rests upon the belief that the characteristics of dramatic types can be clearly isolated and defined. This was the usual position from the Renaissance until about 1750. Many adherents of this view have also suggested that a play may be judged according to how well it fulfills the requirements of its particular type. The doctrine of *organic form*, on the other hand, is based on the belief that a play takes shape and grows as a plant does, and that each play must be free to follow its own needs and laws without reference to any preexisting ideas about form.

Each of these two views is partially defensible. Most plays can be classified according to type, and the major characteristics of each type can be listed. Furthermore, in criticizing a play, it is usually helpful to compare it with other works of similar type; using categories as points of reference can also save much time (for example, a term such as *comedy of manners* summarizes many qualities and communicates quickly, provided that a reader understands the meaning of the designation).

On the other hand, each play is unique in some respects and should be appreciated for its individuality. Often it is impossible to classify a play according to form, and the attempt to label it may assume more importance than understanding it. For example, arguments as to whether *Death of a Salesman* can rightfully be called a tragedy have frequently consumed undue attention in discussions. One form is not necessarily better than another, for there are both excellent and poor examples of each form. Furthermore, a play is not necessarily defective because it does not fit some abstract idea of form. For example, our inability to categorize *Waiting for Godot* neatly does not lessen that play's effectiveness. Thus, while the classification of plays according to form may be helpful, it can also be misused.

An almost endless number of forms and subforms have been suggested by critics. Since it would be impossible to define all of the labels that have been used, the basic forms will be discussed and then deviations will be noted. All labels used to describe dramatic forms can be related to one of three basic qualities: the serious, the comic, and the seriocomic. In turn, these three divisions are epitomized in three forms: tragedy, comedy, and melodrama.

Tragedy. A tragedy presents a genuinely serious action and maintains a mood throughout that underscores the play's serious intention (although there may be moments of comic relief). It raises important questions about the meaning of man's existence, his moral nature, and his social or psychological relationships.

Most tragedies written prior to the eighteenth century show the interaction between cosmic and human forces: a god, providence, or some moral power independent of man usually affects the outcome of the action almost as much as do the human agents. Many tragedies imply that the protagonist has violated a moral order which must be vindicated and

reestablished. Because superhuman forces are involved, the outcome often seems inevitable and predetermined.

In the eighteenth century, the supernatural element began to decline as social and psychological forces were given increased emphasis and as the conflicts were gradually reduced to strictly human ones. Eventually the action no longer involved man's will in conflict with divine laws, but was restricted to conflict among human desires, laws, and institutions. Since strictly human problems may be more readily understood and solved, happy resolutions were more probable. Because this later drama has often been concerned with everyday situations and seems less profound than earlier works, many critics have refused to call it tragedy and have substituted the term *drama* or *drame*.

The protagonist of tragedy is usually a person who arouses our sympathy and admiration—which in some cases, however, may be limited. Macbeth, Richard III, and Medea, for example, are tragic protagonists who have noble qualities and whose indomitable wills we can admire, but whose actions we cannot condone. Normally, the protagonist is ethically superior without being perfect: he is sufficiently above the average to inspire admiration, but is sufficiently imperfect to be believably human and at least partially responsible for his own downfall.

Most often, the tragic protagonist encounters disaster through his pursuit of a worthy aim, but, on following one ideal, he violates some other moral or social law which overpowers him. A recurring motif of serious drama is the imposition of a duty, the performance of which will inevita-



David Garrick in the storm scene of *King Lear*. Note the eighteenth-century garments. From a contemporary engraving after a painting by Wilson. (Courtesy University of Iowa Library.)

bly lead to loss of life, love, reputation, or peace of mind. The protagonist (Hamlet, for example) is faced therefore with choosing between two goals, each of which under other circumstances would be good, but which have been placed in seemingly irreconcilable opposition. Another recurring motif in tragedy (seen in *Oedipus the King* and *King Lear*) is man's inability to control his destiny.

In most tragedies written prior to the eighteenth century the protagonists are members of the ruling class, but in succeeding periods they have been drawn increasingly from the middle or lower classes. Many critics have questioned whether the average man can acquire the stature necessary to a tragic hero. There seems little basis, however, for the assumption that social class has any connection with nobility of character and action. Although most modern serious drama is less powerful than the best tragedies of the Greek and Elizabethans, the difference is one of degree and is probably related to man's reduced estimate of his place in the whole scheme of being. (The reverence accorded to tragedy seldom extends to other forms; for example, few critics have even implied that a play should not be called a comedy merely because it is less powerful than certain other comedies or because it differs from the work of other periods.)

The emotional effect of tragedy is usually described as the "arousal of pity and fear," but these basic emotions include a wide range of other responses: understanding, compassion, admiration, apprehension, foreboding, dread, awe, and terror. Pity and fear are rooted in two instinctive human reactions: fear in the desire for self-preservation and pity in concern for the welfare of others. Aristotle, in the *Poetics*, states that pity is aroused by the apprehension of some pain or harm about to befall someone like ourselves, and that were we in the position of the endangered person we would feel fear. Thus, pity and fear are complementary emotions. To feel pity, we must perceive some likeness between ourselves and the tragic character, and we must be able to imagine ourselves in his situation. Aristotle further argues that if we fear too much for ourselves we cannot pity others, for panic drives out altruistic concerns. Fear, then, is an emotion which stems from the instinct for self-preservation, while pity transcends self-concern. Fear enables us to empathize with the struggling protagonist, while pity carries us outside ourselves and unites us with man's struggle for integrity. The degree to which these responses are aroused by a particular play depends upon the nature of the protagonist and the action, and upon the capacity of the spectator to experience these emotions.

In addition to arousing pity and fear, tragedy also calms or purges these emotions. Rather than leaving us emotionally unsettled, the ending of a tragedy releases the tensions that have been aroused and brings us back to a state of equilibrium. It not only resolves the situation which has aroused pity and fear but it also leads us to recognize the inevitability of the outcome and to perceive its implications.

Comedy. The action of comedy is based on some deviation from nor-



Scene from *Tartuffe* as directed by Roger Planchon, one of the most respected of contemporary French producers. (Photo by Pic.)

mality in action, character, thought, or speech. The deviation, however, must not pose a serious threat to the well-being of the normal, and a comic (or "in fun") mood must be maintained. There is no subject, however trivial or important, that cannot be treated in comedy provided it is placed in a framework which exploits its incongruities.

Comedy also demands that the audience view situation, characters, or ideas objectively. Henri Bergson, in *Laughter*, has stated that comedy requires "an anesthesia of the heart," for it is difficult to laugh at anything with which we are too closely allied either through sympathy or dislike. For example, we might find the sight of a man slipping on a banana peel ludicrous, but if we discover that he has recently undergone a serious operation, our concern will destroy the laughter. Likewise, we may dislike some things so intensely that we cannot see their ridiculous qualities. On the other hand, an audience is not objective about all elements of a comedy, for sympathy is aroused for the norm. Part of comic pleasure comes from witnessing the eventual triumph of normative behavior, characters or ideas over a threat from the abnormal.

Because of its wide range, comedy is often divided into a number of subcategories. All the classifications, however, can be related to three variables: the extent to which the action focuses on situation, character, or thought; the degree of objectivity with which the protagonist is treated; and the nature and implications of the action. Consequently, the three

basic types are comedies of situation, comedies of character, and comedies of idea, although each may be further divided into one or more subtypes.

A *comedy of situation* shows the ludicrous results of placing characters in unusual circumstances. For example, a number of persons are planning to attend a masked ball, but each, for his own reasons, tries to conceal his intentions. The devices for getting rid of each other, the attempts to elude discovery when all appear at the ball, the reactions upon being recognized, and the eventual reconciliation of the characters make up the comic action. In such a play, character and idea are of minor importance.

Many critics treat *farce* as a separate form, although there is little to distinguish it from a comedy of situation. Farce is often used as a classification for those plays, or portions of plays, which rely principally upon buffoonery, accident, and coincidence. Pies in the face, beatings, the naïve or mistaken views of characters, the ludicrous situation arising from coincidence or circumstantial evidence exemplify the devices of farce. Often it seems a kind of inspired nonsense with situations so obviously contrived that a sensible word from any character would resolve the action at once. Farce is sometimes said to have no purpose beyond entertainment. While it is true that most farces seem devoid of serious purpose, elements of farce have been important ingredients in many of the world's finest comedies, including those of Aristophanes and Molière.

A *comedy of character* grows out of the eccentricities of the protagonist. For example, some of Molière's best plays are built around characters suffering from hypochondria, miserliness, or hypocrisy.

Although it may draw some of its characteristics from comedies of situation or idea, *romantic comedy* is most closely related to the comedy of character, for it usually treats the struggles—often those centering around a love affair—of characters who are basically admirable. It is best illustrated by Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night* and *As You Like It*, in which the main characters are lovers pursuing normal and sympathetic goals. A comic response is aroused primarily because of the ludicrous devices the characters use in pursuing success and the misunderstandings or complication that result. In romantic comedy the more boisterous action is usually relegated to subplots involving minor but ridiculous characters. Thus, it reverses the pattern found in a comedy of character.

A *comedy of ideas* has as its principal focus a conflict over a concept or a way of thought. It is probably best exemplified in the work of George Bernard Shaw and Aristophanes.

While the *comedy of manners* shares some traits with the comedy of situation and of character, it is most nearly related to the comedy of ideas, for it exploits the incongruities that arise from adherence to an accepted code of behavior at the expense of normal desires and responses. As a label, comedy of manners is sometimes reserved for plays about aristocratic and sophisticated characters who indulge in sparkling and witty repartee, attributes that have also given currency to an alternative label, *comedy of wit*.

Social comedy is still another variation on the comedy of ideas, for it explores social values, standards of behavior, or accepted ways of thought. If it aims at remedying society or behavior, it may be called *corrective comedy*.

Although most comedies can be placed in one of the categories just listed, almost all have elements that relate them to several types. A comedy of character, for instance, may use devices normally associated with farce, a comedy of manners, or a comedy of ideas. Labels, therefore, need to be used with some flexibility if they are to be helpful.

All comedy seeks to arouse emotions which lie in a range between joy and scorn. At one extreme, Shakespeare's romantic comedies elicit a response that can best be described as a feeling of well-being. They may arouse smiles or quiet laughter but seldom boisterous laughter. At the other extreme, Ben Jonson's *Volpone* at times becomes almost too painful for laughter. These extremes of the gentlest teasing and the bitterest ridicule mark the limits of comic response.

Comedy seldom (except through implication) raises great moral questions, as does tragedy. Rather, it concentrates on man in his social relationships. It reaffirms the need for a society that allows normal human impulses adequate scope while putting a check on deviations that threaten to destroy what is valuable in it. As conceptions about normative behavior vary from one era to another, the scope of comedy changes accordingly.

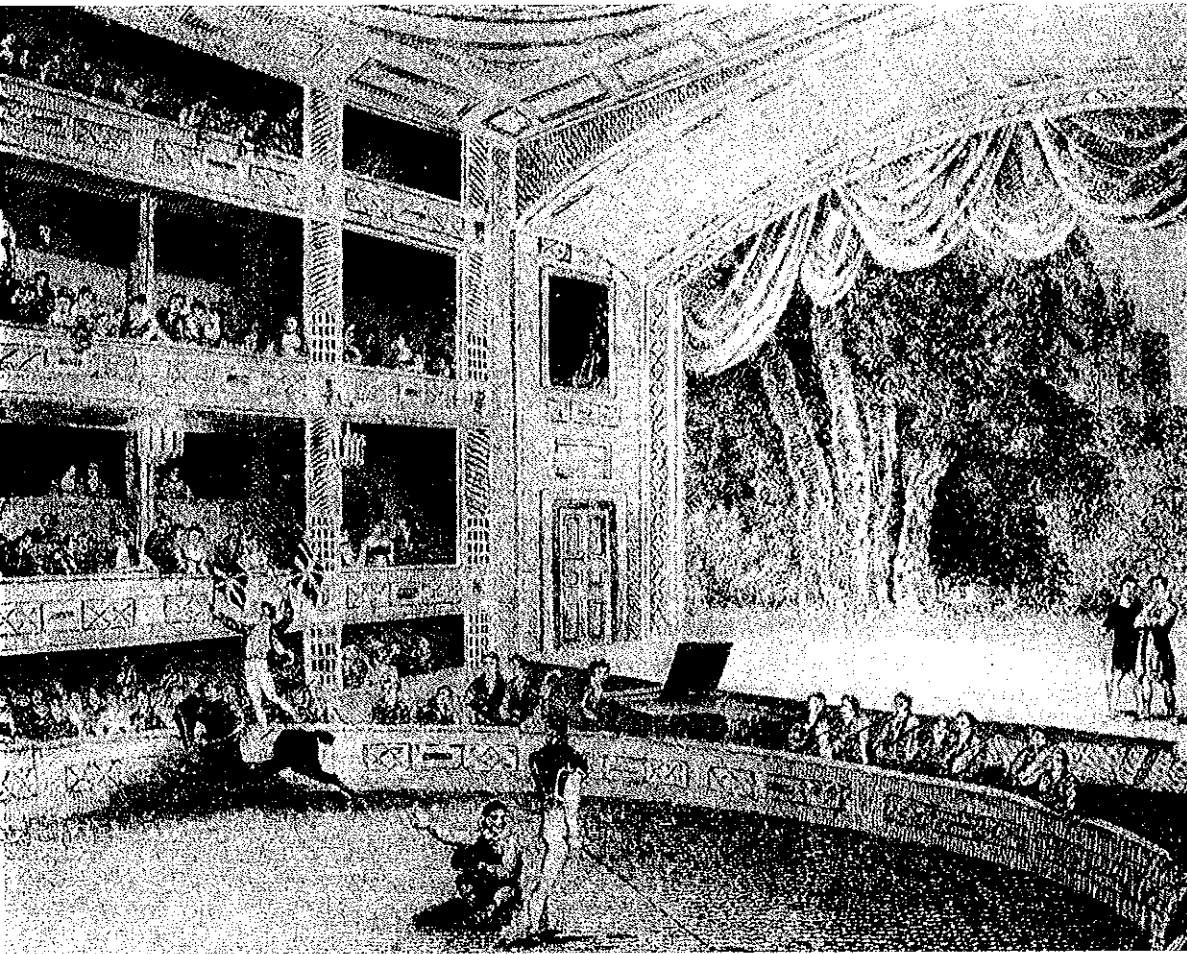
Melodrama. Although the term *melodrama* was not widely used until the nineteenth century, the type had existed since the fifth century B.C. In some periods it has been called *tragicomedy*, and today it is often labeled *drama* because the term *melodrama* is in disrepute.

A melodrama deals with a serious action. Its seriousness, however, is only temporary and is usually attributable to the malicious designs of an unsympathetic character. A happy resolution is achieved, therefore, by neutralizing or destroying the power of the villain.

Since melodrama depicts a world in which good and evil are clearly separated, the conflict almost always involves a sharply defined moral code. There is seldom any question as to where the audience's sympathy should lie.

The characters in melodrama are usually divided into those who are almost completely sympathetic and those who are almost completely antipathetic. For the sake of variety, there may also be one or more simple-minded or uninhibited characters who provide comic relief. The unsympathetic characters usually set in motion the complications, while the sympathetic characters seek only to deal with the danger. Thus, the characters do not grow and change, as in tragedy, for the moral nature of each is established at the beginning of the play and remains constant throughout.

The action of melodrama usually develops a powerful threat against the well-being of an admirable and innocent protagonist. It shows his entanglement in a web of circumstances and his eventual rescue from death or



Many variations on melodrama were exploited in the nineteenth century. Among the most popular was equestrian drama, which combined daring horsemanship with melodramatic plots. The illustration above depicts a performance at Astley's Amphitheatre in London in 1815. (From *Londina Illustrata*.)

ruin, usually at the last possible moment. (Most contemporary television series dealing with crime and danger are melodramas.)

The appeals of melodrama are strong and basic, since the incidents, which seek to build the most intense suspense, create a desire to see wronged innocence vindicated and unchecked evil chastised. The emotions aroused by melodrama range from dread and concern for the protagonist to hatred for the antagonist.

Melodrama has a double ending in which the good characters are rescued and rewarded and the evil are detected and punished. Thus, it is related to tragedy through the seriousness of its action and to comedy through its happy conclusion. It has been a popular form throughout history, for it assures audiences that good triumphs over evil.

Mixed Forms. Although tragedy, comedy, and melodrama are the primary forms, many plays do not fit comfortably into any of these three categories. For example, some works, although basically serious, do not achieve "the sense of high purpose" which we associate with tragedy; thus, we may seek other labels to set them off from plays which are more clearly tragic. Other dramas shift tone frequently from comic to serious

and may end either happily or unhappily; consequently, it may be difficult to decide whether they are more nearly comedies or tragedies. Still other works have all the marks of melodrama until the end, when the failure to reward the good and punish the evil characters raises questions about the play's type.

This mixing of characteristics is probably most typical of modern times, when playwrights have often deliberately departed from the traditional forms. For example, Ionesco has labeled some of his works "anti-plays" or "tragic farces," while Harold Pinter called his early plays "comedies of menace," and Michel de Ghelderode subtitled some of his works "burlesque mysteries" and "tragedies of the music hall." Although these designations indicate significant departures from the conventional forms, most also suggest a connection with them. For example, Ionesco's use of "tragic farce" to describe *The Chairs* indicates his awareness of manipulating comic techniques to make an audience perceive the seriousness behind the semifarcical events. Similarly, his use of "anti-play" to describe *The Bald Soprano* shows his deliberate departure from traditional structural patterns, although, as in *The Chairs*, the dramatic devices are essentially those of comedy.

In reading plays that deviate from the traditional forms, it is probably of little help to insist upon clear-cut type designations. On the other hand, it may be illuminating to note in each the tendencies toward tragedy, comedy, or melodrama, since this may clarify the ways and the extent to which comic, serious, and seriocomic elements have been mingled. Nevertheless, the fact that so much modern drama does not fit into the traditional categories demonstrates the danger of overemphasizing formal classifications. Identifying a play's type is important only because it may help to define its purpose and because it provides a basis for comparing it with other works having similar characteristics. Classification is only one step toward understanding a play and is no substitute for careful analysis.

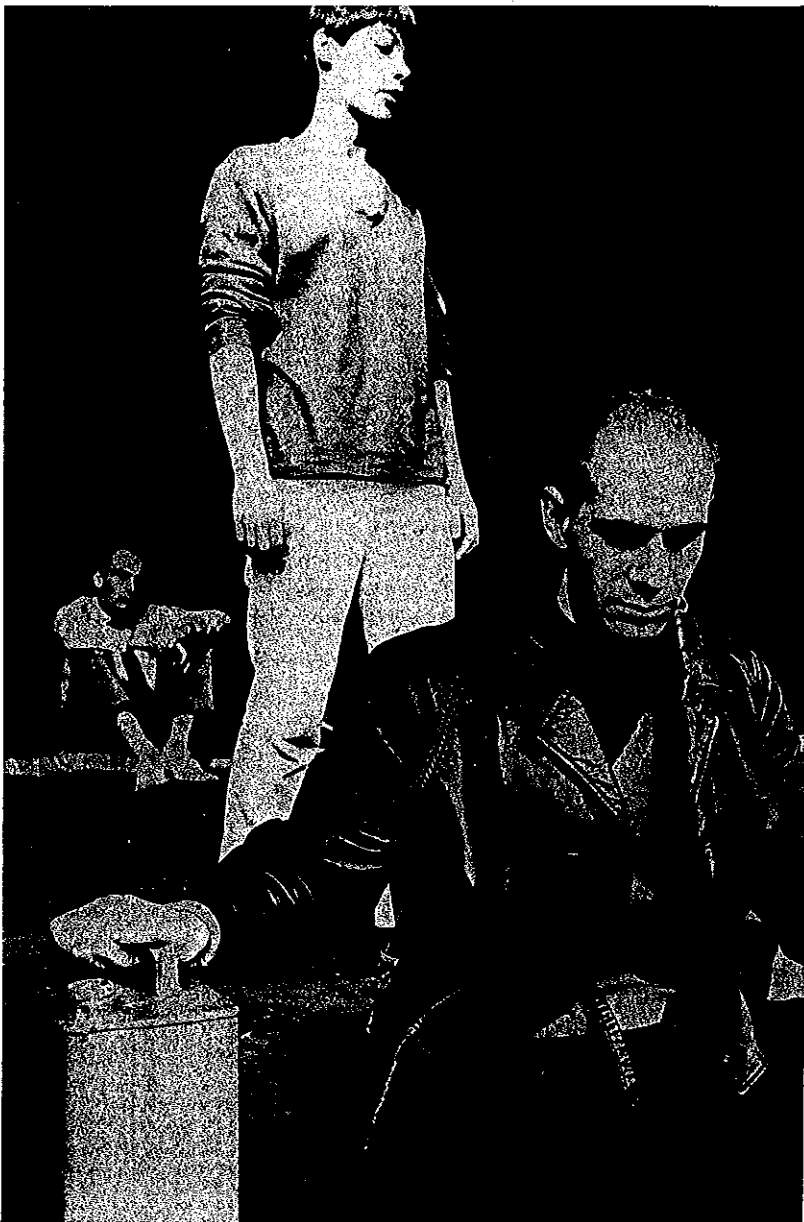
Style

When we categorize plays, we should recognize that even plays of the same type vary considerably. One cause of this variety is style. Like form, style is difficult to define because it has been used to designate many concepts. Basically, however, *style* is a quality which results from a characteristic mode of expression or method of presentation.

Style may stem from traits attributable to a period, a nation, a movement, or an author. In most periods, the drama of all Western nations has certain common qualities that may be attributed to the prevailing religious, philosophical, and psychological concepts and to current dramatic and theatrical conventions. Thus, we may speak of an eighteenth-century style. Within a period, however, there are national differences that permit us to distinguish a French from an English style. Furthermore, the dramas

written by neoclassicists demonstrate qualities that permit us to identify the stylistic features of that movement and to distinguish them from those written by romantics, expressionists, or absurdists. Finally, the plays of individual authors have distinctive qualities that set them off from the work of all other writers. Thus, we may speak of Shakespeare's or of Sophocles' style.

Most discussions of style in theatre and drama consider only period and artistic movement. Style is usually divided into such categories as classicism, neoclassicism, romanticism, realism, naturalism, expressionism, symbolism, absurdism, epic theatre, and so on. Since each category is associated with specific periods, it is usually discussed in connection with style as it relates to an age. (The chronological survey of theatre and drama in



*Scene from US, a documentary
play conceived and directed by
Peter Brook with the Royal
Shakespeare Company. (Courtesy
Royal Shakespeare Company.)*

Part 2 will treat style more fully as it applies to periods and movements.)

Style in drama results from two basic influences. First, it is grounded upon assumptions about truth and reality. Dramatists of different movements or periods have all sought to convey truthful pictures of the human predicament, but they have differed widely in their answers to these fundamental questions: What constitutes ultimate truth? By what process can we perceive reality? At times it has been argued that surface appearances merely disguise reality, which is to be found in the inner workings of the mind or in some spiritual realm. At others, it has been maintained that truth can be discovered only by objective study of those things that can be felt, tasted, seen, heard, or smelled. To advocates of the latter view, observable details hold the key to truth, while to the former the same details only hide the more significant aspects of truth. Although all writers attempt to depict the truth as they see it, the individual playwright's conception of truth is determined in large part by his basic temperament and talents, and by the religious, philosophical, social, and psychological influences which have shaped them. But, because in each period and movement there are many shared beliefs, we may generalize about the conceptions of truth that provide the raw material of drama and influence the style of that period or movement.

Second, style results from the manner in which the playwright manipulates his means of expression. All dramatists have at their disposal the same basic means—sound and spectacle, or the aural and visual—out of which to create plot, character, and thought. Nevertheless, the work of each playwright is distinctive, for each perceives the human condition from a somewhat different point of view and each must find methods adequate to communicate his vision to others. His perceptions are reflected in the situations, characters, and ideas he invents, in his manipulation of language, and in his suggestions for the use of spectacle. Thus, the playwright who believes that truth is embodied in the details of daily existence will probably invent incidents and characters modeled closely upon contemporary life, and his dialogue, settings, and costumes will mirror faithfully the speech, places, clothing, and behavior of daily existence. On the other hand, the playwright who believes that truth must be sought in some psychological or spiritual realm may depart from the standards of observable reality and may deliberately distort or eliminate details in order to force the audience to look behind surface appearances.

In the theatre, style results from the manner in which the play is presented. The directing, acting, scenery, costumes, lighting, music and dance used to translate the play from the written script to the stage may each be manipulated to affect stylistic qualities. (Each of these elements is treated at length in Part 3 of this book.) Because so many persons are involved in producing a play, it is not unusual to find conflicting or inconsistent stylistic elements in a single production. Normally, however, unity of style is a primary artistic goal. Each theatre artist, working with his own means, seeks to create qualities analogous to those found in the written text, and

the director then coordinates all of the parts into a unified whole. On the other hand, plays are sometimes presented in a manner at variance with the script. Such departures, however, are usually made deliberately and for the sake of some effect considered more significant than that which could be achieved by faithfulness to the original text. The Russian director Vsevolod Meyerhold, for example, converted *The Dawns*, a poetic symbolist play of the late nineteenth century, into a piece that reflected the Russian Revolution and even had the latest news dispatches from the battle front inserted into the performance each evening. In such cases, the director becomes the primary creator, and his work is affected by the same determinants that influence the style of a writer.

Ultimately, then, style in drama and theatre results from the way in which means are adapted to ends. It contributes significantly to that sense of unity and wholeness which is the mark of effective drama.

In many contemporary discussions of the theatre, the term *stylization* is used to indicate any deviation from realism. This terminology is sometimes helpful but it is imprecise, since realism is itself a style and since departures from realism may be in any number of directions. Every play has a style, although, as with form, the specific label to be attached to it may be difficult to determine.

Since dramatic structure, form, and style may be combined in infinite variations, discussions of them remain abstract until applied to specific examples. The chapters that follow show how these principles have been put into practice. Each chapter in Part 2 summarizes briefly the development of theatre and drama in a particular era, and outlines the background needed for understanding the plays and theatrical conventions of that period. In addition, in each chapter, one or more representative plays are analyzed and treated both as products of a specific time and place and as art works that transcend their age. Pertinent points about dramatic structure, form, and style are considered when relevant. A chronological order is used because each period is in part an outgrowth of what has gone before. Thus, the historical survey provides a perspective from which to view our present situation.